

Prologue

Sing, O muse . . .

That's how the old stories used to start. At least, that is how they used to start in Hellas, Greece – of all realms the most jealously guarded by its gods. A light-drenched land set in wine-dark waters, its craggy hillsides dense with pine, bright with acanthus, loud with the constant thrum of cicadas. Hillsides crowned with the cities of men: Mycenae, citadel of long-dead Agamemnon; warlike Sparta; rocky Aulis where Iphigenia died at her father's hand. Pylos of the golden sands, on which the palace of wise Nestor once stood, looking out across the Ionian Sea. And mightiest of all, Thebes, from where Orpheus the Tyrant sends out his armies, cutting down kingdom after kingdom.

Sing, O muse, a song of Death . . .

There's the city of Iolkos, high on its hill above the gulf of Pagasae. One-time home of Jason, second-rate hero, third-rate husband and thief of the golden fleece. But the heroes – good and bad – dwindled and disappeared long ago. Now there are gods, and there are men, and there is Orpheus – a mortal who thinks he is a god. Iolkos is just a backwater, another place

caught within his net. And there, in a granite-walled complex beyond the boundaries of the city, in a small lamp-lit room with its windows open to admit moonlight and the scent of rosemary from the garden beyond, lies a girl who is dying.

Sing, O muse, a song of Death and the maiden . . .

Sickness stalks the broad streets of Iolkos, and Death follows in its wake. After all, he is everywhere, in all living things: their beginnings, their endings, and each moment of existence between. Built into every atom of the space they inhabit. He is only, and always, to be expected. Whether through disease or violence or the swift-footed passage of the years, all life eventually falls beneath the shadow of his wings.

A plague has left fresh scars on this girl's cheeks. Her eyes are mis-matched – one dark brown, one grey-green – and half-veiled by fever-fluttered lids. And there's a symbol on her forehead. She's one of the Theodesmioi, the god-marked. Marked by Zeus, king of the heavens and the earth, or by Poseidon, lord of the seas, or by Hephaestus, hammer-wielding master of metals, or, in this girl's case, by Hades, ruler of the Underworld. Serving the city in Hades' name and drawing a fraction of the god's power in return. A very small fraction. Not enough to save herself.

Death tightens his grip on his sword. Swings back the blade, ready to sever her lifeline and unship her soul from its earthly vessel. The movement brings him closer to her face.

Her unseeing eyes open. For the first time in more centuries than he can remember, Death hesitates.

A ring of gold has burst into being around the pupil of the girl's dark brown eye like the sudden unfolding of a

sunflower. She gasps with pain and sinks back into oblivion. His sharp-edged blade is still ready. He knows he ought to use it.

And yet . . .

And yet, who's to say she can't survive? She's strong. A fighter. Perhaps there's something she wants very badly. A reason for her to try to stay alive. Death sheathes his sword, doing his best to ignore the voice he thought he'd long since silenced, the insidious whispering of hope.

What if she could be the one?

The girl's existence hangs by a fraying thread, fine as spider's silk, brittle as old bone, but not quite broken. Death lingers, warming himself at the flickering embers of her life. She can't see him. She can't hear him. Still, he murmurs two words into the darkness.

Fight harder.



Iolkos, two years later

Hope, Deina decided, was a terrible thing.

From where she was standing in the shady, stone-paved portico of the megaron – the labyrinthine palace that sat at the heart of Iolkos’s citadel – she couldn’t see the guilty man. He hadn’t yet been brought up from the cells. She could hear him well enough, though. Pleading with the guards. Begging, over and over. Bargaining. He’d been sentenced to what was generally held to be a fate worse than death. But apparently, despite all evidence to the contrary, he still hoped for mercy. Maybe even a miracle.

The gods alone knew why. In Deina’s experience, neither they nor the city’s rulers dealt in either. After all, the man had been condemned to undergo the Punishment Rite. The ritual stripped a soul from its human housing and trapped it forever in the Threshold – a space that functioned most of the time as a transition between life and death, a staging post between the mortal world and the Underworld, but which

was transformed by this particular rite into an eternal prison. Of all the functions carried out by the Soul Severers – the Theodesmioi of the Order of Hades – the Punishment Rite was the most terrible, inflicted only for the worst crimes. So terrible that years might elapse between performances. No wonder so many had come to watch.

The dead heat of mid-summer wrapped the city like a shroud, and even the buzzing clouds of fat, black flies seemed drowsy. Still, people were crammed into the huge, colonnaded courtyard that extended outwards from the front of the megaron. More were huddled precariously on top of the massive ceremonial gateway that gave access to the palace complex. Some silent. Some gossiping. Some, enterprising, moving among the throng and trying to sell refreshments to anyone who could afford them. There weren't a lot of young men in the crowd, all told. So many had been conscripted into the Dominion's armies; so few had returned.

But there at the front of the crowd stood Aster, one of Deina's fellow Severers. Despite the press of people, there was a little space around him. Partly because of *what* he was, partly, Deina suspected, because no one wanted to accidentally jostle someone with such large and obvious muscles. As Aster frowned up at the portico, running a hand impatiently through his auburn curls, his lips were pursed like he'd eaten some particularly sour grapes. She'd heard him complaining – for days – that the rite should have been performed by him, or, at a push, Theron; they'd both been adepts for half a year longer than Deina, they were skilled, they were men. Deina gave him a cheery wave. Too bad Theron wasn't also here to



witness her victory.

Deina's gaze drifted to the proclamation pinned to one of the gilded columns making up the front and sides of the portico. She could read a little of it. A sentence with the condemned man's name – Dionys – and his crimes: murder, treason. And the word *eupatridae* – the well-born. Dionys either was a member of the nobility, the warrior class, or had killed one. But the rest of the text was still beyond her. She had a lesson later – unofficially, of course. Perhaps she could somehow take the proclamation with her . . .

Her mouth was parched. Heat radiated off the stone altar, ready and waiting on the top step. Various priests, all nobles, were huddled into the deeper shade on the other side of the portico, fanning themselves and wilting. Deina's mentor, Anteïs, a red-robed elder of the Order of Hades, was standing nearby, eyes closed in meditation. Shouts from the crowd signalled the beginning of a fight. But the rite couldn't start without the presence of the archon, the highest rank in the city now that Iolkos was ruled from Thebes and had no king of its own. Perhaps the archon was still counting the gold for the quarterly tribute; the Theban collection ships were overdue. More likely, he was working out how much he could siphon off for himself, while his city grew more and more impoverished.

There were two other Theodesmioi flanking the doorway to the megaron. The thunderbolt sigils on their foreheads marked them as members of the Order of Zeus, the god who held sway over the heavens and the earth. Part of the palace guard, so most likely Battle Wagers – Theodesmioi gifted with more-than-human reflexes and stamina, reflecting the earthly



side of Zeus's remit. Only a few of their order had the much rarer gift of influencing the winds and rains with their minds. If the archon had a Weather Worker in his employment, he would have boasted about it for all the city to hear. Still, Deina hissed at the nearest of them.

'Hey, can't you summon up some clouds?'

The man scowled at her, but before he could answer, the archon – heavily perfumed, ruddy faced, robes flapping – hurried through the doorway.

'Bring up the condemned,' he ordered.

Struggling, still appealing for mercy, the man Dionys was dragged into the daylight. He was younger than Deina had expected. Naked, with bloody lacerations criss-crossing his skin from some earlier flogging. She'd seen bodies in a worse state. But the way he screamed, when the guards bound him to the hot surface of the stone altar, made her wince.

The archon cleared his throat. 'People of Iolkos, this man, Dionys of the clan Diminae, has been found guilty of patricide and of plotting treason against the city.' He dabbed the sweat from his forehead. 'In accordance with the wise commands of our master, Orpheus, sovereign ruler of the Theban Dominion, he is to be handed over to the Soul Severers of the Order of Hades for punishment.'

The archon wasn't telling the people anything they didn't know already. Still, the noise level in the courtyard rose.

Until one of the palace servants struck the huge bronze gong that stood nearby. The sound rippled through the air, leaving silence in its wake.

Deina came forward to stand next to the altar. The crowd

stared at her, faces tilted upwards, squinting in the noon sun. Even the blank stone eyes of the leaping dolphins that formed the gateway's arch seemed to be fixed on her. For once, she was glad of the too-thick ceremonial robes and the veil that concealed her pockmarked face. Black linen for an adept, edged with scarlet – the sigil of Hades repeated in unending loops of silken flame.

But the people had the right to see the sign of her authority. Deina took a deep breath and folded back her veil to reveal the sigil on her forehead. The same symbol that scarred the forehead of Anteïs and that of every other Severer. Three stylised lines representing a sceptre, topped by the upswept wings of a bird.

'Why don't you just kill me? My father deserved the death I gave him!' The condemned man was writhing, trying to break free. He twisted his head towards the archon. 'You deserve it too! All of you, standing by while Orpheus takes our lands and birthright, forcing us to fight over what's left –' He raised his eyes to Deina, standing by his head. 'Please, I beg you . . .'

The bronze torc Deina had to wear was heavy against her collarbone. Ignoring the thumping of her heart, she deliberately turned away from Dionys as he was gagged. Doubt – of her choices, of her abilities – was a luxury she couldn't afford if she wanted any chance of being free. And what were the squabbles of the nobility to her? The well-born knew nothing of what the Theodesmioi suffered and they cared even less. In any case, if she'd turned down this opportunity, Theron would have taken it. Him, or Aster, or another Severer. Punish the criminal and earn a year's freedom – an entire twelve months struck from the forty-year period of her indenture – or watch

someone else do it. An easy enough choice.

As the archon and his retinue withdrew beyond the limits of the sacred circle, Deina tried to remember everything she'd been taught, everything she'd practised, all the advice that Anteïs had given her.

The first time is always difficult. It's hard enough to draw a soul from a body that's not ready to leave. Harder still to resist the pleading – and there is always pleading. Remember, they are condemned by the king and by the city, not by us. We don't have to judge. We just have to act . . .

That's why the older woman was here: to lend a hand. Not that Deina planned on needing any help.

Deina's tools were already laid out on the small table next to her: a sharp-bladed knife carved from bone, a small bowl of white poplar wood, dried herbs and roots. And a vial of ashes, taken from the burnt remains of the man's victim. She murmured the opening lines of the Song for this rite, the words that gave shape and purpose to the power that dwelt within her. Gripped her knife tightly as she focused on sliding the blade across the man's wrist to open the vein. His skin split exactly like the ripe figs Deina had practised on, his blood flowing easily into the bowl. So far, so good. Ignoring his stifled screams, still chanting, she sprinkled the blood with a pinch of pungent mint, beloved of Hades, and one of rosemary, for memory. Added some shavings of dried asphodel root. Finally, she tipped in some of the ashes and mashed everything together with her knife.

Deina passed the bowl to Anteïs, keeping hold of the knife. Dipping her forefinger into the mixture she leaned forward and spoke the final lines of this part of the rite as she pressed her

fingertip against the man's breastbone, then against Anteïs's, then against her own, staining the skin.

'Heart to measure.'

The bright afternoon sunshine faded. Shadows began to gather and grow at the edges of the circle. Deina dipped her finger again.

'Touch to find.' Forcing Dionys's hands open, she smeared the mixture on his palms. Then on Anteïs's, then on her own. The hair on Deina's arms stood up as the air within the circle cooled.

'Tongue to summon.' His lips first, then Anteïs's, then hers. The noise of the crowd in the courtyard faded until Deina could hear nothing but the man's sobs, and the slowing beat of her own heart.

'Blood to bind.' She pressed her damp fingertips to Anteïs's brow and tipped what was left in the bowl onto the man's forehead. Placed her free hand gently on the side of his face as Anteïs gripped her shoulder tightly. Dionys had finally stopped struggling; no hope left now.

The sigil of Hades bound into Deina's skin was pulsing. Not pain exactly, but something so close to it that she had to grit her teeth and force herself to breathe evenly. She bent over until her forehead was just above his. Waited, until the light had almost gone, until she could feel frost forming on her skin, until she couldn't bear to resist a moment longer.

Finally, she let her head drop. The bloody mixture staining Dionys's forehead came into contact with her sigil. Darkness fell like an axe.

Sensation crept back. Deina became aware of the weight of

Anteis's hand on her shoulder. The cool solidity of the knife-hilt in her palm. As the light returned, so did her sight.

She knew where she was: the Threshold. She'd been here before. A place constructed centuries ago by the first Soul Severers, drawing on the power of the Underworld, but separate from it, and accessible only to those bearing the sigil of Hades. The Threshold was both familiar and strange. Always the same, but always different. Reconstructed each time according to the type of rite and the power of the Severer who had summoned it. A few days ago, Deina had carried out a Severing Rite, releasing the soul of a child from her badly burnt body and setting her on the first step of her journey into and through the Underworld. An act of mercy that was the most common of the rites they were called on to conduct. The Threshold then had been welcoming – a small garden, bright with flowers. But this version of the Threshold was bleak and angular. A flat expanse of lifeless rock, dull grey sky above, surrounded by dense, unmoving cloud. It was almost like being marooned on the peak of a high mountain, with no visible means of descent. And looming over the space, conjured by Deina's will and the Punishment Rite, stood the Deathless Trees. Every detail from the Song, all exactly as she'd practised: blackened bark, gnarled trunk, branches drooping like so much lank hair. Bones for roots, poking up out of the ground. Menace leaked from their rotting hearts like sap.

The man, Dionys, was standing nearby. His lifeline encircled his body – a faint silvery thread that also looped around Deina's waist and around Anteis's. It would fade soon, but until then, the lifeline tethered them all to the mortal world.

But Dionys didn't seem to see it. Instead, he was staring at the unblemished skin on his wrist.

Deina cleared her throat, drawing his attention. His eyes widened in recognition and he took off, sprinting full pelt towards the wall of mist surrounding the space, lifeline unspooling behind him, glancing over his shoulder at Deina – until he slammed into the mist and flew backwards. With one finger, Deina carefully prodded the fluffy edges of a nearby cloud – as solid and as sharp as glass.

Dionys still wasn't giving up. Back on his feet, he began running back and forth around the boundary, testing it, hurling himself against it in growing desperation.

Deina looked away and thought about the sketch of a ship pinned to the wall of her room. The kind of ship she hoped might one day take her somewhere. Anywhere, as long as it was far, far away from Iolkos.

'Deina.' Anteïs nodded towards the man, one eyebrow raised. 'Get on with it.'

'Right.' Deina ran her tongue over her dry lips, recalling the next part of the rite: the fettering. She took a deep breath and held up her arms.

'Deep-rooted guardians of the Threshold, I call on thee. Deathless, lifeless, keep this accursed villain in your tender embrace, and subject his soul to everlasting chastisement.'

The roots and the branches of the two trees began to quiver, growing and slithering towards their prey, seeking blindly. When Dionys realised what was happening, he flung his hands up, mouth open in a silent scream. But there was no escape. With a mesmerising inevitability the trees embraced him,

weaving themselves around him – arms, legs, body, head – until he was caught fast. The last tendrils latched on to his eyelids and forced them open.

Next, the summoning. Dionys bore the imprint of Deina's sigil on his forehead. At her words, something like smoke spilled from the mark, billowing and shifting until it became a full-sized image: a living, moving memory, built out of the smoke itself. There was Dionys, a cup in his hand, approaching an old man who was lying propped up in a bed. Holding the cup to his father's lips and making him drain the contents. Standing there and watching as the other began to thrash about. The air within the Threshold grew rank with the stink of death and excrement, strong enough to make Deina gag. She could hear everything too: the horrible, gurgling, choking of the old man trying to breathe through the blood gushing from his mouth and nose. Until Dionys stood over his father's corpse, spattered with blood, an expression of triumph on his face.

As soon as it finished, the scene replayed from the beginning. Over and over. That was the point: for the murderer to experience the horror of what he had done. For eternity.

Anteïs was leaning heavily on Deina now, her eyes closed, her face drained of colour, her breathing fast and shallow.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes . . .' Anteïs sniffed and straightened up. 'Hurry. The severing.'

Deina nodded, tightened her grip on the knife and picked her way across the floor of the Threshold – Anteïs following

closely, still gripping her shoulder – to where Dionys hung, immobile. Reaching the trees, Deina chanted the final prayer to Hades to end the rite as she drove her knife into a crack in one of the black branches and widened it. She gathered up the glimmering thread of Dionys's life and looped it tightly around the branch, making sure the lifeline was stuck fast into the crack, trapping him there, inside the Threshold. Shifted her hold on the knife to cut the other end of the cord, to send her and Anteïs back before it was too late.

Paused.

He was there . . .

Long hair, dark as jet, framing a young man's face. What looked to be old scars spiralling up and around the bare flesh of his arms. He wore a black tunic with a silver sword belt and seemed wrapped in a cloak of darkness, though his eyes glittered all the more brightly for that, like sapphires held up to the sun.

Deina lowered the knife as her grip on the hilt slackened.

Two years had passed since she'd first noticed him; every time one of the Severers' rites had led her beyond the boundaries of the mortal world into the Threshold, there he had been, watching her at a distance, as motionless as a beautifully crafted statue. Silent too; he'd never spoken. Only his gaze had suggested he had some interest in her.

Questions crowded her mind: who was he? What was he? Some Underworld creature that had breached the other side of the Threshold, even though all Deina had been taught told her that shouldn't be possible? A tremor of fear – of the creature, of what his appearance might mean – unsettled her breath.

He – it – moved. Cocked his head to one side, locked eyes with her, smiled and began sauntering towards her.

A bolt of pain shot from Deina's left temple into her eye. She gasped. The creature drew closer and the pain intensified until she was gritting her teeth. What was he doing to her?

'Deina, the knife!' Anteïs's voice jerked Deina back to the rite. To Dionys's lifeline, rapidly fading from existence. Before Deina could more than swear at the danger her loss of concentration had placed them in, the elder snatched the blade and sliced through their end of the lifeline. Just in time. The Threshold spun away from them and they were dragged back into the mortal world with a suddenness that took Deina's breath away.

They were standing on the top step of the portico. Dionys's body, now no more than an empty shell, was still bound to the altar.

Deina caught Anteïs as the older woman slumped. A servant hurried forward, and together they began to lead her back into the megaron.

'Fire . . .' Anteïs barely breathed the word, her eyelids fluttering.

Deina glanced over her shoulder at the archon, still loitering outside the circle. 'It's done. You can burn what's left.' No long rest for Dionys within the silent enclosure of the city's tombs. By the time she got Anteïs inside and the doors were shut behind them, kindling had been spread on top of his body, and the flames were already eating into his flesh.

The servant led them to one of the small rooms that made up the bulk of the megaron, helped Deina settle Anteïs on a

couch and made his escape. Olives, bread, a jug of water and another of vinegary wine had been left there in readiness; Deina poured herself a drink and picked at the refreshments and watched her mentor's face. Anteïs was undergoing the Toll, the side effects that almost inevitably followed performance of any of the rites. The exercise of power exacted a varying price, depending on the strength of the Severer and the difficulty of the rite: headaches; vomiting; bleeding from nose, ears or pores; temporary blindness; stomach cramps; seizures. Death, if you were inadequately prepared, weak or unlucky.

Deina fretted a piece of bread into crumbs. She had carried out the whole rite, apart from cutting the lifeline at the end. Would it be enough? Would she receive the reward for the rite, or would Anteïs? Deina didn't feel tired or unwell, but then she very rarely did; for whatever reason, the Toll was mostly something that happened to other people. She lifted the neck of her tunic and gazed at her torso. Like that of all Soul Severers, her skin bore a record of her deeds. Rite-seals, they were called: every severing, every laying, every hallowing – every time she'd wielded Hades' power in the service of the city – was imprinted on her flesh. A different symbol for each rite. Like one half of a balance sheet, they showed how much time she had earned from her work, to set against the term of her indenture. The rite-seals began above one's heart; Deina's first, curving around her left breast, had already begun to fade to a paler scar. There was no sign yet of any new imprint, though sometimes they took a while to appear . . .

Anteïs opened her eyes, groaning.

'Hades, I'm getting too old for this.' Her gaze focused on

Deina. 'What happened?'

'Don't you remember?'

'Oh, I remember. I remember having to take your knife and free us before the lifeline faded. Damn.' Anteïs wiped away a trickle of blood from her nose. 'So I'm going to ask you again: what happened?'

Deina hesitated. Going into details about the dark-haired boy would raise all sorts of questions. And she didn't have any answers. 'I lost my nerve. That's all.'

Anteïs pushed herself up on her elbows, eyebrows raised. 'You lost your nerve.'

The words, generously salted with disbelief, hung in the air. Deina would have to offer an edited version of events.

'I thought . . . I thought I saw something. Something in the Threshold that didn't belong there, that I hadn't called into being. I was mistaken, obviously. But it made me lose my concentration and I got a headache.' She touched her temple. 'The Toll, I suppose.' Thinking about it, perhaps she *had* created the dark-haired boy, unintentionally. Those Severers who survived the physical demands of the rites often ended up losing their minds instead. Deina tipped back her head and drained the wine in her goblet.

'The Toll, before the completion of the rite? Hmm.' Anteïs lay back on the couch. 'Well, it's unfortunate.' The elder pushed the fabric of her tunic up above her elbow, revealing a fresh abrasion on her bicep. 'You lost your nerve, and I completed the rite, so I benefit from what should have been yours.' She gave Deina's hand a quick pat. 'I'm sorry, child.'

Deina stared at the puckered red skin around the new

rite-seal. A year off the term of her indenture. That's what she would have earned, if that mark had currently been burning its way into *her* skin. An entire year. There were no symbols yet on her own arms: they hadn't reached that far. She'd been earning rite-seals for four years, but of the forty years of service due under her indenture, she'd only worked off three.

Hot rage pounded through Deina's skull – **but she couldn't give in to it. Not here.** She wanted to slam the silver goblet she held over and over against the archon's elaborately painted walls. Instead, she gripped it until her fingers ached. Forced herself to breathe slowly, until the fury ebbed. All she could do was keep playing the game, and play it even better.

A cart took them from the megaron back to the House. Anteïs slept while Deina brooded, listening to the bustle of the city and the gossip passing between their servant and the cart driver. The men discussed the weather, the price of bread, the latest war Orpheus was waging to push the boundaries of the Theban Dominion even further. There'd been fresh news in the marketplaces that morning: a battle won in the west, twenty thousand of the enemy dead, more captured. Some of Orpheus's own soldiers, a cohort from Athens, slaughtered for objecting to the scale of the bloodshed. The walls of the defeated city pulled down and its fields ploughed with salt because it had dared to resist. Rome, the driver called it. As the cart passed through Iolkos's main gates, into the short stretch of countryside that lay between the city and the House of Hades, Deina rolled the strange name around her mouth, almost like a prayer. Orpheus never lost. The people of that city had never stood a chance.

The heavy bronze gates of the House rumbled shut behind them. Even blindfolded, she would have known where she was. High stone walls sealed them in and shut out the rest of the world. Here, all was order. Bells, used to start and end the constant competition bouts in the training grounds – running, wrestling, archery and blade work – formed a counterpoint to the chanting of the apprentices and novices as they learned the Severers' ancient Songs and rites. There *were* children here. Every winter solstice more arrived, those on whose foreheads the sigil had appeared that year, rounded up and taken from their parents. Most had seen no more than five summers, some were even younger, but their childhood ended as they entered the House; there was no sound of play.

Deina couldn't properly remember her life before the House, or how old she'd been when she'd come here. She'd long since stopped trying. She didn't even recall her real name; the House gave you a new one. In theory, it was to protect you against ghosts and sorcery – it was harder to work evil magic against someone without knowing their true name. In reality, it helped the Order suppress any sense of identity that didn't relate to being a Severer. The House named you, fed you, clothed you, and you owed it everything.

Singing and chimes and the clash of weapons and the scent of the rosemary that edged every path – this had become home to her.

And she couldn't wait to escape.



Brown-robed servants were hovering in the front courtyard of the House. Deina waved away their offers of help and went straight inside, hurrying along the cool stone cloisters that led to the women's quarters and her own room. She didn't linger, staying just long enough to change from the ceremonial robes into a plain tunic, and to stick her larger, everyday knife into her belt. Out of habit, she tested the point of the blade against the pad of her finger: good and sharp. Every city in the Dominion had at least three Houses of Theodesmioi, usually from the Orders of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. In theory, the god-marked of the four orders could be called upon to fight for whichever god they served, should the gods prefer to play out their power struggles on a mortal battlefield. In practice, it had never happened. Still, the possibility remained.

Deina smiled to herself; no *point* in being unprepared. She snatched up a shawl and retraced her steps towards the cool shadows of the entrance hall.

'Deina!' Chryse was hurrying towards her, footsteps ringing

on the polished marble tiles. 'Did you carry out the rite?'

'Yes. No.' Deina shrugged one shoulder. 'Not exactly.'

Chryse gazed up into Deina's face, her forehead creased. 'You're unhappy. Was it so horrible, the rite? Or is it the Toll?'

'Neither – I just need some fresh air and some quiet.' Deina gestured to the front doors, kept shut against the heat. 'I'm going down to the shore.'

'I'll come with you, then. I was waiting for you to get back, so I've not been out today.'

'Are you sure? You look tired.' There were shadows beneath Chryse's large blue eyes, dark as bruises. 'How long ago was your last Severing?' Deina demanded. 'Shouldn't you be resting?'

Chryse shook her head, impatient.

'I've been in bed for the last three days. Not that I could sleep.' She swallowed, bringing her fingers to her temple. 'It was an elderly nobleman. He passed through the Threshold and into the Underworld easily enough – he was happy to leave behind the pain, I think – but his memories . . . They were difficult. I promise, though, I feel much better today. And look –' Chryse brightened up – 'the family gave me a brooch.' She lifted the folds of her tunic to display the trinket pinned there: copper set with carnelian. Pretty enough, but of little value – unlike the fee the man's death must have brought into the House treasury. Deina tried to calculate it in her head. A man, and a member of the *eupatridae* – that would be at least one gold ingot. More, if one of his family members had held the archonship. And then Chryse was charged out at the highest rate, the same as the male Severers of her grade; apparently people preferred it if the last living face they saw was

breathtakingly beautiful. Deina didn't blame them; she loved looking at Chryse too. Her friend had the kind of beauty that might make Aphrodite jealous: dewy skin, plump lips, lustrous clouds of golden hair. The Orders tried to erase the identity of the Theodesmioi as much as possible, but how a person looked was one thing they couldn't control. Chryse knew nothing of her parents – none of them did – but it was obvious that one of them must have been a northern barbarian. Just as it was easy to guess from Deina's dark brown hair and the warmer tone of her skin that her parents were probably both from the territory around Iolkos, like most of those in the House, and to guess that Theron's black hair and darker skin was due to a parent or grandparent who had perhaps come from the great Phoenician city of Carthage, that even Deina had heard of. Not that such guessing helped. The sigil marking them as Theodesmioi was all that mattered, and ranking within the House was based partly on age but mostly on talent. Chryse wasn't strong enough to carry out frequent Severings, and spent most of her time hired out, less lucratively, as a professional mourner. Still, her good looks made her popular with clients, which was enough to lead the elders to treat her with some indulgence.

Chryse linked her arm through Deina's, squeezing tightly, and glanced up at her. '*Please* let me come with you. You've been so busy preparing for the rite. I've missed you.'

Deina smiled.

'I've missed you too. Let's go.'

They gave their names to the gate-keeper – only one outing allowed a day, unless you had a token to prove you were on

official business – and headed down the scrub-covered hillside, still dotted with the fading blooms of white lilies that grew among the rocks. Before they reached the city, Deina rearranged her shawl so that it veiled her head, covering her sigil and shadowing her scarred cheeks and odd-coloured eyes. Chryse mimicked her action. Their torcs would pass, at least under casual inspection, as the kind of jewellery that many people wore. For a little while, they could be ordinary.

Beneath the watchful scrutiny of the city guards they passed through the gates into Apollo's Quarter, home to the city's artisans: potters, carpenters, smiths. Though the dusty streets were quiet, with furnaces banked against the heat of the afternoon, the occupants were still busy; the tap of hammer against metal, the repetitive whisper of wood being planed, sounded from open doorways. But other houses were abandoned. Beautiful things tended to be costly, and in Iolkos there were fewer and fewer who could afford them.

'So, tell me then.' Chryse, her arm still linked with Deina's, spoke low. 'The rite. Was it difficult? It must have been hard to watch what he'd done. I've heard the others talking about the way he murdered his father.' She shuddered. 'But at least it's finished. And you've worked off a whole year.'

'Except that I didn't. Right at the end, I got distracted. I –' The word *failed* stuck in Deina's throat like an olive stone. All that practising, not to mention a hefty bribe slipped to the archon's steward to ensure she'd be chosen for the Punishment Rite instead of Theron, and for nothing. 'I didn't earn any time for today.' She glanced at Chryse. 'It didn't exactly go to plan.'

Deina's plan had started as a barely formed dream while

she was still an apprentice. It had grown in detail once she'd become a novice. And finally, a year or so ago, the day she reached the rank of adept, she'd sworn to herself that her dream would become reality. Deina – stronger, far better suited to the life they'd both been born into – was going to work off her indenture faster than any Soul Severer ever. What she couldn't earn, she was going to steal. And then, once she was free, she was going to accumulate enough to buy Chryse's freedom too – Chryse was the person she cared most about in the world, and Deina owed her. And then, she'd buy passage for them both on a fast ship, and then –

The open horizon. Freedom. To go wherever, to be whatever they wanted. Not that she'd shared her plan with Chryse. Better for it to be a wonderful surprise rather than have Chryse counting the days until Deina was able to purchase the rest of her indenture.

Chryse patted her hand.

'You fret too much. It's not as though we have a bad life here. We've got a roof over our head and the food's good and there's plenty of it . . .' She trailed off. 'And a special place in Elysium when we die. That's something. More than most have to look forward to.'

Deina shrugged. Guaranteed bliss in the afterlife was all very well, but she wanted a life this side of the veil too – a better life than this. Forbidden to marry or have a family. Told where to go and what to do for the entirety of an indenture that virtually none of the Theodesmioi ever earned out because most didn't live long enough. The Battle Wagers of the Order of Zeus died in wars and the Sea Singers of the Order of Poseidon went

down with their ships and the Soul Severers of the Order of Hades lost their minds, trapped in the memories of the dying ones they'd been summoned to help. Deina had only ever met a handful of Spell Casters from the Order of Hephaestus; they were all taken to Mycenae or Thebes, and were only sent to other cities when the Theodesmioi of the other orders needed new torcs fitted. But they probably died young too. Human frames weren't meant to channel the power of a god.

'It's hot,' Deina muttered. 'Let's rest.'

They climbed a set of steps leading to the shaded portico of a temple. As the thin, inhuman scream of an animal being sacrificed echoed from open doors behind them, causing Chryse to wince and murmur a protest, Deina picked a daisy from a crack in the stonework and began plucking off its petals. The dark-haired boy who'd watched her in the Threshold . . . Was he human? *Pluck*. Or a monster from the Underworld? *Pluck*. Or a sign of the insanity that every Severer feared? *Pluck*. Over and over, until every petal lay on the floor at her feet.

A young servant slouched out of the temple doors and headed towards the animals penned up nearby. He had golden bracelets about his wrists – more gold, Deina thought sourly, than most of the worshipers within the temple courtyard would be able to earn in several lifetimes. The boy selected a piglet for slaughter, binding its legs and slinging the squealing bundle over his shoulders. When he noticed Deina, the sullen frown on the boy's face deepened – did he take her for a beggar, she wondered – until he saw Chryse. The frown became a leer. 'You . . . I can show you somewhere more comfortable to rest, if you like. Somewhere private.'

As Chryse, oblivious, began to thank him, Deina drew back her shawl.

It took the boy a moment: to focus on the sigil on her forehead, to work out which of the Houses she came from. When he gasped and stepped back, fumbling to retain his grip on the squirming piglet, Deina smiled.

‘I didn’t mean to offend. Forgive me, merciful one . . .’

His attempt at a deferential expression didn’t quite mask the distaste and fear in his eyes. Still, as names went, it was better than ‘death vulture’. As a child, Deina hadn’t understood why Severers were considered bad luck. Why the House of Zeus and the House of Poseidon were within the city walls, but the House of Hades wasn’t. After all, Severing, the most common of the rites they performed, *was* merciful. For a price, the House would send a Severer to the bedside of anyone in the city who was dying, to ease the soul from the suffering body and accompany it into the Threshold, so it wouldn’t have to start its journey to the Underworld alone. But as she’d grown, Deina realised why healthy people didn’t want a Severer around. No one wanted to think about dying, or about what might happen next. And then there were the rumours, not exactly discouraged by the House, that a Severer could alter a soul’s destiny. No wonder people avoided them until death was inevitable. Deina replaced the shawl, nodding a dismissal, and the boy turned to leave.

‘Wait –’ she held out her hand – ‘why another sacrifice, so soon?’

He shrugged. ‘The priest saw something he didn’t like in the entrails of the last one.’

As the servant retreated into the darkness of the temple,

Chryse made a gesture, a swift bringing together of thumb and middle fingers that was meant to turn away the evil eye.

'I agree,' Deina observed. 'He was definitely evil.'

'Not him.' Chryse seemed to look through Deina, her eyes unfocused. 'Something else. Something's coming. A storm.'

'But the sky's clear . . .'

Chryse shook herself, closed her eyes and tilted her face up to the sun, as if she were one of the flowers that bore its name. 'You're right. It's the wrong time of year for storms. And nothing unexpected *ever* happens in Iolkos. I'm tired still, I suppose.'

From inside the temple, the squealing and the invocation started up again. 'Immortal gods of Olympus, hear me. Poseidon, lord of the sea, bless me . . .' Piglet and priest together, louder and louder. Until the knife fell, and relative silence with it.

'Immortal gods be damned,' Deina muttered through gritted teeth. If gods could be killed, she'd know what to do with her freedom once she'd earned it: hunt them down and slit their throats, and smile while she was doing it. 'D'you hear me, Poseidon?' They were in his Quarter now, in a straggling street that ran down towards the harbour. She slammed the side of her fist into one of the temple's brightly painted wooden pillars. 'I'd like to chop you up and feed you to your own fish.'

'Deina, don't. What if he does hear you?' Chryse glanced up and down the street, as if the god himself might suddenly manifest: angry, vengeful, garlanded with seaweed.

'Relax. I'm sure Poseidon has better things to do than come after us.' They both knew the gods existed. But unlike Chryse, Deina didn't care what they thought.

Her gaze drifted to the tavern opposite. Almost deserted now, apart from a man sitting at a table outside, shovelling down a mound of what looked like roasted lamb. The boulder-built citadel, topped by the enormous complex of the megaron, loomed in the distance. Nearer at hand were racks of fish, laid out to dry in front of tiny, dark-windowed houses. The stink of last night's catch had risen with the heat.

This was a place of fishermen and sailors, a few of whom – too drunk to stagger home – were still slumped on the tavern steps. But the man at the table didn't look like either. His body was soft – dimpled and rounded, like bread that had been left to rise but not yet baked. He was a ship owner, more likely. A trader in wine or olives, still doing well enough – despite the ever-increasing taxes and tributes imposed by Orpheus – to wear a fine linen tunic and gorge himself on meat. Or – Deina caught sight of what looked like a badge of office pinned in the folds of his cloak – a tax collector. Perhaps there was a way to salvage something useful from the day after all.

'Chryse, I think you should head back to the House.'

'Why?' She followed Deina's gaze. 'Oh.' A long, slow exhale, shaking her head. 'You know, one of these days, you're going to get caught.'

'I never get caught. And if I did . . .' Deina shrugged. 'I earn plenty for the House, and enough of that finds its way into the city treasury.' She thought back over the last week. On a single day, a good day, she'd reduced her indenture by a day and three quarters: severing a soul (half a day), laying a ghost (an entire day) and hallowing the house of a nobleman – expensive for him, even though she'd only earned a quarter

of a day. Trickery, really: the House recommended an annual hallowing ceremony to keep ghosts at bay, preferring not to tell people that ghosts generally didn't linger in the mortal world. Like Chryse's beauty, Deina's capacity for work added enough extra silver to the House's coffers to gain her a certain amount of indulgence.

She nodded towards the tax collector, who was now mopping up the last juices of his meal, his jowls glistening with smeared oil and spice. 'You know I don't like to pass up a good opportunity. And if I steal a bit from him, what's he going to do about it?'

'Report you. Identify you. And if he makes enough of a fuss, they'll have to do something. You'll be charged with bringing the House into disrepute. They'll stop you working and add five years onto your time.' Chryse shook her head. 'I don't understand why you keep taking these kinds of risks.'

'Yes, you do.' They'd had this conversation before. Deina stole because she wanted something that was just hers. Something that didn't belong to the House. Or the gods. Or this damn city. Even if it was no more than a couple of bronze coins. And of course, she had her plan to think of.

'Well, maybe I do,' Chryse conceded. 'But I still wish you wouldn't. I worry about you. Do come back with me. Or let's just walk to the shore as we planned. Or let me stay and help. I could –'

'Definitely not.' Deina sighed and raised one eyebrow in the direction of the tax collector. 'I can't look after you and deal with him at the same time.'

Chryse pouted a little. She was fiddling with the tassels of

an embroidered belt, bright with blue flowers; Deina gestured to the needlework.

‘You finished it. Very pretty.’

Her friend nodded. ‘It is, isn’t it. Though I’ve not finished the one I’m embroidering for you. Or the hem of my tunic. I’ve run out of thread.’ Her fingers stilled, and she glanced up at Deina. ‘I suppose, if you stole from that man, you could give me a little to buy some more . . .’

‘Exactly.’

Chryse grinned. ‘Then thank you.’ She stood up. ‘I mean it, though: be careful.’

‘I’m always careful. But my potential victim’s had two skinfuls of wine, at least, and the way he eats, I’d be willing to bet that the only part of him used to running is his bowels.’ Deina winked. ‘I think I can handle him.’ As the other girl turned away, Deina added, ‘Cover for me, if Mistress Kalistra asks where I am. And go straight back to the House.’

Deina watched Chryse to the end of the street before drawing her shawl further over her head and shuffling back into the shadows of the temple portico. She didn’t have to wait long; the tax collector soon pushed his chair back from the table, tossed a few coins to the tavern keeper, and staggered off down the street.

Deina followed.

Her target led her through the nearest marketplace, which would have been useful, if she’d had the opportunity to rob him earlier in the day. Plenty of distractions. Fishmongers, butchers and bakers all plying their trades, filling the air with their cries. But the only noise now was the squawk of crows

squabbling over dusty scraps of smoked fish and fly-blown meat. The stallholders had packed up for the day, driven home by the heat to courtyard gardens or shady balconies. The little square was almost deserted. Almost, but not entirely: there were three beggars still huddled by the water trough. There were beggars on most corners, even though things weren't quite as bad now as they had been last winter, when the bulk of Iolkos's grain had been sent as tribute to Thebes and famine stalked the city's streets, hollowing out its homes.

A woman wearing a frayed tunic was hawking glass beads from a tray.

'Pretty trinkets, best Egyptian glass! Blessed by Aphrodite herself, guaranteed to get you a good match!' As Deina slipped past, the woman's sales pitch rose to a litany of complaints: she'd sold nothing all morning, she was behind with her rent.

Deina didn't slow down. She carried no coin, and everyone had their problems. But, if her theft was successful, she'd come back this way. Or think about it, at least.

The tax collector left the square and passed into a network of narrow lanes, mostly empty. Outside one house there were a few children playing five-stones in the dirt. The man watching them gave her a disinterested glance and went back to mending his fishing net. She clung to the shadows and gripped her knife tightly. Her target slowed. But instead of entering a doorway, he turned to face the nearest house, lifted his tunic and began pissing loudly against the wall, sighing with relief.

A woman's head emerged screeching from the window above. 'Get away from there, you filthy, stinking, sack of wine!'

As the tax collector started to tell the woman exactly what she

could do with herself, Deina darted forward – dodging the damp patch of earth – cut the money pouch from his belt and ran.

There was a bellow of anger from her victim, a shout of laughter from the outraged householder, followed by a yell. ‘Run faster!’

Deina glanced over her shoulder and saw why: the man was pelting after her, a blade in his hand, neither quite as drunk nor quite as unfit as she’d believed. She cursed and switched directions, leaving Poseidon’s Quarter for Demeter’s.

The street widened to a crossroads. Her pursuer slowed, panting and purple faced. Deina slowed too. To one side, a wall enclosed a small orchard. She jogged away from the wall – turned – ran and leaped and dragged herself, grunting, up onto the top. A moment to catch her breath, and she was off again. Brushing past the twisted fingers of olive trees, she flew along the flat tops of the stones, cheered on by a deafening chorus of cicadas. The road itself veered away once it reached the bulk of a grain store up ahead; anyone following it would have to take a detour to catch up. By that time, she’d be long gone.

It was a good plan. Until a snake dropped from the branch of a tree onto the wall directly in front of her. The creature reared up, hissing, and Deina jumped to avoid it. Lost her footing. Teetered, for a moment, on the very edge of the wall, flailing her arms, trying to regain her balance –

Pain blinded her. Once she’d blinked it away, the pattern of stones in front of her resolved into the base of the wall. There was dirt beneath her hands and on her right cheek. Something worse than dirt, too; she took a breath and gagged, pushing herself onto her knees – *everything* hurt – grabbing the purse

from where she'd dropped it and her knife from her belt as heavy footsteps thudded nearer.

'Why, you thieving cutpurse, I'll make you wish you'd –' The man she'd robbed stopped, mouth open, fist – clutching a larger knife than hers – poised to strike. But the blow never fell. He blanched. Pulled an amulet out from beneath his tunic and held it up, hand shaking, his eyes flitting between Deina's forehead and her mismatched eyes. A trickle of sweat ran from his temple to his jaw.

'Give me back my money.' He brought his knife nearer. 'Or . . . Or I'll make you pay. I swear.'

'No.' Deina raised her own knife and tightened her grip on the money bag. They had an audience: two men carrying sacks of grain, and a young boy leading a donkey. All three were looking on with interest. None of them seemed inclined to intervene. She got slowly to her feet. 'You might need our services one day. Consider this a prepayment.' Edging closer, she slashed her knife in the tax collector's direction. 'Or you might end up leaving Iolkos for the Underworld sooner than you'd like.'

The man spat out a stream of curses, but as Deina backed away, he made no move to pursue her. When she reached the corner of the grain store, she ran. Ran through a maze of small streets and the nearest city gate. Kept running through the groves beyond, just for the pleasure of speed and the wind in her face.

Until the sea lay before her. She sank onto the sand-washed turf. Closed her eyes and listened to the rhythm of the waves. Breathed deeply. Pine resin, thyme, the scent of

seaweed carried on the breeze . . . Overlaid by the stench of whatever she'd fallen into. Grimacing, Deina ripped a handful of thyme from the ground and try to clean herself off, inventorying her injuries along the way. One swollen ankle. Two grazed palms. More cuts and bruises elsewhere than she cared to count.

Time to see if it was worth it.

The contents of the money bag glinted, heavy in her palm. It was a good haul: as well as the usual pieces of bronze, bearing the marks of the cities that minted them, there were a few stamped discs of Persian silver and one delicate, Minoan *bull*. Held between finger and thumb, the small circle of gold gleamed in the sunlight. Definitely worth it. Deina grinned as she unpinning one shoulder of her tunic and stashed the loose coins beneath the linen band that bound her breasts. The weight of them against her skin was pleasing; little bits of freedom, held close to her heart.

The tide mark was just below. She walked down there carefully, the tip of one finger beneath the heavy torc that encircled her neck. It was made of spell-cast bronze, created by the Theodesmioi of Hephaestus. The sea itself was beyond her reach, but Deina knew how far to go, exactly how close to the waves she could edge, before the torc would start to tighten. To choke her. To remind her of another of the limits the city had placed on her freedom.

There were stories about Theodesmioi – Severers, and those from other Orders – who had ended their lives this way. An escape. A final choice that even the city couldn't take away, if the day came . . .

But this particular day had redeemed itself. Deina began sorting through the washed-up pebbles, looking for small, flattish stones to refill the money pouch. By the time she was done, her injured ankle was throbbing; she tore a strip from her tunic and bound the ankle tightly. Only when she'd completed this task did she stand up and stretch her stiff shoulders and look out across the bay.

Five black-sailed galleys. Warships, with many banks of oars and battering rams attached to their prows. Theban ships, come to collect the quarterly tribute.

Deina shook her head and turned to go, but a flash of gold and red caught her attention. The wind had unfurled the flag planted in the prow of the largest ship, and it was fluttering brightly in the afternoon sunshine.

A chill clawed its way out of the pit of Deina's stomach.

The flag was the King's Standard, and it signified only one thing.

Orpheus the Tyrant had come to Iolkos.