



LORD OF THE CROOKED PATHS

(including *Master of the Fearful Depths*)

by PATRICK H. ADKINS

“Patrick Adkins is a natural-born storyteller. . . . The man knows how to spin a tale of wonder.”

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“A most entertaining fantasy story, with a great deal of originality.”

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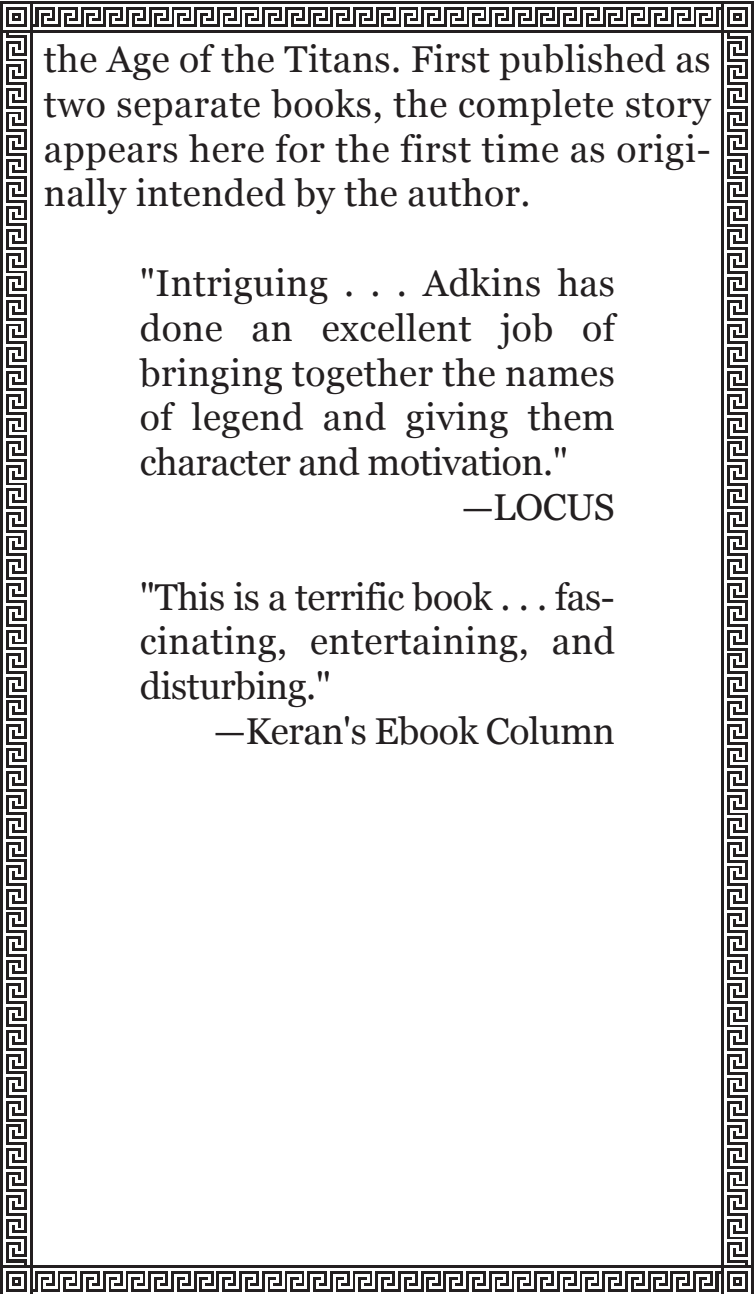
“Patrick Adkins has inherited the dawn-dipped, phoenix-feather quill of Thomas Burnett Swann.”

—Roger Zelazny

For untold ages before the birth of Zeus, Kronos, Lord of the Titans, ruled the world. A giant among giants, the most powerful and revered of all the gods, his unmatched strength and intelligence forged a Golden Age among the Immortals.

But that was long ago. Brooding and increasingly unpredictable, he rules now through fear and unsurpassed cunning, his magnificent palace atop Mt. Olympos rife with whispers of madness and horror. Only Proteus, the shape changer, Proteus's precocious little sister Metis, and her “pet” humans can pierce Kronos's web of deadly intrigue and prevent a disastrous war of the gods from being unleashed across the earth.

A fast, gripping, and sometimes funny tale of adventure, love, and intrigue among the elder gods and goddesses of Greek mythology, *Lord of the Crooked Paths* is also a vivid, authentic reconstruction of a lost mythological era—



the Age of the Titans. First published as two separate books, the complete story appears here for the first time as originally intended by the author.

"Intriguing . . . Adkins has done an excellent job of bringing together the names of legend and giving them character and motivation."

—LOCUS

"This is a terrific book . . . fascinating, entertaining, and disturbing."

—Keran's Ebook Column

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CROOKED PATHS*

(including *Master of the Fearful Depths*)

by

Patrick H. Adkins

A
Strange Excursions
Book

LORD OF THE CROOKED PATHS
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Part I of this work (“Lord of the Titans”) was originally published under the title *Lord of the Crooked Paths* (Ace Books, 1987). Part II was published as *Master of the Fearful Depths* (Ace Books, 1989). This edition contains the complete text of both earlier volumes, which has been corrected and amended by the author.

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All characters in this work are fictional; any resemblance to any real person, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This work has been optimized for screen display.

For Alisha,
my bright-eyed daughter

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Age of the Titans, the elder gods of Greek mythology, was little known even to the ancient Greeks themselves. Our knowledge of that era is still more scanty. The only work of appreciable length dealing directly with it, the *Titanomachia*, failed to survive the collapse of classical civilization. What we know of the Titans is drawn from short summaries in the *Theogony* of Hesiod and the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus, and from brief references that must be sifted from works devoted to other, often nonmythological, subjects.

Although intended as a work of popular fiction, *Lord of the Crooked Paths* is based upon extensive mythological research. My purpose has been to shape a new, fictional story around these scattered fragments, many of which are esoteric and no longer have a true story context of their own. In the process I have attempted to form a coherent fantasy world from the sometimes confusing and contradictory elements of Greek mythology. Like the historical novelist, I have felt free to pick and choose among conflicting evidence, expand upon tantalizing hints that lack full documentation, and extrapolate freely

within the established confines of my subject. Nevertheless, accuracy of mythological detail has been my goal, and I have sought to remain faithful to classical authority throughout.

The reader's forbearance is requested for any seeming contradictions of the mythology of the Age of Zeus. The gods willing, these will be resolved in future volumes. Only one such point need be mentioned here. The Muses are generally said to be the daughters of Zeus and the Titaness Mnemosyne (Memory), a genesis that is more allegory than myth. For this reason and others, I have overruled both Homer and Hesiod in favor of the nearly as ancient testimony of Mimnermus and Alcman, who deem them the children of Ouranos and Gaia.

The nature and manner of the gods are based primarily on Homer, while the milieu of Kronos and the intricacies of divine relationships are drawn principally from Hesiod. Latin authors have been consulted only to elucidate matters left unclear by the Greeks. The title is loosely derived from the Homeric epithet *Kronos anakulometes*. With a single exception the names of the gods have been directly transliterated from the Greek; as an aid to the reader, however, I have partly Latinized Krios to Crios, that he might not so easily be confused with Koios, his brother.

—Patrick H. Adkins

Book I

LORD OF THE TITANS

1

“Come, Kalliope! Melpomene—Thalia, come on!” Metis scowled, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for the three Muses to catch up with her and Lachesis.

For more than half an hour the five goddesses had been making their way across rugged mountains and rambling foothills, walking with an ease and suppleness that belied their towering size. They seemed to glide over the rocky terrain and between the huge fir trees of the mountain forests. When the trees grew too close together, they bent them aside. They drew up the hems of their chitons to step lightly across rivers and gaping chasms.

For the Muses the journey was a lark; the divine maidens traipsed along, singing and bantering among themselves. The young goddess Metis, no longer quite a child but not yet a youth, rushed impetuously ahead while Lachesis, stately and somber as ever, usually brought up the rear.

“Can’t you three come on?” Metis demanded, her dark curls flouncing as she stamped her foot.

Lachesis, wrapped in her own thoughts and walking at a steady pace, had gotten ahead of the others and finally slowed to a stop. “Is something wrong?” she called down, her voice not quite as lackadaisical as usual.

Melpomene shook her head and held up a hand to silence them. Metis shrugged in resignation and began to skip back down the path. A few moments later Lachesis followed her.

Thalia danced toward them as they reached the group. “Quiet, child, do try to hold your tongue,” she sang without the slightest hesitation, caressing Metis’s cheek with her open hand; “a song is not a song, you know, until that song is sung!” She twirled gracefully away, continuing to sing as though there had been no interruption.

Metis folded her arms across her chest and waited with obvious impatience. Finally Thalia completed her last verse, swept into a pirouette, and ended with a deep bow. Kalliope and Melpomene, both laughing, applauded with enthusiasm.

Metis planted her hands firmly on her narrow hips as she turned toward Melpomene. “You promised to show us something new and interesting,” she said. “You’re supposed to be leading us

to it, but I'm always in the lead. And I don't even know where we're going!"

Thalia answered before her sister could. "You lead, rash child, because your feet outpace your brain. A slower pace—"

"You brought your basket," Melpomene interrupted, smiling indulgently. "If we walk too leisurely, you can distract yourself among the plants that grow beside the path."

Metis shook her head vigorously. "You're too slow. You keep stopping to talk and dance—and sing your untrue songs."

"What's this?" Thalia asked, turning to her sisters in exaggerated surprise. "Untrue songs, indeed! The child thinks we lie."

"All those things you sing about—they never really happened," Metis said. "You just make them up."

"Not at all," Kalliope explained patiently. "You're simply too young to understand. We only tell *true* lies."

"True lies?" Metis grimaced. "How can you tell true—?"

Melpomene was holding up her hands to quiet them. "No more, you three. We'll walk faster, and Metis, you may search for plants."

Metis clutched her large basket against her midriff. "I *always* look for unusual plants when I

walk in the woods. I have been looking. I haven't found any."

"And we *always* dance and sing in the woods," Thalia said, patting the child's head.

They began walking again, Melpomene studying the crest of the high, rounded hill.

"Is it much farther?" Metis asked.

"Hush," Thalia said, leaning toward her confidentially. "You'll only embarrass Melpomene. She's lost, you know."

Now Kalliope drew toward them, speaking in a mock whisper intended for Melpomene to hear. "Tell the child the truth, sister. Melpomene does this all the time. She says, 'Come see what I have found'—won't tell you what it is, of course, to keep your interest up—and leads you on a merry chase for hours stacked on end. It makes a fine, droll tale to tell that night."

"I think the place is near," Melpomene said, pointedly ignoring their conversation. "We must be quiet now, or risk discovery. We mustn't scare them away."

"Ah, *discovery*," Thalia whispered. "That certainly lends an air of mystery to the affair. Builds suspense, too."

"*Who?*" Metis demanded. "Who are you talking about? Tell me!"

Melpomene shook her head. "You must be

patient. I promised you something new, and I won't break my promise. I think you'll find it interesting."

"She's got such a knack for suspense," Thalia observed, still pretending to whisper.

"Whatever this mysterious thing is, at least tell us a little," Kalliope said. "When did you find it?"

"Yesterday afternoon, on my way back from Mount Helikon."

"Well, it can't be all that interesting," Thalia said, "or she could never have kept it a secret this long."

Melpomene gave them her most tight-lipped smile. They had reached the top of the hill. All around them stark peaks and gaping canyons bespoke the unimaginable age of their world; at the same time laughing streams and virgin forest proclaimed its eternal youth. Staring out across the treetops, Melpomene scanned the smaller hills and valleys below, teeming with life. A lone red deer came down from a hillside forest, while a saber-tooth stalked it from the concealment of large rocks.

Beyond the farther hills began the moist expanse of the Boiotian plain, most of which was still covered by early morning fog. Near its edge herds of antelope and bison had begun to graze. Barely visible, Lake Kopais glinted dull blue in the distance.

“Yes, I’m right,” Melpomene announced. “We aren’t far now.”

She pointed off to the left, where jagged limestone hills descended toward the plain. A crystalline stream gleamed among the rocks. On its way to the lake it broadened, becoming brown and shallow as it crossed a long, narrow glade rimmed by ash and oak trees.

“Is that where we’re going?” Thalia demanded. “Well, if you weren’t lost, you certainly took the most roundabout route you could find.”

“I wanted to avoid crossing the plain. If we were seen—”

“She *was* lost!” Thalia cried, dancing around her sister.

“I was *not*,” Melpomene protested, for the first time becoming genuinely annoyed at Thalia’s playfulness. “I didn’t want to cross the plain, and I didn’t know the most direct way here.”

“That’s what I said—*you were lost!*”

Melpomene folded her arms across her breasts and refrained from answering. It took only a few moments, however, for her to regain her normal, indulgent good nature. “I’d love to bicker the rest of the morning, dear sister, but we should start walking toward those trees. From here on we must be very quiet—I know you’ll find that a chore, Thalia—and we must avoid being seen.”

Thalia grinned broadly, but before she could reply, her sister Kalliope took her by the arm and guided her in the direction Melpomene had indicated.

The goddesses made their way down the rocky slope. By following the valleys and passes they managed to come to the plain at a point not very far from the glade. A pride of lions, grunting their disapproval at the appearance of the towering maidens, retreated at their approach.

Melpomene brought the goddesses to a halt at the edge of an open area. She held Metis back to keep her from venturing too far into the open, then drew concealing fog from the plain. It crept toward them in drifting wisps at first, then in slow, billowing waves. The fog grew thicker, layer upon layer, completely obscuring the area they must cross.

Hand in hand, Melpomene led them forward until they crouched behind the concealment of the tall, thick trees that rimmed the glade. She dismissed the fog and signaled to the other goddesses. Following her example, they cautiously parted the branches to peer through the foliage.

Metis could see nothing. To gain a better view she threw herself on the ground and crawled forward between the boles of the trees. Before her lay the mud bank of a stream. All along it, at irregular

intervals, vaguely oval mounds protruded from the water and extended onto the shore.

Metis edged forward on her elbows, making as little noise as she could. The mounds glistened where the sunlight struck the translucent slime that coated them, and they heaved with slow, rhythmic movements. She watched in puzzled fascination for more than a minute before she became aware of the creatures across the stream.

They were tiny, but perfectly formed—not much bigger than the hand of a goddess. Ten or fifteen of them were visible, all dirty, but some caked with mud from head to foot. Much of their bodies was covered with coarse, sparse hair, and in places the hair sprouted in thick patches.

Now Metis realized that there were others on her side of the stream. Some were cracking open acorns and eating them. A few seemed to be playing. One began making high-pitched, piping cries as another chased it.

Metis backed out from between the trees to join the other goddesses.

“Well,” Melpomene asked, whispering softly, “what do you think of this strange new thing? An interesting discovery, are they not?”

“What does it mean?” Metis asked. “Except for being so tiny, they look exactly like us.”

Melpomene smiled despite herself. “Well, no—

not *exactly* like us. As far as I can tell, all of them are male.”

“And they’re filthy,” Kalliope said. “They have ugly hair all over their bodies, and they smell dreadful. I can smell them from here.”

“Are they really little?” Metis asked. “Is that their natural size?”

“I suppose so. They were the same size yesterday, when I first saw them.”

Thalia was studying them, her brows contracted in thought. “Dirty, smelly little gods,” she said finally, turning back toward the others.

“I think they’re cute,” Metis objected.

“Filthy, hairy little creatures formed in the image of the immortal gods. Grotesque little godlings, caricatures of the gods—*mockeries* of the gods!” Thalia’s eyes brightened, her lips spreading into an enormous grin. “And not a female among them. It’s wonderful! It’s hilarious!”

Metis was pouting. “I still say they’re cute,” she insisted. “All they need is a good bath.”

“Look at the one over there,” Thalia continued, pointing. “See how he walks, watching the ground. He looks like Crios, and the one next to him could be Koios! Oh, this is a marvelous joke. The gods will never live it down.”

“There’s something . . . something about them.” Lachesis said thoughtfully.

“Indeed there is—their odor!” Thalia cried, unable to control her laughter.

“Quiet,” Melpomene warned. “They’ll hear us. Keep your voices low.”

One of the creatures was wandering toward them in search of acorns. Even as Melpomene spoke it looked up through an opening in the concealing leaves and branches. Its eyes grew very round and it began to cry out in shrill, inarticulate sounds. Kalliope reached for it between the trees. The creature stumbled backward, falling in its effort to escape her, and she picked it up by the feet.

At its first cry the others of its kind disappeared among the rocks and trees and bushes. Soon not one remained in sight.

Melpomene rose to her full height and the other goddesses stood up around her, gathering in close to Kalliope to look at the specimen she had captured. It wriggled like a fish held by the tail, but as soon as it noticed their huge, peering faces, it became completely limp.

For nearly a full minute Melpomene stared at it, her head arched to one side. Finally she said, “*Man.*”

Kalliope and Thalia nodded their immediate agreement.

“What?” Metis asked. “What did you say?”

“This is a *man*,” the Muse explained. “That’s

what the creature is called. Usually we know the right word immediately, without having to think about it. This time it took a bit longer.”

Lachesis repeated the word slowly as she stared at the peculiar *man*, which still dangled upside down from Kalliope’s fingers. “It’s very puny. Puny and helpless,” she said.

“Let me hold it,” Metis pleaded.

Kalliope gently lowered the man into her outstretched hands. Now Lachesis stood beside the child, searching the tiny form with her eyes. Melpomene pushed her way between the trees, and the others followed out to the bank of the stream. They stopped beside one of the mounds. A section of mud had crumbled away near the top. Through the jagged opening they could see a diminutive, godlike mouth. It gurgled and sucked air.

“This man,” Metis said, “is it a god? I mean, is it a little god or . . . or . . . only an animal in the shape of a god?”

Melpomene looked down at the tiny form in the child’s hands. “It’s hard to imagine that they could truly be gods,” she said. “They make me feel sad, somehow.”

“Sad? Why so?” Kalliope asked.

“They’re such pitiful creatures. Look at them. Wretched little things . . . shaped like us, but born of slime.”

“They’re our brothers,” Kalliope said. “After all, we too are children of the earth.”

Melpomene smiled wanly. “A poor joke, sister, and a cruel one. By that logic the grass and the trees and the insects are our brothers and sisters also.”

“They are,” Kalliope insisted. “Less fortunate than we, but still kin, even if born of mud and slime. Poorly born, these peculiar little creatures may yet prove worthy.”

Melpomene looked doubtful.

“Look at this one,” Kalliope continued, gesturing toward the creature Metis was holding. “He has a good face, handsome under the grime. Notice his chin and forehead—the nose too. All well shaped, not without a touch of nobility about them. Perhaps they are gods. It’s too soon to say.”

They moved slowly up the long, narrow glade. Across the stream little heads appeared, wide eyes following them.

“They’re watching us,” Metis said. “They’re curious. That means they’re smart.”

A bittersweet smile touched Melpomene’s lips. “So much the worse, if they do have any intelligence.”

“Why?” Lachesis asked.

“They’ll compare themselves with us. They’ll envy us and aim too high. They’ll smolder with

resentment, and finally they'll hate us, when the futility of their efforts starts to crush them. —Oh, pay no attention to me," she said suddenly. "I don't know what's wrong. My mood has turned terribly glum."

The mounds grew in all sizes. Some were little larger than acorns; others were as big as the full-grown men watching from the trees. Many of the largest mounds had the mud broken away in places from the violent struggles of the creatures within, which seemed to be trying to extricate themselves.

"I think you're wrong," Kalliope said. "None of that matters. Even beings as wretched as these can be noble, if they strive." There was a peculiar quaver in her voice.

"But without hope of success . . . ?"

"It doesn't matter," Kalliope insisted, pointing first toward one of the mounds and then across the stream.

"Yesterday they were struggling to birth themselves from these mud and slime cocoons. Today they're playing in the wind and sunshine. Who may say what they'll be capable of tomorrow?"

Metis was absorbed in the man cuddled against her breast and not listening to their conversation. "May we take this one back with us?" she asked.

It took Melpomene a moment to cast off her sad

thoughts. "I think not, Metis . . . not without Lord Kronos's permission."

"You'd best put him down now," Kalliope told her. She lifted the man gently from Metis's hands and set him on the ground near the stream.

The goddesses continued walking, a pace or two at a time, each now sunk in her own thoughts. Metis hung back, waiting until none of them was looking in her direction. Then she scooped up the man's still limp body and hurriedly concealed it within her basket. As she turned to follow her companions, she looked up to find Thalia grinning at her. The older goddess had observed her surreptitious disobedience but made no effort to inform the others.

"Why do you suppose they've come into existence now, so late?" Lachesis asked.

"Does there have to be a reason?" Thalia said.

The creatures scurried along the opposite bank, behind the trees and brush. Here and there eyes and heads were visible.

"They're so curious," Metis said. "Why don't we try to make friends with them?"

"Just how do you propose we do that?" Thalia asked.

Metis considered for a moment. "You could sing for them. Even animals love your singing. I'm sure these tiny gods will. Please sing for them."

The Muses consulted.

“Dance for them too,” Metis begged.

“What shall we sing?” Melpomene asked.

“A lullaby. Sing a gentle, soft lullaby.”

Metis and Lachesis drew back to make room. Melpomene began to sing with a voice like the wind whistling through canyons and rustling among forest leaves. Her sisters danced with the flowing grace of autumn leaves lapped by the breeze.

Soon tiny heads appeared among the foliage on every side. Hairy, mud-streaked bodies edged forward, until all around the goddesses men stood watching and listening in entranced wonder.

2

Proteus, the shape changer, awoke suddenly, listening. The singing was real, though distant. It had insinuated itself into his dream, merging there with the slow, rhythmic caress of the tide upon the rocky shore of a shaded cove.

He arose slowly, disentangling himself from the arms of the sleeping naiad beside him. She sighed softly at his touch, moistening her parted lips and curling into a more comfortable position. During the night she had shared her cloak with him. As he bent to tuck it carefully around her slender body, he experienced once again the disconcerting sensation he had felt last night—a sort of false memory, as though he had done this before.

Rising, he made his way out of the dimness of the grotto. Outside he paused briefly to listen, then clambered partway up the steep rock wall that partially surrounded the narrow valley. Small rocks dislodged beneath his huge feet, and more than once during the short ascent he was

forced to shift his weight unexpectedly from left to right or from foot to hand. In his own environment, the sure, powerful movements of his supple muscles propelled him through the ocean depths with speed and grace no fish could equal. Here, where everything seemed to be rocky cliff or rock-strewn valley, the ocean god felt distinctly out of place.

Raising his eyes cautiously above the rim of the valley, he peered out across the plain in the direction from which the singing came. He scrutinized the goddesses he saw in the distance, then, looking more closely, became aware of the small, god-like creatures partially hidden by the foliage. The strange sense of familiarity came again, even more strongly. Drawing back a little, he passed his fingers through his thick black hair.

A hand touched his arm and he turned to find the naiad beside him. She had followed him from the grotto.

“Good morning, my lord.” She brushed strands of long brown hair away from her face. Her mouth had a pleasant smile but her eyes kept flitting away from him.

“Good morning,” he answered, trying to shake off the odd feeling that had claimed him. “You climb very quietly.”

She looked out over the valley wall rather than

directly at him, finding herself peculiarly flustered at the sight of his smooth, undraped body. "I love to listen to them," she said after an awkward silence. "Sometimes I stay for days near Mount Helikon, just to hear them sing."

"Mount Helikon? You know them?"

"Of course. Everyone knows the Black-Haired Nine." She hesitated. "Pardon, my lord—you must not be from this region."

"I've been away a long time," he said, almost to himself.

It was his eyes, she decided, that hinted of age. He was tall, neither slender nor bulky, but with sleek muscles that rippled beneath his skin with each slightest movement.

"They are ladies of Olympos," she continued, her glancing eyes absorbing every detail of him. "Those who are singing are three of the nine Muses and—"

"The child," he interrupted, "is she a daughter of Okeanos?"

"I don't know her, my lord." His face was clean-lined, with a high forehead and squared chin. He looked even more handsome now than in the silver moonlight of the night before. "I am Nalassa. What is your name, my lord?"

He had turned again to look toward the Muses. "What are the little creatures?"

“I don’t know, my lord. I’ve never seen them before.”

Small beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he looked back at her.

“You are . . . you are an old one?” Her entire expression radiated keen interest.

She could see amusement lurking in his eyes as he wiped away the perspiration. “Yes,” he said, “and you must be a very young one.”

She stiffened slightly at his remark, which might have been a mild rebuke. His smile was very attractive, though, and she forgave him almost immediately. She kept talking to relieve her self-conscious agitation. “You must have traveled far. You slept soundly last night.”

He nodded, his smile widening into a grin. “Quite far, especially after chasing you.”

This time the naiad blushed vigorously. She turned her back on him and scrambled back down to the valley floor. She stopped there, hesitating, then turned angrily to confront him. “You would never have caught me among the rocks—if I hadn’t wanted you to!”

Probably she expected him to follow her down, or at least to turn in her direction. Instead when she looked back she found him staring out in the direction of the Muses.

As she watched, his hands moved one at a time

from their holds on the rock face of the cliff to clutch his head. He swayed, then tumbled backward. With a cry of surprise she ran toward him. He lay on his back, still clutching his head. His teeth were gritted and his face contorted in pain. She threw herself down on her knees beside him.

“What is it, my lord? What’s wrong? What can I do? How can I help you?”

His face began to change first, the features blurring and shimmering. She drew back as his entire form began to alter. The flesh started to run and shift, flowing like molten wax. As she watched in horror, an amorphous monster writhed upon the ground; but no sooner had the form become distinct and recognizable than it began to change again.

His mouth, which was no longer exactly a mouth, choked out sounds. She forced herself to lean over him, trying to understand the strange words. Some were clear and plainly audible, but many were slurred beyond recognition. Interspersed with the garbled words were groans and sobs and weird, slobbering sounds.

More than five minutes passed while his body writhed in continual metamorphosis. Despite her fear the naiad kneeled beside him the entire time, ready to assist in any way she could. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the seizure passed.

The god's body returned to its usual shape, the panicked breathing slowed and became normal. Finally Proteus was himself again. He stared calmly up into her face.

"Are you better now?" she asked, more upset than he. "Shall I bring you water?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry if I frightened you. That doesn't happen often, but when it does . . . well, there isn't anything I can do about it.

She was still kneeling beside him. She held his arm to steady him as he sat up.

"Did I speak?"

She nodded, her eyes very wide.

"What did I say? You must tell me the exact words."

She recoiled a little at his forcefulness. "I heard you, my lord, but I didn't understand. You kept changing. You would say a few words that I could understand, and then the rest . . . the rest I could not. Don't you know what you said?"

He shook his head. "I never remember afterward. You must try to remember. It's very important."

Nalassa settled on her haunches, pleased at whatever opportunity gave her his attention. "They were strange words, my lord—frightening, too, some of them. But it's very hard to remember, since they meant nothing to me."

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. "What is your name?"

"I am Nalassa, daughter of the river god Asopos."

"Nalassa, please try."

She nodded slowly, staring at the ground in front of them. "You still have not told me *your* name."

"I am Proteus, son of Okeanos."

"Lord Proteus!" Her expression mixed surprise and befuddlement. "You are indeed an old one. Pardon, my lord—" She rose to her feet and bowed her head slightly toward him.

Proteus smiled despite himself.

"I'll tell you all I can, Lord Proteus."

He was grinning. "Good. Please do, but sit back down. You make me uncomfortable."

Her brows drew together in concentration. "Change," she said slowly. "You used that word . . . *change follows change*—that was one of the things you said. And you said something about the Titans—not just them, but all the gods, I think."

"What about the Titans?"

"*Titan against Titan*," she said slowly. "*Titan against Titan, god against god*. And there was something about . . . about . . . I remember! *Change follows change—when god devours god*."

She looked up at him. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. What else?”

“Power, force . . . *Power unleashed, force undreamt*—something like that.”

“Please keep trying to remember.”

“Something about birds . . .”

“What kind of birds?”

The naiad frowned, seeking the exact words. “*The gull . . . the gull shall—weep.*” She moistened her lips. “*The eagle . . . the eagle cease to soar . . . when . . . when . . .* This is it—*when the white mare rears her hooves and the broken willow pierces their hearts.* You said that many times. It’s very odd.”

Proteus seemed lost in thought for some moments. Finally he looked up. “What else, Nalassa?”

She shook her head abruptly. “That’s all I can recall. What does it mean, Lord Proteus?”

“I’m not sure.”

She was studying his face. “Proteus,” she said, almost to herself. “Lord Proteus, the Prophetic One—so they call you. I’ve been trying to remember what I had heard of you, and now I have. They say you know the future.”

He rose to his feet and without looking at her climbed the steep cliff to stare out across the

plain. She rose to join him, but he climbed back down almost immediately.

“The goddesses have left, and it is time for me to go too.”

“You didn’t answer, my lord. Do you know the future? Those strange words, do they tell of what is to be?”

He shrugged. “I no more know the future than you do.”

“No, but you speak the future. That must be what they meant when they called you the Prophetic One. You fall down and begin to change shapes, and the words that come from your mouth tell what will be.”

He had begun to walk down the valley. Now he paused and looked back at her. “The morning is growing late, and I have far to travel. If you want to continue talking, you’ll have to walk with me.”

She broke into a broad grin and began self-consciously arranging her disarrayed hair. “If my lord wishes, I will accompany him.”

From the grotto she recovered her cloak. She threw it around her shoulders and trotted back toward him. They made their way down the narrow valley, bending aside the small trees and stepping over brush and bushes. A young deer scampered away at their approach, almost from under their feet.

“Tell me of Olympos, Nalassa.”

She laughed. “You, one of the greater gods, know far more of Olympos than would a naiad. I spend most of my time with my sisters, or by myself in the forests. I seldom see anyone other than my family. Olympos! Why, I’ve only been there once, and that was years ago, with my father—and for only a brief visit.”

“Come, Nalassa, you’re not as provincial as that. You recognized the Muses. Rumor travels fast and far.”

“I’ve heard rumors, that’s true—but my mother always says that it is foolish to believe them. Still, the rumors are interesting, and it’s interesting to hear of the doings of the Titans and the other gods. Just now everyone is talking about the marriage of Lord Crios to Lady Eurybie. They say it is to be held not on Olympos, but in the Kingdom of Lord Nereus, the sea god. Is that why you’ve come? To go to the wedding? They say it will be wonderfully fancy—”

“No,” he replied, “but I know about the wedding. What else is said?”

She stopped walking and turned to look carefully at him. “I think you have something in mind, my lord. What do you want to know? Why not just ask, rather than waiting for me to stumble on it?”

“You’re pouting. Such seriousness is unnatural to your features.”

She turned suddenly and made a particularly grotesque face at him. “I’m not at all sure I like you,” she said, and began walking ahead of him.

For some time she walked rapidly, without looking back. She wished that she had run harder and faster the night before, that she had taken her first opportunity this morning to slip away, perhaps to find her father and bring him back to punish the insolent ocean god. God of fishes, she thought.

Her feet were beginning to hurt and she found a large outcropping of rock to sit on. She rubbed her feet, glancing up every few seconds to watch him as he approached. Part of her wanted to dislike him, if only because he gave her so little attention, but she found herself fascinated by the supple movements of his perfect body as he picked his way among the huge boulders that separated them. The naturalness of movement and perfect symmetry of the bronzed form drew her eyes to it again and again. As he came nearer, the sun picked out blue tints in his hair.

“Why are you tanned?” she asked as he reached her. “Why aren’t you milky white, like a fish, from swimming around under the ocean all the time?”

“Too many afternoon naps on the beach, I guess.” He gave her a wry smile.

They continued walking but still without much conversation. Despite herself she kept going over in her mind the events of the night before. Her eyes kept wandering to his body, until she felt herself beginning to blush. Of course the gods often abandoned clothing of any sort, displaying their male bodies with an openness and naturalness unthinkable to a goddess. Still, Nalassa could not help feeling that she was staring overmuch.

At last they came to a wide gulf that opened into the Aegean through a narrow strait. She sat on a low hill, her toes in the sand.

“Well, Nalassa,” he said, “I must leave you now.”

“You’re going to Olympos?”

He seemed not to want to answer, but finally nodded.

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Nalassa. I wish you well.”

As she watched he ran toward the shore and dived far out into the glistening blue water. Without intending to, she rose and walked a few steps after him, watching for him to surface.

He came up out of the depths like a dolphin, white spray following him, then disappeared again. When he surfaced the second time he was much farther out. He waved at her, and she found

herself waving back excitedly. She watched until he was out of sight, then returned to sit on the small hill, brushing her feet back and forth across the sand.

After a while she drew her knees up under her chin. The same thoughts ran through her mind. He was thoughtless and arrogant, not really concerned with her at all. She should be glad to see him go back to his ugly fish. She should have run faster; she shouldn't have let him catch her. She had never let anyone else catch her. But she kept remembering the strength of his arms around her, the taste of his mouth on hers, the heat of his body and the rippling of his smooth, vibrant muscles.

Finally she stood up, threw her cloak over her shoulders and straightened her tunic. She began walking toward the north.

"Why shouldn't I visit Mount Olympos if I want to?" she asked herself out loud.

3

“I told you,” Metis said as she adjusted makeshift clothing around the miniature, shivering god that the Muses called a man. “I found him near a stream, with many others of his kind.”

Prometheus and Epimetheus gathered around her as she struggled to form the rectangle of cloth into a crude chiton. The man, recovered from his torpor but dazed by the events of the day, sat limply upon Metis’s bed, allowing her huge fingers to manipulate him as necessary to make the clothing fit.

Metis had returned with the four goddesses to the palace of Kronos on Mount Olympos. Almost as soon as they reentered the massive walls, she made her way to her own room within the chambers of her sister Klymene.

Klymene was perhaps the loveliest of the many lovely daughters of the Titan Okeanos. If she lacked anything of beauty, she more than compensated for it through the charm of her manner

and the sweetness of her disposition. She had married Iapetos, her Titan uncle, and gone to live with him in his brother's palace on Olympos, where she bore four children. Atlas, the eldest, was now fully grown and occupied an apartment of his own. Prometheus and Epimetheus were nearly the same age as Metis—physically and mentally if not chronologically, for the gods do not mature at a consistent rate—while Menoitios still suckled at his mother's breast.

Klymene had found herself longing for the companionship of her sisters and invited some of them to come to Olympos as her guests. Philyra, unmarried and unattached, accepted, and the youthful Metis begged to be allowed to go with her. The two Okeanids joined the household of Iapetos.

Prometheus and Epimetheus had been playing in the atrium, the spacious entrance hall and main room of the apartment. When Metis did not soon reappear from her room after returning from her outing, they followed her there. They found her drying the tiny god-creature after giving it a bath.

“You *will* keep your promise, won't you?” Metis continued as she finished adjusting the miniature chiton and prepared to stitch its edges. “You won't tell anyone about him? You promised.”

“We won’t tell,” Prometheus assured her, leaning forward in his squatting position so that he could more clearly view the creature. “He does look like a god, all cleaned up and dressed. You can’t see all the hair on his body. Why is he shivering so?”

The man had partially revived during his bath, trying vainly to escape from the bowl in which Metis had deposited him. Since then he had for the most part remained very still, clutching his arms across his chest. His skin was beginning to show almost a blue tint.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s cold.” Metis jumped up and ran across the room to one of the oaken chests in which garments of every sort were stored. She found what she was looking for and returned with an odd-shaped fur and a sharp knife. “This should be warm enough.” Drawing the small dagger from its sheath, she fell to work cutting and shaping a tiny cloak from the fur.

“But why does he look like a god?” Prometheus asked as she worked.

“What do you want him to look like? A bird?” Epimetheus said, laughing. “Then he’d be a bird and not a tiny god.”

“He’s a *man*,” Metis said. “Melpomene said that’s what he is.”

“But why does he look like a god?” Prometheus persisted. “Nobody’s ever seen a god so tiny.”

Metis fitted the little cloak around the creature and held him in her hands to warm him. "I don't have anything small enough to use as a clasp at the cloak's neck."

"You could sew it," Epimetheus suggested. "You'd have to leave the neck opening big enough for his head to slip through."

"I guess that's what I'll do." She lifted the fur back off the man and handed him to Prometheus. "Keep him warm while I finish this."

Prometheus grinned as he took the man in his hands.

Epimetheus scowled. "Let me hold him too."

"In a while," his brother said, gently stroking the creature. "I can't help thinking it means something."

"What means something?" Epimetheus asked.

"That they look like us! What else have I been talking about?"

"I don't know. You're always talking about peculiar things. I'd never have time to think about anything myself if I always listened to you."

"Do you think Lord Kronos would let me keep him?" Metis interrupted, looking up from her sewing.

"I don't know why he shouldn't," Prometheus said.

"Lord Kronos might want to exterminate all of

them,” Epimetheus said. “Father says it was Lord Kronos who made the other gods hunt down and kill all the monsters.”

“They’re not all dead,” Prometheus objected. “Lord Hyperion still goes hunting for monsters to kill.”

“He just likes to be away by himself,” Epimetheus said. “He never finds any. They were all killed years ago.”

“You don’t know that. He may not have found the last of them yet.”

“Nobody’s found a monster in years. In ages. They’re all dead,” Epimetheus insisted.

“You don’t know that. New ones could be born anytime, just like the men Metis saw.”

“But what’s this have to do with the men?” Metis asked. “Why should Lord Kronos want to kill them? They aren’t monsters.”

“Lord Kronos might consider them monsters,” Epimetheus said. “He might kill them because they look so much like gods, but aren’t gods.”

“You don’t know they aren’t gods,” Metis said firmly. “They may be *little* gods.”

“Then why do they stay little? Why doesn’t this one make himself big?”

“Maybe he doesn’t know how. He’s only a few days old.” Prometheus was still holding the man against his chest to warm him. “He’s starting to

look around a little," he said. "He's moving a lot more."

The man had indeed become more active. The bluish tint had left his skin and he was craning his head in every direction to observe the room and his enormous captors. He seemed to be trying to escape Prometheus's restraining fingers.

Metis had just finished stitching the little cloak together near the neck. She gently retrieved the creature, adjusted the cloak around it, and set it down on the floor. It took the man a few seconds to become steady enough to walk. The youthful gods watched quietly as he took a few hesitant steps. As his confidence increased, the man began cautiously to explore the room. At first the unfamiliar clothing impeded his progress, and two or three times he seemed to be in the process of ridding himself of the encumbrance, but each time Metis stopped him.

From outside Metis's room the children heard voices. Klymene and Philyra, who had been elsewhere in the apartment, were coming toward the room.

Metis swooped up the man and thrust him into her basket, which rested upon her bed. She turned to face the door, shielding the basket from view with her body.

A perfunctory knock was almost immediately

followed by the door opening wide. Klymene stood in the doorway, Philyra just behind her.

“So here you are,” Klymene began, but her smile faded quickly to an expression of puzzlement as her eyes took in the room and its occupants. The room was exactly what one would fear from a child of Metis’s age. Articles of every description lay scattered about it. Metis’s herb collection, officially consigned to the ledge of the gallery just outside, had spread to every corner.

Philyra, who felt especially responsible for overseeing her sister’s conduct, let out a sigh of exasperation. Klymene, however, seemed more interested in the guilty expressions of the children. A look of suspicion, not unmixed with amusement, came over her face as she moved into the room.

“You left your toys scattered all over the atrium,” she began. “I was going to tell you to pick them up before your father gets home. First, though, I’d like to know what you three have been up to.”

The children maintained stony silence as she approached them. A quick glance disclosed the remnants of fur and cloth left lying on the floor near the bed, along with the thread Metis had used in her sewing. She stopped directly in front of the young goddess.

“You seem strangely stationary for a child with your energetic temperament. Is there something behind you I shouldn’t see?”

Metis began to shake her head but nodded instead. She stepped reluctantly aside. Klymene looked at the basket, then back at her young sister. Puzzled, she picked it up and flipped back the lid. As she looked inside she let out a gasp, almost dropping the basket.

“It’s a *man*,” Epimetheus said.

“Metis found it in the forest,” Prometheus added.

Recovered from her surprise, Klymene peered into the basket again. Philyra joined her. Before long the man had again been freed and was attempting to walk upon the too yielding surface of the bed.

Metis had to relate again the story of her morning adventure. “Please don’t tell anyone I have him,” she begged in conclusion. “Lord Kronos might not let me keep him.”

Philyra turned to Klymene. “Is that true? Would Lord Kronos disapprove of this odd creature being kept here?”

Klymene shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll ask Iapetos. I don’t see why there should be any difficulty, but he’ll know for sure. In the meantime, Metis, keep him out of sight and trouble.”

“Isn’t he cute?” Metis asked, now holding the struggling creature against her breast.

“I suppose so,” Philyra said without assurance in her voice.

“In a disturbing way,” Klymene said.

“Why do you think he looks like us, Mother?” Prometheus asked.

Klymene was stopped short by his question. His questions often had that effect on her. She stared into the handsome face and unknowable eyes of her son, reaching reflexively to brush back the locks of dark hair that covered his forehead.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I do know that those toys are still waiting to be picked up.”

Reluctantly Prometheus and Epimetheus began walking toward the atrium.

“Aren’t you going to help them?” Philyra asked Metis.

“It’s all right,” Prometheus called back from the doorway. “It’s our mess. She didn’t even play with the toys today.”

As soon as the others had left, Philyra took Metis by the hand and led her toward the bed. They sat side by side.

“Metis,” she said, trying to make her voice as indulgent as possible, “I thought we had an understanding between us.”

“You mean about the room?” Metis asked. “I’ll clean it up.”

“Yes, about the room, but also about this creature. While we’re here, you’re my responsibility. If you get into trouble, it’s my fault. Mother was very clear that I should keep careful watch over you.”

Metis’s lips were pressed together and her eyes cast down.

“And your actions reflect not only on me, but on Klymene too.”

“I’ll stay out of trouble,” Metis said softly, not looking up.

There were noises from the atrium, heavy knocks followed by a deep, masculine voice. Philyra rose and walked to the door to listen. After a moment she disappeared down the hall, only to reappear a few moments later.

“It’s Lord Kronos!” she whispered emphatically.

4

Kronos, Lord of the Titans and King of the Gods, stood just inside the doorway as Metis reached the atrium. She had paused only long enough to safely deposit the man within her basket, then followed Philyra back to the main room of the apartment.

He was the largest of all the gods, a giant among giants—tall and very broad-chested, with enormous shoulders and biceps that bulged even at rest. His only clothing was a golden rectangle of cloth wound about his waist and pinned by a simple gold fibula. Thick black hair hung like a mane nearly to his shoulders, merging in places with the curls of his full beard.

“Pardon, Lady Klymene,” he was saying as Metis and Philyra edged slowly from the hall into the atrium. “I came in search of your husband, Lord Iapetos. Since he has not yet returned . . .” As he spoke his large, gray eyes relentlessly roamed the room, merely glancing over the divine inhabitants but scrutinizing the less visible

corners and the closed and opened doors leading to other chambers. The look was not furtive; there was nothing fearful about it. It personified boldness and intense alertness—the instinctive response of a creature accustomed to finding enemies lurking nearby.

“He should be home soon,” Klymene said. “I’ve been expecting him. I suppose he must still be in his workshop.” Only the clutching together of her hands betrayed her nervousness.

“Probably so. That’s where I was going.” His eyes suddenly returned to Philyra as he spoke. This time they lingered there. “I thought I would stop on the way, in case he had returned early. . . . You and your sisters grow more lovely each day. The atmosphere of Olympos must be good for the daughters of my brother Okeanos.”

Philyra became more and more flustered as he spoke, his eyes never leaving her.

Klymene acknowledged the compliment with a demure smile and slight inclination of her head. “Lord Kronos is too kind.”

Metis had edged her way to one side and stood quietly with her back against the wall. Prometheus and Epimetheus were nowhere in sight; Klymene must have shooed her sons from the room.

Kronos smiled, and the smile, neither too broad

nor too narrow, changed the entire aspect of his magnificent face. The craggy lines of stark majesty softened, now imbued with genuine interest and friendliness.

“Come closer, Philyra,” he said. “You have no reason to be bashful about your beauty. Compliments are not to be feared.”

Philyra hesitated, but finally managed to glance quickly up at him. “I do not fear them, my lord. I only mistrust them. They are often more kind than truthful.”

Kronos turned toward Klymene. “Can she really not know how lovely she is?”

“I am too thin, my lord,” Philyra said softly.

The Lord of the Titans carefully appraised her slender body. He shook his head slowly, talking still to Klymene. “She’s refreshing. If only the other goddesses were a little less artful and a bit more natural, like your sister. Lord Okeanos and Lady Tethys breed fine children. This one, however, must never have looked at herself in a mirror. Too thin, indeed!”

He laughed, still shaking his head. “I seem never to have time to talk with the really interesting members of court—those who cluster and chatter around me take up all my time. I must put a stop to that. I *will* put a stop to it. . . . Philyra, how long have you been here on Olympos?”

Klymene answered for her. “She and Metis arrived nearly three months ago.”

“Three months! I’ve seen them about the palace, of course—many times, I suppose—but never really stopped to talk with them. You, child,” he said, addressing Metis. “Have you found things to occupy you here?”

Metis nodded. “Yes, my lord, I—”

“Of course you have. You have Klymene’s sons to play with, young . . .”

“Prometheus and Epimetheus,” Klymene said.

“Yes, young Prometheus and Epimetheus. Fine, handsome boys.” He turned back toward Philyra. “Three months, and I’ve barely had the opportunity to exchange more than a few words with you. This must change. I’m growing tired of seeing the same faces around me all the time, of hearing the same tired conversation. You must come and dine with me tonight, Philyra—no, not tonight, for I have already promised to let myself be bored. You must breakfast with me tomorrow. I would like to hear about your parents and the briny realm they rule.”

“I fear I am a poor conversationalist, my lord.” Philyra still could not bring herself to look into his face.

“Nonsense. You would amuse me even if you never uttered a word, merely by your presence.”

With the direct simplicity of a child Metis made her way to one of the ornate divans that lined the walls of the room. She sat down, feeling slighted by the way Kronos seemed to steadfastly ignore her. On the other hand, she was thankful not to be the subject of too intense scrutiny.

She fought against an almost overwhelming inclination to lie down as she continued following the conversation.

“It’s settled, then,” Kronos was saying. “You’ll join me tomorrow morning, for breakfast. I’ll be awaiting you.”

Out of the corner of her eye Metis caught a movement near the opening into the hall. Sharp-eyed Kronos must have seen it too; he was now staring in that direction. A few moments later the movement was repeated, something scampering from behind the leg of a table toward a large amphora. Metis realized almost immediately that it was the man she had thought safely confined within the basket on her bed.

She moved quickly, springing from her seat. The little creature seemed intent upon avoiding capture. Nevertheless she managed after only a moment to scoop it up as it tried to dart from the amphora to the concealment of a number of thick cushions lying nearby upon the floor. She clutched the man to her breast to keep him out of

sight, and without a backward glance hurried straight toward the hall and her own room.

“Wait, child,” Kronos called after her. “I would see the thing you are carrying. Bring it here.”

“It’s only one of my toys,” she called back, intent on transporting the man out of the room as rapidly as possible.

“Bring it here, child,” he repeated, not harshly, but with the self-assurance of one accustomed to instant obedience.

“Metis!” Klymene called after her, shocked that she would ignore the King of the Gods.

Metis hesitated in the doorway but did not turn to face them.

“Lord Kronos would see the creature you brought back,” Klymene said. “Let him see it. *Do as he asks!*”

With unconcealed reluctance Metis turned and walked slowly toward the imposing figure of the Titan. As she reached him she held the man out in her hand.

An uneven smile touched the lips of the divine king. He took the creature from her with surprising gentleness, held it loosely in one of his enormous hands and studied it intently. Finally he looked up. “This is one of the creatures the Muses discovered. How did you come by it, child?”

“I was with them this morning.”

“But they said they had brought none back.”

Metis hung her head. “They didn’t. *I* did.”

It took him a moment to comprehend her statement. When he did he began to laugh. His laughter was deep, from the chest, with nothing forced or false about it. “They didn’t know, then. You smuggled this creature back against their wishes.”

Metis only nodded.

“Can it talk?” He held the man up in front of his face and shook it ever so slightly—for a god. The creature seemed to consider it a vigorous jostling, though, for as soon as the shaking stopped, it tried to free itself from the light grasp of the Titan.

Metis nervously shifted her weight from foot to foot.

“Has it any intelligence? The Muses said the creatures displayed curiosity.”

“It would seem to be a bit intelligent,” Klymene said, finally managing to edge Metis to one side so that she could take control of the situation before the child offended Kronos. “But we’re not yet sure how bright the thing is.”

“Very interesting,” Kronos said. “Very interesting indeed.”

As he began to hand the creature back to Metis, a knock sounded at the door. Responding to

Klymene's imploring look, Philyra moved quickly to answer it.

The door opened to reveal the tall, black-mantled figure of Thanatos. With a slight bow he made his way into the room.

"Ah, good, you're here, Lord Kronos," he began in his rapid, intense manner, nearly oblivious to the others in the room. "I must speak with you. I recognized your voice from the corridor."

Kronos grimaced. "What is it? I'm occupied at the moment."

"A discovery, my lord. Something which will interest you greatly."

Frowning and sighing in resignation, Kronos said, "Well, you've tracked me down. Go ahead. What is it?"

Thanatos hesitated and began to stutter. "M-m-my lord, I m-m-must tell you in private. This is n-n-not—" He stopped abruptly, all his intense attention focused on a new object, the creature still struggling to escape from Kronos's hand.

The man had continued to try vainly to climb out of the restraining fingers of the god; now he became aware of the new face staring at him. All effort to escape stopped as he began to quiver.

Kronos looked down at him. "The little thing is terrified of you, Thanatos! It's shaking all over in fear."

Kronos started to hand the man back to Metis, but before the exchange could be completed, the long, pale fingers of Thanatos interceded hesitantly. The man began to shriek, his voice surprisingly loud and very shrill.

Kronos glared at Thanatos.

“Please, my lord,” Thanatos said, “i-i-if I might . . . e-e-examine . . . this strange creature for a m-m-moment . . .” His voice and entire manner were high-strung and his still extended fingers quivered as they drew back from the object of their sudden fascination.

Metis, however, did not hesitate. She plucked the man from Kronos’s hand, hugged him to her, and ran toward the door.

Kronos turned on Thanatos angrily. “What do you mean by acting like this?”

Thanatos fumbled unsuccessfully for words, his gaze twitching back and forth between Metis and the king.

“Answer me!”

Finally Thanatos recovered his composure enough to say, “M-m-my Lord Kronos knows w-w-what interest I take in p-p-peculiar life forms of every sort.” He forced himself to speak more slowly. “P-p-please accept m-m-my abject apologies for m-m-my lack of courtesy, b-b-but I seem to l-l-lose control of m-m-myself when I

encounter s-s-something that arouses m-m-my interest to the degree that this l-l-little creature has. I-I have never seen such a thing before. I would v-v-very much like to e-e-examine it.”

Klymene had intercepted Metis before she could disappear from the room. The child was shaking her head as she faced Thanatos.

“No, he’s mine. He’s mine and I don’t want you to touch him. You frighten him. He’s afraid of you. He’s still shaking.”

Thanatos edged toward Kronos. “If I m-m-might speak with you about this p-p-privately for a m-m-moment. . . .”

Kronos frowned. “You always want to speak in private. Why must you be so secretive? It’s very impolite.”

Klymene was trying to take the man from Metis, determined that the creature must be handed over if Kronos so asked. Kronos held up his hand and waved her away. “Let the child be,” he told her, his expression clearly showing his displeasure with the commotion Thanatos had caused.

Thanatos fidgeted, rubbing his hands together and doing his best to communicate without words to his master how imperative it was that they talk privately. At last he leaned toward Kronos and whispered in the god’s ear. Kronos frowned still more deeply, then sighed.

He turned toward the sisters. "I've stayed too long already. Lady Klymene, if I should miss your husband, please tell him that I'm eager to see him. Lady Philyra, I shall be looking forward to your sweet face across from me at breakfast tomorrow." His eyes moved to Metis. "Young lady, please keep me informed of your tiny ward. I'm interested in everything that happens on Mount Olympos."

He turned toward the door. Thanatos opened it for him and, without having directed a single word to the inhabitants of the apartment, followed his master out into the corridor.

5

The Titan Iapetos had his workshop on one of the lower levels of the palace of Kronos, where most of the dark rooms were given over to storage. Here the cast-off possessions of the gods lay half forgotten alongside raw materials of every sort.

Piles of thick pelts and tanned hides reached nearly to the ceiling. Large lidded baskets, stacked one atop the other, were filled with wool, flax, or finest silk; huge wax-sealed amphorae held dyes and perfumes. Elsewhere row upon row of teak, cypress, and ebony, brought from vast distances, lay ready for some god to cut and shape. Elm and cedar trees, stripped of their branches, were neatly stacked for the kiln or hearth, while bins of copper ore awaited smelting. There were whole rooms of gold and silver and ivory. Other rooms overflowed with chests of precious stones.

It was toward this level that Kronos made his way, the natural briskness of his pace forcing the

lanky Thanatos into an uncomfortable trot at his side. They descended wide, spiraling staircases and traversed lengthy corridors. As they walked, Thanatos turned continually to reassure himself that they could not be overheard.

“The little godling can wait,” Kronos said gruffly.

“Well, yes, Lord Kronos, but I think if you understood the possible importance—”

“But it *can* wait?”

“Well, yes, my lord, but—”

“Then, vulture-loving child of Nyx, *let* it wait!”

“But Lord Kronos, this could be an important piece of the puzzle. The sooner—”

“You should take a lesson from your less inquisitive brother,” Kronos said, his tone now good-humored. He nodded down the corridor in front of them. “He never lets himself get unduly enthusiastic.”

A shapeless mass covered a shadowed bench in an alcove just ahead. As they approached, the gray mass began to stir, rising up on the bench. Kronos slowed to a stop as a puffy face appeared from amid the wrinkled folds of a faded cloak. Bleary eyes blinked at them.

“Have the benches grown any softer, Momos?” Kronos asked without the suggestion of a smile.

Momos rubbed the sleep from his eyes, grumbling as he made vain gestures toward smoothing the cloak over his shoulders. “No, they haven’t,” he said. “The floors are too hard too. You should see to them. They make too much noise.”

“Now the floors are making noise?” Kronos asked. “Has someone taught them to talk?”

“They make noise when anyone walks on them,” Momos explained.

“Ah, I understand,” Kronos said, chuckling. “The marble slaps too hard against bare feet.”

“Against sandals too. You should make quiet marble.”

Thanatos, who despised his brother, glared with unconcealed contempt at the paunchy, rumpled god, “If you’d sleep in your own bed, you fat fool, it wouldn’t matter how much noise anyone made in the corridors. Why do you think you have your own quarters!”

Momos rose from his seat with what he must have considered great dignity. “That’s another thing. This palace is too big. Every place is too far from every other place.”

Kronos laughed with genuine amusement. “I shall remember that when we build a new palace.”

Momos nodded. Grumbling to himself, he shambled off down the corridor in the opposite

direction. Kronos watched almost until he was out of sight.

“I can’t imagine why you even talk to that fool,” Thanatos said.

Kronos shrugged. “He’s the only one of the gods I can almost trust.”

“Trust! You trust that doddering, fat . . . ? All he ever does is complain and criticize. He criticizes you more than anyone else.”

“*Almost* trust. He never tries to hide what he thinks.”

Thanatos shook his head in bewilderment. Kronos began walking again, and Thanatos hurried after him.

“The other thing I wanted to tell you,” he said, “it’s the most amazing discovery . . .”

“Can it wait too?”

“Well, yes, I guess it can, but—”

Finally they reached the stairway that led to the lower levels. Kronos took a torch from its scone and gestured to Thanatos to do the same.

“But it is absolutely amazing. When I tell you—”

“But it can wait?”

“Yes, Lord Kronos.”

“Very good, Thanatos. In two or three centuries you may acquire a modicum of patience. It’s an important virtue, absolutely essential for the fulfillment of any ambitious project. I must give you

a full dissertation upon its merits. You will remind me.”

“Yes, Lord Kronos,” Thanatos said glumly.

They had almost reached Kronos’s destination. “I don’t know why you’ve insisted on walking all this way with me,” he told Thanatos, “but you can make yourself useful. Go through the storerooms and find the most beautiful mirror there, of gold. It should be full length, for a goddess to properly appreciate her own appearance, but I suppose we’ll have to be satisfied with whatever you can find. Dust and polish it, then deliver it to Lady Philyra, the sister of Klymene.”

“But my lord, that could take hours. The discovery I have made—”

“I will come to your chambers when I’ve finished,” Kronos said with a finality tantamount to dismissal.

Turning his back on Thanatos, Kronos entered the workshop of Iapetos without announcing himself, carefully closing the door behind him. He paused by the forge, first placing his hand near it, then touching the side; the metal was barely warm. No detail escaped him as he moved through the apartment.

He found his brother in one of the rear rooms, hard at work. Nearly thirty seconds passed before Iapetos became aware of his presence.

With a quick movement he threw a rag over something on his bench and turned to meet the intruder.

“Oh, it’s you, brother,” he said, swirling around on his stool and standing.

Kronos came toward the workbench and lifted the rag from the object it had hastily concealed. He nodded approvingly and took the object in his hands, almost with reverence. “It’s finished?” he asked.

Iapetos nodded. “I haven’t ornamented the hilt yet, but aside from that—”

“That doesn’t matter. No one else has been here? No one knows of its existence?”

“No one but us,” Iapetos said softly as Kronos searched his aquiline features for any trace of duplicity.

Kronos had ensconced his torch in the atrium of the workshop, and now he took the long, heavy weapon in both hands and held it near the oil lamp that burned upon the table. The bronze blade glistened.

“It still needs a bit more sharpening,” Iapetos said.

Kronos shrugged. “You can do that later.” He ran the edge of his thumb along the blade, then held the weapon extended from one hand as he tested the balance.

“This is what you had in mind?” Iapetos asked. “This one is satisfactory?”

“Yes, I think so. What have you done with the other?”

Iapetos made his way to a corner of the room. From behind a jumble of objects he withdrew a similar weapon, tall as a full-grown holly tree. The blade was straight, lacking the long, gradual curve of the newer one. Iapetos brought it to Kronos.

The Lord of the Titans held one in each hand, making slow, slashing movements with the swords. Then he lay the new, curved one on the workbench and took the other in both hands. Very deliberately he snapped its bronze blade across his knee.

“Melt the pieces down,” he instructed, handing Iapetos the two halves. “Melt them down so that no one may ever look upon the bronze and guess what it once was.”

Iapetos nodded in assent, his eyes peering into those of his brother. “When I began this task for you, I promised to abide by your wishes. The curved blade satisfies you more, but the straight one might have been of some use—if there is any use for a knife longer than a leg.” As he spoke, Iapetos seated himself in front of his bench and began to hone the sword’s edge with a stone.

“It’s my wish, brother,” Kronos said, “that only one of these long knives ever exist. The other must vanish as though it had never been made. And no one must ever know about this one.”

“I know,” Iapetos observed.

“What is known may be forgotten.”

“Perhaps, in time,” Iapetos said. “But for the present I can’t help being curious. What is the purpose for such a blade? It would be of little use for the tasks normally performed by a knife. An ax would do better for chopping wood.”

“There is no need for you to know its purpose, brother. I needed the skill of your hands, and you have given it to me admirably. I also need your silence. And loyalty. Do I have them?”

Iapetos continued sharpening the long, bronze blade, now moving the stone in light, polishing strokes. “Were the gradual curve of the blade not important,” he continued, “you would have accepted my first effort. A curved blade would be excellent for slashing.” He looked up. “For clearing away bushes and saplings, for instance.”

Kronos did not answer.

Iapetos applied the final strokes of the stone, then held the sword upright by the hilt. “It would make a fearful weapon with which to attack a god, wouldn’t it, brother?” He turned it around and

handed it hilt first to Kronos. "Of course, you have no need of that."

Kronos studied him through half-lidded eyes. Finally he said, "I want you to pledge me your silence."

"I've already pledged it," Iapetos said. "You shall have it. No one shall learn of this through me."

"You will obliterate every trace of the first sword?"

Iapetos nodded.

"And your loyalty? Do I still have that?"

"As much as ever."

Kronos's face unclouded and he laid an affectionate hand on his brother's shoulder. "Good. I need you." He hefted the sword again. "I'm very satisfied. You've never done better work. I'll take it with me now."

"I can still embellish the handle."

"No, it's not necessary. This is fine. Do you have a cloak? I didn't bring one, and I need something to conceal this."

They walked together to one of the other rooms, where Iapetos lent him a long, dark mantle. Kronos wrapped it about the sword in such a way that none could determine what lay within.

Just before they reached the main door Kronos turned toward him again. "You will take care of the other one soon?"

Iapetos nodded. "Today. Before I leave here."

"Good." Kronos clapped him on the shoulder again. "Good, brother. I know I can always count on you." He turned and left the room.

For a few minutes Iapetos stared vacantly at the closed door, then slowly made his way back to his workroom. From behind a mound of clutter he brought out a third sword, identical to the second. He carried it to his bench and began to sharpen it.

6

Just outside the door of Iapetos's workshop Kronos was accosted by Thanatos, who had been waiting for him to reappear.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the Titan.

"I've been waiting for you, Lord Kronos, to talk to you as you walk back."

Kronos glared at him in annoyance. "What about the mirror I asked you to find?"

"Here it is." Thanatos brought out an enormous mirror of polished gold from among the shadows. "I found it without much difficulty, and have been dusting and polishing it while I waited."

"Do as I told you," Kronos commanded, keeping the cloak-wrapped sword to one side, where Thanatos would not see it. "Bring it to Lady Philyra *now!*"

"Y-y-yes, my lord."

Kronos stood watching as the god hefted the heavy mirror and stumbled down the corridor with it. He waited until Thanatos had had time to

get all the way up the stairs, then proceeded hurriedly to his own chambers on the uppermost floor of the palace.

Passing quickly through innumerable outer rooms, he came at last to a small, nearly empty one. He lay the sword on a table, then went to a cupboard and withdrew a large object draped in black. He carried it to another table, deposited it there, and from an adjoining room brought a stool. He worked with these objects until he was satisfied with their arrangement. The stool stood atop the table and the draped thing atop the stool, the whole reaching nearly to the height of the King of the Gods.

He stood back a little and pulled the cloth free to reveal the huge clay bust of a god, a god peculiarly devoid of facial features. It had eyes and nose and mouth, but portrayed no one.

From the other table he took the sword, unwrapping it and holding it loosely at his side. He positioned himself in front of the bust, the sword almost dangling from his hand. Twice he reached forward and adjusted the bust so that it faced exactly the direction he wished. He stared into the lifeless clay eyes.

Suddenly the sword flew back to a position far behind his head, then swept forward in a whirling arc. The clay head rolled free, striking the floor

with a thud. Part of the clay shoulder followed it down.

For a few moments the Lord of the Titans stood staring at the headless figure.

He lay the sword aside and picked up the moist clay. His fingers trembled as he began to reshape it and work it back onto the bust. When he had it firmly reattached he took up his position again. Again the sword whirled and the clay head thudded to the floor.

For nearly an hour he worked without stopping, reshaping and decapitating the senseless clay until the bust ceased to resemble anything divine.

He allowed himself to sit quietly in a thickly cushioned chair for ten or fifteen minutes, his thoughts clustering fast and thick. Finally, with a deep sigh, he rose and put away the clay and the sword. He locked them both within the cupboard.

Thanatos was awaiting him in the hall, pacing nervously.

“There you are, my lord,” he said as Kronos appeared from one of the doors. “This way, my lord . . .”

“Did you deliver the mirror?”

“Mirror? Oh, yes, as soon as I left you. This discovery may be the most important yet. It’s another—”

“Did she like it? Was she pleased?”

“Pleased? Who? Oh, you mean the Okeanid.”

“Yes, the Okeanid Philyra,” Kronos said crossly. “Does she like the mirror?”

“I suppose so, my lord.” Thanatos looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“You suppose so!”

“Yes, my lord,” Thanatos said, nodding. “It’s an attractive piece of furniture, for those who care about such things.”

“Didn’t she say anything? Didn’t you notice how she reacted when you gave it to her? Did her eyes light up? Did she smile?”

“She said it was lovely and that I should thank you. Yes, I think that’s what she said. As to whether or not she smiled, I really didn’t notice. But as I was saying, my lord, this discovery presents not only a new part to the puzzle, but one that we did not even suspect existed.”

They had reached the entrance of the apartment in which Thanatos was allowed to live and work. Pushing open the enormous double doors, Thanatos stood to one side to allow Kronos to precede him.

“This discovery of yours,” the Titan said, “it better be important. I’m growing weary of your pestering.”

“It’s very important.” Thanatos followed his master through the open doors and pushed them closed.

The small apartment, one of the suites set aside for Kronos himself, was fitted and furnished in gold and ivory, ebony and teak. Now it was cluttered to overflowing and thick with dust and debris.

“Clean this place up,” the Titan grumbled.

“Of course, my lord. As soon as I can find time.”

They continued through the series of rooms to the bedchamber, which testified even more forcefully, not to the laziness of the occupant, but to his single-mindedness. Precious moments could not be squandered on anything as insignificant as cleanliness.

A massive bronze door blocked their way at the rear of the bedchamber. Thanatos ran his fingers along a portion of the nearby wall in search of a hidden catch. A click sounded and the heavy door swung inward.

Kronos recoiled at the dark portal, the odor of decay billowing out from the opening. “Can’t you do something about this odor?” he demanded.

Thanatos seemed not to hear him. He was already busy lighting the lamps that were set in niches all around the walls. At the noise of his movements something began to moan softly and make muffled, whispering sounds.

Kronos forced himself to look slowly about the room. It was crowded with brass tables and cages

of living animals, birds and mammals of many kinds. One table held a long row of brass instruments; light glittered from their cutting edges. Most of the other tables were covered with neatly dissected animal corpses. Usually the removed organs lay neatly arranged along one side of the opened body. Many were in an advanced state of decay, with flesh now browned and desiccated.

Kronos stepped over an almost filled bucket of congealed blood as he moved to pick up one of the oil lamps. The whispering sounds had continued, and he followed them back into a dark recess of the room, thrusting the lamp forward to dispel the darkness.

“Over here, my lord,” Thanatos was saying.

“Can’t you stop this noise?” Kronos said, distressed by the entire atmosphere of the room. As he spoke, the light fell upon the decapitated head of a god. It hung by the hair from a peg in the wall, a tiny, completely formed body dangling from its neck.

“It’s only Oizys. Come see this, my lord.”

Kronos drew back. “What does he want? He’s trying to say something.” He watched in horror as the flabby lips moved soundlessly.

Thanatos came to Kronos’s side, intent upon leading him to the other side of the room. “He can’t talk yet. His body hasn’t regenerated fully

enough. The lungs are too small to make words, so he makes little whispering or moaning sounds as best he can. He's probably hungry again."

"How long has it been since you've fed him?"

Thanatos shrugged. "A few days, I guess. I have to feed the others or they'll die, but sometimes I skip him."

Kronos's face hardened in indignation as Oizys ceased trying to speak and began to whimper. "Why don't you feed him, then?"

"I'll feed him later, my lord. Right now I want to show you—"

"Feed him now, Thanatos—feed all these creatures—or I'll see to it that you don't eat yourself for a week."

Thanatos, who sometimes forgot to eat for days at a time, hurried to fulfill his master's command. He located the bag of grain that he kept for the animals and dumped a large quantity into a flat pan. He made a circuit of the room, tossing food into the cages. The birds began to flutter excitedly, the pigs to grunt. Finally he rejoined Kronos, placing the pan on the top of one of the tables.

"I can't understand how you can tolerate being in this place," Kronos said, his eyes returning again and again to the oval face and flabby lips of the head.

“My lord found it interesting enough when I first showed him what happens when a god’s head and body are severed.”

An almost imperceptible shudder ran through the King of the Gods. “Feed Oizys quickly so you can show me this new thing that you think is so important. I want to get out of this dreadful room. I warn you, my patience is growing short.”

Thanatos lifted the head of his brother down by the hair and lay it face down in the pan. Immediately Oizys began to grunt and crunch the grain in ravenous abandon.

Without a second glance at the creature, Thanatos led Kronos toward the far side of the room. The location and darkness had conspired until this moment to hide the thing upon the table from the Titan.

“Here it is, my lord,” Thanatos said with a flourish of the lamp he held in his hand.

“What . . . ?” Kronos moved closer to peer down at what seemed to be a divine body. The eyes were open and staring blankly. The lips were drawn back in a humorless grin. One hand hung limply off the side of the table, but when he touched it, he discovered it was not limp at all. It was stiff and cold.

Kronos drew away, a terrible oath slipping from his lips. “What is it?” he asked, almost whispering.

“A nymph, my lord. Or at least it was. It’s dead now.”

Kronos was shaking his head. “No. No, that isn’t a nymph. At least not like any I’ve ever seen. Look at the hair. It’s white. And the skin is dried out and wrinkled.”

Thanatos nodded. “Nevertheless it is a nymph. A dead nymph.”

“That can’t be,” Kronos said. “Nymphs are not animals. They are goddesses—less powerful than other goddesses, perhaps, but still divine. They are immortal.”

“That’s what everyone has always thought. Until now.”

“Maybe she’s only asleep, unconscious.”

“She isn’t asleep,” Thanatos assured him. “If you lean close to her you can already detect the odor of decay. Her body has begun to decompose.” He grinned broadly. “She’s dead, my lord.”

“Detect the odor!” Kronos exclaimed in a suppressed voice. “How can anyone distinguish an individual smell here?”

“My nose is very acute. You can take my word for it, she’s very dead.” He was almost gloating over his discovery now.

Kronos stared down at the corpse. Finally he shook his head again. “There’s some mistake. She was some kind of freak. The gods are immortal.

They don't die like animals. They don't become meat for jackals."

"That could be true, my lord. Still, it is a very important piece of information, even if she was not a typical nymph. I think you're wrong, though."

"But why does she look like that?"

"Part of her appearance is due simply to her being dead. But the white hair and wrinkled skin—they're what make you doubt she was a normal nymph. Perhaps you've never noticed, but there is a similar thing that happens to animals when they live to be very old. Their bodies begin to wear out—somewhat as flowers wilt or trees die branch by branch. I think the same thing must have happened to her."

"But why hasn't it ever happened before?"

"There always has to be a first time. I think this is it. If I'm right, other nymphs—the oldest of them—will begin to wear out just as this one must have. She needn't even be the first, for that matter. Living as they do—by themselves for the most part—a number may have withered and died without anyone being aware of it. I do know that she died from the inside. There are no external wounds."

Kronos only stared down at the once beautiful body.

“That, of course, leads to the next question,” Thanatos continued. “If she could die, could she be killed?”

“Who was she?” Kronos asked suddenly.

Thanatos shrugged. “Just one of the thousands of nymphs who teem among the hills and valleys. I found her body in Aetolia, where my servants had discovered it.”

“The vultures,” Kronos said.

Thanatos nodded. “No one else was around, not for a very long distance. No one but you and I know of this.”

“Are you certain she isn’t asleep?” Kronos asked.

“I’ll prove it to you,” Thanatos said, plucking from a nearby table a sharp, gleaming instrument. He ran the edge along the forearm of the corpse so that the flesh opened to a fair depth. “See, the ichor doesn’t flow, even from a relatively deep wound. It only oozes out. . . .” He performed the same operation on his own forearm without the slightest hesitation, cutting not quite as deeply. “See, the ichor flows out immediately.” He displayed his arm.

Kronos watched in shocked fascination as the thick, translucent substance that is the immortal blood of the gods welled from the long cut and began to run down Thanatos’s arm.

Thanatos wrapped his arm in a makeshift bandage. “The questions raised by this discovery are fascinating, and it will take a long time and much more study to answer them. Can all nymphs die? Can they be killed, or only die of old age? If nymphs can die, can the other lesser gods? Are all of the gods mortal to some degree?” He stared into Kronos’s face, a razor smile spreading over his lips. “*Can the gods be killed?*”

Kronos wanted to look away from this creature who spoke of death and decay so offhandedly.

Thanatos walked partway across the room, Kronos following him, glad to be away from the nymph’s corpse. Thanatos stopped beside the headless body of Oizys.

“It’s been two months now since I cut off Oizys’s head, but his body remains imperishable. If I cut it, ichor flows, just as though it still had a head and were completely alive. After a day or two the wound heals completely. The heart continues to beat—very slowly. Yet it hasn’t begun to regenerate a head. I suppose the head will grow back a completely new body and this body will remain just as it is, lying here and twitching occasionally—perhaps forever.”

He spun around to face Kronos, his face and hands animated by intense interest. “The power of regeneration must be centered in the brain—but

not completely so. See where I amputated his finger—it's coming along nicely and soon will be full size again." He rubbed his hands together. "There's so much to study. Scars, for instance. I had to inflict twenty-seven cuts on the body before I could get one to scar. That may mean that the regeneration response works imperfectly, that it sometimes makes a mistake. But many trials still have to be performed to be certain."

The head of Oizys had begun to make low noises again. Thanatos went to it, yanked it out of the pan of grain, and hung it back on the wall.

Kronos stood brooding over what he had seen and heard. At last he said, "She died from living too long?"

"That's my first thought, but I must have time to make tests. I want to see how the body decays. That could provide important clues. I've been unable to kill Oizys, even when I cut his skull in half. He just went into some kind of deep sleep until the two halves grew back together properly. . . . Still, if you give me time, it's very possible that I may find the secret of killing a god."

"What an awful gift you dangle before me."

"Gift, my lord?"

"Yes, with your studies, should they succeed."

"I don't understand. You mean if I learn how a god may be killed? That would be a powerful

weapon, and would repay you for allowing me to perform my studies here.”

“Why are the gods *gods*?” Kronos went on. “How do they differ from animals? Why are they deathless?”

“You said the knowledge might be useful to you. . . .”

“Indeed, it very well might be—why else would I put up with this carrion room of yours? The nature of life, of mortality and immortality—those are things fitting for the King of the Gods to know. The limits of immortality! I have many enemies, and such knowledge would be a potent weapon indeed. Cleave a divine head in half and the god is incapacitated until the halves heal back together. Decapitate him and his body flops to the floor, powerless against you. Not pretty things to consider, but potentially very useful.”

“But Lord Kronos, it would be ever so much more efficient if you could kill your enemy.”

Kronos shook his head sadly. “You don’t understand, do you? You tell me blithely that the gods may not be immortal after all. This one nymph has died for some reason or other, and perhaps you can find a way that even the great gods can be killed. But death is a double-edged dagger. If I can kill my enemies—my enemies can kill me! If they can die, then I too can die—*you* can die!”

Thanatos's pale, narrow face watched unblinkingly, polite but unperturbed.

"No, you really don't understand." Kronos shrugged. "I've seen enough. Keep me informed, but I don't want to have to come back here unless absolutely necessary. No one saw you bring the nymph?"

"No, my lord. I was very careful. I concealed both of us in dark clouds."

"Good. No one must learn of this." Kronos began to leave the room.

"A moment more, Lord Kronos," Thanatos said as he followed him.

In the bedchamber Kronos paused, listening impatiently.

"This new creature, the one Metis discovered . . ."

Kronos nodded. "What about it?"

"I must have it."

"Why?"

"To learn what it is. To dissect it and see how it differs from the nymph and Oizys, and from animals."

Kronos thought for a moment. At last he said, "Do what you must. But don't draw attention to yourself, and don't involve me in what you do. You're tolerated here because I need your work—the knowledge it promises. I make no pretense of liking it. You must be discreet."

“Yes, my lord, I will. One last thing. I must establish the mortality or immortality of nymphs, and to do that I must have another to study.”

Kronos shuddered, turning away and walking toward the front of the apartment. Thanatos followed close behind him.

“Well, my lord? May I acquire the things I need to continue my work?”

In front of the main door Kronos paused. “Do what you think necessary, but let no one discover it. I don’t even want to know about it.”

He turned and left the apartment of Thanatos, a disconcerting, churning sensation deep within him.

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