

FIRST BLOOD



THE ADVENTURES OF DEVCALION

BLOOD SERIES

BY MICHAEL LYNES



Shuman

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First Blood

The Blood Series, Volume 2

Michael Lynes

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

FIRST BLOOD

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Chapter 1 – Hermes



“G ood gwacious!” Hermes peered into the shadowy mist, his eyes goggling wide. “Well, sink me! Who’d’ve thawt. . . ?”

It had been mere hours since he bade farewell to dear sweet Adrestia and that rascal Devalcion as they embarked on Charon’s boat, setting off on the last leg of their journey to Tartarus. He’d done all he could to help them, making sure they understood how to avoid being swept over the Great Falls and telling them how to make a safe landing on the tower isle in their center that contained the entrance to the Pit. He’d shaken his head as they disappeared into the clouds of acidic steam that hung low over the River of Fire. *It will all come to a bad end*, he had thought. His face brightened. *No matter! If by chance Adrestia should die, then her beautiful shade would return to me in the Underworld! And then she and I could have all the time in the world for a good chat.* Nodding with satisfaction, he had turned his attention back to the pungent brew he had been concocting when he was so rudely interrupted.

He was standing by the fire and stirring his pot. Constant motion and precise strokes were required to allow the gentle heat to drive off the volatiles and concentrate the mixture. As he waited for it to thicken, he racked his brains, trying to come up with the perfect name. “Euweeka!” he cried, flourishing his long-handled spoon like a scepter. “I shall cawl dis one *l’Puant d’Hermes*. . .”

His excited cry died in his throat. The cloying mists swirled and parted. Red eyes appeared like a host of flickering sparks, gleaming in the surrounding shadows. A chorus of ghostly voices sighed and moaned. “Lord Hermes! Lord. . .lord!” they cried, a multi-throated wail that blended and mingled with the burbling voice of the river behind him. “Hear us. . .lord Hermes! Hermes lord. . .*heear ussss!* Lord. . .lord. . . .”

Hermes froze, spoon upraised. A host of the Dead clustered thick round him; their keening cries sent a chill through his core. No matter that he too was dead and beyond all physical harm. He had served for millennia as the *psychopompus*, the soul-guide, but he had never grown comfortable with the shades of men. Being who he was, he had taken great pride in performing his work, paying exact attention to protocol, but he found no joy in it.

Of course he had not been tasked with the care of every dead soul. To be escorted by a god in death was a distinction afforded to only a precious few, the

greatest of mortal heroes. On the occasions that he was called into service, his habit had been to wait for the summons of Hades. The lord of the Underworld was always well informed when it came to any sort of violence among men. Hermes would then place himself upon the periphery of the battle, ready to take charge of the shades of one heroic champion or two, a half-dozen at most, guiding them in honor to Charon's landing.

It was a noble calling and something he professed to be proud of. In truth he'd always found the task macabre and distasteful. He especially disliked dealing with Charon. He found his personality almost as repulsive as his person, and the feeling was mutual. He still had misgivings following the latest encounter with the Boatman; he'd been of half a mind to take Adrestia aside and confide his suspicions regarding their guide and his conflicted loyalties, but the opportunity for a private chat had not presented itself. This unexpected manifestation, following as it did so closely on the last disruption in his peaceful routine, unnerved him.

He blinked, nonplussed, and then drew himself up. A peevish tone entered his voice, overlaid with a tremulous quaver. "W-what do you want?" he stammered. "I am q-q-qwright busy now, good shades. I must pay cwose attention and constantwee stir my current concockshun in order to prevent it from cwotting!" He gestured towards the bubbling cauldron. "State yaw desire and then allow me to weeturn to my work!" The massed shades stood mute, a wave of near palpable gloom emanating from them. They moaned and gibbered among themselves, red eyes blinking in the mist. The silence grew, but none stepped forth to respond to his demands. As the seconds ticked by, his impatience began to outweigh his fear. "Come! Come naw!" he exhorted them. "Surewee you do not interrupt me wifout cause!" His brows lowered and his voice grew cutting. "Speak! I command you!"

At his words a shudder ran through the throng. As one, they prostrated themselves. Thousands, nay tens of thousands, fell to their knees and groveled before him. Shocked, his breath caught in his throat as one wretched shade began to worm her way forward, transparent limbs quaking in terror. She buried her face in the dust and stretched forth her hands, laying her trembling grasp on the arch of his left foot. "Lord!" she moaned, and the massed voices of the multitude joined with hers, each word filling the air with a breathless multi-throated whispering. "Lost. . .lost we are! We are *lossst*. . .lost. Lead us! Lead us, Lord. . .Lord! We are lost!"

He froze, her words filling him with a nameless terror. *Lead? But. . .what of the lord Hades?* His brows rose as he stared at the groveling specter. At last he found his voice. "Lost?" he replied. "What nonthense is this?" His voice grew

stronger as anger ignited in his breast. “Shade, you jest wif me! My good uncle Hades is yaw lord. Why do you twuble me wif your ridiculous notions?” He brandished his spoon in a dismissive flourish. “Weave me. . . !”

“No, Lord! No!” the shade gasped, her voice cutting through the air like a blade. “Hades! Hades is no more! No more our lord. . .our lord!” Her cries grew stronger, and the voices of all the Dead rose, becoming a hollow, groaning howl, echoing from the surrounding hills. “Dis-missed! He has been dismissed. Dismissed by She! She who mussst be obeyed. . . obeyed. We are free. . .free, Lord! But we are lost. . .lost. Lead us!”

Hermes gazed down at her, as still as stone. His face was deathly pale.

Then, all at once, his chin rose. An odd gleam, a reflection of the cauldron fire perhaps, lit up his eyes. He looked out over the multitude. He could feel their abject adulation as it washed over him, their massed longing to join together and to flow into him—if only he would give his assent.

It occurred to him that their power could heal him. He was still a god, in name at least, yet a mere shadow of his former self. His body was dust, destroyed by Typhon’s madness. Without knowing how, he knew that he had but to give the word and he would be restored.

As he vacillated, a lone whisper from the foremost came to his ears, sibilant yet piercing in its intensity. “You *must* lead us, Lord!” she begged. “We exist. . .exist to serve. To serve! We must. . .we must serve, Lord. Serve! Else we are lost. Lead us!”

For a timeless instant he paused, heart balanced on a razor’s edge. He had never wished for a position of command. He was happiest in solitude, composing his verses or brewing his distillations. In some ways, the time he’d spent being a discorporate shade had been among the best days of his existence. Not that he’d *wanted* to be dead, no! Yet when he was one god among many, servant to all and master of none, something had always seemed to be missing.

My good advice is always ignored! he thought with sudden pique. *My so-called “family,” vacuous trollops and muscle-brained loudmouths the lot of them, need someone who can tell them what to do. Someone who knows better, and has the power to make them listen!* His brows lowered as a grim smile twisted his fair face. “Yes. . .” he whispered aloud, “someone who knows better. . .and why not me?”

He released the spoon and opened his arms, fingers splayed wide. At once the pent-up energy of the Dead flowed into him, filling him with their power. His dead spirit was clothed in flesh once more, reinvigorated and strong. He raised his right hand, staring at the green tongues of flame that danced across it. His eyes blazed as he clenched it into a fist. The virulent glow enveloped him,

limning him in light. He spread his arms wide, assuming dominion over his new realm. With a wordless cry, the massed shades rushed toward him. They seized him, raising him up on countless hands. Like a howling wind, they turned and rushed over the shadowed hills. They bore him swiftly to the Keep, hastening to fill the void left by the unseating of their lord.

Neglected, the cauldron boiled over, its ruined contents sending up clouds of black smoke as they flowed over its lip into the flames. Slowly, the mists settled back onto the desolate banks of the steaming river, covering all.



“NO, NO, NO!” HERMES’ expression was aghast. “Absowutewee hideous! Take them away from me at once! Next!” The bevy of shades that had been dithering before him turned and melted into the gloom-filled eaves, the upholstery samples and fabric swatches they carried fluttering with the speed of their departure. The next group emerged from the darkness on his left, similarly burdened. They clustered together, whispering among themselves, waiting to be recognized and then called upon by the motherly shade that hovered at Hermes’ right hand.

He glanced up at her from his seat, catching her eye but making no other sign. When he had accepted the offer of lordship over the Dead host, it was she who had been the foremost, the shade who had begged him to become their new lord. Her name was Helpful, he had learned, a name given to her by the Lady Adrestia when they first met. Among all the Dead, she was singular, the only one who possessed a name. Because of it the host had flocked to her after they were released from the service of Hades and departed from the Keep. Upon seating himself on the throne, he had named her his first counselor and placed her in charge of the affairs of the castle and its servants.

She waited in total silence for his permission. At last he inclined his head, indicating his assent. She glanced back into the dark eaves and then held up one spectral hand, quieting the group of shades with an almost regal gesture. She turned her red-eyed gaze back to her new lord. “My Lord,” she announced, her voice a moaning whisper, “the painters. . .the painters are here. . .are here.”

“Good!” His eyes narrowed and he favored her with a tight smile. “I wish to inspect the new colors they have brawght me to choose from. You may allow dem to appwoach me!” Helpful raised her hand in a summoning gesture. The workers ghosted up to the foot of the great obsidian throne that the Keep’s former master had set in the center of his cavernous, black-draped audience hall—except that the drapery was in the process of being removed. Groups of

specters were busy tearing down the wall-coverings and placing them in carts. Others were hanging heavy brocades that had been dyed a rosy shade of magenta, complete with intricate gold-trimmed valences. More spirits hovered above their heads, dismantling the medieval wrought-iron chandeliers and replacing them with multi-tier, baroque style lighting hung with leaded crystal and lit by pure white tapers. The whole Keep was abuzz with furious activity.

Hermes' expression grew ecstatic as he raised his chin, ignoring the array of vibrant color samples that were being set before him and taking in the whole room. He spread his arms wide, and spectral flames of potent green engulfed his hands.

"Yes!" his sudden cry echoed off the walls. "I haf been dying to redecowate dis dwafty dump faw ages!" His voice fell to an intense whisper. "But I cannot do it awone." His brows contracted as sorrow flooded onto his face. "Helpful!" he exclaimed as he turned his mournful gaze upon her. "You were the wady Adwestia's favorite, were you not?" The shade bowed her head in assent. "If onwy she was heah! Her expertise in inteewieor design is unpawawelled. She would help me twansfawm this dwedful décor!" Helpful stood mute, her eyes downcast. Without waiting for her reply, he gestured to the painters, taking them in along with the rest of the Dead who were working all around them.

"Enough!" he screamed. "Send dem all away." He turned back towards his patient attendant. "Helpful! I am famished, and it is past teatime. Have my weepast set befaw me!" He sat back on the throne, now covered in a regal shade of purple velvet, and draped a pale arm over the side, drawing his fingers over Cerberus's nearest head and scratching him behind one oversized ear. The dread Beast of Hades let out a growl of contentment as his middle head continued gnawing the human femur he had propped between his paws. The last head snuffled and snored at the god's feet. "Yes. . .dere's a good boy. I tweet you bettah than yaw pweevious master. . .yes. . .don't I?" He continued stroking the great hound as red-eyed spirits hurried to lay starched white linen on the board before him. A troupe of phantom waiters trailed in their wake, setting a full mid-afternoon tea service. Hermes sat up, his hand poised over a plate of delicate finger sandwiches.

His expression grew severe. "Imbeciles!" He glared at the cowering servants. "Deese sammiches have *cwusts*!" He kicked over the table, shattering plate and crystal and sending the food flying. There was a breathless silence. All the shades in the hall froze as he lifted his gaze from the ruined meal. "Helpful! Have dese incawmpetent scum banished from my sight!" His eyes roved around the room. "And wheah is that filthy Boatman. . . ?" he called. "I have not seen him since dat day on the wiverbank when he set off wif her in his

boat! I will wait no wonger! He must weeturn the wuvwee wady Adwestia to me. I demand her pwesence!” He stamped his feet in fury. “Her silly adventures wif dat wascaly thief Devcalweeion are at an end! Have Chawon bwaght to me at once!” He pointed a green-glowing finger at the motionless cooks. His voice began to echo, reverberating in the hall with a wild edge of madness. “Send deese useless wights to the entwance to Tartawus, and have them fetch me Chawon and Adewstia!” he screamed. “The west of you, cwean up dis mess! And bwing me maw food! I am starving!”



“OY! ME BLEEDIN’ ‘EAD!”

Charon coughed, gasping in pain as he spat out clots of dark blood. His black eyes gleamed, fever bright, from the sunken hollows in his corpse-pale skin. He was standing with one shoulder braced against the entrance to the *hektoni*’s cavern, craning his neck to gaze up the sheer basalt cliff. His right arm was useless. He’d tucked it into his ragged tunic, cradling the broken ribs of his injured side. His head was swimming, legs trembling beneath him. Every step was agony as his shattered bones grated past one another. *I’ll never make it up the cliff wiffout a bit o’ rest*, he thought, turning and slipping down to a seated position, his back against the slick rock. The subterranean booming of the falls drowned all other sound.

“At least ‘at murderin’ git ‘Ades ‘as fared no better!” he wheezed between labored breaths. “I ‘ope the ‘undred-hands are picking ‘is bones outa their teeth roight naw!” His brows sank as the memory of the conflict with his former lord blossomed into his mind. Sudden remorse filled him as he thought of Adrestia. *She set me free!* His last image had been of her beautiful face as she tumbled through the air, disappearing into the well of Tartarus. His eyes burned, too dry for tears. He let loose a breathless laugh. “Look at you!” he muttered. “Ain’t you a fine piece ’o work, teary-eyed oer’ a lass! Why, she’d never look twice at the loikes of you. . .”

He grimaced, but then his expression became somber once more. *She was the only one. . .the only one in all the centuries who treated me with respect!* He raised his left hand, awkwardly fingering the dimpled scars above his heart. “An naw she’s *gawn!*” he cried, his voice hoarse with pain. “Buried deep in the Pit.” He gazed over his knees into the roaring chasm that yawned before him. “I ‘ave nothin’.” His expression became grim, his lips pressed together into a bloodless line. “No job. . .no lord. . .naught to live for.” He rose, swaying on his unsteady limbs, and stepped forward to the brink. His gaze sank into the depths, staring

long at the bottomless cataract that would consume him, icy spray soaking through his black tunic. “Me world is dark,” he groaned, “cold, and empty.” Sudden rage lit in his heart. “Milady!” he screamed, and it echoed from the black precipice. “I know ye cawnt ‘ear me! You are lost in that Abyss, an even yer shade ‘as been devoured, never to return!” A single tear traced down his withered cheek. Soundless it fell. “I did nawt choose this loife. . .” He hawked and spat into the void. “I will be alone no longer! I will make an end, ‘ere an naw, and join you.” The echoes died as he stood for a long moment upon the brink.

I love you, he thought. He stepped into space.



HADES AWOKE IN UTTER darkness, head pounding. His mouth was parched, and his entire body ached as though it had been beaten by giant hands. He sat up, groaning aloud. The last thing he could recall was the shock he had felt when Adrestia was transformed by the power of the Ring. Sudden rage gathered in his breast. *He had been on the verge of claiming it!* He raised his hand to his face, fingering the rough gap that her blade had cut in his black beard, and the spot of clotted blood where her bitter sword-point had pricked his throat. Fear shook him, tempering his anger. He knew in his heart that the power she had demonstrated when she used the Ring had been greater than any he had ever faced before. *And what was it that she had named me? Aidoneus. . .yes, my birth-name!* His eyes grew wide in the blank darkness. *None have called me that, not for ages and ages. Not since She—*

He broke off, a jolt of realization lancing like a spear into his dark heart. *Her! Can it be that She is at the root of this all? That She is Zeus’s true foe?* He shuddered in the cold, an unaccustomed thrill of terror turning his gut to jelly.

“No matter!” he croaked, mastering himself. His lips twisted into a grim smile, unseen in the gloom. *She may be the puppet master, but her marionette is not invincible. Had I struck an instant sooner I would have spitted that skinny wisp of a princess!*

But the traitorous beast Charon had spoiled his aim, and the consequences of his errant thrust had been dire. “Even that filthy cur is above me now.” His face twisted into the black tempest of a scowl. “He is likely the true instigator behind this revolt! I imagine he is quite pleased, setting himself on my high seat and making free with my meats and wine!” He ground his teeth in fury. “Just you wait!” he hissed. “I shall have my revenge! I shall cut out your putrescent liver

and stuff it down your rotten gullet when next we meet! I shall have you torn limb from limb!” His voice rose to a howl, echoing back to him from the black rock walls, seeming to mock his words. Blinding pain shot through his head, accompanied by flashes of phantom light behind his eyes.

Gingerly he probed the egg-shaped bruise over his right temple. His helm had likely saved his life, blunting the blow delivered by the hundred-handed monsters, but now it was missing. Thrown from his head, he reasoned, by the horrible force of the *hekatonis*’ blow. He had no clue where it might be in the black chasm, and without it he was as helpless as any mortal. “Curse them!” he muttered. “They are faithless allies. Like as not they have stolen it, though why they did not also lay their foul hands upon me I cannot comprehend.” It was true, it had been he who had engaged their aid in order to force Adrestia’s hand and get her to give him the Ring. But when his spear missed her and struck one of them, the beasts had gone mad, lashing out before any of them could react.

I suppose I should count myself lucky that I awoke at all! Of Adrestia and Charon and that fool Devalcion, there was no sign. He stood, his legs shaky but holding his weight. The cavern again filled with echoes, magnifying the sound of his awkward movement, and he froze, waiting for the disturbance to subside. He had no wish to encounter those many-eyed fiends in his present state. He drew a deep breath and took stock. He still had his wits about him, and his ability to use his other senses in lieu of sight was unparalleled. He continued to move up the lightless passage, feeling his way, hardly daring to breathe. At last he came to the entrance, stepping out onto the narrow shelf of scree that lay before the Door, and blinking in the half-light of his familiar realm.

Charon? The unhappy Boatman stood a few paces before him, teetering on the edge of the precipice. Black rage rose in his heart. *Traitor!* He raised his arm to summon forth his twin-tipped spear, intent on thrusting it into the unprotected back of his faithless henchman. But before he could strike, Charon bowed his head and stepped into the void.

The blood drained from Hades’ face, and he clutched the wall, knees weak. The rock below his feet trembled with the force of the twin cataracts as they poured past either side of the broad bulk of the mount and into the bottomless pit before him. The sheer face of the basalt cliff towered above him, hundreds of feet above his head. He leaned back against it to steady himself. *Poor wretch!* He stared at the point from which Charon had fallen, his mind blank. But he had no time to absorb the shock. A host of shades, their red eyes unwavering, swam up out of the gloom. “Ah!” he exclaimed, mastering the tremor in his voice, his expression severe. “At last you have returned!” He stared as they remained motionless, hemming him in on all sides. “Well! Don’t just *stand*

there!” he cried, shouting to be heard above the roar of the falls. “You are too late to save the Boatman. Attend to me!” They surged forward, laying their cold hands upon him. “Seize!” they cried, their voices howling like a bitter wind. “Seize him! *Seize!*”

He fought back against them with savage fury. The power of his weapon proved too great for their small force, and he was victorious—but at a terrible cost. He dispatched the last shade, thrusting his spear into its cold heart, but the wight tore the haft from his hand as he fell, and it was lost to the roaring falls. Disarmed and exhausted, Hades scrambled up to the narrow ledge and then edged his way along as it climbed the face of the vertical cliff.

The ascent was perilous, and the smooth black stone was slick with icy spray. He let out a great breath when he reached the top without mishap. He continued on into the gloom, making his way back along the rocky passage that led to the lee side of the basalt mount that bisected the great falls. He came at last to the rock-strewn shore, moving with caution. He expected to be attacked at any moment, but all was quiet. Charon’s metal boat lay where he recalled it would, and its anchor was still holding fast. He moved towards it with care, suspecting some sort of trap, but the boat too was derelict. In haste he boarded her, cast off, and rowed towards the western edge of the great lake rather than back to the mouth of the Phlegethon. At length he came to the reedy fen that marked the foul mouth of the Styx, and he entered it, plying the sweeps against its mud-choked torpid current.

He continued under the sunless half-light, rowing till his hands were raw and blistered from the unaccustomed effort, making his way back upriver. “I have grown soft!” he muttered under his breath. The slow flow of the river fought his efforts, yet it remained the fastest route back to the Keep. Two days’ water journey, he knew, would bring him near the landing, whereas he might spend a half-fortnight trekking up and down the hills of the barren highlands. He kept a careful watch, especially when he tied up to take rest. All about him, the lands appeared desolate, yet with each stroke of his oars his sense of unease grew. He felt he was being watched. . .but by whom?



Chapter 2 – The Dead



Cold. . .so cold. The Boatman's teeth chattered, and he clenched them together to still the tremor. Blank darkness enveloped him. He was soaking wet, chilled to the bone, and the fall seemed endless. 'Ow long? he wondered. 'Ow long till I hits the bottom? The last thing he remembered was the soul-filling roar of the falls as he had plummeted into the abyss, then nothing. *Must've passed out, I reckon, an' no tellin' 'ow long neither.* He still seemed to be falling. He could feel the air as it rushed past him, and every breath was like knives of pain in his chest. . .but something was amiss. The air was moving. . .true, but slower, and the roaring spray of the falls was absent. The only sound that came to his ears was his own rasping breath.

Prap's I'm already dead? He considered the possibility but rejected it almost immediately. *Naw, caint be. . .the Dead feel no pain, an' they don't breathe much neither. . .heh.* He had stepped off the cliff in full awareness. Self-destruction had been his desire, and he had fallen as a stone falls, cleaving the air. He'd closed his eyes against the buffeting wind and pelting spray. There had been nothing to see in any case, the darkness absolute and the sound deafening.

"Oy!" he exclaimed. "At's it! *No sound. . .*" His heart leapt in his chest, and he forced his eyes open. Dim gray light, the familiar sky of the underworld, met his gaze. His body was horizontal, suspended in mid-air, and the black ground was far below. Cold hands gripped him, and red eyes, flickering against the gloom, surrounded him. *The Dead!* He fixed his gaze on one shade and drew a shallow breath. "Gettch'er bleedin' mitts offa me, an' put me down!" he croaked. His voice was a reedy whisper. "What roight 'ave ye to hold me?"

The shade glanced at him but gave no reply. He realized that his legs were bound with ropes, and his injured arm had been tied against his body with new cloth. Sudden anger arose within him. Agony radiated from his arm and side as he struggled in vain against their icy grip. They continued to ignore his cries and thrashing, holding fast to him and bearing him swiftly through the cool air.

At last he grew quiet once more. He composed himself and began to take stock of his situation. He knew that the Dead did nothing without orders, and that his authority over them was no more. They had obeyed him only because he had been the Boatman of Hades. *But if they're no longer subject to me, then to*

whom? While he considered this question, he spied a familiar mountainous silhouette. *So they're takin' me back to the Keep . . .but why?*

His captors began to descend towards the rocky highland and glide along the path that led to the black gates. Soon the outer walls loomed up from the shadows. Each was manned by legions of flickering red eyes.

Before he could wonder at this new development, they alighted in the outer court. His captors set him down on a dark wooden cart, still holding his arms and legs fast. A large host of red-eyed specters surrounded the bier. One stepped forward. He recognized her as the captain of the Guard. "Bind! Bind him!" she ordered. At once a gag of cloth was shoved into his mouth, and his legs were bound with more ropes. Iron manacles were fixed on his left hand, securing it to the side of the cart. His injured hand and side were untouched. A dark hood was pulled over his head, blocking out all sight. He lay quiet as the cart was borne up, moving into a more enclosed space.

Loik as nawt I'm ta be thrown into the dungeons, he thought, but the cart proceeded at an even pace. After a short run, his captors turned left and ascended a flight of stairs and then down a long, echoing corridor. He lost count of the turns as they continued through a maze of passages, culminating with another long ascent up a spiral stair with creaking doors at both the bottom and top. Each door was opened and then locked behind them by unseen hands. At last they turned and entered a smaller space through yet another door. The echoes of their passage died.

The air in the room was cool but not uncomfortable, with a sweet scent. Cold hands seized his limbs once more, immobilizing him. He could hear the wards of the manacles turn as they were opened, and then he was once again lifted into the air. Seconds later he was laid on a soft bed, his captors reattaching the cuff to it. The ropes binding his legs were removed, not ungently, and then a second cuff was affixed to his right ankle. The sweet scent grew stronger, sage mixed with lavender seeming to rise from the pillowy bedding itself. A soft covering was drawn up over his body, and then the cold hands holding him withdrew. The hood remained in place, blocking his sight. He could see flecks of candlelight through its loose weave. *Well. . .at least this ain't no dungeon, but 'tis far from freedom. What can the—*

Suddenly the dark veil was withdrawn. He blinked in the unaccustomed light, his eyes unable to focus. Twin points of red fire swam up from the shadows. "Charon. . .Charon!" a voice groaned. "Boatman of the dead. . .of the dead." A cold hand caressed his cheek, drawing the gag out of his mouth. He choked and spat, trying to clear his throat. She wiped the spittle away with a soft cloth. "Hush. . .hush, now. . .hush. . ." she crooned, leaning close and placing

her ghostly hand over his mouth. Her eyes scanned the shadows, seeming to search them. Then she turned back to him, her voice an intense whisper. “Cry not! Cry not, else your life. . .your life be forfeit. . . forfeit!”

He stared at her, swallowing hard. “Oo are *you*?” he asked at last, his voice a cracked whisper. “Why ‘ave ye brought me ‘ere?” He raised his left hand, rattling the chain. “An’ why all this? Am I a prisoner?”

She offered no reply, gazing at him in silence. “The lord,” she moaned at last. “The lord commanded us. . .commanded us to fetch you. . .to fetch you.”

He gazed back at her, momentarily nonplussed. “What lawd? ‘Ades is dead! Or ‘e ought ta be! Rottin’ in some *hekatoni*’s belly, I expect.” He grinned despite the pain. “I sawr ta that. ‘E was tryin’ ta kill the poor Princess, ‘e was! I did na more than try to save ‘er loife, I did.”

The shade drew back. He fancied he could detect a hint of shock in her voice. “The lord. . .” she intoned. “The lord Hermes. . .Hermes lord. . .Hermes. The lord Hermes has commanded. . .has commanded us. . .commanded us to find her. . . to find and return her!” Her red eyes blinked, and her voice grew even more doleful. “Say. . .say! Tell us more. . .tell usss. . .where. . .where is she? My lady. . .my lady Adrestia . . . Where has she gone. . .where? My lady. . .my lady!”

Charon frowned. *Hermes! What right did he have to rule the Dead?* He could see that much had changed since the fight in the cave. *But what to do now?* he wondered as he stared at the agitated shade. *I cannot risk tellin’ the whole tale. . .not yet.* He needed information before he could act. A sudden fit of coughing struck him, and he almost screamed from the pain. He spat again to clear his mouth. Fresh blood began to creep from between his lips, and he groaned in agony.

Helpful’s eyes grew bright. She stood up and then raised her hand in a gesture of summons. At once the room was filled with shades. She turned and nodded to each, holding them in her gaze. They vanished without a word and then began to return, singly and in small groups, bearing hot water and soap, bandages and ointments, tea and warm broth.

Charon had lain back on his pallet and lapsed into a semiconscious state. His injuries were grave. She knew that he might not survive them. *Mere chance*, she thought, *that the hapless cooks had found him poised above the great Falls, and chance surely that they had been able to arrest his attempt at suicide.* But their return to the Keep, so soon and without the lady Adrestia, would raise many questions, and she was not prepared to answer them. Concern smote her heart. Where was the Princess? *The Boatman knows more than he has told. . .I must hear his tale before I can act with confidence.*

Hermes was the lord of the Underworld now. When Hades was deposed, the leaderless Dead had begged her to assume command. It had been her own decision to refuse and instead to offer their allegiance to the shade of the God of Poets. But it had become plain that Hermes was not accustomed to rule, and his erratic behavior did not rest easily upon her or any of the Dead. She had hoped that the return of Adrestia to his side might help stabilize his infantile passions and bring peace back to the troubled Underworld. Now, she was unsure. Her heart was upset by all that the Boatman had said, and even more by what he had not, and she feared most what Hermes' reaction might be if he learned that Adrestia had come to harm.

Helpful watched her attendants bend to their healing work, cutting the bloody bindings and filthy clothes from the Boatman's emaciated frame. *Attend to him, let him encounter no lack, but do not release him! Say not a word. . .not a word*, she silently commanded them. *Nothing. . .nothing until we are sure. . .we are sure.*



HIS EYES FLUTTERED open. All was still. The room was dim, lit only by the dull red glow of coals coming from the small grate on his left. He lay at ease on soft bedding. The scent of fragrant herbs had filled the air. He drew a shallow breath, wrinkling his nose and pursing his lips in disgust. *Oy!* he thought. *What's that 'orrible smell?* He coughed and spat, and then braced for the stabbing agony that he'd grown to expect from every motion. His eyes widened in the darkness. *There was no pain!* He took a deep, wondrous breath. His chest expanded and fell, with only a hint of stiffness.

Slowly he sat up, still expecting discomfort, but there was none. His motion drew a rattle from the manacle upon his left hand, and he frowned in the gloom. "So, 'ealed but still a prisoner eh?" he muttered. "Charon, me lad, you'd better play your cards smart, else your old 'ead 'll be gettin' a vacation from your skinny neck one day soon!"

Still seated, he continued to take stock. He suddenly realized that another profound change had been worked upon his person. He was naked and, even more surprising, clean! Some strong-stomached soul had removed his ruined clothing along with a few millennia worth of filth and grime. He let out a silent laugh. "Heh, only the Dead could 'ave done me that service, cos the living would'a been long dead afore they finished! But 'at ain't no matter." Clothing, or the lack of it, did not trouble him, but not knowing why he'd been captured and what was being planned for him did. His captivity so far seemed to be

benign, but it was captivity nonetheless. He spied an unlit taper on a low stand on his right side. He could not reach it with his encumbered arm, and his injured arm was still bound to his side in a loose sling. Its healing seemed to be incomplete. There was no pain coming from the shattered bones, but it also did not respond to his will. The arm seemed lifeless. He tried another tack. He drew in a deep breath and yelled as loud as he could, “Oy! Oy! Oy! Ow ‘bout a little loight, an’ sum grub? Oy! Oy!” He waited in breathless silence.

Red eyes, many pairs of them, swam up out of the shadows. The Dead attendants seemed surprised, their hands fluttering in dismay. “Nooo!” they called, moaning and gibbering, “Cry! Cry not! Noooo!”

“All roight, then! Took ye long enough. . .” He grinned, pleased at their shocked reaction. “I ask ye, issat any way ta treat an honored guest?” His grin morphed into a glare. “I’m ‘ungry! Hear? Get me sommat ta eat, an’ quick now, else I’ll start yellin’ again.”

He nodded as several of the shades turned and disappeared. *That was more like it!* The rest hovered around him, their red eyes glimmering. He fixed his gaze on the closest and lowered his voice to a growl. “You there! Loight up that wick. And you—” he gestured to the rest—“find that bleedin’ git of a leader of yours and bring ‘im here! I gotta bone ta pick wif ‘im.” He drew a deep breath as they hesitated. “Now!” he bellowed. They scattered.



HELPFUL TURNED, RESPONDING to the silent presence that hovered behind her, waiting her leave to speak. Her brows rose. It was of one of the spirits she had commanded to keep watch on the injured Boatman. *No!* she silently exclaimed as he delivered his message. *How could you be so stupid!* Her eyes blazed bright with alarm. *Why did you follow his command and not first consult with me?* But she knew, almost as she uttered the words, that it was too late. The shade vanished, even as she began to sense the anger of her lord radiating through the etheric atmosphere of the Keep. Like an arrow from the bow, she flew toward the room where her charge lay. Despair consumed her.



“FAITHWESS WETCH! I shall have you dwawn and quartered!” Hermes raised his hand high. Spectral flames of brilliant green burst forth, crowning his head in light and running up the length of his arm. A golden rod appeared within his grasp, its twin serpents writhing in endless copulation at its head, its slender shaft terminating in a bitter point. With a motion too swift for sight, he thrust it

forward, its barb pricking the bare chest of the terrified Boatman. His brows rose to the sky, and his mouth gaped wide. "Speak!" the Lord of the Dead screamed. "Tell me what you have done wif my dear Wady Adwestria! And choose yaw words with care, for if you do not pwease me, I shall drive this stake through yaw heart and feed yaw bones to Cerweebus!"

Charon drew back, gibbering in fear. The manacles still held him fast to the bedframe; there was no escape from Hermes' wrath. The silent wraiths who had led their new lord into his chamber had faded into the shadows, their red eyes gleaming like sparks from a bonfire. "My lord," he began, gasping for breath, "spare me! Spare this foul worm." His face contorted with grief as he continued in a hoarse whisper, "I tried to save her, Lord! I did. . .I swear! But she is gawn, poor lass. . .gawn."

Hermes's face went white. He leaned forward, pressing the point of his caduceus into Charon's breast, breaking the skin. Fresh blood began to drip from the wound. "No!" he screamed. "You lie! The Pwincess and I are connected—our hearts are as one. I would have known it were she dead!" His eyes were full of wild passion, and his voice became a manic howl. "Ha! If she has been destwoyed as you claim, then wheah is her shade? Answer me that, you disgusting cur! Answer me with truth, and I shall make yaw death swift! Or hold to yaw wies, and I shall see to it that yaw torment wasts as wong as the heavens weemain above the Earth!"

Charon stared at him for a long moment. Then the fear drained from his face, and his expression became a blank mask. "You are roight, milord," he whispered. "I deserves death. . . in fact I welcomes it!" He shook his head as a tear tracked down his withered cheek. "I loved 'er too. . .and yet I could'na save 'er." His expression collapsed into fresh grief as he continued. "Twas that rotten coward 'Ades, milord! His was the fault! 'E planned to trap 'er between the Pit and the *hekatoni*, an' force 'er to give up 'er prize. But 'e got a big surprise, 'e did." His voice became savage. "I knew what 'e 'ad planned milord, an' I 'ated meself for deceiving 'er, but 'e was my lord, and I could nawt gainsay 'im. 'E ordered me to bring them to the Pit. An 'e told me they was nawt ta come ta any 'arm." He made a rude noise. "But I knew better! 'E planned all along to let them 'undred-'anded beasties 'ave them."

Hermes drew back, his face wooden, staring at the Boatman. He lowered his weapon, entranced by his words.

"So I does me duty. I brings em to the Doorstep, but no further. And she thanked me, milord! Thanked me for bringin' 'er nigh to 'er death! She was a wonder milord, a wonder." His eyes opened wide, his voice dropping into an awed whisper. "And then, roight there upon the threshold of Tartarus, she set me

free! Free! After thousands of years of thankless servitude, she ‘ad pity on me, milord! She released me, under ‘er authority as Nemesis of the ‘ouse of Nyx, and I was free.” He shook his head, and his voice fell. “We parted. They made for the Door, and I turned back to me boat.” He looked down, and his brows lowered into a black scowl. “Twas then that I spied the lord ‘Ades. He doffed ‘is Helm o’ Darkness and appeared to me in the passageway. ‘E tried to order me to aid ‘im! And I *refused*.” Charon’s face rose, his eyes staring up into the darkness, and his voice shook with passion. “I refused ‘im, for the first time ever. I was *free*.”

“I made off, leavin’ ‘im screamin’ after me. An’ when ‘e continued on, I doubled back, followin’ ‘im into the *hekatoni*’s cave. I witnessed ‘is treachery meeself, milord. ‘E tried to spear ‘er with ‘is black fork, when ‘er back was turned! I tackled ‘im an spoiled his aim.” Charon’s face fell, and his tone became mournful. “At’s when it all went bad. ‘Ades spear missed milady Adrestia, but it stuck in one of them ‘orribles! The ‘undred-‘ands struck out and sent us all flyin’.” Bitter tears choked his last words. “I sawr ‘er as she fell, milord, lifeless into the Pit.”

Charon ceased speaking, lost in the melancholy memory, ignoring both his peril and the presence of Hermes. The god of Poetry too was mute, his face ashen. The silence grew. From the shadows gleamed a pair of red eyes, growing closer. Helpful placed her hands on the bloody wound above her patient’s heart. Her gaze sought that of her lord. “Why? Why, lord?” Her voice was a moaning whisper. “Why have you hurt him. . .hurt him? He is a hero, Lord! A hero! He tried. . .he tried to save her. . .to save the Princess. Why?”

Hermes made no reply. He threw his head back, arms wide. He drew in a great breath, his body shaking as he clenched his fists. Green flames clothed him in light.

“*Lost!*” he screamed, his voice ringing off the walls of the stone chamber. “She is gone! Lost in the bwack Pit of Tawtawus, nevah to weeturn!” His hand flew forward, striking the helpless Boatman across the mouth. Charon reeled, gasping in pain. Fresh blood ran from his mouth and nose. “Weemove him from my sight! Throw him into the deepest dungeon, nevah to be seen again.” His mouth worked, and he screamed once more, “I wish his torment to be endwess and excrewciating!”

He turned and glared at Helpful as the Dead seized Charon and dragged him out of the room. “Hades is to be found!” he hissed. “Dispatch the Host! He is to be hunted down and captured! And I want him *awive!*”



Chapter 3 – Time



“I had no beginning. I will have no end.” The voice rose up from the seated figure, whispering into the void. He lifted his gaze, focusing on the formless zenith. His right eye was a spinning orb, half Darkness, half Light; the other was a piercing shade of blue. His robes too were ever-shifting, at once light and dark and all-colored, patterned with the same mystic symbol. “The words are indistinguishable, and meaningless.” He swept his chalk-white forearm towards the emptiness that enveloped him, and his ebony hand opened, turning outward, its fingers spread wide. Each digit was adorned with a band of argent, and each band contained a stone that was filled with light—scarlet, gold, celadon, cyan, and indigo. He gazed at the rings and sighed.

“After all. . .to me, nothing matters. The infinite is added to the infinite, and all is void.” He rose, leaning on a crooked staff of yew, and raised his chin. The servo-motors in the gleaming metal that formed his left hand whined as he stroked the length of his forked silver beard.

“. . .Then again,” he added in a thoughtful tone. “To me, everything matters. Every fraction of every second is counted. The existence of each one is essential to the whole, and they accrue without end to become the infinite.” He let go of his beard as a frown twisted onto his tattooed lips. “Every heartbeat is significant to the one in whose breast it resides; yet all life is void, pointless and empty.” He nodded to himself. “The poet wrote, *‘the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is done: There is no new thing. . .under the sun,’* and it is the plainest truth. Yet each instant that is lived requires a chooser and a choice. Each choosing overflows with possibility!”

He released another deep sigh. “But despite all, I am *bored*. If you ask me, boredom is the real mind-killer—the big death, if you will. I am eternally bored.” He crooked his little finger; indigo light filled his hand as he rose into the air and turned in a slow circle. His voice began to reverberate, filling the space around him. “Without me, everything is a void . . .yet I am invisible, unnoticed, and imperceptible. I am deathless, but to all things I bring death. I am absolute, yet meaningless without comparison. I am ever-present, elusive, untouchable, impossible to hold or to perceive, yet a part of all things. I am the circumference of Light and the boundary of Shadow. I am the root of all motion, the sound beyond hearing, and the heart of silence. I am the soul of stillness. .

.the essence of chaos. I am unstoppable, invincible!” He paused, becoming still. “All this and more,” he continued in a piercing whisper. “Beyond my own understanding! I am a mystery enveloped in an enigma, a paradox at the heart of a conundrum. . .the infinite unknowable *now*.” His voice dropped even lower. “I am all and I am nothing.”

“And, I am. . .a liar!” He shook his head, baring his teeth in a wide smile. “Gaia bore me in the time before time. *Ouranos*, the Lord of the Sky, was my sire, and from the stillness and the formlessness came both the clock-spring and the winder. The arrow of all existence points as I will it, and I can curve it upon itself, to the confusion of all. I sit alone upon on the lotus.” He laughed aloud. “But I am not without ambition. From the beginning, I desired dominion. I ruled the universe, and despite pretenders, betrayal, and usurping kin, I have never abdicated my stolen throne. Even now, though my traitor offspring may think me contained, they do not realize with whom they reckon. I am nothing if not patient. In the end, I can never lose, for all-time is my plaything.”



“I HATE HER.” THE WORDS whispered and howled from his countless mouths. They chorused from his limitless tongues, echoing from the not-walls in that place that was no place. Starless, airless—impenetrable and void. . .it was unique, outside the realm of time. Void within a greater void, it was lightless, colder than death, a profound emptiness, a place of madness and pain. Yet to him it was familiar, comforting. . .his cradle-tomb, it swaddled him within its dimensionless depths. “Mother!” he shrieked from his innumerable throats. “I was mad, and now I am beyond all madness.” The chorus fell to a feral growl. “You wounded me, and you healed me, and I hate you. Forever. . .”

New rage rose up in him, and he screamed once more. His uncountable years of madness had ended, but his fury at confinement, his boundless appetite for destruction, and his depthless pain were unchanged. “Why?” he cried, his voice a piteous wail. “How can it be that you still have the greater power?”

The flaw in his prison—the contrived crack through which he had been able to project a fraction of his power—was gone. She had restored the stolen splinter to his mind, and the walls which trammled him were again featureless and smooth. Yet still he felt *something*, a bothersome sort of thing, as though a momentary breath of cool air curled about him, swirling, touching his awareness, teasing him as it invaded the fetid warmth of his cell. He sought its source, spending his energy with manic abandon, but his search was fruitless. Exhaustion at last claimed him, and he slept. Into his sleep there came a dream.



HE WAS YOUNG, AND THE world was bright and new. The time was before his rage was kindled, and before he had fallen, broken by the lightning of Zeus. He played alone, dancing through the wet dew that lay on the green morning grass. The flowers surrounding him nodded and bobbed as the sweet breeze blew through their stems. The morning wore on, and the sun mounted into the sky, rising toward the zenith. The heat of the day came over the land, the flowers withered, and the grass became sere and brown. A great dryness arose within him, but there was nothing to slake it with. He cried out for Mother, for an end to the torment, but she did not respond. The land seemed desolate, an endless desert through which he staggered, seeking succor and shelter. At last, mad with thirst and pain, he collapsed on the hard-baked earth. His eyes closed, and he knew no more.

In his dream, he slept. The scorching sun fell from the sky, and darkness covered him. He awoke, shivering in the bitter cold, and staring up into the starless void. The silence seemed endless. A strange thread of light appeared before his eyes, dancing in the stygian darkness above him. His curiosity piqued, he reached out with one of his many arms. His hand opened, and the tip of one adamantine claw pierced its sinuous core. A thrill, like an electric shock, vibrated through his being. He heard a voice! He listened but could make out no words. He moved his claw, tracing the filament as it pulsed and oscillated before him. "More," he sighed. His voice was a hoarse moan in the darkness. He strained, forcing his awareness into its substance. The voice became clearer. *Hermes?* he thought, at once amazed and shocked. *But he is dead! Destroyed by my own hand!* The voice continued, fading in and out.

"I haf been. . .faw ages. . . awone. . . . Helpful. . . Adwestia's favowite. . . . If onwy she was heah. . ."

Sudden fury rose in him, tearing him from his stupor. He awoke in truth, raging. "Hermes!" he screamed, trembling with pleasure. "And Adrestia! Zeus's jewel, ha-ha!" His myriad jaws yawned wide, and he howled with laughter. "I know not how this can be. . .but I care not!" Joy overflowed in his black heart at the opportunity for mayhem. The first of the hated Olympians he had possessed had been Hermes. It seemed that he was still connected to him. "And this will be enough!" he screamed. "They will all be destroyed. . .maimed! Ripped apart!" His claws clenched as he forced himself to be calm. "*Control,*" he whispered, his voice trembling with suppressed excitement. "The key will be control."



Chapter 4 – Exile



It was not until he had come near the clotted filth of the landing that he was again attacked.

The Dead army had lain in ambush on the banks, and they had almost succeeded in taking him by surprise. He had become aware of them at the last moment and had managed to elude them by poling his craft towards the farther shore. They had followed, surging in prepared boats across the polluted water, pursuing him like an implacable tide. He had raced ahead of them without food or rest. *The rebellion has spread, even to the Keep! If I can reach the Acheron, perhaps I can still escape across her and make for the Living Lands.* Almost blind with fear, he had run before them into the hilly wasteland like a hunted beast, stumbling with weariness, desperate to keep ahead of the horde. At last he dragged himself to the crest of the final mount, breathing hard. Despite the grinding pursuit, his spirits had begun to rise. *I have won!* He knew that an easy downhill mile lay between him and the dock. He had raised his gaze from the rock-strewn path, seeking the dull glint of the river through the gloom, when he was brought up short.

Red-eyes, like a forest of flickering sparks, gleamed from the shadowed vale that lay before him. The Dead soldiers had been toying with him, dividing their forces and letting him waste his energy as they harried him across the dark hills, driving him into their snare. He stood on the highland, staring at their pikemen as they drew closer; their noiseless approach unnerving in the gloom. *Trapped!* he thought, cursing through clenched teeth. *But I shall not surrender to these treasonous wraiths!* He turned his back to Acheron, facing the main body of his foes as they surrounded him. He did not take cover, fearing no arrow. He knew they wanted him alive, else they would have long since filled his chest with shafts and been done with him. He shuddered to think what lay behind that desire. As he gazed down at them, his heart filled with fury. He raised one arm high, clenching his weaponless hand into a fist.

“Come then!” he screamed, sudden madness possessing him. “Come at me, you worthless traitors! Come and meet the wrath of the son of Cronos, and be less for it!” His voice rose to a wordless howl. As if in response, the dark sky flared sun-bright. Wild lightning burst forth from the sullen clouds. The Dead halted, pulling back from him as though he had been responsible for the uncanny

tumult. They cried aloud as blinding blue-white light alternated with impenetrable darkness, and fantastic energies rained down all around them. Then the ground trembled, rolling beneath his feet as though it were a great beast, its muscles writhing. Sudden agony lanced into him as the air filled with a keening, bell-like tone. He clapped his hands over his ears as it rose, louder and louder, till the entire universe seemed drowned by it. The hideous sound continued, its pitch rose beyond hearing, yet it beat upon him till he was blind with pain. His nails tore into his flesh as he tried to quash the fire behind his eyes.

The Dead were not unaffected. All about him they collapsed, dropping their weapons, unable to move or speak. The sound reached a crescendo. The sky above became a vast moiré pattern, bands of depthless blackness and sun-bright white covering the celestial vault with dizzying complexity.

Then it ended. In the deafening silence, he stood once more. The army of the dead lay all about him, felled by the mysterious forces that had ripped through the world. He stumbled forward through the midst of them, moving as fast as he could down to the landing, lest they arise and continue their pursuit.

Ha! he laughed to himself as he set off on Charon's dilapidated skiff. *They will not pursue me in future without caution. . .they must think me powerful beyond measure!*