

GODS AND HEROES



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Gods and Heroes

by
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Chapter 1: Of Gods and Heroes

(i)

Atop a high mountain, two men and a woman

stood in the thin, cold air and looked down upon the world. It was obvious that they weren't your average, everyday type of people. They were nearly naked, for a start. Any normal person wearing nothing but a thin toga to protect themselves from the freezing winds would have been a shivering, blue mess - albeit briefly. Another clue would have been the golden nimbus of light that outlined their perfect forms, and the way they stood impossibly straight and tall.

Despite being beautiful beyond belief, the frowns upon their faces made it obvious that they weren't happy. The source of their unhappiness was clearly the large citadel they were peering at, which sat like a black scar in the middle of a green forest and was, in a most bizarre way, many miles away and yet near enough to touch.

'It just appeared out of nowhere, you say?' said the man with flowing white locks and neatly cropped white beard. His name was Mazi and he was Lord of the Gods of Helvenica. 'Why don't we just go down there and fry the lot of them. You've drowned more with a storm in a day when the temper has taken you,' he said, turning to the women whose deep blue eyes glowed as if lit from within.

'We've tried that, my Lord, but somehow they are protected,' said the dark haired man to his right. His name was Pyros and he was God of Fire. 'I sent my sons to sear this blight from the world, but their flames washed over the intruders without singeing a single hair. It was as if the Lords of Fire were nothing more than puffs of wind.'

Mazi shook his head and sighed.

'This is the work of the God who calls himself Monos,' said the woman. A look of distaste clouded her perfect features. She was Aquina, Goddess of the Sea and Mistress of Storms. 'I've been watching him for many years, long before he appeared here. I heard the whispers of his rising in the South and watched as he gained strength. His power is now so great that he can pour some of it into a staff carried by the High Priest. The staff is the reason your sons' efforts were futile because it's blessing makes all who follow it immune to our divine will, as if each soldier were the God Monos himself.'

'A new God? How can that be? Didn't we sort all that out with that Isiha fellow all those years ago?' Mazi said. Although he was Lord of the Gods with power immeasurable, he was prepared to concede that he wasn't quite up to speed on current events, and that Aquina had it all over him when it came to politics and intrigue. 'And what are we going to do about it?' he added.

'A new power is rising in the world, Lord, and it has called Monos into existence. He is the God of Men, and believes them to be greater than all else in the world, including Gods.' Aquina looked down at the citadel. 'As for what we are to do? Fear not, the wheels have been put in motion,' she said. 'However, we must be patient.'

'A God of Men? Hasn't Munga got that all wrapped up?'

A look that suggested patience lost crossed Aquina's features, but it was fleeting. 'Munga's realm includes masculinity, my Lord. It is probably more accurate to describe Monos as God of Humanity.'

Mazi nodded. 'Oh, I see,' he said. 'And what do you think of this, brother?'

A perplexed look crossed Pyros's features. The citadel was crawling with industrious people, rushing about, building this and constructing that. There was obviously a lot happening down there. 'I don't understand his motivation, my Lord. I cannot believe he can just grow a city overnight and muster an army in a week. What is he up to? And only a fool would build such a structure on the borders of the land in which we are most powerful and expect to march through unhindered. Is he arrogant or just plain old stupid? Does he really think he has nothing to fear from us?'

'His motivation is the destruction of all Gods but him,' Aquina said, rather dramatically. 'He believes that men should only worship the God of Men, and all other Gods should be driven out.' She paused a moment. 'He thinks his armies can overcome our own as long as he keeps us at bay. In his eyes, we have only two alternatives - to ignore the battle of the worshipers and attack him ourselves, or to flee before his power. Regardless of what we do, his focus will be on our temples and our cities. If he were to capture or destroy enough of them, he would greatly reduce us and be able to banish us from Helvenica and into the wild lands. That is why

we must be patient, my Lord. It is futile to attack him ourselves. He is far too strong. Our only chance is to drive his armies back, and to do that we must be cunning. He thinks they are invulnerable, but I think he may be wrong.'

'I don't know,' Mazi said. He was unused to subtlety, and usually met threats with brutality and violence. It was traditional, and he wasn't ready to abandon the old ways so soon in a fight. 'What if The Twelve were to unite? Surely he would be no match for our combined strength.'

'Getting The Twelve to stop bickering long enough to fight would be a task nearly as difficult as dealing with this usurper, but even if we could convince them to cooperate, I doubt we could match him. You will need to trust me on this, my Lord. Not all weapons are obvious.'

'Is he really that strong?' Mazi asked. He looked impressed. 'The problem is yours, then, deal with it as you see fit.'

'Thank you, my Lord,' Aquina said. 'I may need your help on occasion and yours too, Pyros. We'll show this upstart that the Gods of Helvenica are not to be trifled with.'

Mazi looked down at the citadel and almost felt sorry for Monos. Aquina's temper was legend in Helvenica, and he could feel a fair old tantrum building. This could top the tsunami of rage that wiped out an entire city and sent the island upon which it stood to the bottom of the sea. And all because Aquina thought the temple to Figari, the God of the Moon, was better than hers.

A wise God would keep his distance from Aquina when she was on the warpath, Mazi thought to himself, and Monos was about to find out why.

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Fotio had a dream, which wasn't all that unusual. Unlike most people, who restricted their dreaming to when they were sleeping or not doing anything very important, Fotio could dream almost anywhere. His mind, which appeared to be on a slightly different wavelength to Fotio himself, could wander at any time or in any place, regardless of what he was actually doing. It was a terrible affliction for a young man and he'd tried changing - he would face every new day with square-jawed determination - but an inability to focus on the task at hand seemed to be an unchangeable part of who he was.

When he was but a stripling, his daydreaming had driven the teachers at his school to forgo their fee and suggest to his mother that a trade, something like blacksmithing, would be a better fit for the young lad. And it was Fotio's dreaming that led to Master Blacksmith Arapsi dismissing him as his apprentice shortly thereafter. His reasoning was that someone like Fotio - big, strong, and with the attention span of a gnat - should not be wielding a heavy hammer. In the end, dreaming had led him to where he was now - an errand boy who worked at the docks and supplemented his meager

income with the odd theft.

That was speaking in generalities, of course. Specific dreams usually led nowhere. Except for this one particularly vivid dream from which he had woken in a cold sweat three days earlier. *That* dream had led him to be dangling from a rope a few inches from the greatest treasure he had ever seen. He reached out to take it and hesitated.

The Heart of Fire, forged by Pyros himself to symbolize the bond between the Gods and the Earth, was Fotio's for the taking. The dream had been quite accurate. The guards *were* disinterested and sleepy. There *was* a handy gargoyle on the roof upon which to fasten a rope. Even the statue of Pyros holding the gem aloft was as it had been in his mind's eye.

It would have been nice to say that the thought of stealing a precious cultural artifact is what caused Fotio to hesitate. Sadly, this was not the case. Rather, it was the thought of the possible repercussions that led him to pause. Would Pyros take a personal interest? Not likely, but then again most Gods have a dim view of temple desecrators. Pyros may decide to hunt him down and burn his head off as an example of what happens to those who don't behave appropriately in houses of worship.

To complicate matters further, the huge gem was well outside Fotio's comfort zone. He tended to choose easy targets - goods that weren't too valuable and were easy to offload. The fact that he was currently dangling over an

extremely valuable and distinctive treasure was giving him a little trouble. There were many questions that needed answering. Even if he were to get away cleanly, to whom could he sell it? It's all well and good to possess a priceless treasure, but would it put food on the table?

He reached out and snatched the gem. 'Gods and men be damned,' he thought. 'This gem wouldn't just put food on the table, it would pay for a better table. And a house to put it in. With servants. And then we'll see who's wasted all his potential.'

Fotio scuttled up the knotted rope like a monkey in a hurry, vaulted onto the roof, untied the rope from the gargoyle, and wound it around his waist. Feeling that it was all too easy and hoping more dreams leading to treasure would visit him in the near future, he jogged to the edge of the wall nearest the forest and dropped lightly to the ground. The first he knew of the alert guard that had been lurking in the shadows of the temple was when the butt of a spear hit him in the back of the head.

(iii)

'Ah, he seems to be waking. Good, I thought your blow might have been a little too enthusiastic. Thankfully it wasn't.'

Fotio opened his eyes and looked up at the speaker. It was the King. No doubt about it. Solon the Just, High Priest

of Aquina and King of Aquinos, was looking down at him with a look of concern etched upon his regal features.

'Your Majesty,' Fotio said and made an unsuccessful attempt at getting up on his feet so that he could drop to his knees in supplication. The shackles on his wrists and ankles kept him secured to the floor, however, so instead he tried his best to look terrified and submissive, with some success.

'Good morning Fotio,' Solon said, smiling a regal smile. 'It is good to see that you have woken from your extended nap. How do you feel?'

'You know my name? The King knows my name! I'm going to die, aren't I?' Fotio gibbered.

'Would we be so concerned for your welfare if we were only going to execute you?' Solon said, and looked at the tall man standing to his right, who looked blank for a moment before remembering to laugh at the King's attempt at humor.

'No, no. Quite the opposite. We have a task for you.'

'For me?'

'Yes you,' Solon said, and turned once again to the tall man. 'Let him up, would you. It's disconcerting talking to a man chained to the floor.'

'Yes my Lord,' said the man, and quickly released Fotio's bonds.

'You asked how I know your name?' Solon said, as Fotio stood and rubbed at the back of his head. An impressive

lump had formed where the spear had caught him. 'It is because you are Fate's chosen. One hundred heroes of Helvenica dreamed of the Heart of Fire, and only you responded. Of the hundred, yours was the only name that I did not recognize. Still, you have the look of a hero even though you have yet to do anything heroic,' the King's eyes sparkled. 'Perhaps you will be one yet. You have been chosen to perform a great service for The Twelve. A new God has risen in the South and his followers are camped on our doorstep, ready to wage war. You are to stop them.'

'A God? You want me to fight a God?'

'Oh no,' Solon said, and laughed a mirthless laugh. 'The combined might of The Twelve may not be enough to match this upstart. You wouldn't even register as a threat. No, your task is somewhat different.'

'How can there be a new God? What's he a God of?'

'It's hard to say, really, but his name is Monos and I have heard him referred to as the God of Men.'

'What, you mean like shaving and virility and all that? I thought Munga had that all covered.'

Solon looked at Fotio with newfound disrespect. 'I think what it means is that he is God of Humanity.'

'Oh. Is that bad is it?'

'Yes, it is, or so I am told, and it was Aquina herself who told me, so I am not in a position to doubt it. He has only one priest, who serves as his mouthpiece in the human world. His teachings are peculiar. He condemns kings and

emperors. The people are encouraged to rule themselves. Can you imagine? Peasants and goatherds in command of their own destiny?'

'Sounds pretty good to me,' Fotio said.

A small point of light appeared in front of the young thief, from which a miniature lightning bolt earthed itself in his groin.

Solon looked at Fotio as if waiting for a reaction. When none was forthcoming, he motioned to the tall man, who hit Fotio in the groin with the butt of his spear.

'Aquina obviously doesn't agree with you,' Solon said, looking down at Fotio's writhing form.

'Why don't the Gods do something about it, then?' Fotio said, as the pain subsided.

'They cannot. Monos's power protects his followers from divine interference. No, only mortal men can stop the rise of the God of Men.'

'Okay, I'm your man,' Fotio said. 'I think my record of achievement and success holds me in good stead to serve the Gods in their battle against a being so powerful, they fear to face him.'

At this point, it should be noted that Fotio's teachers had told his long-suffering mother that dreaming wasn't the only problem they had with her son. There was also an infuriating belligerence about the boy, coupled with his vast bulk and surprising strength. He'd once barricaded half the faculty in the school's temple to Engefalo, the God of

teachers and knowledge. He single handedly held the door shut despite the best efforts of those inside. In the end, they had to wait for him to lose interest and wander off before they could get out.

Incidents such as these were uppermost in the head teacher's mind when he had told Fotio's mother that the fee for Fotio to remain at the school were more than she could possibly afford. The amount she could afford was irrelevant because the fees would *always* be higher. But Solon was a King, and not known for taking lip from his subjects.

'Do not make light of this, Fotio the thief, because there are ninety nine others ready to take your place if I decide that your head is too big for your shoulders.'

'My apologies, Your Majesty, but it is a little overwhelming. Yesterday I was an errand boy and today I am to challenge a God.'

'Errand boys do not steal treasures from the Gods,' Solon said sternly. 'Fate has chosen you, my boy, and there is nothing you can do about it.'

'I will do my best, Sire,' Fotio said, and bowed his head.

'I'm sure you will,' Solon said. 'And to ensure that you have every opportunity to perform at your best, Akakion will accompany you,' Solon pointed to the tall, silent man that had loosed the young thief from his shackles.

Fotio looked at him properly for the first time. He wasn't all too happy with what he saw. The man was older,

with receding grey hair, cut close to the scalp. His eyes were dark and set deep in a weathered face built around a nose like an axe blade. Looking at him, Fotio could almost imagine he was descended from a bird of prey, or was possibly a great eagle or condor that had taken human form.

'He is skilled in weapons and sorcery, and will be a boon on your travels,' the King continued as he walked towards the throne at the far end of the room. 'I have my doubts that you will succeed, which is why we are mustering our armies. But a long and bloody war would be costly and there is nothing to lose by giving you a chance.' He flopped down onto the throne in a most un-regal way. Akakion prodded Fotio with his spear, indicating he should move closer to the throne.

'Monos is mustering his armies in a camp to the south,' Solon said. 'It is at the very edge of our territories and a difficult journey, even if you encounter no problems on the road. The preparations for war are starting at The Temple of All Gods. Go there now and seek the council of the Emperor. He has the ear of Mazi and will be able to explain your task in greater detail.'

Fotio bowed. 'Yes, my Lord,' he said.

'Good, Akakion has already made all the arrangements. Oh, and by the way, I wouldn't entertain the idea of swapping sides if I were you.'

'Your Majesty,' Fotio exclaimed, 'I would never turn my back on The Twelve and my own people!'

'Your dedication is a ray of sunlight in these dark times,' Solon said, 'but even the strongest of wills is subject to temptation. Knowledge is your shield, and you should know that followers of Monos do not have an easy life. They must spend their first year in devoted service to his glory. In that year, they engage in no sexual activity whatsoever, and follow a strict regime of meditation and fasting. Even after the first year, they do not allow alcohol to pass their lips, eat meat only on Wednesdays, and indulge in sexual liaisons only when the moon is full.'

'Really? I'm surprised he has any followers at all.'

'People will do the most depraved things in the name of religion,' Solon said. 'Now go, and may the blessings of The Twelve be with you.'

Akakion took Fotio by the elbow and led him to the door at the opposite end of the chamber from the throne, where he turned and bowed. Fotio, terrified and confused, mimicked his actions but without the grace and poise.

(iv)

The guards in the corridor outside the throne room closed the doors when the two newly acquainted companions had stepped through.

'Come,' Akakion said. 'I have had travelling packs prepared so we can set off right away. They are waiting for us at the stables.'

The two strode along the corridor leading away from the throne room. More accurately, Akakion strode and Fotio jogged nervously beside him.

'You're not serious?' Fotio said, as he struggled to keep up with the dour faced priest. 'This can't be happening. I'm not a hero. I'm not even a good errand boy. And I'm a lousy thief. This must be a mistake.'

'You question the will of the Gods?' Akakion said, and came to an abrupt halt.

'No, it's their sanity that I'm worried about. If Monos is such a dire threat, why send me to deal with it? I don't think there is anyone in all of Helvenica less qualified than I. Even my aging mother would probably do a better job.'

For a moment, Fotio saw doubt in Akakion's dark eyes, but it was fleeting. 'You seem less than ideal, but the Gods see more than I. You probably possess qualities that have yet to be tested,' he said. 'There must be unplumbed depths to your personality that will be drawn out in this adventure we are fated to share.'

'That's not true. I'm completely two dimensional,' Fotio complained, 'what you see is far less than what you get.'

'If you think you are ill suited to the task then I suggest you petition Aquina to release you,' Akakion said. 'But until you do, I am bound to bring you before the Emperor in The Temple of All Gods. Now shut up and follow me. We will stay the night at the inn in the village of Putami, and it is several hours away.'

So saying, Akakion turned on his heel and resumed his march along the corridor. For a moment, Fotio entertained the thought of praying to Aquina, but he knew success was unlikely. She would probably have him fed to the sharks for wasting her time, and he'd *still* have to go on the quest. That's the trouble with messing with the Gods - anything is possible. His dropped his broad shoulders and slouched after Akakion.

'Is there a coach to Putami?' he asked.

'Yes,' Akakion said and Fotio's heart jumped, 'but it has already gone and there won't be another for two days. We'll walk. It is only a few hours away and the countryside is beautiful this time of year.'

'We're going to walk all the way to All Gods, aren't we? Carrying our own packs,' Fotio said, in a resigned tone.

'Why, yes. The Temple is a journey of many days and the coaches go there but once a month. We will need to carry food to last us ten days, as well as our weapons and such. You do have a weapon, don't you?'

Fotio shrugged. 'I'm not much of a fighter,' he said.

Akakion again stopped abruptly. 'You have no weapon,' he said, sounding incredulous. 'You'll definitely need a weapon. The road between here and The Temple has grown wild of late. Come, we will visit the armory before we set off.'

Fotio shrugged. 'Whatever,' he said, but the priest was already many paces away and accelerating. 'Would you please slow down,' Fotio yelled and took off after him.

The Palace of Solon the Just also served as a temple to Aquina and was an opulent affair. Had Fotio not been so obsessed with his own ill fate, he would have marveled at the lifelike frescoes of the creatures of the sea, and the amazing walls that shimmered and sparkled like a calm ocean on a sunny day. He would have been in awe of the many priceless statues and tapestries that lined the corridors, most of which showed Aquina dispensing swift and violent justice. But, as is often the case, the stresses of life got in the way and Fotio raced through the beautiful corridors, oblivious to the splendor that surrounded him.

Akakion led them to a small room at the end of a dark corridor that had a disproportionately large contingent of alert and well-armed guards.

'Lord Akakion,' one of the guards said, and crossed his heart with the fist of his right hand - the traditional salute of the Helvenican military.

'At ease, Pontos,' Akakion responded. 'I have come to find a weapon for my companion here. We are setting off on a dangerous journey and he has no arms.'

Pontos looked Fotio up and down and nodded approvingly. 'Hmmm, he looks like a big strong lad, my Lord. I think I have something that will suit him well,' he said. 'I'll be right back.'

The guard disappeared into the room while Fotio stared at Akakion. 'Lord? You're a Lord?' he finally managed to stammer out.

Akakion nodded. 'I am Keeper of the Order.'

Pontos returned before Fotio could respond, dragging a huge mace behind him.

'Here you go,' he said, and the other guards sniggered. Fotio looked at Akakion, who nodded encouragingly. He reached out, took the mace from Pontos, and gave it a couple of practice swings. 'Nice,' he said. 'Good balance.' Only then did he notice that everyone was staring at him. 'What?'

'Doesn't it feel a little heavy?' Pontos asked.

'No, it's fine,' Fotio said, tossing the mace from hand to hand.

'I don't think your journey is going to be as dangerous as you think, Lord Akakion,' Pontos said without taking his eyes off Fotio, who had taken to twirling the mace above his head.

'I think you may be right,' Akakion said, also staring at the young thief. 'Are you sure that's the right mace?'

'Yes Lord. Nothing else in there is nearly as heavy.'

'Well, it looks like we've discovered one of your hidden talents,' Akakion said. 'No ordinary man should have the strength to wield the Stone Mace as you do. Congratulations, Fotio. I think we have found you a suitable weapon.'

'You mean I can keep it?'

'You can use it for the duration of our adventure,'

Akakion said. 'If you want to keep it forever, I am afraid you will need to ask Mazi. It's his mace.'

Fotio dropped the weapon onto his foot. 'Ouch!' he exclaimed, and then picked it up and hobbled after Akakion, who had already turned and was speeding back along the corridor. 'Would you please slow down.'

Akakion stopped and looked back impatiently while Fotio caught up.

'Why are you in such a hurry?'

'I'm not. This is how I always walk.'

'Great,' Fotio grumbled. 'Well, just so you know, I don't walk that fast.'

'You will learn,' Akakion said and turned to continue.

Fotio felt at the bump on his head, noted that the guards were unsighted behind a bend in the corridor and decided that enough was enough. The Gods had ninety-nine others to choose from if he were to vanish. And, to be honest, they were usually too busy squabbling amongst themselves to waste their time on a lowly thief. He just needed to keep away from temples until this whole thing blew over. Or, at the very worst, he could go to Selonisia were Queen Sinnefi ruled, High Priestess of the God Oranos. He and Aqina were usually at one another's throats, and he would probably let Fotio live just to get up Aquina's nose.

All these thoughts flashed through Fotio's mind in the background, so to speak, in order to justify the big, bad

thought that was front and center. 'No I won't,' he said, and swung his newly acquired mace at Akakion's head.

Without even looking back, the priest raised his spear to parry the blow, hooked its shaft beneath the head of the mace and, with barely a grunt of effort, sent it clattering back along the corridor, and the thief sprawling onto his backside.

'Are you mad?' Akakion said, and brought his spear down until the point was inches from Fotio's face, 'because only a madman would aim a blow at the head of one of Aquina's favored sons while still walking the corridors of her temple. Do you really think she would allow injury to befall me within these walls? Nor am I a petty thug, or a bumbling city watchman. Not for nothing did King Solon warn you that I am skilled in weapons and sorcery. It is my task to bring you to the Emperor, and I will tell you now, once and once only. If you so much as grumble on our journey I will truss you up like a pig and have you sent to him like a particularly onerous parcel.'

'The lump on the back of my head aches,' Fotio grumbled and scrambled to his feet. 'I was simply looking to even the score. Anyway, why does it have to be me? There are ninety nine others who would gladly take my place.'

The priest stared at Fotio. 'The Goddess Aquina truly loves and protects you,' he said. 'I know this because you are still alive despite questioning her wisdom repeatedly while in her temple.'

There was a sound like a wave crashing into a cliff and Aquina herself appeared behind Fotio.

'Akakion, loyal servant of the Gods, is a wise man,' she said. Fotio stood, mouth agape, and stared at the blue-eyed Goddess who was shining with an inner light. Akakion dropped to his knees and hoped the thief wouldn't do anything stupid.

'Fate has chosen you to be the champion of Helvenica, Fotio, and it is in Fate that you must trust. Solon, who rules this land in my name, prefers to trust in steel and tactics rather than in heroes and bravery. I do not. You, Fotio, are our only hope. Succeed, and our people will continue to live free and proud. Fail and Monos will enslave all of Helvenica with the illusion of freedom,' Aquina said, and then paused. Fotio was standing before her, enraptured. Despite the Goddess being over eight foot tall and floating several feet above the ground, she was everything he thought a woman should be.

Aquina sensed his lust and smiled. 'Fate has decreed that you must do this of your own free will or the endeavor will be doomed to failure,' she continued, 'which is why the Gods have found themselves in a strange and unusual place. We can be little more than spectators watching from the sidelines as others decide our fate. We are powerless to stop the invading armies of our enemy, and our one hope of victory lies with a man who does not care for us. All I can do is beg you to help us, Fotio. Without you, there is no hope

for Helvenica or her Gods.'

Then, just as suddenly as she appeared, the Goddess vanished.

'She's so beautiful,' Fotio said.

'Yes she is, and you're lucky she didn't fry you,' Akakion said, getting up off his knees. The Gods of Helvenica were very hands-on and turned up quite frequently - often ready to dispense rough justice to all and sundry. Subtlety was not a Godly virtue and they usually met difficult situations with divine retribution. The fact that Fotio was still walking was a testament to just how desperate the Gods were. 'Come on, let's go,' he said. 'It would be nice to get to Putami before nightfall.'

Fotio nodded agreement. The Gods were not a big part of his life and were only ever mentioned by various and sundry authority figures as they cursed Fotio's retreating form - 'the Gods will punish you for this' and 'the Gods will punish you for that' had been a constant theme in his upbringing - but he rarely took note. After all, it would be a very petty God who would come after him because he failed to complete his history homework. But if Aquina were taking a personal interest, then it was probably prudent to muzzle his rebellious side. He picked up the mace and followed Akakion, who led him through the palace to the stables outside, where two very heavy packs were waiting for them.

It did not take long for Fotio's natural belligerence to push through Aquina's glamour. He looked longingly at the

many fine horses that could easily carry their load for them and grumbled as he shouldered his heavy pack.

'If our task is so vital for The Twelve, why can't we use these fine animals to speed us on our way? Even one to carry our provisions would make the journey quicker and easier.'

'The armies of Helvenica are mustering,' Akakion said. 'There are no horses to spare for the likes of us. The Emperor may furnish us with mounts if he thinks our quest worthy of the cost. Every parathes must be accounted for in times of war, and if providing us with horses means that there are fewer soldiers ready to meet the enemy, then I doubt the cost will be worth it.'

'Before we set out, I must visit my mother,' Fotio said. 'She frets if she doesn't see me regularly. I want to let her know that I am going on a quest to aid the Gods, and that I may never return.'

'I'm impressed that you take the time out from self pity to think of your family,' Akakion said, and eased the heavy pack onto his back. 'Lead the way.'

Fotio shot the priest what he thought was a withering look. 'I want to go alone,' he said. 'It won't take me long. Have a prayer or whatever it is you people do to kill some time.'

'I don't trust you,' the priest said, bluntly. 'Lead the way.'

Fotio shook his head, slung the mace over one

shoulder and set off towards the gates on the Eastern side of the palace grounds. 'Come on, then.'

(v)

Akakion followed Fotio to a small house on a hillside overlooking the harbor and palace.

'Foti!' said the vision of beauty and light that opened the door to the young thief's knocking. 'How nice to see you so soon after your last visit, and who is this wonderful looking man you have with you?'

This time it was Akakion who stood transfixed with mouth agape. Fotio's "aging mother" was the most beautiful woman the priest had ever seen. She was tall and elegant, with golden eyes, and curly black hair that tumbled in graceful locks to her shoulders.

'Hi Mom,' Fotio said, 'this is Lord Akakion, Keeper of the Order. We're going to go and fight a Mad God's army together. I probably won't survive.'

'I'm very sorry to disturb you, madam,' Akakion said quickly, in an effort to cut off the stream of negativity flowing out of Fotio's mouth. He would have added an angry stare at the young thief, but his eyes refused to release the beautiful woman from their sight. 'I am, as Fotio has said, Lord Akakion. My task, set by Aquina herself, is to accompany your son to The Temple of All Gods. He is fated for greatness, or so the Goddess believes.'

Fotio's mother looked from Akakion to her son and back again. She noted Akakion's rich clothing upon which the symbol of Mazi featured heavily. She was very impressed by his strong, handsome features and the large spear that he carried in his big, strong hands. She could see no subterfuge or fraud in his dark eyes and quickly concluded that a man such as this did not skulk around in the background, waiting to take advantage of the vulnerable. A man such as this did not steal or deceive. No. A man such as this took what he wanted, by force if necessary. To resist him would be futile.

A hot flush kissed her cheeks at roughly the same time that Akakion's words of praise for her son, after having made their way with some difficulty through the mazelike labyrinth of her subconscious, presented themselves to her maternal pride. A huge grin stretched over her near-perfect features. 'I knew you were special,' she said, and rushed out to embrace her son. Fotio blushed.

'I've just made lunch and, as usual, I have made too much,' she said, putting a proud arm as far around her son's broad shoulders as she could. 'Why don't you boys come inside and make an old lady happy?'

'I don't think we can,' Fotio said, looking at the priest for confirmation.

Akakion nodded. 'I'm afraid we must make haste,' he said.

'Then you can take some with you,' she said, and rushed back inside before Akakion could answer. She returned

almost instantly carrying a plate covered by a cloth bag, which she handed to the priest.

'Foti can bring the plate back later,' she said.

(vi)

Akakion and Fotio followed the road as it wound down the hill and into the city of Neraki, capital of Aquinos. The city was a small, dense place, with too many people trying to occupy the small spit of land between the city walls and the harbor. The land beyond the wall was sparsely populated, not because of the protection that the city provided - Aquina ensured that Aquinos was a safe place by visiting divine retribution upon the unruly. It was just that your average Nerakian would rather nail his or her privates to a post than live beyond the wall. It was a widely held view within the land that those living outside the city were less sophisticated than their urban cousins, and *everyone* in Neraki considered themselves sophisticated

The two travelers ambled along the crowded streets between the white and blue painted buildings - Aquina's favorite colors - and into the busiest docks in Helvenica, where the smell of the sea permeated all. They walked without talking - Akakion was busy eating honey cakes and Fotio was wondering how he was going to get himself out of this ridiculous mess - which was just as well because the docks were a noisy place. Had they been inclined to chat as they

walked, they would have struggled to make themselves heard over the cry of the sea birds and the sound of honest sailors busying themselves doing nautical things to ships.

Akakion was on his seventh cake by the time the docks gave way to the Avenue of All Gods, where stood all the temples not dedicated to Aquina. It was considerably quieter here and Fotio could hear the priest masticating the rock-hard cookies.

'Are you sure you don't want one?' Akakion asked as they strolled along the road.

'Positive.'

'They're amazingly good. Your mother is quite the cook.'

Fotio smirked. 'Those cakes are pretty much all she eats.'

Akakion swallowed down a mouthful of cake.

'Really?'

'Yep. We ate honey cakes and drank rose nectar two out of every three meals when I was growing up. Just the thought of eating one now makes me queasy.'

Akakion took up another cake from the plate. It was the third to last. 'They're certainly very tasty,' he said, 'and a blessing for those who were too busy to eat breakfast this morning, but probably wouldn't constitute a balanced diet on their own. By the way, your mother is a very beautiful woman.'

Fotio shrugged and walked on in silence.

'What's her name?' Akakion asked.

'Neoleia.'

'That's nice. She looks very young.'

'She's always looked exactly like that, for as long as I can remember.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' Fotio snapped. 'Hasn't aged a day in over twenty years.'

Akakion was about to say "really" again, but the look on Fotio's face warned him against it. 'You haven't mentioned your father.'

'He died before I was born,' Fotio said. 'On a ship taken by a storm.'

'Eternity in Psorfios realm is the fate of all mortal men,' Akakion said which drew an irritated glare from his companion.

'If you weren't Keeper of the Order,' Fotio said, his temper obviously on the rise.

'The way I see it, as long as I don't turn my back on you, I'm safe,' Akakion said, making it obvious what he thought of Fotio temper. 'And what does it matter if I am the Keeper of the Order? It's not like it means anything, really, if you look at it objectively.'

'What?'

'Being Keeper of the Order is what I do, not who I am. Apart from the title and the divine powers granted me by the Gods, I'm just like everybody else.'

'It's an office granted by Mazi himself!' Fotio said, his anger ceding the floor to disbelief and shock. 'I can't believe that you, a priest of Mazi, just said that.'

'Well, I've met him, haven't I? In fact, I've met them all.'

Fotio stared at the priest with a horrified look on his face. He'd always worn his disdain for the Gods like a badge of honor, an outward symbol of his defiance to all those who had made his life difficult through the years. He wasn't quite ready to hear the same level of disrespect from one of the highest ranked priests in the land.

'They're not good role models, is what I'm trying to say,' Akakion said, in the face of Fotio's face. 'Take Aquina for example.'

A look of panic crossed Fotio's features.

'It's okay, she's not listening,' Akakion said. 'She probably lost interest when we left the palace.'

'You sure about that?'

'Would I be talking like this if I wasn't? She'll look in every now and then to make sure we're on track, but that's about it. She's probably off looking for something to get offended about so she can have a righteous smite. That's what I mean. Aquina's temper tantrums are the stuff of legend. She goes off at the smallest provocation and her reactions are always over the top. If my eight-year-old nephew behaved like that, my brother would take a belt to him. But Aquina's a God, so she can sink a ship because its sail isn't the right shade

of blue and there isn't anything anyone can do about it. That's not how a God should behave. It a disgrace.'

The two lapsed into silence again as Fotio wondered where the sanity had got to this morning. Akakion masticated his way through the last cake. When he had finished, Fotio took the plate from him and carefully placed it into his pack.

'So what you're telling me is that you think the Gods, The Twelve Divine beings that rule over the mortal lands, are a bunch of irresponsible brats who do as they please because no one can take a belt to their backsides.'

'Pretty much. I've never met a God I can respect, to be honest.'

'But what about all that divine wisdom stuff in the palace? And anyway, you're a priest,' Fotio said. 'You have to respect the Gods. It's in the job description.'

'I'm not an idiot. In their temples they can hear everything. Talking like this would see my career go up in flames, and I would probably follow shortly after. Anyway, as a priest I have to *serve* the Gods. No one ever said anything about liking the bastards.'

'If you don't like them, then why are you going to defend them?'

'Because I am Keeper of the Order and there is nothing like an invading army to mess up order,' Akakion said. 'Look lad, you're young and innocent, despite the fact that you think you're old and cynical. The Gods are part of

who we are and, while we may not be perfect, Helvenica works. We have laws that keep the peace most of the time and food enough to feed all. What are the chances that this will continue if Monos takes over?'

'I don't know,' Fotio said.

'Neither do I, and that's the problem. What if Monos is one of those needy buggers who's gotta have sacrifices morning, noon, and night? Or one of those horrible micromanagers? I can see it now. Thou shalt not do this, and thou shalt not do that, and thou shalt kiss my butt on Fridays,' Akakion said. 'Only a maniac would stop his followers eating meat.'

'Okay,' Fotio squeaked. 'I understand.'

The tone of Fotio's voice brought Akakion back from the angry edge. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I get a little passionate when discussing religion.'

'That's okay. Passion is good. It shows you care.'

'I didn't always think like this, you know. I was as fresh faced and keen as every other neophyte in my class when I first started. If I had gone off and become a priest at some tiny temple somewhere in the sticks, then I probably wouldn't be so cynical. But like a fool I wanted more. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to serve my Gods with everything I had. I've been Keeper of the Order for as long as I can remember, at the beck and call of The Twelve, and I've yet to find one shred of evidence that there is anything divine in our Gods. Not one shred!'

Fotio shrugged and swung his mace from his left to his right shoulder.

'Do you know why the mace that you carry is here in Aquinos rather than in the armory in The Temple of All Gods?'

'No, but I think I'm about to find out,' Fotio mumbled.

'It's because it reminds Mazi of something that makes him angry. Every time he sees it, he flies into a rage and goes out looking for fountains to smash.'

'Fountains?' Fotio said, interested and amused despite himself.

'Yes, fountains. I don't know exactly why and I was too afraid to ask.'

The walk from the Palace to the city walls was not long and they soon found themselves at the city gates, looking out into the tamed farmlands beyond. Fotio was a city boy by heart and was most comfortable in enclosed environments. The wide-open fields and pastures in which wheat grew and cows farted made him uncomfortable. A shiver went down his spine and he resisted the urge to turn around and run home. 'So what you're telling me is that we're going on a mad quest to save the Gods despite the fact neither of us like them,' he said. 'Does that sound right to you?'

Akakion shrugged. 'Pretty much.'

'And we're doing this because the new God may be worse than the old Gods.'

'It's not just the Gods, lad. It's Helvenica. Our land, our country,' Akakion said. 'The armies of Monos are mustering upon our borders and their one and only purpose is to make us a part of them. They don't just want to kill our Gods, they want to kill Helvenica.' He pulled a small flask from his pack and took a swig before offering it to Fotio. 'Stiporo?'

'Thanks,' Fotio said. He took a drink from the proffered flask and gagged. The priest's liquor was not for the faint of heart. 'A noble cause,' he managed to say between choking coughs. 'But I am not nearly as dedicated to the Helvenican way of life. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just wander off when you aren't looking?'

'If you don't go, Aquina will feed you to the sharks.'

'That's coercion that is! Fate said that I had to do this of my own free will!'

'Yes, yes, of course she did. What she didn't tell you was that if you didn't go of your own free will, then your fate would be to be eaten by sharks.'

'Oh. I think I'm beginning to understand,' Fotios said. He took a second, deeper drink from the flask.

Akakion smiled. 'And when all is said and done, being a hero is far better than being a thief.'

'But being alive is far better than being dead.' Fotio said and took another swig of the flask. 'Come on, let's go.'

Akakion withdrew a second flask from his pack. 'I always carry a second in case of cold weather,' he said, as the

two set off on the road to Putami.

Chapter 2: Tragics and Tragedy

The journey to Putami was uneventful and, depending upon one's perspective, pleasant. The day was warm, the air fragrant, and the landscape picturesque. Fotio, after half a flask of stiporo, was feeling fine. Akakion, whose anxiety levels rose with every step he took, wasn't feeling quite as benevolent - and he'd had an entire flask.

'At last,' Akakion said, as the white walls of the village came into view. Putami was on the edge of the semi-wild lands that lay between Aquinos and The Temple of All Gods. The thick wall around the village gave the residents a feeling of security as they lay in their beds at night. 'I'm going to visit the priest at the local temple here to arrange for supplies for the trip to the Temple. You can wait for me at the inn.'

'Oh, so now you trust me?'

Akakion shrugged. 'You have a greater understanding of your fate now,' he said, his voice clear and his words crisp despite having downed a decent volume of stiporo.

The guard on the wall recognized Akakion and hastily opened the gate.

'Captain, escort my companion here to the inn and stay with him until I return.'

'Yes Lord,' the guard replied and turned to Fotio. 'This way, good sir,' he said.

'There's no need for an escort,' Fotio said, but Akakion was already gone. Fotio could see him scuttling through the crowded streets as if all the demons in the underworld were on his tail. He sighed and turned back to the guardsman. 'Lead the way, Captain.'

Fotio fell into step with the guard, who led him in the opposite direction to that which the priest had taken. Putami wasn't a big place, but it was surprisingly lively. 'Is it usually this busy?' he asked as they pushed their way through an especially dense intersection.

'No sir, usually it's a quiet little place. But once a year it fills to the brim for the Tragedy Festival. People come from all over Helvenica to have a bit of a weep, sir. Very popular.'

'I've lived in Neraki my whole life and have never heard of it.'

'We get lots of folk from Neraki here, sir. Maybe tragedy just isn't your thing?'

Fotio considered his life.

'Yeah, I'm definitely more a dark comedy type of guy. Is there a festival for the ridiculous?'

'Not that I know of sir. Not here, anyway. We're far too serious here for comedy. Uh, and here we are,' he said, pointing to a large building located on a busy crossroads. There was a picture of a hole painted over the door, which

Fotio thought was unusual. The guard led the way, and held the door open for the young thief.

Fotio was a gregarious individual, and the inn was *almost* everything he could have wanted. There were people everywhere, the drink was flowing, and the noise was at pain levels. It's just that no one looked like they were having much fun.

'It's the tragedy festival, sir,' the guard said in response to Fotio's shocked expression. 'All of these people are Tragic. You get used to it after a while. Everyone's enjoying themselves, and that's what counts in the end.

'But they all look miserable, Captain,' Fotio said.

'That's part of being a Tragic sir. That and the black clothes. You can't be a Tragic and wear bright green pants with a pink shirt and go around smiling all the time, now can you?'

Fotio surveyed the tragic scene and almost despaired.

'I'll be sitting by the door if you need me sir. Have fun.'

Fotio glared at the guard. 'Thanks,' he said and made his way through the black clad crowd to the bar.

The innkeeper was plump and rosy of cheek and didn't need the black clothes to show the world he was a Tragic. It was plain to see on his face.

'Welcome to the Pit of Despair,' he said when Fotio was within earshot. 'Would you care to try a Dismal

cocktail? Created special for the festival.'

'Got anything happier?' Fotio growled.

The light in the innkeeper's eyes seemed to dim for a moment and his face lost some of its color. Fotio was taken aback by how broken the innkeeper looked. Obviously, being the sponge that absorbs tragic tales all day long can do terrible things to a person.

'We certainly do,' the innkeeper said, and poured a large measure of stiporo into a glass. 'This is obviously your first encounter with Tragics so I'll give you a little advice. Stiporo helps. The first one is on the house.'

'I'll try not to smile too much while drinking it,' Fotio said as he accepted his free drink and headed towards the only empty table in the house. It was, coincidentally, in a brightly lit area of the Inn, directly opposite a window through which the late afternoon sunlight streamed. The Tragics wouldn't go anywhere near it.

The thought of spending however long it took Akakion to return, sitting and staring at the dismal scene in the inn made Fotio gag, so he seated himself facing the window.

'You look a little out of place here,' a voice purred behind him as he was making himself comfortable. Fotio turned around and looked up into a pair of green, almond shaped eyes.

'Ung,' he said in response. The eyes belonged to the second most beautiful woman Fotio had ever seen. She stood

before him, bathed in sunlight, a vision that almost matched that of the Goddess Aquina. His eyes drank in her beauty. They lingered on her oval face, framed by auburn curls that fell to her shoulders. They spent a little more time below the neckline, where her simple, loosely cut, and scant blue dress highlighted the fact that she was a female of the species.

'Hello? Can I sit down?'

'Yes, yes, please do,' Fotio said, coming out of his trance.

'My name is Geneka,' she said, after she had taken a seat. Either by accident or by design - Fotio found it hard to decide which - her dress managed to reveal just enough flesh to raise his temperature but not enough to make him blow his stack.

'Am I glad to see someone not wearing black.' she said.

'Me too,' Fotios squeaked. Geneka giggled and he blushed.

'I'm sorry,' he said in a more normal tone, 'it's been a long day, and it's ended in this depressing place. I wasn't expecting the most beautiful woman in all of Helvenica to step out of the darkness and ask to share my table. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed.'

Geneka blushed. 'I know how you feel,' she said, crimson to the ears. 'I was sitting at the bar with some of the most miserable people in all of Helvenica when the most handsome man I have ever seen walked through the door.'

'I think that is, quite possibly, the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.'

Geneka smiled and Fotio fell in love. He knew it was love because he and Geneka talked and laughed and an hour passed without either of them touching their drink. In fact, he was enjoying himself so much that he began to feel worried.

'Are you okay?' Geneka asked. 'You look nervous all of a sudden.'

'That's because I am. We're getting along so well, and I like you so much, and now everything is going to go wrong,' Fotio blurted out.

'What?'

'It always does! I've never, ever kissed anyone because it always goes wrong!'

Geneka looked puzzled. 'You've never been kissed?'

'Never, ever. Every time I get close, something terrible happens.'

'Like what?'

'A burning stone fell from the heavens and struck the bed upon which my first love and I lay just as I was about to steal my first kiss.'

'Was she struck?'

'No, but her father's house burnt to the ground, and she said it was my fault.'

'How could it be your fault? That's just bad luck.'

'That's what I thought so I moved on. I was on a

picnic with my second love and just as I was about to steal a kiss, a tree fell over our blanket and squashed her pet dog.'

'Oh come on, how can that be your fault?'

Fotio shrugged. 'I don't know, but it was. Just like it was my fault that lightning struck the next one. And a lion attacked the one after that.'

'Maybe they just weren't the girls for you.'

Fotio shrugged and looked crestfallen. 'A wall fell on the last one and I hadn't even talked to her yet.'

Geneka leaned forward and, before Fotio could react, kissed him gently on the lips. 'Nothing's happened to me,' she said.

Fotio looked around, expecting the worst. When it didn't happen, he relaxed a little.

'It's probably because you're not serious,' he said. 'You just did that to prove a point.'

'No, nothing happened because I am protected by Monos. The old Gods have no power over me.'

Fotio dropped his head into his hands and began to sob. 'I knew something bad would happen, I just knew it!'

'Come with me, Fotio. Monos is a benevolent God,' Geneka said. She leaned forward and took Fotio's hands in hers. 'I haven't taken my vows yet. Why don't you come up to my room with me? Tomorrow, after a night of passion and love, we will take our vows together. A year will pass in the blink of an eye and then we can make love every full moon for the rest of our lives.'

'How can you do such a thing? How can you betray your people and your Gods? How can you forsake me?' Fotio wailed. 'Even if I wanted to, I can't come with you! Aquina herself has sent me on a mission. I'm to accompany Akakion, the Keeper of the Order, to try and stop the war!'

'There will only be war if the people resist the coming of the True God,' Geneka said. 'Come with me and we will spread the word. Once people know that the light is coming, they will abandon the darkness.'

'Do you really believe that?' Fotio said.

'Yes. The coming of the light is inevitable. Join us.'

Through the window, Fotio saw Akakion trudging disconsolately towards the Inn. 'Akakion has returned,' he said.

'Where,' Geneka said, and looked panicked.

At the door, the Captain stood and saluted when Akakion entered the inn, and then returned to loitering in the shadows.

'That's him there,' Fotio said, and turned to Geneka, but the seat was empty.

Akakion, with a glum look on his face, flopped down into the now empty seat beside Fotio. 'She's gone,' he said.

'How do you know she's gone? Did you see her?'

'What?'

'Geneka, the girl who was sitting where you are now.'

'I didn't see no girl. I was talking about my wife. Not even the Gods can help me. My Sharon is gone.'

'I'm sorry. That's tragic. How did she pass away?'

Akakion suddenly looked angry. 'She's not dead, you buffoon, she left me.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'And the great Mazi can't do anything about it. Sharon has Strigla on her side and he daren't get involved.'

'Strigla?'

'Mazi's wife, one of the seven spirits of love. Don't you know anything about your Gods?'

Fotio shrugged. 'I was banned from religious studies at school.'

'Why?'

'I hit the teacher with a chair.'

'That was a stupid thing to do.'

'He was picking on me!' Fotio said, defensively. 'And anyway, I didn't hit him all that hard. Sure, he lost consciousness for a bit but he was back at school the next week.'

'You could be Fate's first failure,' Akakion said.

'I don't get the connection between Mazi and your wife leaving you.'

'He's the lord of the Gods! He should be able to do something about it! He could command her to come back to me, or use his divine power to make her love me unquestioningly.'

'Oh,' said Fotio. 'Is that why you went to the temple?'

'Definitely not! I was there to organize our supplies for the journey south. But, since I was already in a temple I thought it wouldn't hurt to make a quick sacrifice and see how my prayer had been received.' Akakion fell silent for a moment and looked like he was fighting back tears. 'Mazi said I should just forget her and get on with my life.'

'Sounds like good advice to me. Have a drink or two. That'll help you forget, for a while anyway.'

'NO!' Akakion stood and slammed his fist on the table, where it left a sizeable dent, and sent Fotio's drink tumbling to the ground. 'I will not drink! I will not mope! I will not curl up and die! That's what she wants, but she can't have it. By the Twelve, I will rise above. I don't need her! I am Akakion, Keeper of the bloody Order and I will not be broken by a sour faced harpy!'

'Atta' boy,' Fotio said, and signaled to the innkeeper to replace his spilt drink. Akakion's return had reignited his desire for alcohol.

'There is no time for that!' Akakion shouted, and jumped out of his seat. 'We must press on. This adventure will be the salvation of our people and we must not delay. We will set off immediately!'

'No we won't! It's been a big day and I'm tired. We'll have a good night's sleep here and set out nice and early tomorrow morning, just like we planned. What do you say?'

'NO! It must be now. The sooner we go, the sooner I can show that bitch that she's made a mistake leaving me. I, Akakion, will save Helvenica and her Gods and when I do, I'll shove it right up her...'

Akakion's rage was all encompassing, so he hadn't seen Fotio stand up, nor was he ready for the expertly executed jab to his jaw that knocked him halfway into dreamland.

Fotio rubbed his knuckles and looked down at the priest's semi-conscious form, sprawled face down on the table and bathed in sunlight. 'I've been dying to do that ever since I met him,' he said, to no one in particular.

A hand dragged back his hair and a sword magically appeared at his throat. 'You're going to hang for that,' said an angry voice behind him. 'That's if I don't slice you open first.'

'That's enough Captain,' Akakion said. He sat up and shook his head to clear the lingering shadows of his temporary stupor. 'Believe it or not, the fate of all Helvenica rests on this boy's shoulders.'

'Stuff Helvenica. No one clobbers the Keeper of the Order in my town and gets away with it.'

'He did us both a favor, Attios. The grief of losing my wife maddened me for a moment. Fotio's blow drove away the madness and for that, I am grateful.'

The blade vanished from Fotio's throat and the hand release his hair.

'You're lucky the Lord Akakion is a forgiving man,'

Captain Attios said as he sheathed his sword.

'Thank you, Captain, you may return to your duties now.'

'As you wish, Lord. Pardon me if I'm being out of line, my Lord, but we heard down at the barracks that you was having a hard time of it lately. If you need cheering up or anything, you're always welcome to come down to the mess hall and hang out with us. Some of the lads are so funny they could put a smile on a Tragic's face.'

'If only I could, Captain, I would gladly take you up on your invitation. But we are on an urgent mission and will be leaving at first light.'

Captain Attios saluted Akakion, gave Fotio a greasy look, and marched out of the inn.

Fotio watched him go. 'Why do all the guards like you?' he asked, looking out the window at the Captain's progress through the tragic choked streets.

'They like me because I'm their paymaster. It's smart to be on good terms with the boss.'

'It's more than that, though. You know them all by name. And Captain Attios there was really annoyed that I'd given you a love tap.'

Akakion felt at his jaw. 'Each year, the Gods choose fifty warriors to spend three months with me learning to be leaders as well as fighters. Maybe I make a good impression.'

Fotio sighed and looked at his spilt drink. Akakion

sighed and looked at Fotio's spilt drink. As one, they turned and signaled the innkeeper to bring them more.

The innkeeper, like all good barkeeps in the universe, did not need verbal instruction. The way his clients stood, their demeanor, and their sullen expressions were enough to tell him what he needed to know. He poured three very large glasses of stiporo, downed one in a sudden mouthful and, still gagging at the burning in his throat, carried the others to the only two Tragicis in the house not wearing black.

(ii)

Atop a very high mountain, the Goddess Aquina looked down into the Pit of Despair and smiled.

'Who would have thought that such a handsome young man could go through life without being ensnared in Love's web? At least we know he won't be tempted to betray us.'

Geneka, who was standing beside her, shrugged. 'He's so sweet,' she said, looking down at Fotio with a faraway look in her eyes.

'Now, now, Genny, how many times have I told you, no romantic trysts with humans,' Aquina said. 'Especially not this one. Fate says that he will be our salvation, but I'm not so sure. There's something about him that doesn't sit right.'

'I'm old enough to take care of myself, Mom.'

'Who in their right mind would have children,'

Aquina muttered to herself, and then returned her gaze to the Inn, where Fotio was getting well and truly smashed. She was feeling a little disappointed with Akakion, whom she was relying upon to keep the young thief in line. From all appearances, the priest was in an even worse state than his ward. It was strange because the Keeper was usually so dependable that he bordered on being boring

'Thank the Pillars of Fate that Fotio's not a vegetarian,' she said.

(iii)

In the Pit of Despair, Fotio couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him, which compounded his general feeling of gloominess. Akakion, after organizing their rooms with the innkeeper, had settled in for a night of self-pity and was going on and on about how the Gods had abandoned him. It was starting to get on Fotio's nerves.

'How can you say that?' Fotio snapped in response to a particularly nerve-grating moan from the priest. 'The Gods are everywhere! Less than a day has passed since we last spoke to Aquina in person. We tread in fear lest she hear our blasphemy and fry our nuts. I don't think it's possible for the Gods to be more involved without sharing our beds.'

'Yes, but what good are the Gods if they don't

provide guidance,' Akakion replied, vehemently. 'I'm abandoned! You're abandoned! We're all abandoned!' He paused his wailing for a moment to take a gulp from his cup of stiporo. 'We are forsaken!'

'Oh come on, Mazi spoke to you in person! He told you himself to get on with your life. That's guidance. You're not abandoned, you're just drunk.'

'Oh please, that's not guidance. He didn't want to get in trouble with his wife, but he had to say something. Empty words not worth the breath he wasted upon them.'

'Well, he's still married, isn't he? And you're not? Maybe you should take a leaf out of his book and do things that make your wife happy?'

Akakion snorted into his drink. 'Yeah, right. He and Strigla are married in name only. They don't even live on the same side of Mount Polypsilo anymore.'

'What?'

'Yeah, you heard me. He's just too proud to admit he married the wrong person. They live a lie, Fotio. Our Gods are liars. And they won't do anything that isn't in their own interest, you know what I mean? They've got responsibilities to us, the people of Helvenica. We give them their power. We worship them, and make sacrifices to them, and what do we get in return? Nothing! Absolutely nothing.'

Fotio drained his cup for all the good it would do. Not even stiporo could shift his mood of black sobriety. All he could think about was Geneka and the fact that, if ever

their paths were to cross again, she would probably be celibate and cheering for the other side. 'I'm going to bed,' he said. 'See you in the morning.'

Chapter 3: Honey Cakes?

The following day dawned bright and beautiful, much to the dismay of the Tragic's preparing to go home after their festival of misery. Fotio wasn't all that happy about the sunshine either - it was far too intense for his tastes on this particular morning. What was even more annoying was that Akakion showed no ill effects from the excesses of the night before. The priest had risen early, knocked on the door to Fotio's room and let in Dawn's rosy fingers, which proceeded to pummel the young thief's brain. The priest even whistled as they made their way to the Temple of Mazi to pick up supplies for the journey south - a high-pitched keening that annoyed rather than entertained.

'Honey cakes?' Fotio said after inspecting his pack. 'You got your lackeys to fill our bags with honey cakes? Is this what we're going to eat for a week?'

Akakion stopped whistling, which brought a smile to Fotio's, albeit a fleeting one. 'Don't grumble, there's other stuff in there. I never realized just how good those things were, especially as walking food. They're tasty, lightweight and last forever. I got the temple cooks to prepare a batch for us. They're not as good as your Mom's, but they'll do.'

Fotio made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat and hoisted the pack onto his shoulders.

They wound through the narrow streets and past the caravan that was waiting to collect the last few Tragics who needed to travel south. For the first time since the two had met, Fotio and Akakion agreed on something: better to walk than to ride in the caravan of misery.

A couple of the bored looking guards that were slouched against a cart straightened up and saluted Akakion as he walked past. 'Poor bastards,' he muttered when they had moved beyond earshot. 'Imagine having to go on such a long trip with someone you don't like.'

'Yeah. Poor them.'

The priest laughed and clapped Fotio on the back. 'At least their travelling companions aren't reluctant servants of the Gods, eh Foti?'

'You seem far more cheerful today than you were last night.'

'Not even the Gods can deny a man a moment of grief when his marriage falls apart,' Akakion said, as they approached the southern gate in the town wall. 'But today is a new day, and life goes on.'

'Very philosophical,' Fotio said and hoisted his pack higher up on his shoulders. Despite all his grumbings, he was beginning to enjoy himself. The morning was clear and warm, with a refreshing cool breeze that carried a faint tang of the sea coming from the west. Regardless of the bizarreness of his

current plight, it was still better than waking up in a musty stable and wondering where his next meal was coming from. He may be a hostage of Fate, but at least Fate was a good host, and there were far worse dooms than to go on a pleasant stroll through the forests of Helvenica in the summer time. As they walked, Fotio found himself pondering life while Akakion whistled.

There was little to distract Fotio during the march - the countryside south of Putami was very similar to the countryside north of Putami, just a little wilder. The fertile fields weren't as manicured, the farmer's homes less well kept, and the occasional wood they passed through was darker. He found himself focusing more and more on Akakion's whistling, until his ears buzzed and his mind filled with images of blood and devastation, which got in the way of his pondering.

'It all seems a bit farfetched,' he said, after they had been marching steadily for close to an hour. It's not that he felt the need to converse, but he did need to stop Akakion's whistling, and it was either chat or crush the priest's skull with the mace. Considering the way his two previous assaults had fared, chatting was probably the safest option.

'What?'

'This.'

'Walking to the Temple? I thought we agreed against going with the caravan.'

'No, the reason we're going to the Temple at all. It

all seems a bit strange and unreal.'

Akakion shrugged. 'It seems quite normal to me.'

'Yeah, but you're part of the whole conspiracy, aren't you? The Gods didn't pluck you out at random and tell you that you've got to go and save the world. It's all in a day's work for you.'

'Helvenica is not the whole world, and your presence on the journey is not an accident. Do you think the Gods send dreams to one hundred heroes every day of the week?'

'But I'm not a hero! I'm just a delivery boy who moonlights as a bad thief...'

'Who just happens to be able to wield the Stone Mace, a weapon most men can't even lift off the ground!' Akakion said abruptly. 'Face it lad, you're not just a regular failure. You're a *heroic* failure.'

Fotio fell silent. 'You could at least take me seriously,' he said, after a short while.

'I've travelled many miles to escort you to an audience with the Emperor, leaving important duties undone. You do understand that it's the *Emperor*? The ruler of all Helvenica. The boss! The big cheese! And you've already had an audience with a King. Had you even seen King Solon before? And you've met a God. How many times have you met a God? This is a deadly and important journey we are about to undertake and you should not take it lightly.'

The band of Harpy's that chose that precise

moment to attack only served to highlight Akakion's point.

Fotio didn't have time to count them properly, but at least ten of the screeching fiends swooped down upon them from behind. The two travelers managed to ward off the first wave with mace and spear.

'I always thought Harpy's were ugly,' Fotio said, as he and Akakion stood back to back watching the circling monsters. He assumed they were Harpies. There couldn't be too many types of flying women-ish monsters in the world, but they weren't quite what Fotio thought Harpies should be. His mind's eye pictured fanged and taloned monstrosities that were only vaguely humanoid, and, while the creatures circling them certainly had fangs and talons, they definitely weren't monstrous. Quite the opposite. From Fotio's point of view, they were being attacked by beautiful young women with white-feathered wings and a bad attitude.

'They're ugly on the inside,' Akakion said, sounding strangely distant. 'Just like all women.'

Fotio didn't know what was more frightening, the circling devils or Akakion's tone of voice. 'Are you okay?'

'Why'd you do it,' Akakion screamed. 'Why! Why!'

'What are you talking about, Keeper?' The biggest of the flying women screeched in response to Akakion's strange question. Unlike the others, she wielded a dagger in each of her hands. 'We haven't eaten you yet.'

'I was always good to you!' Akakion screamed back. 'I told you when we first met I'd be away from home a lot. I

am the Keeper and the Gods need me.'

Fotio decided that the strange sound the Harpy made must have been laughter, but he failed to see any humor in the situation. The evidence of his ears suggested Akakion had been having sexual relations with a monster. An attractive monster, with well-groomed blonde hair and a taut, feminine body, but a monster nonetheless. A little voice at the back of his head expressed concern that he found their assailants sexually appealing, but he ignored it.

'You would not survive a visit to my home, little man, and your Gods have met their match. They can protect you no more. At them sisters, we will feast on the flesh of men tonight.'

With a decidedly un-feminine screech, the Harpies flew at the two men, their talons stretched out before them like three pronged spears. Fotio saw a beam of light strike the armed Harpy in the chest and pin her to the ground before the monsters were upon him. His mace felt unusually light and he knew, in a strangely detached way, that he was in dire peril. But his body felt strong, his blood was pounding, and fear was the last thing on his mind.

The Harpies dove at him from all directions, but Fotio spun and twisted, dodging talon and tooth and claw, while his mace crushed and smashed. He did not think. He did not feel. He simply reacted. Feathers flew, bones cracked, but there was no blood and the bodies of the Harpies turned to dust as his mace drove the life from them.

When the last of the Harpies had crumbled, Fotio dropped to his knees and leaned on his mace. The muscles in his arms and chest burned, and his lungs heaved like the bellows at Master Arapsi's forge. He was surprised at how spent he felt. The battle could not have lasted more than ten minutes and he had suffered only a few superficial wounds. Through the pain and fatigue, he could hear that at least one Harpy had not vanished.

The battle had taken him some distance from Akakion, and it was from that direction that the voice of the Harpy came. Despite the protestations of his legs, he stood up and stumbled the short distance to where the Keeper of the Order stood, totally unharmed, beside the road. Akakion's eyes were focused on a spot several yards away, where the armed Harpy lay pressed to the ground and surrounded by a shimmering blue light.

'Why? Answer me,' Akakion screamed at the Harpy as Fotio approached.

'How would I know, I'm a spirit not a mortal woman,' she screeched. Fotio hadn't heard the whole question, but he could guess what it was. In a way, it was a relief to know that his companion was simply insane and not a cross-species sexual adventurer.

'Let her up,' Fotio said, but Akakion ignored him.

'Let her up,' he repeated, and pushed the priest's shoulder.

Akakion almost fell over, righted himself and then

turned startled eyes on Fotio. 'What?' he said, and the blue light surrounding the Harpy faded.

'Why did you attack us?' Fotio asked the Harpy, who was still on the ground.

'Your time is at an end,' she screeched defiantly, but there was pain in her voice. Fotio noticed that her wings were pinned under her body, crushed and broken.

'What?'

'Monos comes and you and the Twelve will be banished from Helvenica.'

'And do you think Monos will look kindly upon your kind?' Akakion said. He seemed to have recovered from his daze and was standing beside Fotio.

'Because the Twelve have been so generous to us,' she said and drove one of her daggers into her chest. Fotio and Akakion watched her turn to dust and the dagger fall to the earth.

'She'd rather face oblivion than talk to you,' Fotio said.

'What? She's not dead. Harpies are immortal.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. They are spirits of the Earth, which is why she knew me. What do they teach kids in school these days, or did you miss anthropology because you hit the teacher with a table? The Harpies will return to their Spirit Halls beneath Mount Polipsilo where they will carve new bodies from the stones of the mountain. It will take them

years, but what is time to an immortal creature?'

'I'm not the first person to nod off in school and I'm sure I won't be the last,' Fotio said. 'Let's move up the road a little. I don't think I can relax enough to rest here. All these piles of dust are weird.'

Akakion wasn't listening. 'She was right,' he said, sitting down in the middle of the road. 'Sharon hates me.'

'Well, yeah. That's why she left you.'

'I'm a terrible person and Sharon hates me,'

Akakion said, and started to sob.

Fotio stood, slack jawed, and watched as Akakion fell onto his side and curled his knees into his chest. 'She hates me,' he whispered, wrapped his arms around his knees, and started to cry.

(ii)

The Tragics, whose caravan arrived at the scene of the battle an hour later, were in awe of Akakion's level of misery. They clustered around the guards who formed a muscular barricade a few yards from where he lay and stared at him in envy.

'Lord Akakion!' one of the soldiers said, making his way to the priest's side while his peers kept the ogling Tragics at bay.

'We got attacked by Harpies,' Fotio volunteered.

'What have you done to him?' the soldier said,

drawing his sword and facing the young thief. Behind him, the other soldiers also drew their swords.

Fotio hadn't noticed just how many soldiers there were. 'I didn't do anything to him. I told you. Harpies attacked us.'

'Do you think we're idiots or something? No harpy would be stupid enough to attack the Keeper. Mazi would make it his personal business to turn her eternity into a misery.'

'Ask him! It's not as if he's unconscious or dead,' Fotio said, and a look of concern crossed his features. 'He isn't, is he?'

'No, Foti, I am not dead,' a cracked and broken voice said. If it hadn't come from the curled body he would not have recognized it as Akakion's. 'He speaks the truth, sergeant, we were attacked by harpies, and they knew who I was. They just didn't care.'

Akakion uncurled himself and stood up. 'Our Gods are weakening while we stroll through the countryside.'

'So it's true what Captain Attios said, we are abandoned.'

'Not abandoned, sergeant, just left to our own devices. The Gods cannot help us now. It's up to the people of Helvenica to answer the threat of Monos and his army. I hate to do this, but my companion and I must get to the Temple of All Gods as quickly as possible so we must take two of your horses.'

'At once, Lord,' the sergeant said and hustled off, yelling at people at the top of his voice.

'We're going to ride?' Fotio said, hope in his voice.

'Yes. The situation is worse than I had thought and we must make haste. The Gods may as well not be there for all the help they're going to be to the people of Helvenica.'

Fotio thought for a moment of what a world without Gods would be like. It seemed a rather pleasant proposition from where he currently stood, but he thought it best to keep his thoughts to himself.

The sergeant, who returned leading two poor old nags, interrupted his theological cogitations. 'This is all we can spare, Lord,' he said to Akakios. 'They may be getting on, but they're both still strong and capable of carrying a rider.'

'Thank you, sergeant, these will be fine,' Akakios said, and took the reins of both horses and passed one set over to Fotio.

'Oh, just one more thing,' the sergeant said after he had helped them load their packs onto the horses. 'Old Ormi here,' he pointed to Fotio's horse, 'he's had a bit of a tough life and every now and again he takes fright. It's not that bad, really, and he eventually slows down and wanders back.'

(iii)

Fotio hadn't ridden a horse for some time - not since his ignoble exit from school in fact - and he'd missed it.

He was a long way away from being Helvenica's best horseman, but he could put in a fair claim for being its most enthusiastic. Until now, all the horses he'd ridden had made him feel like he was astride a beast that was power and speed made flesh. Today he learnt that not all horses were the same.

Ormi was not a horse in a hurry.

'We could probably make better time walking,'

Fotio complained, but Akakion ignored him. He'd been moody and unresponsive for most of the day and it was beginning to get on Fotio's nerves.

'Want a honey cake,' he ventured a few minutes later.

Akakion turned to look at the young thief. His eyes were red and tear stained, and barely concealed the roiling mind behind them. 'No I don't want a honey cake,' he said in a barely audible whisper. 'I HATE HONEY CAKES!' he screamed, scaring twelve textures of shit out of Fotio and magically transforming Ormi the plodder into a beast that was power and speed made flesh.

Fotio grasped the reins and hung on for dear life, 'Aaaaiiiiiieeeee,' was all he could think of saying as Ormi bolted down the road like there was a pride of hungry lions on his tail.

One scream was barely adequate and Fotio was gathering a good lung-full of air to power the second when he was distracted from his panic by a giant, disembodied,

feminine hand. It popped into existence right before his eyes, surrounded in a golden light, and moved down to stroke Ormi's head.

This had little effect on the animal.

Fotio gibbered in terror and contemplated jumping off. A mad horse was bad enough, but a mad horse haunted by a giant hand was definitely too much.

The ghost-hand grabbed the reins, but there was no stopping Ormi in his reckless flight from the demons of his mind. Apparently out of ideas, the hand wandered down and vanished beneath the horse.

Fotio watched it go, but its disappearance did little to comfort him. He was about to unleash the almighty scream he had prepared earlier when he was distracted yet again, this time by Ormi's hooves leaving the ground.

Man and horse made confused noises and looked down at the ground, which was about a yard beneath where they both thought it ought to be. Ormi thrashed his legs and Fotio finally let out his scream, but they both ran out of puff after a few minutes and ended up just hanging in the air.

Fortunately, Ormi had stayed on the road and it wasn't long before Akakion caught up with them. 'I think the Gods are watching,' he said as he reined his horse in beside the dangling duo.

'I never would have guessed,' Fotio replied. 'Can you get us down from here, please?'

'I don't think so. It's not like the Gods listen to my

prayers,' Akakion said.

Ormi and Fotio floated gently to the ground, in a gesture that Akakion felt proved just what petulant bastards the Gods were. He snatched the reins in case the horse decided to bolt again, but Ormi had gone right off the whole idea and was considering never getting above a gentle trot ever again.

Fotio carefully dismounted, moved several yards away, and sat down heavily on the grassy verge of the road. 'You are the craziest bastard I have ever met,' he said. 'You're even crazier than that bloody horse.'

'Sorry.'

'Sorry? Is that it? Sorry? You were useless against the Harpies, you scared the life out of my horse and almost got me killed, and all you can say is sorry? It's a miracle Helvenica still exists with you as the Keeper.'

Fotio flopped backwards onto the ground. 'You've tormented me more in a couple of days than all my teachers managed in all the years I spent at school put together.'

'I'm sure you've had girlfriends that have been worse,' Akakion said and flopped down beside the thief.

The horses, freed from their bonds, looked at one another and reached a conclusion. Things had been a bit weird in the last few minutes and some quiet time was in order. They took to grazing on the side of the road.

'It's a mystery to me why women are so attracted to thugs and thieves,' Akakion continued, oblivious to the blush creeping over Fotio's face. 'When I was a lad, it was a

struggle meeting women, yet the local bully boys had to beat them off with a stick. What is it that women see in men like you?'

'What in the name of The Twelve are you talking about? Who cares what women see in men like me?'

'No, go on, tell me. It's a serious question.'

Fotio rolled his eyes and sighed.

'Come on Foti, don't be shy. I left you alone in the Inn for a couple of hours and you somehow managed to snare a girl,' Akakion paused. 'What was her name? Germina, wasn't it?'

'It was Geneka and you scared her off,' Fotio snapped.

'Pretty name,' Akakion said, his smile stretching towards leer-dom. 'It's a pity I never got to meet her.'

'Why, so you could ask her why your wife left you?'

'Not all relationships are like your empty affairs,' Akakion said, his voice becoming heated and his attitude combative. 'Marriage is a lifelong commitment, not a quick grope in the dark.'

'How far are we from The Temple?' Fotio asked in an effort to change the flow of conversation. He was eager to get to their destination because he was sure that the Emperor would see the madness of this plan and release him. His cynical heart laughed at his optimism.

'Two days if the horses stay well,' Akakion said and then looked about him. They were in a small clearing by the

side of the road. 'It's getting late so we may as well stop here for the night.'

'Oh come on, there's still plenty of sunlight left, and the horses look like they could keep going. Why delay? After all, the future of Helvenica is in our hands!'

Akakion looked suspiciously at the thief. 'I suppose so. Let's get a move on then.'

Chapter 4: The Temple of All Gods

Fotio had been eager to end the journey and had insisted upon taking meals while they rode and stopping only when the horses were exhausted. Thanks to his impatience, the two travelers found themselves on a small hill overlooking The Temple of All Gods on the evening of the third day from Putami.

Sitting atop his worn out mount, Fotio looked down upon the city as it lay bathed in the soft light of the setting sun and pondered his growing doubt. The same people who had built this beautiful place were seeking his help, and he was going to refuse them. He wasn't quite sure *why* he was going to refuse them, but that's what he was going to do. He sighed - something he had been doing a lot more of since meeting the priest - and urged Ormi into motion. Akakion hesitated a few seconds and then followed.

Lifelike statues of Gods and Emperors lined the road winding down from the hill to a magnificent red and blue

archway that framed a gap in the high walls. Behind the wall, blue and white buildings rose up from the valley floor, forming intricate patterns of laneways on either side of the road as it wound up onto the slopes of two large and craggy hills. A river flowed under a smaller and bared archway to the east of the road, its course through the city made visible by the lush gardens that were cultivated along its banks. The temple itself rose up on the western side and towered over the tree lined streets and avenues.

'There is no door in the archway,' Fotio observed.

'There is, but it has been fashioned by divine hands,' Akakion replied. 'Thulia, the God of Toil, made a gate of air and fire that allows only those that love the Gods to pass. Any who are enemies are incinerated and their ashes scattered to the heavens.'

Fotio gave him a look. 'That sounds a little farfetched.'

'Nah, it's true. I've seen it happen.'

They followed the cobbled road and, after only a short hesitation from Fotio who imagined he felt a sudden heat as he neared the invisible gate, rode through the arch and into the city. Akakion explained that there were no guards because the statues on the road were sentinels and would warn the city if danger approached. Once through the gate, the priest took the lead and immediately turned right onto a narrow path that followed the wall from the inside. 'This will lead us directly to the emperor's compound,' he explained.

After three days on the road with a surly companion, Fotio looked wistfully at the cobbled boulevard that wound into the city itself. He craved a strong drink and a hot meal amongst normal people, but he consoled himself with the thought that the sooner he saw the Emperor, the sooner this farce would be over.

The path they travelled may have been narrow, but it made up for its lack of stature with its magnificent attire. The cobblestones were of a dark red hue with fine veins of gold and silver forming interconnected patterns upon their surface, as if a spider had built its web within the stone itself. Red painted columns with blue collars at their top supported a stone roof upon which appeared images of Mazi engaging in Godly activities - usually involving violence. Fotio was fairly sure that the images were only paintings, but they were so realistic that he was half expecting blood to drip down upon him from one of the many battle scenes. Despite the odd image that did not feature violence as a central theme, the ceiling paintings made it clear that Mazi, the Lord of the Gods, did not shirk from a fight.

The city wall was eventually replaced at the side of the path by the raw stone of the hillside, and soon after it opened into a large open yard in which a small army was encamped. At least, the camp looked like the sort an army would make. The individual soldiers, however, didn't quite fit as far as Fotio was concerned. He turned to Akakion to voice his concerns about the un-military soldiers and was surprised

to see the look on the priest's face. It was a curious blend of pride and fear.

'If these soldiers are here, then the situation is far worse than I feared. These are The Guardians of Eternity, the three hundred soldiers who usually protect the entrance to the realm of the Gods at the foot of Mount Polipsilo,' Akakion replied to Fotio's unasked question. 'They are, without a doubt, the finest body of warriors in the world.'

Fotio turned his unbelieving eyes back to the strange camp. 'They're naked!' he pointed out, despite knowing it was a redundant statement. Anyone with eyes could see that. 'And some of them are, um, engaging in lewd behaviour. Look at those two over there,' he said, pointing. 'That doesn't look very military to me. Oh, there's three of them.'

'They are the Army of Lovers,' Akakion explained. 'They owe their ferocity to the fact that each soldier would be ashamed to be seen as weak in the eyes of his or her lover. And they are not naked! Look, can you see? They each have a shield. In battle, they also carry two javelins and a sword buckled about their waist. And they're wearing sandals.'

While they were talking, one of the soldiers noticed them and straightened up. He was the only one wearing any clothing in the entire camp - a helmet with a long comb running from front to back. Fotio guessed that he was the head pervert.

'Company! ATTEN-TION!' the hat-wearing

soldier bellowed.

Three hundred naked people disengaged themselves from whatever it was they were doing and stood up straight. Only a few carried a shield despite Akakion's statement and those that did held it over their left flank, which Fotio thought did them absolutely no good at all.

Tears of pride welled up in Akakion's eyes. 'I trained them all,' he said, 'and they make me so proud.' He crossed his right fist across his chest and then thrust it into the air, middle finger extended to the heavens in a symbolic representation of the landmass of Helvenica. 'Soldiers of Eternity,' he bellowed even louder than the helmet-wearing soldier, 'I salute you!'

Three hundred middle fingers rose to the heavens in response.

'I thought I heard the footfalls of a giant,' said a voice from the direction of the temple. A man stepped out from behind the body of naked soldiers. It had to be a man, Fotio thought to himself, because bears can't talk.

'Your Holiness,' Akakion said as he slid off his horse and onto his knees. The soldiers all followed suit, which left Fotio sitting atop Ormi and towering over everyone.

'So this is the hero who will save Helvenica and her Gods,' the big man said as he approached.

Akakion looked up urgently at Fotio, who finally twigged on who was talking to them and slid off his horse and onto his knees.

The big man laughed and the sound was so rich and hearty that it made Fotio want to join in the joke. The Emperor, for that is who he surely was, came and stood beside the horses. Up close, he looked even more impressive. He was a huge man, a full head taller than Fotio who towered over most, and nearly as broad across the shoulder. But even more striking than his size was his hair, which was curly, and black as night. It hung about his head like a dark and angry cloud, and his beard fell to his chest in dark ringlets that contrasted with his blood red and sky blue robe.

'The times are too urgent to allow rank and tradition to govern our actions,' the big man said and gestured to Akakion and Fotio to stand. 'And while I am flattered that the Guardians of Eternity hold me in such esteem, I would be grateful if they continued their preparations to march tomorrow.'

'You heard His Holiness,' bellowed the helmeted soldier, 'back to work.'

'Word has reached me, Lord Keeper, that you have been struggling of late,' the Emperor said.

'I am sorry, Your Holiness,' Akakion mumbled, looking at the ground. 'The situation with my wife has clouded my mind.'

'Mazi is very concerned, as am I,' the Emperor said. 'If the circumstances were any less dire I would have insisted you take some time off.'

'I understand, Your Holiness. I will do my best.'

The Emperor turned to Fotio, and a puzzled look crossed his bearded face. 'Have we met before, young hero?' he asked.

'No Your Holiness, I have never before been blessed by your presence.' Fotio said and made to continue, but hesitated. Throughout the entire journey from Putami, he had planned to beg the Emperor to let him return home because he was not a hero and the whole quest felt like a ghastly mistake, but now that the time had come to speak, he wasn't quite so sure.

What did he have to go home too? He had always thought of his mother's house as home, but pride forced him to spend most of his nights in a stable at the edge of town. And his "friends" were a motley collection of thieves and petty scofflaws who had probably already forgotten his name.

How could someone like himself say no to an Emperor offering him an opportunity to be a hero, to save his homeland and his Gods, and to stop a long and pointless war? For the first time in his life, Fotio had an inkling that, just possibly, he was his own worst enemy.

The big man noted the young thief's hesitation and smiled through his big beard. 'Do not doubt yourself, young hero,' he said, as if he had read Fotio's mind. 'You have been chosen by the Gods and while some may doubt their wisdom,' he looked pointedly at Akakion, 'they are not fools. You carry the Stone Mace on your back as if it was the lightest cotton cloak, and your mount was able to carry you and the

Mace together, which shows it is not just the strength in your arm that makes it possible.' He looked perplexed for a moment. 'But you do remind me of someone and I cannot figure out who. Never mind, I'm sure it will come to me in time. Your name is Fotio, is it not?'

'Yes Your Holiness.'

'I'm sure you will have a major part to play in saving Helvenica and her people, Fotio,' he said and turned back to Akakion. 'I know that you have only just arrived and are in need of rest, but the situation has worsened considerably since you were last here, Lord Keeper. The armies of Monos are almost ready to march, which is why we have summoned the Guardians of Eternity. We hope that they will buy us enough time to allow our own armies to reach full strength.'

'But Your Holiness, you cannot sacrifice these soldiers for such a trivial gain. They are our most potent weapon.'

'We have no choice. Our forces are scattered throughout the land and would offer little resistance to the invaders. Only the Guardians can hope to slow them down enough to allow us to muster the strength to face them. There is a chance that they will triumph, however, and that chance is tied to your quest, Keeper,' the Emperor said. 'You and Fotio are going to leave here tomorrow morning, a few hours before the Guardians march. If you can destroy the staff before they engage the armies of Monos, then the Twelve

will be able to aid them in their attack. They will be all but invincible.'

Akakion looked shocked. 'It is a grave responsibility you place upon our shoulders, Your Holiness. Ours is a difficult mission with little hope of success! Such a slim chance of victory means that you are effectively condemning these fine soldiers to death!'

'If you fail, Keeper, we are all of us condemned. Even at full strength, our armies are no match for the force that Monos is assembling against us, and there is no way he would spare the priests and soldiers of The Twelve if he were to succeed in banishing our Gods.' The Emperor paused and looked long and hard at Fotio, before turning back to Akakion. 'Do not despair, my friend, you have Aquina watching over you. Of all The Twelve, she is the one I would most want by my side in such an endeavor. Your, um, wife, has requested you not return to your home tonight, so a meal and lodgings have been arranged for you here at the Temple.'

'As you wish, Your Holiness,' Akakion said, but quietly and with no vigor in his voice.

'Oh, and there is one more thing that you should know. If the reports from our agents are true, then some of the Kings and Queens cannot be trusted. The influence of The Twelve has waned in the spirit realm with the rise of Monos, which has caused disquiet amongst some who are attuned to its influence. We believe that the Harpies who attacked you were also responding to this weakness, so be wary of any spirits

you encounter, however benign they may appear. Despite your need for haste, I would recommend you avoid the main roads and steer clear of the big cities, especially Pethamenos directly to the south. Even the Guardians are going to march around it.'

'Going around will add many days to our journey, Your Holiness. Is it really that bad?'

'It's worse, Lord Keeper, far worse. The King of Pethamenos has all but renounced The Twelve, and the Church of Psofios has been thrown into chaos.'

'This is disturbing news, Your Holiness. What of Enorganon which sits just below it?'

'I will be honest and say that they appear to have resisted the corruption of Monos, but they have strange ways and should be avoided on general principle. They worship Homatos, the god of fertility and some of her, um, uniqueness, has tainted her worshipers.'

'Yes Your Holiness.'

'You are a giant amongst us, Lord Keeper, and even the Gods have a great respect for you. If anyone can save us, it is you. With the help of your young friend, of course.'

'Yes Your Holiness, thank you.'

'The Captain will show you to your quarters. I must hurry off because there is much to do before the hammer falls. I hope that we will be able to cushion the blow, at the very least, even if we cannot avert a war. Good luck to you both, and may The Twelve be with you.'

After the Emperor had gone, one of the naked soldiers took the reins of their horses and another led them into the temple. He showed them the dining room where a feast had been prepared for them, and the two adjoining rooms where they could rest.

'I was surprised you didn't ask the Emperor to free you from this fate,' Akakion said after they had eaten their fill. The banquet, while lavish, was lacking in one respect. He was making up for that lack by pouring stiporo from a flask into two goblets.

'It crossed my mind,' Fotio said, accepting one of the goblets, 'but where would I go? Back to being a nobody? Back to sleeping in a stable? This whole affair may be mad and will probably lead me to my death, but it's still preferable to going back to my old life.'

Akakion nodded and drained his cup. He reached into his robe and produced another flask. 'Believe it or not, I understand,' he said, and poured another measure of stiporo. 'I also am starting a new life but, unlike you, I'm not doing it willingly. If we succeed, we will be heroes and all of Helvenica will be thankful, and if we fail, well, it's not like we have all that much to lose.'

'Got another of those flasks?' Fotio asked. 'Thanks,' he said as Akakion silently withdrew a third flask from his robe and handed it over. 'There is one thing that is playing on my mind. I know what we have to do, but how do we actually do it?'

'That has been taken care of, apparently,' Akakion said. 'The Gods have managed to infiltrate Monos's camp. All we need to do is get there and they will lead us to the high priest.'

It finally dawned on Fotio just what it was he was to do. 'We're assassins!' he exclaimed.

Once again, Akakion shrugged. 'Not really. We must destroy the staff. If whoever is holding the staff refuses to let go, then, yes, we will probably be assassins. Why else would they send people like us?'

Fotio made as if to say something, but thought better of it.

'It's war, lad. We're soldiers with a job to do.'

'Got any more stiporo?'

(ii)

Despite spending the night leaning heavily upon the crutch that is alcohol, both Fotio and Akakion felt sober and alert as they stood beside their horses in the pre-dawn gloom. The Emperor had provided a pack mule to carry extra supplies in case something delayed them on the road, but that was the only indication that their journey meant anything to anyone but themselves. Even the soldiers who brought their horses simply passed over the reins and scuttled off with barely a word. Feeling isolated and alone, the two travelers mounted up and rode out of the city.

Pethamenos straddled a pass in the Irophia Mountains, which meant that they had to journey many miles to the east to avoid it. In good times, some travelers considered the eastern pass a pleasant alternative to the starkness of the city that had Psofios, the God of Death and Order, as its patron. But these were not good times, and so it was with some reluctance that Akakion led them off the main road and onto a smaller, unpaved track that led into the rising sun.

Both men were in a contemplative mood, pre-occupied with heavy internal dialogues involving the meaning of life, the mystery of love, and the dignity of the human condition, so the conversation was sparse and distracted.

'It's funny, isn't it?' Akakion said when the sun had risen above their eye line and they could look ahead without squinting. The trepidation he had felt when they turned off the main road had evaporated with the morning dew.

'What is?'

'Us. I mean, look at me. Keeper of the Order on a mission that could make or break the land I swore to protect, and it all seems so irrelevant when compared to my wife leaving me.'

'Yeah, it's an absolute hoot.'

'No need to be sarcastic about it,' Akakion said, sounding miffed but pressing on nonetheless. 'It's not as if Sharon and I got along after the first year or two, anyway, which makes it all the stranger.'

Fotio shrugged and fixed his eyes on the road ahead.

'What's really weird is that before she left me, I spent most of my time fantasizing about leaving *her*.'

Fotio maintained his silence.

'And it's not as if we ever spent much time together,' Akakion continued. 'As Keeper, I was away more often than not, and on the rare occasions that I was home, she was usually off tending Strigla's Temple.'

Fotio sighed, but said nothing.

'And you, from the look of you, I would guess that you are a bit of a lady's man who's gotten tired of his shallow, hedonistic lifestyle. What a pair, eh? It's strange how we've reached the same place from different directions.'

Fotio looked at the man upon whose shoulders rested the fate of an entire nation. 'Are you pining for a different life, Lord Keeper?'

'Far from it, young thief, I am well aware of the lifestyle maintained by people of your ilk and have no wish to share it. One partner after another, of all shapes and sizes no doubt, until you can no longer remember who you've been with and how. All that depravity twists and warps your definition of what it is to be human and fills you with a perverse and hollow thirst for carnal pleasure.'

'Tell me, how was your sex life with Sharon?'

'Pretty dire.'

'Thought so,' Fotio said, and then a thought

dropped into his head. 'What about that so called army of lovers. They looked like they were into the carnal thing in a big way.'

Akakion shook his head in dismay. 'Your defective education shines through again,' he said. 'They are devotees of Pomeros, the spirit of free love. They love many, this is true, but they love their lovers for all time.'

They rode on in silence for a little while. Eventually, Fotio said 'What if I told you that I have never kissed a girl?'

'What can I say? I am a modern man. Your choice of sexual partners is your own.'

'No, you idiot! I'm a virgin! I've never been with anyone!'

For a moment, Akakion looked stunned and then an expression of understanding swept over his face. 'There's nothing to be ashamed of, my friend, I won't judge you on the number of people you've slept with, or haven't slept with, as the case may be.' A lewd wink and a leer accompanied the end of the sentence.

Fotio was about to make an insensitive comment about the priest's ancestry that would have permanently damaged their relationship so, in a strange way, it was fortunate that a huge net come out of the scrub to his left and dragged him off Ormi, who promptly bolted. The net wrapped around and immobilized his arms, and the horse's panic twisted him in mid air so that he fell, head first, onto the

road. The last thing he saw before blackness overcame him were several huge, ugly, humanoid monsters lumbering out of the scrub at the side of the track. He thought that only concussion could explain the fact that they were all dressed in clothes that were the height of fashion and each had a blue, bow-shaped ribbon pinned to its chest.

(iii)

Consciousness returned to Fotio in stages, as if it wanted him to experience the full horror of his predicament. It began by introducing him to all his aches and pains before opening up his mind to the world at large. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard urgent voices speaking in hushed tones.

'We've got to let him go, Simon! He's the Keeper! Could you imagine what Mazi would do if he found out we ate his favorite human? He'd be beside himself!'

'Oh fiddlesticks! Mazi is yesterday's God now that this new fellow's shown up. I say we eat the priest just to show that smelly old beast that we aren't afraid of him anymore.'

'I don't know about you, my dear, but Mazi still scares the pants off me. He may be fading, but I reckon he'd have just enough power left to send a thunderbolt or two up our backsides. Just let the Keeper go. We can eat the other one. I'll make a nice meat sauce for some pasta so that there's enough to go around.'

'Quiet lads, the kid's coming around,' broke in a

third voice.

Fotio groaned and tried to roll over, but couldn't. He could feel tight ropes restricting his hands and feet, but it was only after he had opened his eyes that he realized the full extent of his bonds; looking down revealed an intricate web of ropes that totally immobilized him.

'You know, Simon, I think you over did it when you tied up this little fellow,' said an ugly giant standing a few yards away. He was wearing a bright green shirt buttoned to the collar, matched with darker green pants. In his mildly concussed state, Fotio thought his outfit was quite stylish.

'I just didn't want our dinner to escape,' said another ugly giant, who was wearing a flame red, one-piece jump suit that Fotio thought was nice, if a little showy. The long white apron he was wearing on top didn't improve it, nor did the belt of various knives that hung around his waist. 'You're always criticizing me for the most ridiculous reasons. Sometimes I think you're just jealous of my superior fashion sense.'

'Superior fashion sense?' said the first ogre, for that is what these monsters obviously were but, once again, the reality didn't quite fit the myth in Fotio's mind. 'You call what you're wearing fashion? It may be clothing, sweetheart, but it's definitely not fashion,' the Ogre concluded.

Simon was about to reply when the third ogre, whom Fotio thought was the best dressed of the three in a black and blue leather outfit, spoke up. He'd been studying

Fotio intently with a concerned look on his face while the other two had been bickering. 'This kid reminds me of someone, but I can't quite figure out whom.'

The other two ogres stopped arguing and turned to Fotio. A moment later, Simon let out a horrified squeal. 'You're right, Benny, we've got to let them both go. Look at him!'

'Oh shit,' was all Benny had to say.

'Simon, go fetch the Keeper,' the third ogre said and came and loosened Fotio's bonds. 'There's been a terrible mistake, sir,' he said as he worked on one of the more stubborn knots, 'but this is what we've been reduced to. We were once the doyens of fashion on Mount Polipsilo, now we are no more than common thieves, scratching out a miserable living on the misfortune of others.'

'You only have yourselves to blame, Douglas,' Akakion said. Simon had returned with the priest slung over his shoulder. By the looks of his bonds, Simon had done his as well. 'You all know how sensitive Mazi is. Calling him a redneck beast during a dinner in his own hall was always going to get you in trouble.'

'Put him down over here, please,' Douglas said, 'but don't untie him yet.'

Simon did as instructed and then went and stood beside Benny.

'We realize that what we did was wrong, Keeper, and would have taken it back a thousand times if we could

have.'

'Most definitely,' agreed Benny.

'In a heartbeat,' Simon averred.

'Now just to show you how sorry we are, we're not going to eat you, despite the fact that we've got sixty starving ogres back at camp. In return, you've got to put in a good word with Mazi for us. Do you agree?'

'Yes,' Akakion said without hesitating. 'You have my word that I will do my best to have Mazi lift your exile.'

'The word of the Keeper is good enough for me,' Douglas said. 'Untie these two, please Simon. I can't seem to get the hang of your knots.'

'But Dougy, what are we going to eat?' Benny whined. 'I'm fed up to the back teeth with nettle pesto on fettuccine.'

'I think that there is something else that the Keeper wouldn't mind us taking, and it'll be almost as good as fettuccine with meat sauce.'

'Nooo,' yelled Fotio, jumping to what he thought was an obvious conclusion. 'Don't take our horses! They're old and tough and will taste terrible.'

All three ogres focused angry stares upon Fotio, who blushed. If Akakion's hands had been free, he would have buried his face in them. Instead, he looked upon the scene with horror and anticipation, as if he were waiting to see what would happen to someone who had just uttered a terrible blasphemy in a temple while the God was present and in a bad

mood.

'We are not savages,' Simon said, after a textured moment. 'We would not eat such beautiful animals.' With an offended look on his face, he took off the belt from which hung many well used butcher's knives, took off his butcher's smock, and withdrew two blue ribbons from the pocket of his fashionable pants. 'These are for you to wear, so that the world will know that you support the Ogre's return from exile. Benny, if you would be so kind.'

'I was talking about the honey cakes,' Douglas said, and upended one of the packs. 'They would make a nice donation to our cause, which you obviously support because you're wearing the ribbons.'

'Honey cakes!' squealed Benny. 'I love honey cakes.' He took the ribbons from Simon and moved to pin them onto the chests of the captives.

'We'll leave you enough food to get you back to the Temple,' Douglas said, looking at the priest. 'But we're going to take pretty much everything else. In our reduced circumstances, we need all the resources we can get.'

'They're very nice,' Akakion commented, as Benny fastened the ribbon to his chest and Simon busied himself with his bonds, 'but hardly worth all of our food and our horses.'

'They are worth your lives,' Douglas said. 'Simon, could you go and tell the others we are leaving please?'

'You're so bossy,' Simon grumbled as he turned and disappeared into the forest.

'How much should we leave them?' Benny asked, looking wistfully at the pile of cakes.

Douglas smirked. 'On second thoughts, we'll keep it all. After all, we have many mouths to feed and the Keeper is a resourceful man. I'm sure he and his rugged looking companion will have no trouble finding food in this fertile land.'

Benny squealed with delight and began shoveling cakes back into Akakion's backpack, along with pretty much everything else. After they had collected most of Fotio and Akakion's possessions and untied them, the two Ogres vanished into the forest with surprising speed.

'That was well done,' Fotio said, rubbing his wrists where Simon's bonds had been particularly tight.

'Be thankful you're alive,' Akakion said and wandered over to the small pile of items that the ogres had left behind. 'They've left us our weapons, which is a blessing, and all our clothes, which I'm sure they wouldn't be caught dead in.'

'I noticed they were very well dressed.'

Akakion snorted. 'There was general rejoicing when Mazi kicked their backsides off the mountain. Bloody snobs.'

'Do you think the Emperor will give us new horses?'

'No, because we're not going back.'

'But we have no food.'

'We don't need any food. The trip around

Pethamenos takes days but the trip through takes hours. There is a shrine to Mazi in the valley on the other side of the city where we can restock.'

'But the Emperor warned us...'

'The Emperor wasn't to know that we would be captured by ogres and taken miles out of our way,' Akakion replied. 'There is a little known entrance to the city near here and I can cast an illusion upon us that will make us blend in. All we have to do is slip in the back door and walk through the city. There shouldn't be any problems as long as we keep our heads down and avoid priests.'

'Why avoid priests?'

'They may be able to see through the illusion.'

'I don't know,' Fotio began, but Akakion cut him off.

'There is no other way! The Guardians of Eternity have probably already set off and it will take us the rest of the day and most of tomorrow morning to get back to the Temple. If we go through the city, we will be on the other side before nightfall. Instead of losing time, we will have gained it, and the priests at the shrine will give us fresh horses and supplies so we can continue on our way tomorrow morning.'

Fotio was about to argue, but the priest's face warned him off it. 'Okay, lead the way,' he said.

'It's off the road to the south. Grab what's left of your stuff and follow me.'

(iv)

As far as Fotio could tell, the scrubby forest through which Akakion led them consisted entirely of thorny plants that had a personal vendetta against him. After an hour of skin tearing good times, they emerged from the scrub onto the shore of a wide marshy lake over which hung a faint purple haze.

'Poh, what a stench!' Fotio said, gagging and clutching at his nose.

'This is the fabled Hygiene Marsh of Pethamenos. Don't drink the water.'

'Where's the entrance to the city?'

'At the foot of the mountains near those buildings,' Akakion said, pointing towards the looming mountains on the other side of the lake. Come on.'

Through the purple haze, Fotio could just make out a number of buildings clustered together at the foot of the mountains. They gave the impression that they were trying to get as far away from the water as possible.

'What is this place, and who in their right mind would live here?'

'No one lives here. The sewer of the underground city runs into the biggest building over there and then out into this valley.'

'You mean this is a lake of sh..'

'Yes,' Akakion said, cutting him off, 'but they do something to it in the buildings which they say cleans it all up and gives them power to chase shadows away.'

Fotio looked around in horror. 'How do you clean turds? And what do you do with them afterwards? And if you think I'm swimming through that bog to get to the other side, then you are out of mind.' Fotio paused a moment and thought about what he had just said. 'More out of your mind than you are, I mean,' he added.

'We don't have to swim, you idiot, just follow the bloody path.'

'Hey! What happened to you?' Fotio said, and then looked down at himself. 'And me too.'

'It's the illusion. I prayed up to get them to disguise us. We look like regular Pethamenosians now.'

'Nice beard,' Fotio said, running his newly stubbified fingers through the luxuriant growth on his face. 'Why are we so short?'

'They spend most of their time underground and it's stunted their growth, or so I'm told.'

'Was it the same people who told you about the clean turds?'

Akakion shot the young thief a look that was no less poisonous for being lower to the ground and partially obfuscated by masses of facial hair. 'Just follow me and try not to draw attention to us,' he said, and set off along the path that ran beside the fetid lake.

'Why is there a path here,' Fotio asked as they trudged through the purple-tinted atmosphere.

'They grow food on the other side of the lake.'

Fotio made a sour face that somehow managed to convey his disgust through his newly acquired thick beard.

'These people are disgusting.'

'Shhh, stop talking. If anyone hears us, they'll know we're not from these parts.'

'What does it matter? We're all Helvenican, right?'

'Even before all this nastiness with Monos, the Pethamenosians weren't the most hospitable of people. Everyone passing through the city had to stay on the prescribed path, and they had to be out from under the mountain before sunset. To top it off, the greedy little buggers charged a fortune to travel through. If, as the Emperor believes, the King has renounced The Twelve then they may be even less friendly than usual.'

As they trudged towards the mountains, Akakion described his many unhappy encounters with the Pethamenosian authorities in his capacity as Keeper, but Fotio was only half listening. He had an uncomfortable feeling that not all was well, and it grew the closer they got to the mountains.

'I'm not sure this is a good idea,' he blurted out when they were only a few hundred yards from the cluster of buildings.

'Don't worry. We just need to keep our heads down

and walk swiftly and we'll be through in a couple of hours.'

'It feels wrong,' Fotio said, and un-slung his mace. It had shrunk along with rest of him, but the haft felt familiar in his hands and that reduced his anxiety somewhat.

'Just follow me and keep quiet,' Akakion said.

Grumbling about the ways of priests, Fotio allowed Akakion to lead him towards the largest of the buildings. The handful of workers busying themselves around the shores of the lake totally ignored the two as they walked past. The guards at the door weren't quite so indifferent.

'What business have you at these gates, citizens,' one of the guards asked as the two travelers approached, his accent so thick that Fotio could barely understand him.

'We have news from The Temple for the King's ears only,' Akakion said in the same accent,

'Better you than I,' the guard said. 'Pass this once, but be aware that this gate is to be closed to all but the workers of the field come sunset. The King is concerned for the safety of his people.'

'And so he should be,' Akakion said. 'War is coming and the Guardians of Eternity are marching.' He strode through the door despite his short legs and Fotio made to follow, but no sooner had Akakion crossed the threshold than the illusion lifted and he was his tall self once again. The guards gasped.

'Lord Akakion,' the second guard squealed and vanished into the building. The other guard loosened his axe

and moved to block their retreat. He did not look happy. 'I am aware that I could not stop you if you wished to leave, but I am willing to die in the attempt.'

'I would not raise arms against such a valiant soldier and Helvenican, Sergeant Chimento,' Akakion said. 'We will await our fate peacefully.'

'I know why you are here, Lord, and just so you know, I don't like what's happening,' Sergeant Chimento said, lowering his axe. 'The King rants and raves about how the Gods have abandoned us and let us down, and how we are better off alone. We know it's creepy and wrong, but Psofios has not been seen for many a day, and the King still rules despite his heresy. We have to obey him because that is the Gods' will, is it not?'

Akakion looked perplexed. 'You know of our mission?'

'It's not hard to guess, is it,' Chimento said. 'I mean, come on, you can only bad mouth the Gods for so long before they send someone to cut out your windpipe. I just want you to know that we, the guards, are faithful servants of the Gods and will be so for the rest of our days, however many they may be.'

'I am glad for your loyalty,' Akakion said.

'Do you have anything to eat?' Fotio cut in. 'We may be here a while and we haven't eaten since breakfast.'

'Actually, we've got some honey cakes back here,' Chimento said, and ducked into an alcove beside the gate.

When King Petrakefalo and the royal guard arrived, they found the three of them sitting on the grass a few feet from the door, enjoying a meal of honey cakes washed down with wine.

'Is this how my guards react to threats to our city? The home they have sworn to protect?'

'I'm sorry Your Majesty, but this is no enemy. It's Lord Akakion, Keeper of the Order.'

'Silence!' the King screamed, causing the three diners to jump to their feet. Fotio grasped his mace nervously; his feeling of disquiet had escalated to a full panic. There was something about the King that made his heart race and he was pretty sure it wasn't love.

'Your Majesty,' Akakion said, 'although I use the term loosely. Why does the divine magic of The Twelve fail when we enter your city?'

The King sneered at Akakion. 'The Twelve no longer have power in my domain. I have banished them!'

'Where did someone like you get the power to banish the Gods?' Akakion said, swinging his spear around to point at the King. Fotio took this as a signal to get ready to fight. He grasped the haft of his mace with both hands.

'Only another God has that sort of power. Are you in league with the enemies of Helvenica? Do you have a symbol from Monos?' Akakion asked.

'I need no symbol. I have the power of my mind,' the King replied. 'Guards! Arrest these two and throw them in

the dungeon.'

The command did not have the effect King Petrakefalo had expected. The guards all looked towards Sergeant Chimento, who was fiddling with his beard.

'But Sire, this is the Keeper. If we arrest him, Mazi might get angry and it's not good to have the Lord of the Gods annoyed at you.'

'Are you questioning me, your King?'

'Well, you're only King by the will of the Gods, and if they aren't here anymore, then you are no longer the King.'

'Monos is the only true God and I rule in his name!'

Fotio had heard enough. He flung the mace with all his might and it struck the King full in the head. He hadn't meant to kill him, but the mace was heavy and travelling at such a velocity that it ripped the King's head right off his shoulders. The body did an acrobatic spin in the air before collapsing in a shower of blood, while the head travelled on a few yards and struck the far wall, where the weight of the mace reduced it to a gory red smear. An eyeball somehow survived the collision and stuck out from the wall, as if interested to see what would happen next.

'Well, now we know why you were chosen,'

Akakion said.

Fotio felt sick to his stomach but he didn't have much time to ponder the wrongs and rights of what he had done because the ground beneath the King's body began to bubble and boil. Amidst the violet flames, a figure appeared.

Everyone fell to the floor except for Fotio, who stood staring at the carnage with a look of culpable idiocy on his face.

'Thank you young man,' said the apparition in the purple fire. It looked like a tall Pethamenosian, but with a violent tinge to his skin and pupil-less eyes as black as night. 'Now that you have sent that fool down to my domain I can deal with him at my leisure.' The apparition paused for a moment and looked at Fotio. 'You look familiar,' it said. 'Have we met before?'

'No,' squeaked Fotio and looked at Akakion, who was lying on the ground with his face in his hands. 'Are you Psofios?'

'Yes, yes I am,' Psofios said, 'and I am far from happy!' He looked down at the Pethamenosians who were lying prostrate on the floor, 'you have all betrayed me and The Twelve, and for that you will pay a heavy price. Henceforth, no Pethamenosian shall ever grow hair upon his face.'

There was a crowded silence as all the guards clutched at their faces, and then a great wailing rose up to the heavens.

'But Lord, we did not know what the King was up to,' Chimento cried.

'Oh please, I am a God you know. I could see what was happening and so could you. Count yourselves lucky that I was able to turn my brother's wrath and get you all off

lightly. He wanted to bring the whole mountain down upon your heads. Now, tend to our guests. They have a long and hard road ahead of them, and will need a bed for the night and horses and provisions to continue their journey tomorrow.'

'Your will shall be done, Lord,' Chimento said.

'It had better,' the God replied and sunk back into the violet puddle of molten rock.

Chimento sighed and looked at one of the guards who had accompanied the King. 'Hali, get someone to clean this mess up,' he commanded, pointing to the former King's body.

Hali, being a soldier, resorted to the tried and true military tactic of yelling at people until they did what he wanted them to do.

Chimento rubbed at his baby pink face and looked down at his beard, which had remained on the ground when he stood up. 'It's a black day for Pethamenos,' he said, scooped up his beard and tucked it into a fold in his armor. 'You've made quite an impact, young man, but I can't say that the old King didn't have it coming.' He grabbed the handle of the mace and tried to lift it off the ground, but failed.

'Sorry about that,' Fotio said, and took the weapon from the straining guard's hands. He was surprised to see that despite the gory mess it had created, the mace itself was spotless.

'We have guest rooms in the palace,' Sergeant Chimento said, not taking his eyes off Fotio. 'If you will

follow me, we'll get you settled and organize a proper evening meal.'

Fotio and Akakion followed the diminutive guard into the side of the mountain. Akakion had visited Pethamenos before, but for Fotio it was like stepping into a new world. He had been expecting cold, dark tunnels of rough stone, possibly with puddles of water created by the dripping stalactites hanging down from the ceiling. The warm, brightly lit corridor was a surprise, as were the many colorful paintings and tapestries that hung on the wall. 'Wow,' he said, 'this is amazing. Very artistic.'

Sergeant Chimento beamed with pride. 'Thank you. It's a shame more non-Peths don't get to see the corridors of our city. They are heated and lit by the bounty of the Marsh, and the greatest artists in Helvenica fight one another for the privilege of hanging their work on the walls.'

'You were the last Peth to undergo training with me, young Chimento, and that was well over two years ago,' Akakion said as they traipsed along the corridor. 'Why did Pethamenos stop sending soldiers to the capital?'

'The King went a bit funny shortly after I returned. He started going on about how Helvenica needed a new direction.'

'You should have told me.'

'Yes I should have, Lord,' Chimento said, fingering his hairless chin, 'and for failing to do so I have been adequately punished, don't you think?'

Akakion smiled. 'Peths are not known for their respect of authority,' he said. 'It's amazing that you all obeyed the King even though he was obviously going mad.'

'No offence my Lord, but there are many in the city who think that you and the Emperor are a couple of bullies who should keep your noses and tax collectors out of our business. If the King had not denounced The Twelve just now, things may not have gone as well for you as they have.'

Akakion shook his head. 'The legendary Peth love of coin rears its ugly head yet again. What do you think, Foti?'

Fotio had been busy admiring the artwork on the walls and had not been paying attention. 'Think of what?'

'Weren't you listening? The Peth love of money? What do you think about it?'

'I don't know about their love of money, but these paintings and stuff are absolutely amazing. And nobody's getting killed in any of them. That's almost unique in Helvenica. I wish I could stay longer. Is there an inn or something I can come back and stay at when all this war business is finished? And a guide to show me around?'

Chimento stopped dead in his tracks. 'What?'

'Oh. Sorry. I forgot about your xenophobia.'

Chimento's face couldn't decide on an expression. Shock, disbelief, greed - even anger had a go. It finally settled on confusion. 'I suppose we could organize some accommodation, but it will be fairly expensive. And a guide,

someone like my brother in law who is very knowledgeable when it comes to art and stuff, but he'll need to be well paid.'

'You'd do that for me? I've got a little money saved at home, about three hundred parathes. Would that be enough for a week's worth of accommodation and a guide?'

Chimento's face registered shock.

'Oh, I'm sorry! I've insulted you. Many apologies, but I'm new to these parts. Would four hundred be enough? I'm sure my mom could lend me another hundred if she knew what it was for. She loves culture and art.'

'Four hundred parathes would be enough, yes,' Chimento chocked out. 'I'll organize a special meal for you when we get to the palace,' he continued through a newly acquired manic grin. 'It'll be a taste of the legendary Peth hospitality.'

'Is Peth hospitality legendary?' Fotio asked Akakion as they trudged along behind Chimento.

'It's more than legendary, lad, it's mythical,' Akakion growled, 'but I have a feeling we're going to hear a lot more about it regardless of who wins the war.'

The corridor eventually opened up into a cavern so large that Fotio thought for a moment that they had come out into the open. Unlike the corridors, the soft light of the evening sun lit the cavern through shafts in the ceiling. The cunning engineers of Pethamenos had designed them to focus the light of day onto an ornate building at the cavern's center, giving it an otherworldly glow.

'The Temple of Psofios,' Chimento said with pride in his voice. 'Few outsiders have ever cast their eyes upon its magnificence.'

'Not yet, anyway,' Akakion muttered.

The sheer size of the cavern played tricks with their eyes and warped perspective, so what Fotio thought was a short distance to the temple took several minutes to traverse, and the temple seemed to grow as they approached. By the time they were standing at the door, Fotio could only see the top by craning his head all the way back. 'Wow,' was all he could think to say.

Beaming like a pyromaniac in a paper factory, Chimento led them inside. 'Our collection of religious art is housed in the temple,' he said leading them through an enormous entrance hall. 'It is even more spectacular than the displays in the corridors. Fotio, however, was not impressed with the paintings and tapestries that lined the walls, all of which depicted the violet-skinned Psofios attending to his divine duties. He noted that they were very similar in theme to the paintings in The Temple of all Gods and at the Palace in Neraki, except that Psofios could be seen visiting bloody retribution on the deserving before and after they were dead.

Fotio sighed. From the story that Helvenican religious art told, divinity and violence went hand in hand, which didn't feel right to the young thief. The images of violence brought the dead King to the front of his mind, and he wondered if someone would make a painting about that

distressing incident to hang on a temple wall. It was certainly gory enough.

The temple was huge and lit by the same type of smokeless flames as in the corridors. After several minutes leading them through passages and halls, Chimento opened the door to a richly decorated room and ushered them inside. 'I'll go and organize your dinner,' he said, before he and his manic grin withdrew, closing the door behind them.

Their lodgings were far too big for just the two of them, with several couches scattered amongst exotic statues, and half a dozen bedrooms accessed via discrete doors hidden behind tapestries. Murals of divine violence covered the wall, and a thick, violet carpet covered the floor.

Fotio ignored it all and threw himself, face first and rather dramatically, onto one of the couches. 'I killed him. I didn't want to kill him. It just wanted him to stop him being an idiot,' he said.

'What, the King?'

'Who else have I killed in the recent past?'

'Lots of Harpies?'

'They were monsters, not people.'

'No, they weren't human. They were still people.'

'Anyway, you said they're immortal. I didn't kill them, I just inconvenienced them for a while.'

'Many years, actually.'

'Whatever. What I mean is that King Petrakefalo is dead. He's gone forever. And I did it.'

'Didn't you listen to anything at school? Anything at all?

'Why do you always go on about my education?'

'Because you appear to have not had any! This is something that even an eight year old would know, but you have absolutely no idea.'

Fotio looked shamefaced. 'I always felt that all that crap had nothing to do with me.'

'Immortality refers to the body. An immortal will always have a physical presence here in our world, but we mortals are different. When a mortal's body dies, his soul goes to Psofios's domain deep below Mount Polipsilo where the Gods sit in Judgment and assign an eternal fate. That is where Petrakefalo has gone, and a long and painful eternity it will be for him judging by the way Psofios was talking.'

Akakion sat down on another couch and kicked off his shoes. 'Listen, it's war. People are going to get hurt. Some are going to die. That's the way it is. This is why our mission is so important. If we can destroy that staff, we'll save many, many lives.'

The Keeper stared moodily at one of the murals that showed Psofios dispensing justice in his underground realm with what appeared to be a red-hot poker. 'I don't understand what's going on.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's difficult to explain but I feel like I wasn't quite me until now. It may have been the stress of my separation

from Sharon, but I have a suspicion it was something more sinister. I think that whatever power corrupted the King may have tried to corrupt me as well.'

'Do you think so?'

Akakion shrugged. 'I've never, ever blasphemed before in my life, except for that time in Neraki with you. And you tried to kill me when you first met me. You were reacting to me then, in the same way you reacted to the King now.'

'Hey, keep me out of it. I was in a state of shock when I first met you. The King was clearly off his rocker, and I didn't want to kill him anyway.'

'But you did. And you thought I was off my rocker when you first met me, and I can guarantee you that had your mace connected, I would have died. And to top it all off, you know absolutely nothing about the land in which you have lived your entire life. Doesn't that strike you as odd? And everybody seems to think they've met you before. The harpies, the ogres, the Emperor. Even Psosios. Everybody. I don't know who you are, young Fotio, but I'm going to find out.'

'You will? How?' Fotio asked, but he didn't really want to know. It had been an action packed day and he was feeling a little overloaded. 'And I still think you're off your rocker. In fact, I think I'm off my rocker as well.'

Akakion fell back onto his couch. 'It's difficult to argue that we're sane,' he said, especially since we're going to

go against the Emperor's advice and go to Queen Filia in Enorganon. She may be a bit peculiar but she's also an earth spirit and an oracle. If anyone knows what is going on, it's her.'

There was a knock at the door and Chimento came bustling in followed by two other Pethamenosians carrying trays laden with food. 'The bounty of the Marsh,' he said.

'She must be practically unique for people like us to label her as strange,' Fotio said, as he wandered over to the table where the Pethamenosians had placed the food.

Chapter 5: Enorganon

Their departure from Pethamenos did not go quite as well as Fotio had hoped. The problems began with the horses that the Pethamenosians gave them; they were the same ones that the Ogres had stolen from them the day before. Fotio was delighted to see Ormi again but Akakion was furious, and spent a full half hour berating Chimento - whom Psofios had chosen as the new King and High Priest - about ethics and morality.

The second problem was the supplies, which consisted of half a dozen Peth honey cakes, which Chimento assured them contained whole grains and were very good for the digestion. There had also been some apples, but Fotio had fed them all to the horses before Akakion had finished berating Chimento about duty, honor, and moral fiber, and

the need for an adequate supply of honey cakes. It was a full hour before the Pethamenosians could bake up another batch of honey cakes for their journey, by which time Akakion had also run out of things to chide Chimento about.

They set off with the priest grumbling about people with tight purse strings and the value of gratitude.

'How far is it to Enorganon?' Fotio asked, as they made their way down into the forest with the mountains at their back.

'If all goes well, three days,' Akakion said, 'but we must proceed with caution. The enemy is far more cunning and powerful than we could ever have imagined.'

'You're the expert,' Fotio said. 'Lead the way.'

Travelling in the heart of summer is problematic for those with a serious task, and Fotio had always struggled to maintain a solemn demeanor. The day was warm, but with a gentle breeze that took the sting out of the heat. The trees of the forest sweetened the air; the birds sang and the bees buzzed busily. Fotio all but dozed in the saddle as the morning rolled past. Akakion, on the other hand, was thrumming with paranoia.

'Did you see that?'

'What,' Fotio replied, emerging from a daydream.

'It looked like a glint of sun on steel on the slopes of that hill up ahead.'

'Nah.'

'I think we should investigate. We'll tie up the

horses and scout ahead on foot.'

'Do we have to? It's probably nothing.'

'Yes we have to,' Akakion said as he dismounted. 'Follow me and keep quiet.' He looked up at the grumbling thief. 'On second thoughts, you stay here with the horses. I'll be back in a few minutes.'

No sooner had Akakion vanished into the forest than Fotio got out three apples and gave one to each of the horses. So much had happened to him in such a short time that he was feeling a little overwhelmed. People were fickle, false, mad, and unpredictable, but a horse was a horse and the more apples you gave it, the happier it became. Fotio felt that that was the last undeniable truth in the complex web that his life had become. Gods and heroes. What he wouldn't give to be rid of them?

'It's the right thing to do,' suggested the treacherous voice in his head that had stopped him tearing the wings off flies when he was a child.

'Oh shut up,' he mumbled and sat down beneath a tree at the edge of the road. The horses, realizing that there were to be no more apples, went and found other things to eat. None of them strayed too far from Fotio, just in case the apples started to flow again.

Akakion returned a few minutes later, looking grim. 'There are five armed men at the side of the road.'

'Bandits?'

'No, they are not armed like bandits. And they

didn't look like any Helvenican I've ever met, and I've met plenty.'

'Are we going to fight them?'

'Look, it may be a complete coincidence. Maybe they're travelers or something,' Akakion said, but the tone of his voice made it clear he didn't believe a word he was saying. 'The bush is less dense on this side of the road. We can go around the hill and get back on the road a mile or so further on.'

'Lead the way.'

Their path took them to within fifty yards of the waiting men and Fotio saw why Akakion was convinced this was no ordinary band of thieves. Through the trees, he saw men, tall and angular, with skin so white that they seemed to glow in the sunlight. They all held spears as tall as they were, and were clothed in pale blue tunics with white leather armor on their chests and legs. What confused Fotio was that they were all looking the other way along the road from which the two travelers had been approaching. He was about to point this out to Akakion when a huge white man stepped out of the bushes ahead of him and struck him full in the chest with a spear, shattering the spear and knocking Fotio to the ground.

The following seconds were a riot of sound and pain. The horses screamed and bolted, a horn began to sound a few yards away from him but stopped abruptly. Fotio recovered enough to see his assailant holding the spear haft

above his head like a club, preparing to bring it down upon his skull. Reacting instinctively, he kicked out the man's legs from under him, vaulted to his feet, and unslung his mace in one fluid movement. The man had barely enough time to cower and register a look of terror before the Stone Mace crushed his skull.

Fotio turned back towards the road to see that Akakion had skewered a second man with his spear, but not before he had sounded a horn, which was still in his mouth. He looked up expecting to see the ambushers rushing towards them. Instead, their bodies littered the road and a dozen mounted soldiers, obviously Helvenican, were riding towards them with bloodied swords in hand. Fotio collapsed onto the ground and started to weep.

Akakion knelt beside him and looked at the wound on his chest. The skin was broken and there was a bloody bruise at the point of impact. He turned and picked up what was left of the spear that had struck the young thief. It looked as if someone had hit the point, very hard, with an iron hammer. He looked back at Fotio and realized that all the scratches he had gotten in their trip through the scrub yesterday were gone. The boy had complained bitterly about them last night after dinner, laying the blame squarely at Akakion's feet for picking a poor path. He had also suffered a deep cut on his right shoulder in the battle against the Harpies that should have left a mark if Akakion was any judge, and his battle-scarred hide was testament to his experience. But it,

too, had vanished. 'It's no longer a question of who you are, lad,' he said. 'It's now a question of what you are.' He cast the broken spear aside and turned to greet the soldiers.

'Lord Akakion,' the first soldier said and dismounted. He gave the traditional Helvenican salute before continuing. 'The Queen sent us to find you. She had a vision that you and your companion were in need of aid.'

'You arrived just in time, Sergeant Cotos,' Akakion said. 'My young friend is not a soldier and seems to have had about as much death and violence as he can take.'

Sergeant Cotos looked down sympathetically at Fotio. 'The first kill is always the most difficult. I'm still haunted by mine, even though he was a murderous bastard who will spend eternity in torment. You just have to remind yourself that what you did was for the good of Helvenica.'

Fotio stopped crying and stood up. Sergeant Cotos took a step back. 'Somehow, I don't think it will be your last,' he said.

Red eyed and with blood dripping down his torso, Fotio looked huge and menacing. He picked up the Stone Mace and glared at the soldier. 'I killed the King of Pethamenos yesterday,' he said, 'but he was mad and dangerous. This was just a man, someone I had never met, who tried to kill me and for what? Nothing. There was no reason. He tried to kill me because his God commanded it.'

'Religion is bloody work, young Fotio,' Akakion said. 'Sergeant, help us gather the horses and we can be on our

way. I don't know how the Queen managed to time your arrival so well, but thank The Twelve that she did.'

(ii)

The soldiers accompanied them on the ride to Enorganon and to everyone surprise but Akakion's, Fotio's wound had completely healed by the time they arrived. During the ride, Fotio saw why soldiers in Helvenica had so much respect for Akakion. He made it his business to learn the name and story of each of the soldiers they rode with; he gave encouragement where required, and advice when needed. Fotio wasn't much of a people person and had never led anyone anywhere, but even he recognized that as a management style, Akakion's approach was practically unique. Who would have thought that treating one's underlings with dignity and respect could be so productive?

The city of Enorganon wasn't quite what Fotio had expected. It had been his experience up until now that people made city walls using stone and mud. This had been the first time he had encountered a wall created by encouraging trees to huddle together. He'd initially thought it was made of logs hammered into the earth, but Akakion pointed out the canopy.

'They're called Sklirathendra and they are amazing. Their roots go deep into the earth, they won't burn, and are as hard as steel. If every city in Helvenica had such a wall, we

would be far safer from the invaders.'

The soldiers, who had been their companions for the past few days, became their escorts and formed a row on either side of Akakion and Fotio as they rode through the cobbled streets. It was early in the evening and the light of the setting sun highlighted the red and brown hues that dominated the city. Even the people who stood aside and watched them pass were a ruddy brown color.

The soldiers led them to a three storey building in the city's heart. Only the fact that it was slightly higher distinguished it from the surrounding structures.

'Queen Filia awaits you in the palace, Lord,' Sergeant Cotos said, and dismounted. 'Come, I will show you the way.'

'This is a palace?' Fotio said, getting off Ormi and reluctantly handing the reins to a soldier.

'The palace is where the Queen has her residence, friend Fotio. We are an earthy folk and do not value excess.'

Sergeant Cotos pushed open the doors and led them into a large room, at the far end of which a beautiful young woman crowned with a garland of leaves sat on a simple wooden throne. Fotio thought she looked vaguely familiar. He took a moment to take in the room and was disappointed to see that it followed the convention of all Helvenican temples. Red and brown paintings of the God Homatos going about her divine duties, Helvenican style, covered the walls. There was considerably more red than brown because there

was more blood than Earth. He sighed. It seemed that religious iconography in Helvenica couldn't get past the smiting.

'Your Majesty, I bring you Lord Akakion, the Keeper of the Order, and Fotio of Aquina.'

'Thank you Sergeant,' the Queen said, 'but introductions are not necessary. I know both these men quite well.'

The soldier bowed his head and withdrew to stand by the door.

'It has been too long since you have graced our city, Lord Akakion. I welcome you both in the name of Homatos, the God of the Earth and all that it contains.'

'My only regret is that we cannot linger, Your Majesty,' Akakion said, and bowed deeply.

'And you, dear nephew, have never visited us at all!'

'What?' Fotio said.

The Queen laughed. 'That's not generally an accepted greeting for a queen or an aunty,' she said, 'but I will forgive you this time.'

'Why are you mocking me? I have no relatives. It's just my mother and me,' Fotio said.

'I'm not mocking you. Your mother is my sister. I was there at your birth and you've grown to be quite an impressive young man, just like your father.'

Feeling as if he was in a dream from which he could wake at any moment, Fotio fought against a sudden

lightheadedness and an urge to cry. He had wept once in the recent past and fainting or bursting into tears right now probably wouldn't do his man-credibility any favors. Instead, he said 'You knew my father?' in a cracked voice.

'Yes, I knew him well.'

'What was he like?'

Filia smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. 'How can I describe a father to the son who has never known him? Nothing I can tell you will fill the void, but know that he was no ordinary man. Have you not wondered about your life? Did it not feel as if there was someone looking over you, shielding you from harm?'

'No, not really. As far as I can tell, my life has been a series of disasters that have culminated in an insane quest to defeat a mad god.'

'Those doing the shielding may have been a little, uh, overzealous,' the Queen conceded.

'Overzealous?' Akakion burst out. 'Incompetent more like it. They couldn't even arrange a rudimentary education.'

'And yet the hopes of all Helvenica rest upon his shoulders,' the Queen said. 'As you've probably realized, Lord Keeper, Fotio is no ordinary man. He is an immortal; the son of my sister, Neoleia, an Earth spirit. His father, also a powerful spirit, feared for his safety for reasons I won't go into, and decided it would be best that Fotio be raised as a commoner, away from those who may seek to harm him.' She

paused and looked at the sweating young man. 'All that is in your past, Fotio, but it is with your future that we are all concerned. Now is your time. You are destined to decide the fate of Helvenica. Succeed in your mission and we will continue. Fail, and Helvenica will wither and die.'

'That's a heavy burden to place on the shoulders of any man,' Akakion said, 'but it is especially difficult for one so young.'

'That is why you are accompanying him, Lord Akakion. I can see that you have shaken off the influence of Monos and are now once again your true self. Monos is a most powerful being that can impress his will upon others even from a great distance. You have felt his influence upon you, and you saw how he affected King Petrakefalo. But even someone as powerful as Monos cannot control everything. He can press down upon us with all his might, but there will always be those upon whom his power will have no influence.'

Akakion looked at Fotio, who was sweating heavily. 'But your Majesty, look at him. He is struggling with all that has happened to him in such a short space of time. If it is just a matter of infiltrating the camp and destroying the artifact, then wouldn't it be wiser for me to go on my own?'

'Fate has told us that only Fotio stands a chance of victory.'

'Why must we fight a war at all?' Fotio said. 'Wouldn't it be wiser to just surrender our Gods?'

Akakion's jaw dropped and he turned to look at the

young man.

Queen Filia smiled, but it looked forced. 'Something that you wouldn't have learnt in school, even if you were paying attention, is that the Gods are the bridge between this world and the next. If Monos drives out our Gods, then the link will be broken and Helvenica will disappear. People will continue to live in this land, that is true, but they will no longer be Helvenican. They won't go to Psosios's domain when they die. The immortals will slowly disappear because the source of their immortality, Mount Polipsilo, will be just a big hill. We will fade away to little more than stories and legends. Our ancestors, our customs, everything about us, will wither and die.'

Fotio shook his head. 'You are wrong. Helvenica is not a product of her Gods. Helvenica is the sum of her people. The Gods may shape us, but that doesn't mean that we will die if they cease to exist. A war in which many of our people die will do far more damage to Helvenica than replacing a bunch of selfish halfwits with a solitary selfish halfwit,' Fotio said. The thought that Helvenica was just an extension of her Gods had raised his hackles somewhat and shaken him out of his light-headedness.

Everyone in the room but Fotio looked up at the heavens as his words tumbled out, expecting divine retribution.

'They won't do anything,' Fotio said, noticing their discomfort. 'I'm their only hope and they know it. I will go

and destroy the staff, but not because I want to save the Gods. I will go because to not go will mean war, and war will cause great sadness and pain for the people of Helvenica.'

'You said those words to me in a vision the day you were born,' the Queen said. 'I did not understand them then, and I do not understand them now. The people of Helvenica and their Gods are one and the same. You cannot have one without the other.'

'As an ordinary Helvenican, Your Majesty, I beg to differ,' Fotio said. 'Until Lord Akakion summoned me for this task, the Gods meant nothing to me. Even now, if I were asked to choose between going to war to save the Gods, or abandoning them for peace, then I would opt for peace.'

'You are no ordinary Helvenican, nor is this the time to debate philosophy, nephew. You are willingly to fight for Helvenica, and that is all that matters.' The Queen turned to Sergeant Cotos. 'See that these men are properly quartered until they want to leave.'

The soldier saluted and opened the door. 'Please follow me, my Lords,' he said.

'Good luck,' the Queen said as Akakion and Fotio filed out of the room, 'and remember to trust your instincts, young Fotio. You see far more than you realize.'

(iii)

Fotio and Akakion lingered in Enorganon for two

days, mainly because Fotio was feeling tired and ill at ease, but also because Akakion wanted to question Filia about any visions she may have had about Monos.

'She can tell us nothing more than what we already know,' he said upon returning from yet another meeting with the Queen. It was the third morning since their arrival and Akakion was becoming restless. 'He can reach over great distances to affect those who have doubt in their hearts and minds, and he's got a thing about being the one true god.'

'That doesn't sound right,' Fotio said, who'd taken to wandering the city while Akakion was talking with the Queen and had found the earthiness of the place soothing. 'If there are no other Gods, who is he fighting?'

'Demons and devils, apparently.'

'I'm glad he can tell the difference between Gods and demons,' Fotio said, 'because I certainly can't.'

'Enough of your blasphemy, there is no need to alienate the Gods further,' Akakion said, and dropped heavily onto a chair opposite Fotio. The remnants of Fotio's breakfast covered the table between them, and it was obvious the malaise had not affected the young man's appetite. 'But she did warn me that all is not well in the land of the free marketeers, and that King Prosoti may have become corrupted.'

'We should avoid it then. Is there another way?'

'There is another way, but I want to see what is happening in Episkeros for myself. Prosoti and I are old

friends, and he is a son of Mazi. Can someone with divine blood in their veins be corrupted?'

'When do we set out?'

'As soon as Sergeant Cotos readies our supplies.'

Fotio went to his room and buckled on the copper breastplate his aunty had insisted he wear on his journey. She had spent as much time with him as her schedule would allow, and this morning's breakfast had been the first meal they had not shared since Fotio's arrival. 'The times are hazardous and your enemies powerful. You will leave armed and armored from my city. I insist upon it,' she said at dinner last night. A leather skirt and bronze greaves completed his protection. He'd refused the helmet because the plumes kept falling into his face whenever he turned his head.

The Queen also provided them both with razor sharp short swords to wear on their hips. 'I know you have your preferred weapons,' she had said, 'but these blades have been made by the finest sword smith in all of Helvenica. The God Homatos herself!'

Feeling a little self-conscious in his shiny outfit, Fotio made his way to the stables where Akakion was waiting for him. He had not been expecting Queen Filia to see them off, but she was there beside the priest, her gaggle of flunkies a few yards behind her. Sergeant Cotos stood to one side, his weather-beaten and battle-scarred face a stark contrast to the manicured courtiers.

'You are a most formidable sight, nephew,' Queen

Filia said as Fotio approached. 'But you are not quite complete.' She motioned to a courtier behind her, who handed her a large golden shield that featured, at its center, a stylized hand with the middle finger extended skyward - the symbol of Helvenica. She took the shield and offered it to Fotio. 'I've polished it so that it will reflect the true nature of those whose image it captures. It will tear away all illusion to show the reality underneath.'

'A God's mace, a sword sharpened by divine labor, and now a magic shield,' Akakion said. 'Any more magic and you'll glow in the dark.'

Chapter 6: The Toll Masters

Fotio could not help but feel a twinge of regret as they rode out of the city of Enorganon. Knowing there were others connected to him besides his mother was comforting - he had always found it tough being an island in the sea. It would have been nice to know more about his father, if only so that he could find him and thank him for all his 'protection' over the years. Beneath the flippant curiosity, he could feel the roiling emotions that the news his father lived had stirred up - hurt, fear, abandonment - but what possible use could it be to examine them? He chose to ignore it all and, instead, looked down at his shiny new toys. 'I don't understand how I'm going to see what's shown in the shield,' he said, after a moment's reflection.

'What? You just look at it.'

'But I'm on the other side, if you know what I'm saying.'

Akakion considered this and shrugged. 'I'll keep an eye on it for you.'

'How far to Episkeros?'

'It'll take us most of the day to get to the river Polinero, and Episkeros is on the other side. Then another day to get to the city of Plusia,' Akakion replied. 'Once we get past the toll bridge, it'll be easier riding. The road to Plusia is lined with inns and taverns. It's an amazing place.'

The forest dropped away and the land flattened out as they travelled south, arriving at the toll bridge just as the sun was setting.

'We can sleep in proper beds tonight if we press on,' Akakion said, as he led them towards the wide bridge that spanned the great river.

Fotio followed in silence. The river Polinero was so wide that the far bank was lost in the evening haze. The bridge was, in a strange way, even bigger. The river was a natural thing, whereas the bridge was born in the mind of some mad bastard who'd managed to convince his fellows that it was possible to build something that big. It could accommodate twenty men walking abreast quite comfortably, and there were huge fortified towers on either end through which travelers had to pass.

When they got to the foot of the nearest tower,

Akakion stared at the many barred and shuttered windows on its northern wall. 'There can be no surer sign that war is upon us,' he said. 'The Tollmasters have abandoned their bridge.'

The great, fortified gates in the towers were open, allowing travelers to cross. As they rode, Akakion told Fotio of the bridge's history. Fotio learnt, despite not being all that keen to know, that Prosoti built the bridge shortly after Hrima had made him King. At the time, Episkeros had been a rural backwater wedged between prosperous Enorganon with its master artisans, and the wealthy Graphion, which supplied Helvenica with most of her clerks and administrators.

Before Prosoti's coronation, Episkeros was a wild land and dangerous for travelers, who were forced to hire armed escorts in order to pass through safely. It had been Prosoti's idea to build a magnificent road through Episkeros upon which people could travel in safety and comfort. When everyone laughed and suggested that the King would need to rob travelers in order to pay for his dream, he smiled and said 'Good Idea!'

"User pays", he called it. Everyone using the road would pay two parathes to the Toll Masters at the borders - one to enter and one to leave. He sold land along the road to those wanting to build inns and taverns and made an absolute killing. And just in case people decided they would avoid the road and its toll, he made sure there was just enough outlaw activity in the 'wild lands' to make the trip interesting and even more expensive than the road. The complaints of those

who tried to avoid the toll and fell victim to the surprisingly well-mannered bandits were a constant source of amusement for the King and his court. They never actually killed anyone; they just made sure they finished their journey naked and with just enough money to buy new clothes at one of the many emporia that had sprung up along the road.

'Under Prosoti's rule, Episkeros has gone from the poorest of the Helvenican states to the wealthiest,' Akakion concluded.

'You wouldn't know it by looking at it,' Fotio said, as they came to the end of the bridge, which was on a rise and gave a good view of the land ahead. Akakion got off his horse and stared out at the devastation that was Episkeros, the land of the free marketeers. It was obvious that this had once been a thriving thoroughfare - the road was wide and lined with ornate buildings - but those times were in the past. Debris cluttered the road and many of the buildings were smoldering ruins.

'By The Twelve, how could this have happened?' Akakion said.

'There's your answer,' Fotio said, pointing to a building in the middle distance around which several white-armored soldiers were busying themselves.

'The bastards are going to burn it down!' Akakion said and mounted his horse. He bowed his head in prayer and then spurred his steed into action. Ormi, without so much as a 'by your leave' to Fotio, charged after the angry priest.

'Wait, there are too many,' Fotio called, but Akakion either didn't hear or didn't care or, possibly, neither heard nor cared. They rode fast and hard, and it seemed to Fotio that Akakion grew as they drew closer to the white soldiers. By the time the priest vaulted off his horse and fell upon the unsuspecting invaders, he was a giant.

Fotio was a little way behind - Ormi was not built for speed - and saw, to his horror, that there were people peering out of the windows of the building about to be burnt. A curse escaped his lips and he gripped his mace tighter. When he judged he was close enough, he stood up on Ormi's back and leapt into the fray, his mace tearing through flesh and bone as if it had an edge.

From the perspective of the invaders, it was a terrifying - albeit brief - ordeal. Their two assailants appeared out of nowhere and fell upon them with unimaginable fury. The giant who towered over them fought with technical prowess - his movements economic, his defense flawless, and his attack lethal. The man in the golden armor was obviously untrained in the art of war, but he was strong as a bear and agile as a cat. Not for him the subtleties of defense - the shield he wore on his shoulder did little more than keep his left flank free of gore. His mace, on the other hand, was an agent of death and unlike the clinical detachment of the giant, each man he faced died with the certain knowledge that it was personal. To compound the invader's woes, the door to the inn burst open and a dozen Helvenican soldiers charged

out to join the fray.

The battle was over in minutes. Akakion, now back to his normal size, tended to the wounded. He retrieved a flask of stiporo from his pack and, after saying a silent prayer, gave all the injured men a mouthful. 'It will stop your wound festering,' Fotio heard him say to one of the soldiers. Akakion, Fotio realized, had not had a drink since their evening at The Temple of All Gods.

It was only after he had ministered to the wounded and they had established a camp some distance from the scene of the battle that Akakion allowed the leader of the soldiers - Toll Master Psila who, not surprisingly, was known to him - tell them how the enemy had managed to trap them in the inn.

'The King ordered all Tollmen back to the city and all the inns closed,' Psila said, as they sat around a newly built campfire. 'I counseled against such madness and for that, my Tollmen and I were banished. If I were not the Queen's cousin, I'm sure he would have thrown me into the dungeon,' he said, and grimaced. 'We were on the way to man the bridge when these white soldiers ambushed us. We lost many men in that battle, but some of us managed to survive and flee. They pursued us and were almost upon us when we came upon this inn. Knowing we were greatly outnumbered, we decided to try to hold them off here.' Psila looked back at the battleground and the piles of flammable material that had been stacked against the building. 'It would have gone badly for us had you

not arrived when you did.'

'These are difficult times, Toll Master,' Akakion said. 'Rest here tonight, but when the sun rises, make haste with all your men to Enorganon and tell the Queen that I sent you. Now tell me of King Prosoti. Has he denounced The Twelve?'

The soldier looked shocked. 'He is a son of Mazi. Surely his madness would not extend that far?'

'It a possibility. We have just come through Pethamenos where King Petrakefalo had renounced the Gods, a folly for which he paid with his life. Let us hope that King Prosoti's blood protects him from such madness.'

'Do not look for a warm welcome in Prosoti's Halls, Lord Keeper. You may have once been good friends, but his mind has soured. War is upon us, and there are fewer merchants by the day. The city coffers dwindle and our King sits on his throne and gibbers.' The soldier cast his eye over the ruined landscape. 'They are unproductive, these lands.'

The presence of such a large contingent of invading soldiers so far into Helvenica had unnerved Akakion, and he was eager to move off the road. Before he and Fotio parted company with the soldiers, however, he insisted on paying the toll of four parathes as well as giving them the packhorse and a good proportion of their supplies.

Toll Master Psila accepted the money and horse graciously and saluted. 'Thank you, Lord. We owe you and Fotio our lives, but we will not abandon our lands so easily. In

the morning, we will go as planned to the bridge and man the near tower. There is a cache of weapons and food inside that will last us many a day.'

'As you will, Sergeant, but you must send word to the Queen. She must know that Episkeros has been abandoned to the invaders.'

'Once we are set up at the bridge, I will ride myself to see the Queen,' Psila promised.

(ii)

Fotio and Akakion moved about a mile from the Tollmen before they stopped and set up their own camp, not that Fotio thought it was much of a camp. They just dumped their stuff on the ground and went to sleep. Nor was it much of a sleep. Akakion woke Fotio while it was still dark and handed him a honey cake. 'Let's get moving,' was all he had to say.

They rode in silence, with the rising sun at their backs. The land was flat, with the odd hill or scrubby little wood in the distance. It wasn't quite what Fotio had expected. 'I thought you said these were wild lands,' he said, as they rode through the nearly featureless landscape.

'They were once, but they have been tamed,' Akakion replied. 'There are wild forests further to the west, but they are well beyond Plusia.'

'Where are the outlaws?'

'Episkeros is a strange place. There are impassable cliffs on all sides, with only a few gaps through which people can travel. The outlaws tend to congregate near those gaps. The road is the only safe way in or out.'

'Doesn't the road lead to Psila?' Fotio asked.

'This way is far quicker. The road describes a wide arc. If we travel south west, we'll cut a couple of hours off our journey.'

Fotio was finding that getting a conversation on the move was hard work, but travelling in silence invited gory images into his overactive imagination, inspired by the battle the night before. Anything was better than that, even talking to a surely priest. 'You know this place pretty well,' he ventured.

'I spent a lot of time here with King Prosoti. He was the first Keeper, and when Hrima chose him to be King of Episkeros, Prosoti chose me to replace him. My first job was to drive the bandits out of Episkeros so that Prosoti could build his road.'

Fotio looked around at the landscape and appeared embarrassed.

'What's the matter,' Akakion asked.

'Well, I want to ask something, but I have a feeling you'll go on about my lack of schooling again.'

'I won't. Go ahead. Ask.'

'Well, I know that the Keeper of the Order is important, and that he is second only to the Emperor in

holiness,' Fotio said. 'But why?'

'Oh, is that all? Well, it's because people are people and the Gods are short tempered,' Akakion said.

Fotio listened in silence as Akakion launched into a history lesson that ate most of the morning. Being history, it had been embellished somewhat, but the upshot of what Fotio learned was that, hundreds of years ago, the Gods had no leader and being a quarrelsome bunch they spent much of their time feuding. The problem was that when the Gods feuded, their worshipers marched to battle. As a result, Helvenica was in a constant state of war.

Then one day, a prophet rose who changed the way Helvenicans viewed their Gods. He went from city to city, preaching that the Gods weren't worthy of their worshipers - they behaved more like spoilt children than divine beings. Isiha's words resonated with what many had been secretly thinking for years. Resentment grew in the people of Helvenica, fed by the childish antics of several of the more notable Gods, until one day it came to a head.

There was a huge, horrible battle in which over two thousand soldiers died, and all because Mazi and Pyros had a falling out about who should sit at the head of the table at official dinners.

Isiha was furious! He led a delegation of concerned worshipers to a temple dedicated to Mazi and smashed the altar, before occupying the temple. The news of Isiha's act of defiance spread, and soon people all over Helvenica were

smashing altars and occupying temples.

'That doesn't sound like something the Gods would take,' Fotio said. The sun had climbed high into the sky and his thoughts were turning to lunch. His attempt to get Akakion talking had been amazingly successful. The challenge now was to get him to stop.

'I don't think they had a choice,' Akakion said. 'People were beyond annoyed and were starting to get violent, and if there is something the Gods understand, it's violence. The official history tells us that the Gods, hearing the wisdom in Isiha's words, settled their differences and created the council of the Twelve with Mazi at its head. All the other gods, and there were many, became spirits.'

'Is there an unofficial history?'

'Yeah, Mazi and his brothers Pyros and Psofios wanted to kill Isiha and send him down to be judged, but Aquina, who's a little smarter than most and could see the writing on the wall, suggested Mazi and his brothers focus their energies on their fellow Gods. When talking proved fruitless, Mazi and his brothers went around and beat the crap out of pretty much everybody, which led to Mazi being unanimously elected him as leader of the Gods. He often jokes that only a God of War could handle such an unruly bunch.'

'That sounds more like it,' Fotio said, 'what have we got left to eat?' He added, in an effort to end the conversation and start the meal.

Akakion, however, wasn't quite ready to drop out

of school teacher mode. 'Once the Gods had settled their disputes and The Twelve had been chosen, Mazi built the Temple of All Gods, named Isiha as the first Emperor and appointed his son as Keeper of the Order. It was the Emperor's job to rule all of Helvenica, and it was the Keeper's job to make sure that everybody agreed with the Emperor.'

'Didn't you say Prosoti was the first Keeper?'

'Yes he was. He's Mazi's son. I'm sure I've mentioned it before. He was Keeper until just over twenty years ago when I took over.'

Fotio made an incredulous noise.

'Prosoti is immortal, just like you, and your aunty, and your mother,' Akakion said, in exasperation.

'Are you saying I'm not going to grow older?'

Akakion sighed. He knew it wasn't Fotio's fault his education had been limited, but it still exasperated him.

'Immortals age like everyone else until the day they feel an undeniable need to go to Mount Polipsilo. On that day, their aging stops and they remain as they are for eternity. That's why some immortals look like they are little more than children, while others are old and grey.'

'I'm hungry,' Fotio said, in a final, desperate bid to turn the discussion to more earthly matters and thus end the history lesson.

Akakion peered at the smudges on the horizon.

'Plusia is near, not much more than an hour away. Let's push on.' He reached around to his pack and pulled out a honey

cake, which he tossed to the thief. 'Now, the story of how the bridge over the river Polinero was built is key to understanding Helvenican God-worshiper relations,' he said.

Fotio groaned, and took a bite of his honey cake. This was far worse than any classroom he'd ever attended. Probably even worse than the ones he'd avoided, which were far greater in number. A bored student could always doze off in the classroom, but if he nodded off here, he'd fall off his horse.

(iii)

The smudges on the horizon quickly took shape, and it wasn't long before Plusia dominated the entire skyline. It was tall and massive, and sat atop a hill. A single road - crowded with people moving into the city - wound up the steep incline from the east. They must have been expected because a group of mounted tollmen rode out to intercept them shortly before they reached the road.

'Lord Akakion?' the lead rider asked.

'Yes, Toll Master. That is who I am.'

'The King has sent us to bring you to him with all haste. He seeks your advice urgently, and has watched your approach from atop the Keep with impatience.'

Fotio looked at Akakion, who looked back and shrugged. 'Lead the way,' Akakion said to the soldier.

The Toll Master led them to the tollbooth at the

city gates, where Akakion paid the two parathes fee required of travelers who wish to enter the city, and then led them into the city itself. Fotio trailed behind the priest, looking at the amazing buildings that lined the road.

'Staring at the buildings betrays you as a newcomer,' Akakion said, as they trotted along behind the Toll Master and his men.

'It's amazing,' Fotio said, craning his neck as far back as it would go. 'Why do they build them so high?'

'There is only so much room on The Hill. When you run out of space on the ground, it's time to move into the sky.'

The road wound around the hill and it took some time to get to the apex, but it was worth the ride. A huge, impossibly tall building that looked like it was made entirely of glass rose up into the heavens.

'The King awaits you at the Western Garden,' the Toll Master said. 'He has requested that you go alone.'

'No. My companion will accompany me,' Akakion said, and his voice resonated with a strange harmonic that threatened to loosen Fotio's bowels.

'My King commands it,' the Toll Master said, signaling to his tollmen, who lowered their spears to point directly at Akakion and Fotio.

'AND THE GODS SAY NO!' Akakion said, and the sound of his voice shattered the spears and sent the soldier's horses bolting. Ormi and Akakion's mounts stayed put,

probably because they already knew that a horse couldn't run far enough when Gods were involved. 'I am not prepared to be threatened by my own soldiers,' Akakion said, in a more normal tone of voice.

'I'm surprised you didn't know him.'

'He's been recently promoted, probably to replace Psila,' Akakion said, and dismounted. 'Come on. Let's get this over with before they come back.'

Fotio had seen the faces of a few of the soldiers as their horses had carried them away. As far as he could tell, they looked like faces that belonged to people who were, in fact, happy to let their horses carry them away. 'I don't think we'll need to worry too much about that,' he said, confidently.

When looked at from the soldier's perspective, taking on a famed warrior like Akakion would be daunting enough, but when he's accompanied by a wild eyed bear of a man in gleaming golden armor, then it's probably best to let the horse take the lead.

They left Ormi and Akakion's horse, recently named Plod for his boundless enthusiasm to do nothing, at the foot of the building with the rest of their apples to keep them company and went inside with only their weapons. The door to the castle was like nothing Fotio had ever seen. It had four pieces of glass in wooden frames mounted on a central axis, and jutted out of the building in a strange semicircle.

'This is one of the famed revolving doors of Plusia,' Akakion explained. 'Follow me.' He walked into the door and

spun it on its axis so that he was half in the building. 'Hop in,' he said over his shoulder.

With some reluctance, Fotio walked into the next compartment. Akakion pushed on the panel in front of him, and the panel behind Fotio dragged him forward. He would have revolved right back out again had Akakion not dragged him from the door before he could scoot past.

Without a word, Akakion led Fotio through many corridors and rooms, most of which showed Hrima indulging in divine behavior. Fotio was pleased to see that violence was rare, but a little concerned that the God appeared to be, more often than not, luxuriating in a bathtub filled with golden coins.

They climbed five flights of steps on their journey through the castle before Akakion finally pushed open a door that led to a small garden and strode out into the sunshine, with Fotio following closely behind. The young thief looked back and saw that the building rose at least as high again.

A tall man stood at the far edge of the garden with his back to them, looking out over the city and the lands beyond. Fotio assumed he was the King. If he wasn't, then his hat was far too ostentatious for everyday wear. Soldiers lined the wall on either side of the entrance, but the path to the King was clear.

'Ah, Keeper, so good of you to come,' the King said, without turning.

'Your Majesty, I would have left Enorganon sooner

had I known that you wanted to speak to me.' Akakion replied. He was standing on Fotio's left and had his spear at the ready.

'The world is changing, my friend,' the King said, still facing the other way. 'The old Gods are fading and new ones are rising to take their place.'

'The Gods, of whom your father is one, are not fading. They are as powerful as ever.'

'Then why haven't they done something about the armies massing on our borders?' the King snapped. 'Instead they send some halfwit oaf on a ridiculous quest, with you tagging along to hold his hand. Your duty lies here, with my men and I, in defense of this city. Not keeping some fool out of trouble.'

Fotio's eyes hardened and his hand tightened on his mace.

'Don't do it,' Akakion said, aware that Fotio was readying to let fly. He half turned to look at the thief, caught sight of the shield and his jaw dropped in surprise. He looked back at the King and hurriedly mumbled a prayer, begging the Gods to banish illusions.

'Your Majesty,' said the guard by the door. 'The Lord Keeper is not alone.'

There was a loud 'crack', as if someone had struck the universe very hard with a very big hammer, and a small fat man appeared behind the King with his hands somehow *inside* the Kings back.

There was a collective gasp from the soldiers. Akakion made to throw his spear, and then thought better of it, probably because there was a chance that the little man didn't physically exist. Instead, he stepped forward and brought the haft down hard on top of the small man's shining cranium.

The spear made an unusual 'boing' noise when it connected, dispelling any doubt that it was a physical head it had struck. The blow made the small man squeal and take his hands out of the King's back so that he could rub his pate, in a vain effort to soothe his damaged skull.

The King spun around, swung his fist back as if he wanted to hit the small man, and then collapsed onto the floor, his punch un-thrown. The small man turned, shot Akakion a look of pure hatred, and vanished with a soft "pop".

'Who was that?' Fotio said.

'I think it was Monos,' Akakion replied and rushed to the King's side. He pulled a flask of blessed stiporo from his belt and forced some between the King's lips.

Color returned to Prosoti's face, he spluttered once or twice, then snatched the flask from Akakion's hand and took a long, unbroken drink. 'I don't think I've ever been so happy to see your craggy face,' he said, and stood up.

'That was Monos?' Fotio said, sounding incredulous. 'He was tiny, and more than a little plump. How can twelve of the mightiest beings ever to walk the Earth be afraid of that?'

'You must be Fotio,' the King said, 'he thought of you constantly. Don't be fooled, he is mightier than all The Twelve put together,' he paused and took another swig of Akakion's stiporo. 'He has already won a victory over them many years ago, and now he returns to complete what he started. But he fears you, young Fotio. I could get a sense of what he was thinking when he was controlling me. He knows you are the only one who can defeat him. Prophet, he names you.'

'Fotio is a prophet? Now it all makes sense,' Akakion exclaimed. 'Not even immortals heal like you but prophets, well, they're another story.'

'You mean I'm like the first Emperor?'

'Exactly. Prophets are catalysts, people who change the world. The Great Oracle predicted three prophets in Helvenican history, but only one has come forth. Isiha was the first, and he revolutionized the deity-worshiper paradigm. It's a pity he wasn't immortal because I can't see him standing for any of this Monos nonsense.'

'That's where you are completely wrong, Lord Keeper,' King Prosoti said. 'Isiha would certainly stand for this Monos nonsense because Isiha is Monos!'

'Isiha? The first Emperor?' Akakion said. 'I thought he died at sea. There's even a painting devoted to his death in the temple at Aquinos.'

The King sighed. 'You know that his death was set up by the Gods, who thought him mortal?'

Akakion shrugged. 'There is nothing official in the scriptures, but many in the priesthood suspect that the God's conspired to end Isiha's reign.'

'The Gods were all a bit upset by it, actually. Aquina had taken special care with the storm, and my uncle Psofios had set aside a *special* place for Isiha to spend eternity, but he never turned up. The sailors who accompanied him all showed, but none knew what had happened to the Emperor. There was some conjecture that maybe he'd caught wind of what the Gods were planning and made other arrangements, or that he was an immortal. So the Gods waited at Polipsilo for him, but he never showed there either. Now we know what he's been up to and I'm not surprised. He always was a jumped up little oink of a man, always meddling in things that were none of his business.'

'Monos is Helvenican?' Akakion said in an incredulous tone. 'Why is he coming with an army?'

'He told me it was time Helvenica was free of her chains. I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen and I was powerless to stand against him. Have you ever had one of those dreams where you can't move, or speak, or anything? It was like that. I could see what was happening, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was completely under his control.'

'If he can control a King, then no one is safe. How can we know who to trust?' Fotio said.

'It pushed him to the very brink of his power,' King

Prosoti replied, as Akakion made an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his flask. The King took another long mouthful before handing the drink back to the priest. 'There were times when I felt that I could almost shake him off, like when my wife's cousin defied him. Whenever I felt hope or gladness, his hold on me grew weaker. That is why he refused to look at you, for fear that seeing my old friend Akakion would raise my spirits so much that I would be able to cast him out.'

The King sagged as if his bones no longer wanted to support him, and looked pale and weary. 'You both have my eternal gratitude,' he said, 'but for the moment, I must rest. If half a bottle of Akakion's finest healing draft could not shift my weakness, then it is time to give in to sleep. Sergeant, have these men fed and quartered at no expense. Today they saved your King and possibly all of Helvenica. We will meet in the throne room for the evening meal to discuss this most dire of threats.'

(iv)

Fotio stood in front of a floor to ceiling window in an opulent room, looking out over an opulent city. Everything in Plusia was ostentatious and over the top. The furniture, the food, the soldier's uniforms. Everything. Even the door handles were inlaid with precious metals. It came as quite a shock after the earthiness of Enorganon.

'Another honey cake?' Akakion asked. He was

reclining on a lounge at the center of the room.

'No thanks,' Fotio replied. 'The gold tastes strange.'

In truth, he was tired to the back teeth of honey cakes, probably because Akakion had developed an almost alarming addiction to them and insisted on adding them to every meal. In fact, Fotio hadn't eaten much at all since arriving at this strange city. Even the food was too rich. There were meats laced with so many rare and exotic spices that he couldn't recognize what animal they came from. The vegetables floated in pools of butter, and the rainbow-colored sweets were so full of sugar that they began rotting his teeth *before* he had eaten any. And to top it off, there was gold dust or gold leaf on just about everything. In the end, he'd made do with a couple of oranges and a plum.

'I can't believe we've made such good time considering everything that's happened along the way,' Akakion said, carefully picking the precious metal off his cake before taking a mouthful. 'The enemy camp is no more than a week's ride from here, just beyond Graphion. If we stock up, we can ride straight there.'

'How long are we stopping here?'

'We can't linger too long because Monos knows we're coming and we don't want to give him too much time, but before we go I want to talk to Prosoti about his plans for the defense of the passes and the city. There will be an army marching through here soon, now that the King has ejected Monos from his head.'

Fotio continued to look moodily out the window. 'The army will only march if we fail,' he said. 'It's strange, but I just can't get my head around everything that has happened. I started this journey as an underemployed errand boy and now I'm some sort of immortal prophet and savior of my people. It's all a bit overwhelming.'

'You're growing as an individual. What more can I say?'

'It also bothers me that it's been a bloody business so far, and seems destined to get bloodier.'

'How could you expect anything else? War is almost upon us, lad, and there are dark forces bent on our destruction. We didn't attack those harpies, or ambush anyone on the road. We simply reacted to protect ourselves,' Akakion said, and took another bite of his cake.

Fotio sighed. 'I don't consider myself a violent man and actively try to avoid it whenever possible.'

A mouth full of honey cake muffled Akakion's exclamation of derision. 'You're not serious?' he said, after swallowing. 'As far as I can tell, violence is your first and favorite option for dealing with anything more unexpected than a sneeze.' Akakion stood up and put his hand on Fotio's shoulder. 'Face it lad, you're an immortal, which means you've got violence in your blood. Your first reaction to a threat is to smash it into a million pieces, and you don't think of the consequences until later. Just look at what happened today. If I hadn't intervened, you'd have sent Prosoti back to the

Mountain. Imagine trying to explain *that* to Mazi.'

'Why does being of divine blood translate to being blood thirsty?'

'Because everyone of divine blood *is* bloodthirsty,' Akakion said, 'and you've yet to demonstrate otherwise.' He sat back down and finished his honey cake. 'You've told me more than once about the pictures in the temples,' he continued after wiping the crumbs from his unshaved chin. 'Well, that's where you come from. Anyway, it's not as if death is the end. We know that Helvenicans go to Psosios's domain after they die and reside there for eternity, and I'm sure Monos's people have come to a similar arrangement. You may kill the body, but the spirit persists and will continue to do so, regardless of what we do.'

'Not if Monos wins,' Fotio said.

'Why? The cycle of life will continue regardless of the Gods we worship. If Monos banishes our Gods, then Helvenicans will stop going to Psosios's domain and start going to where Monos's followers go. They'll still persist after death, just in a different place.'

Fotio's face contorted as he tried to think his way through this strange philosophical maze. He wished there were some way he could hit it with his mace. 'So what you're saying is that, even though I killed some people, no one has actually ceased to exist because their spirits persisted.'

'Pretty much. It can be gory and I'm sure it hurts but, ultimately, it's just like moving house but without the

packing.' Akakion picked out a sugar-encrusted morsel and popped it into his mouth, where it made a strange crunching noise as he chewed. 'Gosh they're good,' he said. 'Who would have thought you could make cockroaches palatable?

Anyway, that's partly why there is so much death in religious art. Killing a person is the Gods' way of letting them know that it's time to be judged.'

Fotio sat down on a couch opposite Akakion. 'That is so insane that it's almost believable.'

'Do you really think you're the first to notice what's in those paintings? Nearly every neophyte at some time or another asks that very question - why so much death? And the answer is always the same; death is the pathway to judgment. It's especially important when the individual has erred. The sooner they get started on their penance, the sooner they'll be free to enjoy eternity.'

'I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say,' Fotio said, 'because it sounded to me like you were suggesting that sometimes a person needs to die for their own good?'

'Yep.'

For the first time since the magical hour he spent with Geneka in the village of Putami, Fotio laughed. He threw back his head and let the madness of the past few weeks pour out from him in great, braying, lung full's of air. 'You priests are crazy,' he said when he finally regained his breath. 'Do you really believe that no one ever actually ends?'

'Of course I do! Death is definitely not an end. You've met Psofios! How can you doubt?'

'Because that means that mortal life is nothing but a test; a huge, convoluted sham; a waste of time. If that's how it works, then you might as well just die the moment you are born.'

'Why would you do that? The longer a person lives, the more they can influence their eternity for the good. It's the only true justice - everyone gets what they deserve.'

'I never thought of it like that before,' Fotio said.

'History is littered with men and women who thought they could cheat their fate after living evil lives. They would leave vast sums of money to the various churches, or build magnificent temples, but it was always for naught. It's impossible to bribe the Gods if only because there is nothing we can give them that they cannot get for themselves. Every person is judged by the state of their soul, by their thoughts and deeds during life, and not by the weight of their purse.'

Fotio's big, honest brow furrowed as he engaged in unaccustomed cogitation. 'That sounds almost reasonable, but what about those people who have to die for their own good? Don't they deserve the chance to atone for their sins and create a better eternity for themselves?'

Akakion sighed. 'Yeah well, I did say that raising the awareness of judgment is only part of the reason. The other part is that the Gods *like* violence. Not many people

make the connection, and we don't like to talk about it much in case people start to lose respect,' he said. 'You see, God's and immortals never die so they never face judgment. No judgment means that there are no consequences. No consequences mean, well, you just have to look at Helvenica's history to see what happens when there are no consequences. When you strip away all the theology and associated mumbo jumbo, what's left is a bunch of vicious, blood thirsty, psychopaths who don't know right from wrong.'

'You're blaspheming again!' Fotio said, and scooped up his mace from the floor. 'Are you under Monos's influence?'

'Put the mace down! I'm under no one's influence but my own. All senior priests know this, as do all the Kings and Queens, even the immortals like Prosoti. It's a truth that we try not to dwell on. In a way, it's the job of the Kings and Queens to stop the Gods getting annoyed. That's why Prosoti became King here. Hrima lost his temper and filled the old temple with molten gold. He was threatening to kill everyone in the land and only Prosoti's promise to build this temple stopped him.'

'That's, um. That's, ah.' Fotio began, failed to find the right words, and then abruptly stood up. 'I'm going to have a nap,' he said, and marched out of the room.

'It's not as bad as it sounds,' Akakion called after him. 'No one really dies so it's all the same in the end.'

It felt to Fotio as if he had barely gotten his head down when some bastard shook him awake, and that bastard was Akakion.

'Come on, the King has summoned us.'

Feeling like he should have bathed instead of slept, Fotio followed the priest through the labyrinthine passages of the enormous building that served as the Temple of Hrima and the palace of the King of Episkeros. He couldn't help but notice that Akakion had shaved and donned clean clothes, while he had simply unbuckled his armor and collapsed onto a couch without even washing the grime of the road off his face.

They walked through what felt like miles of identical corridors to Fotio, and the further they went the more that Akakion's scrubbed face annoyed him.

'This place is enormous,' he said to take his mind off his growing irritability, 'are you sure you know where you're going?'

'I was here when it was built,' Akakion replied, 'and the hill was all but bare in those days. Plusia started as a garrison to protect those who mined the gold and precious stones in the hills to the southwest. If it weren't for those mines, nobody would ever have settled here. Previous Kings focused on the gold in the ground and ignored everything else. They built a mean little temple to Hrima on the outskirts of

the biggest mining village and spent all their time digging, but Prosoti saw the potential for more. There was good land for farming once he cleared some of the forest, and the neighbors were both rich and in need of passage.'

Fotio nodded at the impromptu history lesson. If anything, it had made him a little more irritable.

Akakion stopped abruptly at a doorway that looked no different from the dozens of others that they had passed. He self-consciously adjusted the set of his clothes, and pushed open the doors. The lights in the room on the other side were so bright that Fotio spent a moment blinking while his eyes adjusted.

'At last. I was about to send someone to see what was keeping you,' said a female voice from out of the glare.

'We came as soon as we could, Princess,' Akakion said. 'My companion was fatigued from the journey and it took a while to rouse him.'

When Fotio's eyes had finally adjusted, he saw that the owner of the voice was a young woman, about his age, who was sitting beside King Prosoti at a table against the far wall. Smokeless torches, similar to the ones in Pethamenos, stood in candelabras along the walls and filled a massive chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The only other occupants of the room were four guards, standing in respectful silence at each corner of the room.

Akakion bowed and entered. Fotio, unsure of how to behave in the presence of royalty - his life as an errand

boy and thief rarely brought him into contact with the monarchy - imitated Akakion. He even followed him to the seat beside the young woman. When he realized his mistake, Fotio scuttled to the empty chair on the other side of the table.

'Our prophet is not comfortable in our presence,' the King said, but his tone was gentle and his smile welcoming. 'I must admit that I myself struggle with the niceties of the court, but one must do one's duty.'

The young woman rolled her eyes. 'You're looking well, Keeper,' she said.

'And you are exactly as I left you all those years ago,' Akakion replied.

'Father tells me that you and Sharon are no longer together, but he's been a bit strange of late so I thought I'd come down and see for myself.'

'Sadly, it's true,' Akakion replied.

'Yes, well,' the King said. 'This was meant to be a private audience in which we discussed the dire situation that our beloved nation finds itself. The emergence of the second prophet is a serious development, my dear Leni, and you are only here because your father indulges you far too much. So please, restrain yourself.'

'Your majesty,' Akakion said, 'your daughter was simply greeting an old friend.'

King Prosoti gave Akakion a tired look. 'My request for restraint also applies to you,' he said.

Fotio was only half-aware of his surrounds during this exchange because the mouth-watering feast on offer elbowed everything else out of his mind. The table groaned under the weight of the food piled upon it: there were deliciously spiced meats, delectable vegetables in luscious sauces, and tempting sweets.

He piled his plate high and fell upon the banquet with enthusiasm and passion. His fellow diners cut short their conversation and watched in awe for a few minutes.

'He's a big boy with an appetite to match,' the King said, eventually.

'He's going to challenge Monos? What's he going to do? Eat him?' Leni said.

'Oh no, definitely not,' Akakion said. 'I've gotten to know our prophet fairly well over the past couple of weeks and I can tell you that the first thing he'll do is hit Monos with his mace.' He watched Fotio eat for a short while. 'He may eat him afterwards,' he conceded, 'but it'll definitely be mace to skull to start with.'

'I reckon you should starve him for a bit, and then tell him that he can eat after he kills the Mad God. I don't think anything would save Monos then.'

Akakion laughed a short, humorless laugh - more a snort than a giggle - and leaned back in his chair. His face became serious. 'Hopefully Monos won't be at the camp. Our job is to break the artifact that protects his followers, not fight the new God himself.'

'I have felt the power of the God of Men, and I don't hold much hope for your mission,' King Prosoti said. 'Even the strength of the second prophet may not be enough.'

They all looked at Fotio, who seemed oblivious to their existence. He appeared totally engrossed in his meal, and was humming a happy tune to himself while he ate.

'What preparations are you going to make for the war?' Akakion asked.

'We must hold the Road Pass, so that is where we'll be concentrating our efforts. It's the only way through from Graphion that is open enough to accommodate such a force,' King Prosoti said. 'I'll send some men to guard the smaller passes in case he tries to flank us.'

Akakion nodded. 'And the city?'

'If he makes it through the Pass, then the city is all but lost. Our best hope would be to flee to Enorganon and drop the bridge behind us.'

'It would be wise to start evacuating some of your people right away. Queen Filia is already preparing for refugees.'

The King sighed. 'We have time yet, my old friend. Monos will take Graphion before moving against us, and I hear that the Guardians of Eternity are marching this way. Hopefully they will arrive in time to help us hold the Pass. The only positive is that we know King Ipalilos is incorruptible because he's such a dour bastard. He wouldn't do anything unless it was accompanied by official paperwork.'

Akakion nodded, grim faced. 'The Guardians have been ordered to attack the enemy's camp. They are the mightiest warriors in Helvenica, but they only number three hundred. Only with the power of the Gods behind them can they hope to triumph against the thousands mustering on our borders. They are doomed unless we can destroy the staff.'

The three descended into a gloom and sat silently watching Fotio eat. Even Leni lost her effervescence. She and Akakion sat absent-mindedly holding hands, while King Prosoti stared into the middle distance. All three jumped in surprised when the young man sat back in his chair, hunger apparently sated. 'The armies of Monos will never march,' he said. 'The Keeper and I will see to that.' He pushed back his chair and stood up. 'If this is a council of war, then I am all but useless and I'd like to get some rest. One final ride awaits us and who knows when I will sleep in a bed again.' Fotio looked at Akakion, who looked at Leni and then shook his head.

It finally dawned on Fotio why Akakion had taken such care to spruce himself up and couldn't help but smile. He turned to the King. 'I would be grateful if you could ask one of the guards to show me to my room.'

'I think the prophet has a point,' King Prosoti said. 'In reality, there is very little for us to discuss at this time. You know what is needed of you and I know what is needed of me.' He looked towards Akakion and Leni, who were quickly receding into their own private universe, and reached a

decision. 'I'll show you the way myself,' he said.

(vi)

Despite his heroic nap in the afternoon, Fotio collapsed into a deep and dreamless sleep the moment his head hit the gold embossed pillow. He could barely remember the walk back to his rooms, recalling only that the King had told him that Akakion and Leni had been very close many years ago, when Akakion was helping Prosoti establish his reign. So close, in fact, that they would have married had the Mountain not called Leni.

Akakion had waited for her to return, but the days became weeks, and the weeks, months. When a year had passed with no word from Leni, the Keeper decided he could wait no more and left Plusia for the Temple of All Gods.

The story stuck in Fotio's mind because he thought Akakion was many things, but a romantic was not one of them. When he expressed this to the King, Prosoti laughed.

'From all I have heard, Akakion all but lost his mind when Sharon left him,' Prosoti said. 'He is probably the most loyal man in all of Helvenica. He is devoted to his people, to his friends, to his country, and to his Gods. Consider yourself fortunate to have such a man at your side, young prophet, because you will never have cause to doubt his allegiance.'

The dreamless sleep carried Fotio through the night

and deposited him, without ceremony, on the cusp of a bright new day. He stumbled into the living area of their rooms to find Akakion ravaging the breakfast spread.

'Hey, slow down,' he said, afraid that the priest would leave him nothing but honey cake crumbs for his morning meal.

Akakion looked up. 'Still hungry after last night's effort?' he said. 'You ate a three course meal for four people. It was awe inspiring.'

'Yeah, well, prophesying is hungry work,' Fotio said, and sat down opposite the priest. 'And what did you get up to last night?'

'Oh, you know, catching up with old friends,' Akakion said, his face carefully neutral.

'No, I don't know.'

'That's right. You've said.'

Fotio's face colored. 'I hope you got some sleep.'

'Plenty. In fact, it was the first night I've slept properly in a long time. When I saw Leni again, I remembered what it was like to feel alone and abandoned. In my head, I heard once again the words Sharon said to me when we first parted, but this time I understood what she meant. She was right. It was time we parted.'

'What did she say?'

'She said she was lonely.'

'Oh.'

Fotio harvested as much as he could from the

breakfast tray without overloading his plate and they both ate in silence for a while.

'What is it like, on the Mountain?' Fotio asked, when his hunger was no longer burning.

Akakion shrugged. 'I've never been, but from what I've been told, it's paradise. That's why the Ogres wanted back in, and why Leni lingered for many years after being summoned. Only mad buggers like the Harpies, who have a thing about human flesh, ever leave it willingly.'

'I went there with my mom when I was a child. She wanted to go to the temple at its foot for some reason or another. All I remember was that it was big, but surely it's not big enough to hold all the Gods, immortals, and human souls?'

'Mount Polipsilo is the doorway. The immortal lands themselves are endless.'

'Is Leni going back?'

'I assume so. She didn't say.'

'But what about when we get back? Isn't she going to wait for you?'

'She said she could visit me in Psofios's domain after I have served my penance.'

Fotio made to say something, and then stopped. The realization that Akakion did not expect to survive their journey hit him like a well-aimed mace to the forehead. He felt shame that he had spent much of the journey behaving like a spoilt child when the man he rode with did so in the certain knowledge that he would die at journey's end.

Akakion saw his struggle and put down his honey cake. 'Don't feel bad,' he said, 'death isn't the end.'

Fotio was almost in tears.

'Look, don't worry about me. It's you that's got the tough job. I'll just go to Psosios's domain but when Monos sends you back to the Mountain, you'll have to explain to Mazi how you lost his favorite mace.'

'But we're not fighting Monos, where just going to destroy the staff.'

Akakion sighed. 'Lad, he knows you're coming. What are the chances he's going to leave the defense of his greatest asset to an underling?'

'If you're so sure we're going to fail, why are we going?'

'Because I'm not sure we're going to fail, I just think it's the most likely outcome. What I am sure of is that if we don't stop this mad bastard, he'll start a war in which thousands will die. We owe it to all those soldiers, Helvenican and followers of Monos alike, to try. '

'Don't you get extra eternity points or something, for dying in a holy war?' Fotio said. He looked directly at the priest and, for the first time, saw doubt in his eyes. 'You don't really believe that no one comes to an end, do you?'

The priest shrugged. 'Life is a hard habit to break.'

'But what about all that stuff you said about having met Psosios? How can *you* doubt?'

'The God's have proved less than reliable.'

Fotio let out a sigh and slumped back in his chair. 'This is all so confusing,' he said, eventually. 'I don't understand any of this Gods business, and I don't really believe in all that death is not the end stuff, and I certainly don't believe that I'm some sort of immortal prophet. What I *do* know is that Monos exists because I've seen him with my own eyes.' He paused a minute. 'At least I think I did? He was there, wasn't he? I saw you hit him with your spear.' Fotio lapsed into another confused silence and then stood up abruptly. 'I want to take a bath. Not even the Gods know when I'll get a chance to have another.'

They stayed in Plusia another two days, but Fotio spent most of the time alone because Akakion was either consulting with the King or looking soulfully into Lena's eyes. Not that it bothered Fotio all that much. He had secured a writing quill and a notebook from one of the King's guards and had busied himself with the unfamiliar task of organizing his thoughts.

So it was late on the morning of their fourth day in Plusia before Fotio and Akakion were ready to depart. King Prosoti, this time accompanied by a roiling cloud of flunkies, was there to see them off. As was the custom of the land, he presented Akakion with an itemized bill but in a rare break with tradition, he extended credit until after their dangerous mission was complete. Customs such as these had made Episkeros the wealthiest of the Helvenican states.

Leni was also present and had eyes only for

Akakion. 'This time it's me waiting for you,' she said, 'so make sure you come back.'

Akakion smiled sadly and mounted Plod. Without a word, he turned to the road.

Fotio mounted Ormi, but hesitated to follow. 'I'll make sure he comes back,' he said.

Leni gave him a bright smile despite the threatening tears. 'After so many years, three nights were not enough.'

Feeling a little lonely, Fotio turned to follow the priest.

Chapter 7: Equine Intervention

They had been riding for an hour and the sun was high in the sky. Fotio had been unable to get the look of longing in Leni's eyes out of his mind since they had left the city. He wondered if anyone would ever crave him as much. 'Yeah, just before the meteor strikes,' he thought bitterly. Aloud, he said 'Leni told me three nights with you weren't enough. Why didn't she come back when she left the first time?'

Akakion shrugged. 'She wouldn't tell me, but it doesn't matter. An immortal cannot and should not love a mortal.' He paused and subjected Fotio to a melodramatic moment of moody silence before continuing. 'It simply can't work. She hasn't changed a day in twenty years, while I have

become older and greyer and far less optimistic. Even if I somehow manage to make it through this adventure alive, in another twenty years I will be even older and even greyer and approaching the end of my days, while she will be exactly as she is now.'

'Like my mom,' Fotio said.

'And like you, after you are called to the Mountain.'

'Gods and immortals, immortals and Gods, it's all so confusing,' Fotio said. The two rode in silence for a while before Fotio, who had the air of someone mentally chewing on spiritual gristle, spat out a question. 'So how did Isiha become a God?'

'I think it's because humanity has grown in power,' Akakion said. 'You see, Gods are the product of belief and all the Gods in all the lands are images of our Gods, because Helvenica is the most advanced of all the peoples and is always the first to build enough belief. As Helvenica became more civilized, people began to believe in themselves and their civilization. In essence, people began to believe in people, and that belief led to the creation of an immortal spirit, a new God. Learning that Monos was the first prophet lends weight to the theory because it was the power of the people that defied the Gods, and Isiha was the symbol of that power,' Akakion turned to Fotio. 'The first prophet has become a God, Fotio, and you are the second. Will you do the same?'

'Yeah, most definitely,' Fotio said, darkly. 'I'm well on the way to becoming the God of Confused Buggers.'

(ii)

The country through which they rode was becoming more rugged by the hour, and a line of hills appeared in the south towards the end of the second day.

'I told the King that we would ride through the Road Pass,' Akakion said as they broke their camp after breakfast, 'but I'm not sure it's such a good idea anymore.'

'Why not?'

'It's the path that Monos's armies must take when they march and I wouldn't be surprised if he's watching it.'

'Is there another way?'

'Yes, but it adds a day to our journey. Still, it may be worth losing the day to maintain some element of surprise.'

'What if they're watching all the passes?'

'Nah, they won't be watching this one,' Akakion said, 'very few people even know it exists.'

The distant hills were upon them much sooner than Fotio had expected, and by the afternoon of the third day, their ragged and boulder-strewn slopes dominated the skyline. As far as he could see, there was no way across, but Akakion was unfazed. He led them to the east, parallel to the steep and impassable slopes, until they came to a small creek running

down out of the hills and into a wood.

'We may as well rest here,' he said, 'the pass is to the south. We just need to follow the creek and we'll find it.'

But Fotio wasn't listening. The ride had been long, hot, and exhausting and he was keen to have a drink and a lie down in the shade.

They settled down under the cover of the trees to a meal free of honey cakes. Fotio had been quite adamant when they were sorting their provisions, and refused to leave the kitchens until all the honey cakes had been removed and replaced with 'real food'. He was dismayed to find that this seemed to consist of what he had come to call 'blah-cakes', which were just like honey cakes, but without the pleasant taste, texture, or smell. They even looked unappetizing.

Fotio was half way through his first, and definitely his last, blah cake, when Ormi threw up his head and pricked his ears. He whinnied softly, which must have meant something in horse because Akakion's mount also pricked its ears. Shortly after, even the humans could hear the sound of distant hooves. Lots and lots of hooves.

The two men looked at one another and came to the same conclusion. They raced out from the cover of the trees, grabbed the reins of their horses and tried to drag them into the brush, but the horses refused to be led. Ormi bucked and carried on, whinnying and braying in a way that Fotio had never seen before. Plod was no better and even managed to knock the priest onto his backside. After a few minutes of

futile struggle during which the hoof beats became louder and louder, they abandoned the horses and dove under cover.

'What's up with them?' Akakion asked.

'I don't know. It's strange because they don't seem scared, just, I don't know, excited?'

'Well, whatever's happened to them, it had better be all that happens to them. I don't want to walk all the way to the enemy's camp,' Akakion said. 'Let's hope that whoever is coming this way is on our side, because from the sound of it, there's a hell of a lot of them.'

'It sounds like they're passing by on the other side of those trees over there,' Fotio said. 'Hey, where's Ormi going? Come back here you silly beast!'

From their place of hiding in the scrub, Fotio and Akakion watched helplessly as Ormi raced across the grass and into a small wood several hundred feet away. A few minutes later, he re-emerged followed by a centaur.

Akakion let out a 'woop' and sprung from his hiding place. The giant creature covered the ground at amazing speed and was upon them very quickly.

'Lord Keeper, thank the Gods we have found you,' the centaur said in a surprisingly cultured voice.

'It is a joy to see you, friend Alogo. The last I heard, you were enjoying the good life in the immortal lands.'

Fotio stared, mouth agape. Of all the mythical creatures in Helvenica, the centaurs fascinated him the most.

He had always wondered what it would be like to travel as fast as the wind. Not even the idea of flight could match the symbolism of freedom to Fotio as did the idea of being able to run faster than all other creatures, probably because he secretly thought that floating amongst the clouds could too easily lead to plummeting to the earth.

The centaur was far more impressive than he had ever imagined. From the waist up, it had the body of a man who, if he had human legs, would probably have stood taller than Fotio. From the waist down, the centaur had the body of a horse. It was an immense creature, and the shoulders of its forelegs stood higher than Fotio's head.

Judging from the arsenal of weapons hanging off the studded leather armor that covered much of his body, the centaur probably wasn't one to take a backward step. Two curved swords hung on a belt about his waist, and he had a spear strapped to his human-back. A long bow and several quivers of arrows hung down over his withers, and a huge double-handed sword ran along the length of his horse-back. It wasn't difficult to imagine the devastating effect that such a massive weapon would have on any number of enemies, especially when wielded by the mighty arms of such a beast.

'We ride to join the Guardians of Eternity in their battle with the Mad God Monos,' Fotio heard the centaur say. 'But Mazi also asked us to aid you however we can. He sends word that the agent who infiltrated the enemy's camp has not been heard from for many days. If you wish to continue your

mission, you will need to come up with another way of getting to the staff.'

'It would be foolish to abandon our quest when we have come so far. The Gods chose a hero to accompany me,' Akakion said, and pointed at Fotio, 'and they chose wisely. Monos has named him the second prophet.'

'The second prophet?' Alogo said, surprised. 'Is this bug eyed fellow the second prophet?' His face soured. 'I'm still recovering from the problems caused by the first prophet, and now there is another?'

'Well, I have news for you, Monos *is* the first prophet,' Akakion said, and went on to explain what had happened to King Prosoti.

'That will make our victory all the sweeter,' Alogo said. 'But tell me, if you are making for the enemy camp, why are you here? This is many miles out of your way?'

'Monos may be watching the Road Pass. I thought it prudent to cross the hills a different way.'

'You humans are too cautious,' Alogo said, and took a horn from his back. He blew a mighty, ear-splitting note. A few minutes passed in which nothing happened, and then Fotio heard the sound of hooves.

Out of the trees burst many, many centaurs - at least a hundred by Fotio's reckoning - thundering towards them. They weren't as big as Alogo, but neither were they much smaller. And all were armed and armored the same way.

Alogo saw the wonder in Fotio's eyes and smiled

approvingly. 'At least this prophet looks like he can fight,' he said. 'Not like that other wimp.'

'That wimp has become the single most powerful entity in all the lands, mortal and immortal,' Akakion said.

'We'll see about that,' the centaur said and drew his two swords. He raised them in the air and screamed something that sounded a lot like a horse's whiney to Fotio's ears. The charging centaurs broke into two groups and fanned out on either side of the small group of men and horses. When they had them encircled, each centaur reared onto his or her hind legs and whinnied. They came crashing down at the same time, causing the earth to tremble. Each centaur raised a right hand to the heavens, middle finger extended.

'I don't know about the wisdom of your mission, Lord Keeper, but if it is truly your wish to enter the enemy's camp, then you should let us take you,' Alogo said. 'Even if you use our brother's speed,' he nodded towards the horses, 'your journey will take many days. I can't even imagine how long it will take upon your own, tiny little feet. But with us, you will be in sight of the enemy camp in two days.'

Akakion looked at Fotio, who shrugged and then asked 'What about Ormi and Plod?'

Ormi whinnied and snorted, and Alogo listened intently, replying in the horse tongue every so often.

'No way,' Fotio exclaimed. 'He can't understand what I just said. Can he?'

'He most definitely can, prophet,' Alogo said.

'Some of our equine brothers understand the words of men and Ormi is such a one. He was once a great leader who commanded the respect of many horses, but he is in his twilight years and would gladly allow us to carry his load.'

To everyone's surprise, Fotio's eyes brimmed with tears and he went and put his arms around Ormi's neck.

'It is decided then?' Alogo said.

'I guess so,' Akakion said.

Alogo whinnied a command and a centaur broke ranks. He trotted over to the two horses and knotted a banner to the saddle of each.

Ormi pulled away from Fotio when the centaur had finished and both he and Plod reared onto their hind legs before galloping off in the direction of Plusia.

'They will return to Plusia with their banners so that King Prosoti knows that you are now with the centaurs,' Alogo said, and turned to Fotio. 'Ormi spoke very highly of you, prophet. He would not leave until I swore to carry you myself.'

'He was my friend when I thought myself alone,' Fotio said. 'I will miss him.'

To Akakion and Fotio's delight, the centaurs had an ample supply of food so they left the blah cakes on the riverbanks, where even the ants avoided them. A passing crow pecked at one or two, gagged, and flew away.

The herd moved off and was soon galloping over the landscape at an amazing speed. Fotio reveled in the

swiftness of their travel; he let his cares fall behind him and concentrated on the thunder of the hooves, which filled his universe and drowned out all other sounds. It felt like Alogo, whom he was to learn had once been a God until the coming of the first prophet, was flying over the Earth with his hooves barely touching the ground.

Fotio whooped and screamed at the blurred countryside as it sped past and, when his excitement grew too big to contain, he stood on Alogo's back and challenged the wind to knock him off. Around him, the centaurs whinnied their approval.

Akakion, who was on the back of the centaur Epitaxi, called out to Alogo. 'Where are you going? The pass is to the south.'

Alogo smiled at the Keeper. 'We run to the Road Pass. Centaurs are too big to hide!'

To Fotio's surprise, the Keeper laughed.

They centaurs ran until darkness forced them to stop, and if they were concerned about the war, they didn't show it when preparing their camp. Within minutes, there was a roaring fire and numerous wineskins were doing the rounds. The only consolation to the times were a couple of sentries who, rather grumpily, walked the perimeter of the camp while their peers ate, drank, and told tall tales of their exploits

Akakion planted himself in the middle of it all. He seemed to be at his most comfortable when on the road

amongst soldiers. Fotio, on the other hand, wasn't feeling particularly gregarious. He sat slightly apart from everyone else and wrote in his notebook.

'The prophet is a man of letters,' Alogo said, when he spied Fotio sitting alone some way away, writing in his book.

Akakion, who was telling the centaurs about the battle he and Fotio had been involved in a few days earlier, paused and looked towards the young man. 'The prophet is many things,' he said, 'but educated isn't one of them. Apparently, he kept hitting his teachers with bits of furniture.'

The centaurs laughed. 'I had similar problems as a foul,' Epitaxi said.

Despite himself, Akakion was curious. 'Hey Foti,' he called out, 'what are you doing?'

Fotio jumped and hurriedly pushed the paper and quill into a fold in his clothing. 'Just, you know, writing stuff.'

'I never pictured you as someone who kept a diary.'

'I've just started,' Fotio said, and stood up. 'Never had anything to write about before.' He stretched and yawned theatrically. 'It's been a big day and I'm off to bed.'

Akakion watched him retreat into the darkness. He did not share Fotio's semi-feigned fatigue. 'Troubled times, these,' he said.

Alogo nodded. 'When the Lord of the Gods comes asking favors, you know that there is trouble brewing.'

The two sat by the fire and talked long into the night. Akakion was feeling pressed; his focus had always been on getting to the enemy's camp, with scant thought on what they would do when they got there. Now that he had the means to end the journey, it was time to think about what they would need to do at its culmination. He was also interested in news on how the rest of Helvenica was preparing for war, which Alogo shared with him.

Akakion was overjoyed to learn that Mazi, at Aquina's beckoning, had asked the centaurs to help the Guardians of Eternity stop the enemy at the Road Pass. He was even happier when he learned that the ogres were also on their way. Mazi had promised them re-entry into the immortal lands if they joined the war.

'At least now the Guardians have a chance,' he said, 'and they'll probably do more good this way.'

'They are still several days away, Lord Keeper,' Alogo said, 'and Gods know where the ogres are. I have a proposal for you. We will take you to the enemy's camp. When we arrive, we will feign an attack.' Akakion made to protest, but Alogo lifted a hand and stopped him. 'Nothing major, he continued, 'just enough so that you and the prophet can get inside unnoticed and do your business. If you succeed, the war will never happen because the Gods will rip the place apart. If you fail, then we will return to the pass and join the Guardians.'

(iii)

Breakfast the following morning was rushed because Akakion insisted they set off at first light. Now that he had the speed of the centaurs at his disposal, he was keen to bring their adventure to an end. The same two centaurs carried them as the day before - Fotio on Alogo and Akakion on Epitaxi.

'We will be at the Road Pass in an hour unless we are delayed,' Alogo said as they ran. They weren't travelling as fast as the day before, which led Fotio to suspect that the extra speed had been a show to impress Akakion and himself. 'What's so important about this pass?' he asked.

'Passages through the hills are few and far between, and most are narrow paths that could accommodate no more than two centaurs abreast,' Alogo explained. 'All but the Road Pass, which is nearly a quarter mile wide.'

'You know these lands well?'

'I roamed the plains beyond the hills with my herd before the coming of the first prophet. In those days, the thunder of centaur hooves could be heard all over Helvenica, but the prophet changed everything. Men no longer welcomed us as friends, and we retreated to the immortal lands. Many of my herd refuse to return, but I have come back several times. The Keeper and I fought side by side to help King Prosoti drive the bandits from these lands many years ago. It was a sad day when he left for The Temple of All Gods. I returned to the immortal lands not long after.'

During his previous ride, Fotio had formed the opinion that the centaurs had no order when they ran, but now he could see that he was wrong. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see that the herd maintained a diamond formation, with Alogo leading and Epitaxi at the far end of the line to the left. The centaur explained that there was a leader at each of the points of the diamond so that they could change direction almost instantly - even turn completely around - and still have a leader to focus the herd.

It wasn't long before the hills to their left fell away and they could see Prosoti's famous road ahead, but the centaurs turned south ahead of the massive tower that straddled it. What they saw beyond the hills drew a cry of dismay from Akakion.

About a mile away, two lines of soldiers were facing each other and about to engage in combat. Nearest to them were the Helvenicans, obvious by the gleam of their bronze armor. They numbered about two hundred in a line four deep, carried large round shields on their left arm and huge ash spears in their right. Fotio was gladdened to see that the ogres had arrived before them. He estimated there were about sixty marching in a line three deep, and were armed with spears at least three times as long as those carried by their human brothers in arms.

Facing them, but still several hundred yards away, were at least ten ranks of Monos soldiers in their familiar white leather armor. They were also armed with spears,

though much shorter than those carried by the Helvenicans and many appeared to be carrying bows. There were far too many for Fotio to estimate their numbers, which did not bode well for his compatriots.

Alogo gave a high-pitched whinny and the centaurs charged. They ran at an incredible speed to the left of the Helvenican line, and the pounding of their hooves on the rocky earth echoed like thunder across the field of battle. The Helvenican troops gave a cheer at the approach of the horse-men and, even through the pounding hooves, Fotio heard a clear voice issue a command:

'AT THEM!'

The Helvenican line picked up speed. By the time they were within bowshot of the Monos worshipers, they were travelling at a run. The missiles of the followers of the God of Men filled the air, but many went over the rapidly advancing Helvenican lines, or bounced harmlessly off shields or metal breastplates. What the soldiers of Monos had expected to be a volley of death had little effect on the charging lines of soldiers.

The speed of the centaurs saw them pass the Helvenican line well before the last arrow dropped. It was then that Alogo gave another whinny and the herd, as one, turned to their left and Epitaxi became the leader, with Akakion grown to giant proportions, astride his back.

The Helvenican soldiers and the centaurs struck the Monos lines at almost exactly the same time. Fotio, his blood boiling in his veins, leapt from Alogo's back into the middle of the enemy's massed ranks. His spinning form crushed and smashed its way across the lines, leaving broken bodies in its wake. The giant Akakion, who had already felled half a dozen enemies before Fotio had even leapt and who was covered head to toe in blood and gore, stood behind the young prophet and made sure that no one was able to take him unawares.

At the same time, the ogres smashed into the other side of the enemy line with such force that some of their spears skewered three or four men in one thrust. The initial push was devastating, but nowhere near as terrifying as the savage swords they unsheathed after abandoning their spears. The irresistible and wickedly sharp blades, wielded with amazing skill and strength, severed limbs and rent skulls, and sometimes even cut men in two.

The soldiers of Monos, caught between two savage forces, cried out in fear and turned to run. Unfortunately, no man can run fast enough to escape a centaur. Most died to the arrows and spears of the galloping horse-men. The few who escaped only did so because Alogo wanted news of the victory to reach the main body of the enemy army.

Eventually, Alogo led the centaurs back to the battleground, by which time Akakion had returned to his normal size and was tending to the wounded.

'I like this new prophet,' the centaur bellowed, 'he fights like a centaur.'

'Yes, which is why he would have been sent back to the Mountain a dozen times if I had not watched his back,' Akakion replied, then turned to Fotio. 'If you are to be a soldier, lad, you're going to have to learn the meaning of defense.'

Fotio, with breastplate unbuckled, was sitting on the ground beside his mace and his shield and writing furiously in his notepad. 'What?' he said.

Akakion sighed. 'I said, if you want to be a soldier, you're going to have to learn to defend yourself.'

'I'm not going to be a soldier, and the best defense is a dead enemy.'

Alogo laughed. 'He even thinks like a centaur.'

'Look you fellows, it's the Keeper,' said a familiar voice. Fotio looked up to see the three ogres that had waylaid them on the road to Pethamenos. He didn't have particularly fond memories of the three so he returned to his writing.

'Well, well, well,' Akakion said, 'it's good to see you three have finally become respectable citizens.'

'Where's the pretty little fellow you were with,' Simon asked.

'You mean the second prophet? He's over there writing in his diary.'

'He's the second prophet? We should have eaten him when we had the chance.'

Fotio looked up from his notes. 'I'd have given you indigestion to go with your poor taste in fashion,' he said.

This drew a hysterical response from the other two ogres, who laughed so hard they almost choked.

'Laughter is not appropriate on a battle ground,' Akakion said, sternly, 'even for ogres. I have heard that Mazi is going to allow you back into the immortal lands.'

'Most definitely,' Douglas said, 'but we have to help in the war. It's a win-win as far as we're concerned. We get to crack some skulls and go home as well.'

'Mazi came and asked us himself,' Benny said. 'He just popped into our camp while we were at dinner.'

'You know, I think we had him wrong all this time. He was quite charming,' Simon said. 'When he told us that Monos was God of Men, we thought we'd better pitch in for the old ways. You just never know what sort of nasty habits this new fellow will have.'

Akakion sighed and looked despondent. 'There are men that need help to make it to camp,' he said, 'and others need help to dig the graves for the fallen.'

'We'll take the injured to the infirmary,' Douglas said and the three ogres shuffled off.

Fotio put away his notebook and stood up. He hadn't allowed himself to think about the recent bloodshed, nor his part in it, but the bloody battlefield was a stark reminder. 'This is horrible,' he said.

'Yes it is. And it's also a glorious victory,' Akakion

said. He had given the last of the wounded a mouthful of blessed stiporo and allowed the ogres to carry them away. Fotio was amazed at just how gentle and strong the ogres were. They had built a platform out of broken spears and shields harvested from the battlefield and had placed all the wounded who could not walk upon it. With barely a grunt of effort, the three lifted the stretcher and over a dozen men into the air and shuffled off towards the camp, a tail of walking wounded followed along behind them.

That left only the dead to deal with.

'This is why we must stop the war,' Akakion said, looking out over the carnage.

'What do we do now?'

'We bury them. Not many of our own have fallen, but the enemy died by the score,' Akakion said. 'Our soldiers will have individual graves and we'll need to dig a pit for all the others.'

'No, Lord Keeper, the soldiers will dig,' Alogo said. 'You and the prophet will eat and rest a while before we continue on.'

Akakion reluctantly followed Alogo off the battlefield, and Fotio tagged along behind. He led them to the central fire of the camp the Helvenican soldiers had erected not far from the road. The three ogres joined them soon after, along with the senior commanders of the soldiers. Akakion was overjoyed to see that Sergeant Cotos and Toll Master Psila were amongst them.

'The ogres came to our city the day after you left,' Cotos explained while Fotio and Akakion munched on honey cakes. It was a warm day, but they found the fire comforting. 'The Queen ordered me to organize a battalion and join them in defense of the Pass. On the way we met Toll Master Psila and his men, who volunteered to join us.'

'Like a fool I followed,' Psila interjected. 'It was nice and safe at the bridge.'

'Safe and exceedingly dull,' Cotos said.

'Better crazy than dead,' Psila said, but there was a smile on his face.

'Anyway, we had barely gotten comfortable here when the white bastards showed up. I reckon we could have beaten them even without the centaurs,' Cotos said, with a touch of pride, 'but your intervention meant we came through with very few casualties, and for that, you have our thanks.'

'Don't be too cocky, Sergeant Cotos,' Akakion said. 'That was just a tiny portion of Monos's strength. He probably wanted to hold the pass against any reinforcements that might come to help Graphion. Helvenica is fortunate we met them before they got entrenched in the tower. They would have been tough to dislodge if they got fortified.'

'When do you think he will move?'

Akakion considered the question. 'This was probably a sign that he is almost ready to launch his invasion. From what others have told me, I gather his army is huge and will require much in the way of food and supplies to march

across Helvenica. Perhaps he has gathered enough, or perhaps the emergence of the second prophet has forced his hand. Either way, he won't stay in his camp for much longer.'

'Why is Monos attacking us?' Psila said. 'Invasion isn't exactly a great way to win friends and influence people.'

'He's not at war with the people,' Akakion said, 'he's at war with the Gods.'

'It's always the way, isn't it? The Gods fight and the people get it in the neck.'

'I hear that Monos has a better organized eternity,' Cotos said, cautiously dipping his metaphoric toe into the theological waters and hoping that the piranhas of dogma don't bite it off. 'I hear you are judged by other people, those who have already served their penance, and you only have to pay penance until you say that you're sorry.'

Everyone considered this for a while.

'I don't know what's so good about having people judge you rather than Gods,' Douglas the ogre said.

'It's because immortals don't know what it's like to die,' Psila said, 'but I certainly wouldn't want to be judged by other people. My father in law would have me spend eternity with a red hot poker up my backside.'

The other soldiers laughed, except for the ones who winced.

'And I don't know about this penance-till-you're-sorry business,' Psila continued. 'I mean, if my penance is to have my liver pecked out by a chicken every day, then I'd be

sorry before the bugger had taken a second beak full. No one would ever do any penance if that was the case.'

'His worshipers only eat meat on Wednesdays and only have, ah, intimate relations during a full moon,' Fotio said.

All those assembled gave this their consideration.

'Really? Only during the full moon?' Cotos asked, looking concerned.

'That's what I was told by someone who was going to convert. And you've got to go a year without either when you first become a worshiper.'

'No wonder those buggers in white were such easy pickings. Weak from hunger and unable to concentrate on what they're doing because of more pressing concerns upon their mind,' Cotos said.

'I think I might just stay with what I know,' Psila said. The other soldiers murmured in agreement.

'He's a bit selfish for mine,' Simon said. 'I mean, why does he have to get rid of all the other Gods? Can't they all just get along?'

'I remember him when he was a prophet,' Alogo said. 'I was a God at the time, and the plains of Helvenica and all the beasts that roamed upon them fell under my domain. Then he came along and said there were too many Gods and that there weren't enough worshipers to go around, so a whole lot of us had to stop being Gods. I'm not surprised the greedy bugger wants all the worshipers to himself.'

Alogo stared moodily into the fire.

'I didn't know Monos was the first prophet. Didn't he die hundreds of years ago?' Psila said.

'Yeah, he was emperor for a while as well,' Akakion said.

'Really? You have to admire his ambition,' Cotos said. 'Did he have humble origins? I've always thought that humble origins are a great driver of ambition.'

Fotio stood up abruptly. 'Let's go,' he said, looking at Akakion. 'We're still one night away so we can rest when the herd stops. Let's just go.'

'The prophet is right. Running is far better than stewing by a fire,' Alogo said. 'I will muster the herd.'

(iv)

The herd ran on for several hours before the sun began to sink in the west. Alogo, who had looked down upon the land from Mount Polipsilo, brought them to rest a little before darkness fell. 'We should rest here tonight and prepare for our assault tomorrow.'

The camp was a far more somber affair than that of the previous night. They lit only a small fire and the sentries were far more numerous and alert. Predictably, the conversations turned to the shape that the war would take in the days to come.

'The thinking at Polipsilo is that Monos will try

and take the cities so that he can destroy the temples,' Alogo said. He, Fotio, and Akakion were alone around the fire. All the other centaurs who did not have sentry duty, including Epitaxi, had taken to their bedrolls for the night. Fotio found it strange that centaurs slept lying down, like men, and each carried their bed with them, strapped across their rump.

'The generals have been advised by the Gods to not meet him in open battle because our numbers are too small,' Alogo continued. 'As you already know, the centaurs, along with the Guardians of Eternity and the ogres, are to buy enough time for the armies to muster and the cities to finish their fortifications. Sadly, we will have to abandon Graphion to the invaders.'

'What of the people? How is the mood amongst the common folk?' Akakion asked.

'Not good, from what I have been told. There are converts to Monos springing up all over Helvenica, and they preach intolerance to all who are not human. The Gods fear that should the armies of Monos begin their march, the people of Helvenica may start smashing the Temples themselves rather than fight a war.'

Fotio had been staring into the fire while the other two debated tactics and strategy. His journey had been long and difficult, and most of it could not be measured in miles. There was still much to do and he wished the road had not tired him as much as it had. 'All the blood and battle will gain us nothing,' he said quietly. 'If the Gods cannot earn the love

and devotion of their worshipers, then they will never truly defeat Monos.'

'We can worry about keeping Monos away after we have driven off his army,' Akakion said. 'What must concern us here and now is how we are going to get to the staff.'

'When Mazi summoned me, he took me to the Mountain and showed me the enemy's camp. It sits like a scar in the forest and is more a citadel than a camp,' the centaur said, and used a stick that had escaped the fire to draw a rough rectangle in the soft earth. 'It's about a mile wide and two miles deep and surrounded by a high timber wall. There's a river on the western side and the only entrance, in the northern wall, is heavily guarded. The interesting thing is that there are only four sentry towers.' Alago drew four crosses on his rough sketch in the earth. 'One overlooking the entrance, another about mid way along the western wall overlooking the river, a third midway along the eastern wall, and a fourth on the eastern wall but near the intersection with the southern wall at the back of the camp.'

'Either Monos's generals are unversed in the art of war, or they aren't all that concerned about being attacked,' Akakion said.

'There are more soldiers in that camp than I could possibly count, so I don't think Monos considers a pre-emptive attack at all likely,' the centaur said. 'We can surprise him with a feint on the gate. We will set you two down to the east of the camp and then attack the front gate with our bows

from the riverbank to the northwest. While the enemy chases shadows in the dark, you two can slip into the camp just behind the front watchtower.'

'How will we get through the wall?' Fotio asked.

'The short swords your aunty gave us would cut through timber as if it were butter,' Akakion said. 'We'll need to be a fair way down along the east wall to be sure the tower guards don't see us, maybe a hundred yards or so.'

'Most of the camp is tents, but there is one permanent structure at its center,' Alogo said. 'That is probably where the staff will be.'

Chapter 8: The God of Men

Fotio found much of the following day difficult. The herd had run through the morning before coming to a stop in the early afternoon on the banks of a wide river.

'Prepare yourselves, brothers and sisters,' Alogo had said, 'for tonight we assault the enemy's stronghold.' The other centaurs greeted the news with a cheer. He then came to where the two men were sitting on their packs and eating honey cakes for lunch. 'The enemy's camp lies on the banks of this river to the south. You have several hours to rest and prepare yourselves while we plan the assault on the gate. I will come for you an hour before dusk.'

Akakion promptly announced he was going to have a nap, which left the young thief-cum-prophet with no one to

talk to and nothing to do but dwell upon his lot in life. He had tried writing in his notebook, but the words would not come. He had tried following Akakion's lead and having a sleep, but his eyes had refused to close and his mind kept running through all that had happened and all that could happen. In the end, he had found a secluded spot away from the herd and sat down to watch the water bubbling and gurgling along its pre-determined path.

Akakion came to find him when the sun was low on the horizon. 'It is time, prophet,' the priest said and handed him a dark, hooded cloak. 'Put this on. It will help keep us hidden in the dark.'

Fotio draped the cloak over his armor with some relief. It would be good to bring this mission to an end, for good or for ill. He could barely remember his life before he had dreamed about stealing a treasure from the Gods. It felt so long ago and somehow alien, as if it were a memory of a life that had been lived by someone else, and that he had merely been a witness to its unfolding. He wrapped the cloak tightly around himself and followed Akakion to where the assembled herd was waiting.

(ii)

The run through the fading evening was surreal because the hooves of the centaurs barely made a sound.

'Centaur's can move lightly over the ground,' Alogo

explained. 'We are spirits of the earth and that is its gift to us.'

'My mother is an earth spirit,' Fotio said.

'And your father?'

'I've never met him. I thought he was dead, but my aunty told me he is an immortal and still lives. She said it was dangerous for me to meet him because, because...' Fotio lapsed into silence.

'Because?'

'I don't really know. I would be in danger if people knew I was his son. It sounds a bit silly now that I come to think about it.'

'Do you wish to meet him?'

Fotio shrugged. 'I should but, to be honest, I'm indifferent. It was a shock when I first found out and I felt angry and confused, but the feeling has faded. It's kind of strange, but I simply don't care. Maybe it would be different if I could remember him, but he "died" before I was born so I've never known a father. It's always been just Mom and me, which suits me just fine.'

The trip along the riverbank was not a long one and the herd soon came to a halt on a clear stretch of land in the forest. Beyond the trees to the south, Fotio could see the rising smoke of campfires in the waning light of evening. It would be dark soon.

Leaving the herd to prepare for battle, Alogo and Epitaxi carried the two men into the bush to the southeast

and dropped them within sight of the enemy's camp. Fotio's heart was racing with excitement. He'd always thought he would be afraid when the moment finally came, but he felt surprisingly calm. Of course, that could be because he didn't quite believe that he and Akakion were about to sneak into a camp stuffed to the brim with soldiers in order to destroy a powerful artifact that was probably being guarded by a Mad God. It's the sort of thing that falls outside everyday experience.

'We will attack when the sun goes down. Wait a few minutes for us to get their attention before trying to get in. The staff is to the south west of here. Good luck,' Alogo said and turned to go.

'How will we know you've started your attack?' Fotio asked, fighting to stamp down on a rising tide of anxiety.

Alogo smirked. 'You'll know,' he said, and he and Epitaxi disappeared into the bush.

Akakion, after casting around for a likely spot, sat down with his back against a tree.

Fotio tried hard not to throw up. 'How can you just sit there?'

Akakion shrugged. 'It will be at least half an hour before the sun sets. There is nothing to do until then except keep out of sight.'

Fotio vomited.

Akakion passed him a water bottle. 'Don't feel bad,'

he said. 'The waiting is always the hardest part.'

'What about the dying?'

'Yes, well, I've never actually experienced that but I imagine that would be pretty bad. Maybe even worse than the waiting.'

'This is not a time to tell jokes!'

'No, it's a time to keep quiet and stay out of sight.'

Fotio took the hint and sat down beside the priest, then offered to return the bottle.

'That's okay. You keep it.'

What followed was the longest half hour in Fotio's life. The sun refused to fall below the horizon and, had anyone asked him, Fotio would have told them that he could feel the grass growing under his backside. But time did pass, and darkness slowly stole over the forest. Eventually the only light from the west came from the enemy's camp.

The sudden screams almost loosened Fotio's bowels.

'They're deadly with those bows,' Akakion said, and got to his feet. 'Come on.' He led them towards the line of darkness that was the camp wall, moving like a shadow in the forest, a silent patch of black that barely disturbed the air as it passed. Fotio tried to emulate his quiet passage but failed. He felt that the only way he could be more conspicuous would be to bang a drum while he walked.

When they reached the wall, Akakion drew the short sword Queen Filia had given him in Enorganon and started hacking at the timber, but with only limited success.

The blade was sharp, but the timber was green and heavy and gripped the blade. 'This may take a while.'

Fotio, once again trying to emulate the actions of the priest, drew his own short sword and, with barely a grunt of effort, pushed it right through the wall. Akakion was impressed. 'Can you cut a hole in the wall?' he whispered.

Fotio nodded and cut a line through two of the huge logs, about a foot long and parallel to the ground. He then pulled the blade free and, with a remarkable show of strength, pulled both logs out of the ground.

'You're not just a pretty face, are you?' the priest whispered, then squeezed through the gap. Fotio shrugged and followed, his pale face shining out from beneath the hood of the robe.

Dozens of campfires were scattered between the rows of tents and they filled the camp with a weird flickering light. To the south west, they could see a tall building looming out of the darkness.

'Follow me,' Akakion said, and crept into a lane of darkness between two rows of tents. Fotio followed, but with a growing sense of unease.

'Where is everybody?' he asked, after they'd snuck along for a few minutes.

'Fighting centaurs.'

'What, everybody? There are hundreds of tents here, each big enough to hold many soldiers. You'd think one or two would have stayed behind.'

'Now that you mention it,' Akakion said, looking around.

'This is a trap,' Fotio said. 'He knows we're here.'

'Don't be stupid, if he knew we were here there'd be soldiers everywhere.'

Fotio looked around and reached a decision. He threw off his cloak and strode into the light. 'Come on. Let's end this.'

Akakion watched him go, first in shock, and then in resignation. He sighed deeply, threw off his own cloak and set off after the young prophet. Fotio did not walk, he strode. As he advanced along the rows of tents, enemy soldiers emerged and stood by their tents, or warmed themselves by the fires. None intercepted him.

As he and Fotio passed, Akakion noticed that the soldiers close ranks behind them. There was no turning back now. Not without major bloodshed, anyway. He looked at Fotio in his gleaming bronze armor with his mace and shield at the ready and the sudden realization came as a shock. This was no young thief striding along in front of him. The man he followed wasn't the same as the one who had vomited on the perimeter of the camp. There was an aura about him now, a presence.

Akakion, who had often secretly despaired at Fotio's softness, saw a completely different man walking ahead of him. A man whose birth caused such a splash in the world that an oracle, already dead for hundreds of years, had

seen his coming. If Fotio decided to turn around and leave right now, the soldiers could do nothing to stop him. Any mortal man getting in the prophet's way here and now would die - quickly and in vain.

They did not take long to reach their destination, which wasn't quite what Akakion had expected and found a little disappointing. The building that housed the most powerful artifact given by a God to men was entirely unremarkable, which simply wasn't right to his way of thinking. If one travels hundreds of miles and overcomes all sorts of dangers to reach a destination, then he was of the opinion that the destination should at least *look* like it was worth reaching. In his mind's eye, he had pictured a magnificent fortress decorated with carvings of the Mad God's triumphs and watched over by fierce, keen-eyed guards. The reality was somewhat less dramatic.

Despite being quite tall, the Mad God's 'fortress' looked like it was squatting on the earth, probably because the bowed timbers that made up its lower level bulged outwards. There were no keen-eyed guards, fierce or otherwise. Just a skinny old man in a grubby toga, holding a stick and standing in front of an open door.

'You are the Prophet Fotio and the false priest Akakion?' the old man asked.

Fotio looked the old man up and down. 'That is who we are old man. Stand aside and let us enter.'

'I am Tiflos, high priest of Monos and I guard the

entrance to the One God's fortress. He came to me in a dream last night and told me to offer you forgiveness, even if you do not renounce the false Gods that have for so long plagued the land of His birth. He also told me to warn you against entering this temple, for he waits inside and no mortal man can hope to look upon his face and not be changed.'

Akakion, who had taken offense at being called a false priest, brought his spear around into a more prominent position. He didn't actually point it at Tiflos, he merely repositioned it so that the old man could see that he also had a stick, and it was sharp. 'You call that a threat?' he said. 'We have come to smash the staff that protects this army of heathens from the divine will of The Twelve. Throw it down and renounce the Mad God or you will spend eternity writhing in pain, as if hot lead ran through your veins and ants were eating your flesh.' He looked smug. 'Now that's a threat.'

The old man smiled a sad smile. 'Many fear the threat of change far more than mere pain.'

Akakion made a sound that communicated, quite eloquently, what he thought of that little piece of wisdom.

'The staff we seek is inside,' Fotio said. He squared his shoulders and walked through the open door. The old man made no move to stop him.

Akakion, acutely aware that he was now alone with hundreds, if not thousands, of enemy soldiers all of whom had sharp sticks, squared his shoulders and followed, but not before casting a sneering look towards the High Priest of Monos.

'You call that a ceremonial robe?'

(iii)

The building was somewhat better appointed inside than out. There were strange totems and carvings hanging from the walls, and the single massive room was bright with light, despite there being no fire. It was as if the very air glowed. There was a raised platform at its center, and a large, well-built man stood upon it. He was wearing black leather armor and holding an ornate staff. Behind him, a young woman was slumped against a post. There were chains on her hands and she was obviously unconscious.

'Geneka!' Fotio exclaimed.

'I heard you were coming so I thought we'd have a party,' the man said, and nodded at the girl. 'I was almost insulted when a daughter of the Gods dropped into my camp and didn't pay her respects.'

Fotio, never one to bandy words when there were skulls to crack, hurled his mace but the big man lifted a hand and swatted it away as if it were a fly.

'You can't kill me, prophet. I am Monos, God of Men. Repent now and I will spare you from my fury. My quarrel is with the so-called Gods of Helvenica, not its people, nor its prophets. I was one myself, you know.'

Fotio lifted his hand and the mace flew to him from where it had fallen. 'You're not Monos. We've seen

Monos and he's a short, plump little fellow.'

'You're eyes deceived you or possibly your mind is too soft to perceive the truth. I am Monos, God of Men and destroyer of Gods, and I have always looked like this.'

Fotio saw Akakion mumble a prayer and begin to grow.

'Ah, the Keeper,' Monos said. He tilted his staff in Akakion's direction and a bolt of lightning knocked the priest off his feet.

Fotio picked that moment to charge. He leapt forward and brought his shield around to block Monos's staff as it swung in a wide arc. There was a clang of wood on metal and the force of the Mad God's blow ripped the shield from Fotio's arm and threw him, tumbling, back towards the door.

Monos laughed a maniacal laugh and mumbled a few syllables under his breath. An invisible force picked up Akakion and pinned him to the wall.

'Oh come on,' Fotio said as he picked himself up. 'Manic laughter as well as black leather armor? You're a walking cliché. Now, give us the staff and march your army out of here or there will be trouble.'

The Mad God looked perplexed for a moment. 'You're joking, right?' His face lit up as realization dawned. 'You're not, are you? You're just dim!' He flexed his fingers and a searing line of fire shot out and engulfed the young thief. When the air cleared, Fotio stood completely unharmed.

'Impressive,' Monos said. 'You have power to burn, prophet. Why do you waste your energies with fading Gods?'

'Because they need me,' Fotio said, and charged again. This time, his mace caught the Mad God in the chest and knocked him off his platform. He spun to plant a killing blow only to find Monos standing beside him and smiling.

'Come now, Fotio, I'm a God. You can't dispatch me with a lump of metal on a stick.' He swung his staff and struck Fotio a blow to the side of the head that rattled his teeth and sent him rolling to the other side of the room.

'Helvenica is being held back by the fools that call themselves her Gods,' Monos said, suddenly appearing beside Fotio again. 'I'm going to drive out their corrupting influence so that the land of my birth can reach its true potential. I was once like you, young Fotio. I thought I could help. I tried everything in my power to help. I even became Emperor in the vain hope that I could build a bridge between the people and their Gods. And do you know how they repaid me? With treachery, that's how. They tried to kill me simply because I wouldn't let them do as they wished, because I'd defied them and somehow diminished them in the eyes of their worshipers.'

'You're mad!' Fotio screamed, and sprung to his feet, his mace arcing through the air. To a mortal man, the blow would have meant death. It would have sent an immortal back to the Mountain. It smashed into Monos's skull and the momentum picked the God up and flung him against the wall

beside Akakion.

'The staff,' Akakion said, his voice faint because of the pressure against his chest. 'Smash the staff!'

Fotio stumbled towards Monos, but the God rose to his feet and struck Fotio in the stomach, then sent him flying through the air with a blow to the side of the head.

'Join me and together we can rid Helvenica of the blight that has held her people back,' Monos urged. 'We don't need the old Gods. Look at your friend the priest. He has powers that the Gods claim originate with them, but he suspects otherwise, don't you Akakion? No other priest has such power. You tell yourself it comes with the office, but deep down you know that's not true. The Gods have nothing to do with it. The power comes from you and you alone.'

'Helvenica and her Gods are one and the same,' Fotio said, struggling to get to his feet.

The Mad God laughed, and appeared beside Fotio again. 'We both know that's not true.'

Fotio, blinked blood out of his eyes from a cut across his forehead and managed to get upright. Still wobbling, he brought his mace around in a full arc and hit Monos in the face. The God took a step back, shook his head, and laughed. He brought the staff around and smashed Fotio in the chest, sending him tumbling back and knocking the mace from his hand.

Once again, Monos appeared beside Fotio. 'To think I feared you and your little mace. When you get back to

the Mountain, tell Aquina I have enjoyed entertaining her daughter.' He laughed maniacally, put his foot on Fotio's chest and raised the staff above his head.

Fotio, in more pain than he had ever experienced before, remembered his short sword. As Monos brought the staff down, Fotio twisted with all his might and pushed the God to the side. The staff struck the ground where Fotio's head had been, and he spun to grip it and hold it in place with his left hand. Despite every movement opening up a new frontier in pain, Fotio drew his sword with his right hand and, instead of striking the Mad God, he brought the razor sharp blade down on the staff, cleaving it in two.

The staff turned to dust in Monos's hands. The illusion of the powerfully built God vanished and the plump Monos that Fotio had seen in Plusia stood before him. 'You broke staffi!' he gibbered. 'How did you do that! I made it and it was meant to last forever! It was magic! You can't break magic!' The Mad God stopped dead in his tracks. 'They can come now. Oh my army! My lovely army!' His face changed suddenly, from showing fear to projecting defiance. 'I don't care if they can come here, they still can't defeat me! I am Monos! I need no army!' He swung a wild fist at Fotio but the blow made no impression.

Akakion, freed from the crushing power of the Mad God, muttered a prayer under his breath and Fotio's mace flew back to his hand. Surprised and delighted, Fotio smacked Monos in the back of the head with it. The small God wobbled

around, obviously hurt. Fotio pulled back his mace to land the killing blow, but hesitated because several things happened at once.

Behind him, Geneka had become conscious. 'Fotio! Is that really you? What's happening? Who is that little man you're fighting?'

There was a high and painful sound and the room became crowded with Gods. Twelve of them, to be precise, and they didn't look happy. Mazi punched Monos square in the nose while Pyros landed a brutal kick between his legs at precisely the same moment. The diminutive God curled up into a ball of pain and vanished.

Aquina let out a scream and raced over to Geneka, who was standing looking dazed and confused. Her chains, which were obviously only for show and not been restricted her at all, had fallen to the ground.

'Geni! What has that monster done to you?' Aquina cried

'What monster?' Geneka said.

'Why Monos, of course. You were his captive and the prophet saved you!'

'Monos isn't a monster, Mom, he's a sweetie. And he's got great arms. We've been having a lovely time and he's a perfect gentleman. He's so lonely and misunderstood because nobody's giving him a chance. You guys would really like him if you met him, like, face to face.'

Fotio felt the green ire of jealousy rising, but the

prospect of divine bloodlust cut it off.

'Right,' Mazi said. 'Now that pint sized bastard is gone, it's time to take care of his bloody army.' There was a manic look in his eyes.

'No! Don't kill them!' Fotio yelled. 'Let them go. Make them swear to never attack Helvenica again and let them go.'

Mazi looked at the young man as if he'd just asked him to kiss a goat. As usual, he turned to his family when he was confused. 'What did he say?' he asked Pyros.

'He said not to kill them.'

'And he wants us to let them go,' Psofios chimed in.

'Does he really?'

Fotio sighed. 'You are Gods. You can enforce any vow if it is made to you. And think of the stories they will tell, of how the Gods of Helvenica defeated Monos but showed mercy to his worshipers.'

All twelve gods looked at Fotio.

'Don't you understand? This is the sort of thing that gave rise to Monos in the first place! If you keep behaving like spoilt children, Monos will be back and the next time he won't even need an army. The next time, the people of Helvenica will smash your temples themselves.'

All the Gods looked to Aquina. 'I think it may be an idea to do as the prophet says.'

'Really?' Mazi looked crestfallen. 'We better do this together then. Okay, everyone in a circle, backs inside.'

Akakion, who had recovered enough to stumble over to where Fotio was standing, reached over and slapped him on the back. 'Well done,' he said. 'You have saved Helvenica from one Mad God.' He looked at the Helvenican pantheon, bickering amongst themselves in the center of the room. 'And you just may be about to save twelve more mad buggers from themselves.' He sat down heavily on the dais. Fotio joined him.

'Right, all sorted?' Mazi said. 'Everyone happy? Good.'

Fotio and Akakion watched as the twelve Gods expanded up into the heavens, smashing the roof and bringing down the walls of Monos's inadequate fortress.

Many of the soldiers of Monos tried to run but found themselves rooted to the ground. Miraculously, the falling debris did not kill or injure anybody, but this sort of thing happens quite often when Gods are involved.

'Soldiers of Monos,' Mazi said, his voice booming across the heavens, 'your God has been defeated, his fortress lies in tatters, and his army is ours to do with as we see fit. In times of old, we would have sent you all to your eternity to pay your penance.'

There was a general outcry from the immobile soldiers.

'Do not fear, men of the south. We, the Gods of Helvenica, have decided to show mercy. Swear to never attack our lands again, cast aside your worship of the false

God, and you may go free!

'Never!' said High Priest Tiflos, and several others took up the cry. Green tendrils of light arced out from within the circle of Gods and sought out those who refused to swear. Unable to move, the soldiers who had remained loyal to Monos could only watch as the light sought them out. It didn't take long for all to be found and then, as one, they began to scream.

From his position on the dais, Fotio watched as the men's flesh visibly changed and become hard as stone. He felt sick to his stomach.

'See what happens to those who defy us?' Mazi bellowed. 'Even eternity will be denied them and their spirits will be trapped forever in the stone that was once their flesh. Are there any others who wish to join them?'

There was silence.

'Good, now repeat after me "I swear to never attack or take up arms against the people of Helvenica ever again, nor worship that bastard Monos." The assembled army repeated the words with enthusiasm. 'You have sworn to us, the Gods of Helvenica. Look to those who have refused and you will see your fate should you break your vow. Now, piss off.'

The Twelve all shrunk back down to a more human size. 'That went quite well, I thought,' Mazi said.

'Yes, my Lord,' Aquina said, 'but was the flourish at the end really necessary?'

'Most definitely. We don't want the buggers hanging around here getting up to no good.'

Akakion, who had somehow managed to find a flask of stiporo and was sharing it with Fotio, abruptly stood up from the dais upon which the two had planted themselves. 'I have to travel to the Mountain,' he said.

Mazi looked to Aquina, who nodded her head. There was a blurred moment and Fotio and Akakion find themselves standing in a golden hall.

Fotio, who had been sitting on the dais, fell onto his bottom, but bounced straight back to his feet. He looked up and then spun around in wonder and awe. The room was twice the size of Monos's fortress. The walls shimmered and when Fotio looked hard at one spot, it became transparent like a window and showed beautiful woodland on the other side. The ceiling was sky blue when he looked directly at it, but was golden in his peripheral vision.

'This is the Hall of the Mountain,' Mazi said, seeing the wonder in his face. He stepped forward and put his arm around Fotio shoulders. 'Lads,' he roared, and clapped Akakion on the back with his free hand, 'you've done it. You've managed to fight off a God.'

Akakion noticed that everyone had fallen silent and were staring, mouths agape, at Mazi and Fotio. He turned to see what had fascinated them so and his jaw dropped in wonder, leaving his mouth agape. It looked like Mazi was standing next to a younger, surlier version of himself.

'From the look on your faces, I can tell you've all but worked it out,' Mazi said. 'I suppose we should make it official. Fotio is my son. Many years ago, during an unfortunate break in my marriage, I met and fell in love with the beautiful Earth spirit Neoleia. It was a brief and passionate affair, and Fotio here was the result. I've nurtured and watched over him ever since.'

Fotio turned and looked directly at Mazi. His mouth opened as if he was going to say something, but instead he swung his mace at the God's head.

Akakion, almost without thinking, intercepted the blow with his spear. 'Well, at least now we know where you got your belligerence from.'

From the back of the gaggle of Gods, there came a squeal of delight. 'You mean he's one of us? Can I Mom, please? Can I?' Geneka said, excitedly.

Aquina looked at her daughter. 'Don't you think it's a little unseemly dear? After all you said about Monos?'

Geneka looked horrified. 'Eeeewww! He's so not my type! You don't really think we got together, do you?'

'Well, okay then.'

Geneka raced across the golden floor and threw herself into Fotio's arms. He winced involuntarily and looked up into the heavens for the expected meteor. When it didn't materialize, he succumbed to Geneka's affection. The two kissed for quite a long time.

'Isn't that nice?' Mazi said. 'We could be related

soon, Aqui.'

At the sound of Mazi's voice, Fotio disengaged himself from Geneka and turned to his newly acquired father, anger etched all over his face. 'You're a bastard,' he said. 'In fact, the lot of you are bastards. Arrogant, meddling, idiotic bastards. I defended you all against Monos, but it was a close thing. He may be a Mad God, but at least he respects his worshiper. You lot couldn't give a damn! You just carry on as if it's only you that matters. Well, I've got news for you, it's not all about you. The people are getting fed up.'

Fotio was so high on rage and indignation that he didn't see Pyros flex his fingers and send a ball of flaming magna arcing in his direction. It completely engulfed the young prophet but singed not a hair on anyone else's head.

When the smoke cleared, Fotio was standing, completely unharmed and staring daggers at the God of Fire.

Pyros gave him a wan smile. 'Sorry about that,' he said. 'I'm the God of Anger as well, and sometimes I get a little worked up. The red mist falls and BOOM, someone's hair is on fire. Can't control myself. So, you're immune to Divine magic, eh? Nice. It's usually only Gods who have that power. If we weren't immune we'd have blown one another to dust centuries ago.'

'That's it!' Akakion exclaimed, 'Gods are immune to divine magic, and you are the second prophet and are immune to divine magic. You're a God, Fotio, a God. And do you know what you're the God of? You're the God of Gods!

They prayed to you and you answered, and now you're going to save them from themselves!

Everyone looked at Akakion.

'You been at the stiporo again?' Mazi asked.

'Can't you see? It's so obvious! Why did you all, without question, accept that some bedraggled thief could challenge and defeat an enemy so powerful the twelve of you combined couldn't even get near him?'

The Twelve all turned to stare at Fotio. 'It does seem silly, now you come to mention it,' Pyros conceded.

Fotio looked at Akakion as if he were mad. 'Oh, come on. This is getting ridiculous. I'm an errand boy who can barely take care of himself. And anyway, if I'm a God where are my divine powers?'

'You can wield the Stone Mace, and are immune to divine magic, and you just defeated the second most powerful being in the lands.'

'Second? Who's the first?' Mazi asked. Akakion pointed at Fotio.

There was silence, and then a voice rose from the knot of Gods staring at Fotio. 'While your reasoning is sound, young Akakion, I'm afraid you have overlooked one small matter. None of the Gods actually believes there is a God to whom they can pray. Without belief, one cannot have a God. As to why they all thought he could help, it's Fate's fault. If Fate told them that banging one's head against a wall once a day would drive away Monos, they'd all have bruised

foreheads.'

The speaker strode to the front of the pack and examined Fotio through half moon glasses that were perched precariously on his nose. He pulled a sheaf of notes from his robe and held them up to his eyes. The glasses slid up his nose automatically as he read down the first page. 'He is certainly an impressive looking fellow,' the God said. A quill magically appeared in his hand and he jotted some notes. 'I've made an extensive study of the Monos phenomena and, naturally, when Fate recommended this young man, I looked into his circumstances as well. Now my findings aren't conclusive by a long shot...'

'Oh do get on with it, Engefalo,' Mazi said in exasperation. The Lord of Gods had never been much of a scholar and just the sound of the God of Education's voice frustrated him.

'Uh, oh, yes, hnmnm, well. Now, if we must be hasty, Fotio and Monos are what I like to call "Meta Gods" because they are the next phase of believer-deity relations. My research indicates that we have incorrectly labeled Monos as the God of Men. A more accurate name would be God of Worshipful Men. Fotio is his polar opposite; he is the God of Godless Men. It may sound illogical, but I have studied the evidence most thoroughly and the events of today do support this hypothesis.'

'That's insane,' Akakion said, after taking a moment to process Engefalo's theory. 'Are you seriously

suggesting that Fotio is the God of Atheists? How can that be?'

'Well, not just atheists, he also draws power from Agnostics and other such non-deity specific believers and spiritualists. Any human who has a passionate belief that Gods don't exist, or that they are merely agents of higher powers falls under the young fellow's domain. The old Gods, of whom we twelve are the last, draw their power from worship rather than belief, which is why our temples are so important. Belief may bring us into existence, but it's worship that keeps us going. The problem is that we have let our worshipers down with some rather erratic behavior. They may call us Gods. They may pray to us, and go through the rituals and what not, but in their hearts, they don't believe that we are Gods. In their hearts, they believe that we are monsters.'

'But a God of Atheists is such a stupid idea. If Fotio is the God of Atheists, why is he helping the Gods? Shouldn't he be opposing them?'

'Oh my no! Fotio's existence depends upon a robust pantheon and belief system against which his believers can rail. It is well known that some atheists are more passionate about their non-belief than all but the most ardent worshipers of The Twelve, and scholars have often wondered where that power got to. What he doesn't need is us, the old Gods. He could simply abandon us twelve and allow Monos to take over without suffering any ill affects at all. That's what Fate meant when he said Fotio had to choose to help us of his own free

will. He could have simply stepped back and watched us get driven out.'

Akakion looked at the God of Education and his face made it clear that he wasn't buying any of it. 'You're the expert,' he said, eventually, and turned to Fotio. 'You were right, Foti. You are the God of Confused Bastards.'

'Um, yeah, whatever,' Fotio said. 'Regardless, there's going to be changes around here. I know you won't like them, but they're for your own good.'

'Don't tell me, you want to be leader of the Gods?' Mazi said. 'He turned to the other Gods and beamed proudly. 'He's a chip off the old block, isn't he?'

'I would rather take a swim in the Hygiene Marsh of Pethamenos,' Fotio said. He fished inside his armor and produced a grubby notebook, which he opened to a particular page and handed to Mazi. 'I've been working on this for ages. That page is all you need to read for now. It's called The Divine Non-Intervention Pact. I'm still working on the detail.'

Mazi looks perplexed as he read. 'The three laws of divinity?' he said, after a while. 'We are Gods! Laws are for others. Come my boy, forget all this nonsense. You've done a mighty deed and we should be celebrating. Is this how you reward your old man? After all the years I watched over you and protected you?'

'Watched over him? Protected him?' Akakion said, in exasperation. 'Protected yourself from your wife more like

it.'

Mazi looked shocked, then angry. 'He may be immortal, Lord Keeper, but you aren't. Prepare for eternity,' he thundered.

Akakion and Fotio both turned towards the old Gods and gripped their weapons. 'You fight him and you'll fight me as well,' Fotio said.

'Actually, my Lord, the situation is a little more complicated than that. The Keeper has been called by Polipsilo,' Aquina said.

'He has?'

'Yes, that's why he is here,' she said and took the paper from Mazi's hands. 'It may also be unwise to start a fight against someone who just defeated the most powerful God ever to walk the lands, mortal or immortal.' She looked down at the piece of paper. 'There are three rules of Divinity,' she read out. 'The first is that the Gods will perform no action that would directly kill people or lead to their death, even if it's for their own good.' She raised her eyebrows and looked at Fotio. 'The second is that the Gods will not directly interfere in the lives of humans. They will choose the Kings and Queens of the land and the Emperor. These office bearers will then act as conduits for divine will. The third is the Gods will protect the people from all threats posed by immortal spirits, demons, and devils.'

While Aquina read, Mazi fumed. By the time she had finished, it was obvious that he was barely containing his

fury. There were sparks flying off his fists and he had turned a bright shade of red.

'Please, my Lord, contain yourself,' Aquina said. 'We do not want a demonstration of why our worshipers believe us to be monsters. I think we should give this Meta God a chance to prove himself.'

'You do?' Mazi said, deflating and looking a trifle disappointed. He felt he'd missed out on brawling with Monos because "the bugger ran away" and had been looking forward to having a bit of a tussle with his son.

'Yes I do. I propose a challenge to determine if Fotio is worthy of imposing his will on the Gods. Each of The Twelve will set you a task, Fotio. Finish all twelve and we will adopt these rules of divinity. Fail and you will accept the will of the Gods and never mention the subject again. What do you say?'

Mazi smiled. 'I don't know where we'd be without you, Aqi,' he said. He looked around the room and was greeted with murmurs of consent from the other ten Gods. 'The Gods accept.'

Fotio hesitated because it felt like a trick. Mazi noticed his hesitation. 'What's the matter? Are ya chicken?'

'Chicken? I've just travelled the length of Helvenica to save your ass. If I was chicken I would have stayed home, or run away, or joined with Monos. I'm not chicken, I just don't trust my Gods,' Fotio said. 'No Helvenican in their right mind would trust their Gods,' he

added, after a moment's consideration.

Mazi started flapping his arms and scratching at the ground with his feet. 'Puc puc PUCAWWWW,' he said, walking up and down in a rather good imitation of a chicken, 'I'm the second prophet and I'm afraid of a little bet with the Gods! Puc Puc Pucawww!'

Fotio went red. 'This is hopeless,' he said. 'How do I get out of this madhouse?'

'Not all the Gods are as closed to your thinking as our great leader,' Aquina said. 'Please accept the challenge, Fotio. Some of us noticed how quickly our worshipers abandoned us when Monos offered an alternative. We are worried and need your help.'

Geneka grabbed Fotio's arm and a thrill ran down his body. She looked up into his eyes and caused his resolve to melt. Admittedly, there were other, more physical manifestations of his respect for her, but if pressed he would swear that they played absolutely no part in his subsequent decision. 'Okay,' he said. 'What do I have to do?'

'What you have to do is take a break,' Akakion chimed in, 'you need some time to rest and recuperate before you save the world again.'

'Have you appointed yourself guardian of the prophet, Lord Akakion?' Aquina said. 'No doubt your wisdom will serve him well.'

Akakion couldn't tell if the God was being generous or mocking him, but he'd insulted one God already today, and

been almost crushed by another. He didn't fancy taking on a third. Besides, of all the Gods, Aquina scared him the most. 'Ahh, yeah, well he's been on the road for quite a while, and there have been several, ahh, difficulties along the way, some of which required a physical response. He needs to go home and take a break, visit with his mom because he told her he wasn't going to get out of this alive.'

'Neoleia is visiting her sister in Enorganon,' Aquina said. 'I told her you would probably end up there when your adventure was over.'

'Can we go there? I found it quite a nice place,' Fotio said, 'what of you priest? Will you come with me?'

Akakion smiled. 'Eventually. I'm going to go to Plusia to see to some unfinished business.'

'I can't let you go without a word of warning, young man,' Episkeros said. 'Although you have many believers, none of them know your name or even consciously believe in you. It makes things tricky, on the God front. There's no doubt you're immortal, but it would be best to avoid dying in the mortal lands. You never know where you'll end up, or even if you'll still be you when you do.'

'I'll do my best,' Fotio said, unable to think of any other way to respond.

Akakion shook his head and clapped Fotio on the shoulder. 'It's a strange day when even you don't believe in you,' he said.

Geneka re-engaged with the young thief cum meta-

god. 'I believe in you,' she said, immediately raising Fotio's spirits.

'We will give the prophet time to rest, but with my daughter by his side, I'm not sure how much rest he will actually get,' Aquina said. 'The Gods will come to you in Enorganon, Fotio. There have been several strange happenings of late. Little things, small annoyances, and yet they are adversely affecting our worshipers. What's frustrating is that, no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot fix these annoyances, and all the Gods have at least one. Maybe you will be able to help.'

'We'll await the tasks with excitement,' Akakion said, obviously in a hurry, 'now, how do we get out of here?'

'Are you volunteering to help the prophet?' Aquina said.

'Of course I am. The boy's inherited his father's temper as well as his attitude to education. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I abandoned him now. So, how do we leave?'

'Through the door over there,' Aquina pointed to a doorway that looked like it was full of white smoke. 'Just think of where you want to go and walk through. It'll do the rest.'

Akakion turned to go.

'Keeper, before you leave, there is something I must tell you.'

'What?' Akakion said, forgetting his manners in his

exasperation at another delay. All of a sudden, Leni's face filled his horizon.

Aquina raised an eyebrow but decided to let the matter pass. 'There is something about your birth you should know.'

'If it's that my parents weren't really my parents, I kind of guessed. My whole family, on both sides, never rose above five foot six. I, on the other hand, stand six foot four. It didn't take a genius to see I was somewhat different.'

'Very perceptive. You would not be surprised, then, to learn that your father is the giant Parapsilos.'

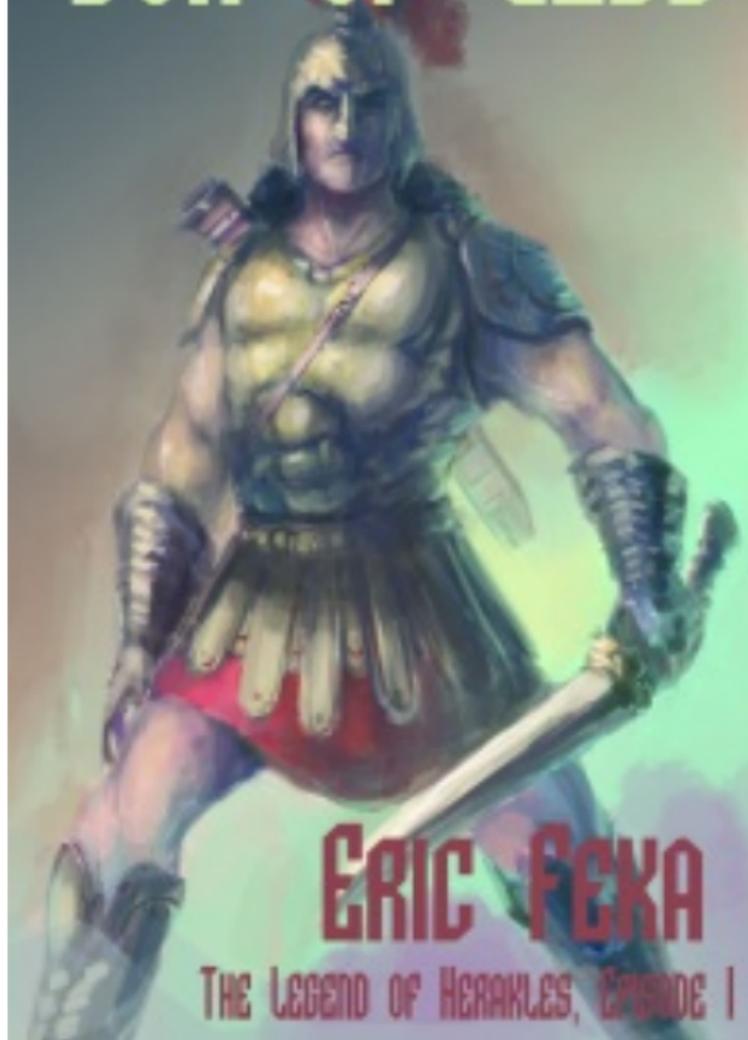
'Really? And my mother?'

Aquina smiled. 'I did a better job looking over you than Mazi did looking over Fotio, don't you think?'

Akakion turned to look at Geneka, who had Fotio in a ~~death-grip~~ lover's embrace. 'Hi bro,' she said and waved, which was the last thing that Akakion saw and heard before consciousness left him.

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