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GOD OF WAR



ROBERT E. VARDEMAN

GOD
Ω
WAR
II

ROBERT E. VARDEMAN



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About the Author



“MY LOVE,” came the soft, urgent whisper. “I want you!”

Kratos, the God of War, stirred, moaned, and reached out. The beloved name *Lysandra* formed on his lips. He sat up and looked about the small, firelit chamber. The scent of burning elder wood permeated the room. A fleecy soft lamb’s-wool blanket had been spread, two goblets of wine nearby. It was perfect for a romantic moment with his wife.

“Lysandra,” he said, louder. “Where are you?”

“Here, my love. You have come home from battle to me. I have missed you so!”

“And I have missed you,” he said, somehow not moving yet crossing the room and taking her into his arms. He held her close, feeling her vitality, the warmth of her body, aroused by the way she moved sensuously against his muscular frame.

“Promise you will never leave me again. I cannot bear to lose you, even for a brief moment.”

Kratos sucked in his breath. His wife’s scent dilated his nostrils and set his heart to hammering. Her silken hair floated like a cloud, brushing his cheek, soothing the wounds on his face with the lightest touch. But he tried to push her away. Something was wrong. She resisted, her strength greater than his.

Her body turned cold where once it had been alive.

“Lysandra, what is wrong?”

“Nothing can be wrong with our love.”

Using his full strength, he succeeded in pushing her from him. Her face was twisted into one of stark terror.

“Don’t let me go, Kratos. Don’t hurt me!”

“Hurt you? I would have killed hundreds to protect you. I would die for you!”

He lifted his hand. A sword dripping with blood thrust forward. His hand circled the hilt, slippery with the life fluids of his enemies, but it was not his will directing the thrust. The coppery scent of blood, the sudden gleam of reflected firelight from the blade, the perfect balance and the keen edge and ...

... and Kratos screamed in agony as he thrust forward, gutting his wife. Lysandra gripped the sword where it penetrated her belly, cutting her fingers on the edge. The blood of his wife mixed with that of warriors he had slain. She looked from the blade spitting her to his shocked face, reached for him, injured fingers red with her own blood. Anguish flooded his senses when he realized what he had done.

Then the screams of rage and fear were snuffed out. The only sound to be heard was the dripping of his wife’s blood to the floor. He jerked away and the sword pulled free from its fleshy berth, sending a gory arc of her blood and organs outward. A bit was flung into the fire, where it sizzled and popped. And then came total silence, except for a singular voice.

The voice of a small girl.

“Papa, what have you done?”

“Calliope,” he called to his young daughter.

“She’s dead. You murdered her! How could you?” Small fists hammered at his armor. He was clad in full battle gear, and Calliope attacked with the full fury of a frightened, angered child.

He swung the sword. His muscles bunched as he tried to stay the blow. He could not. The pommel struck his daughter in the temple, knocking her down.

“I did not mean this!” Kratos stepped forward, greaves clanking and his body armor grating. The reflection from his sword, the

Blades of Chaos attached to the bone of his forearms with cruel chain links, filled his vision and then blinded him.

Rage exploded when he heard a mocking voice.

“Ares!” He shrieked and sought to kill the god with the very blades he had been given to do Ares’ bidding.

The swords, one in each hand, slashed out, but it was Calliope and not Ares who died. The little girl perished in a welter of blood and sobs damning him, crying out for her mother, now dead also by his hand. And the rage and loss exploded within his brain so that he spun about and saw ...

... a dark figure.

“Ares? You forced me to kill my own wife and daughter! I will kill you!”

But it was not Ares he faced but a nebulous, black, misty thing.

“Fight me! Fight me, you craven!” Kratos dismissed the Blades of Chaos and clutched the Blades of Athena, more powerful than any mortal could ever wield. But he was not a mortal now. He had destroyed Ares and was now the God of War.

“I didn’t know I was killing them. I loved them.

“Lysandra, come back to me, I didn’t mean to slay you,” Kratos said, seeking to stop the nocturnal torment the only way he knew, but he swung his blades at emptiness. He again stood on a barren plain that stretched flat in all directions. The more he tried to fight, the heavier the swords became, and when his muscles no longer responded, he sank to his knees and bowed his head. Kratos wept.

And in the distance he heard soft whispers of concern.

“He cries in his sleep.”

“How is this possible? He is God of War!”

“He sheds no tears for those he has slain in battle. Perhaps he—”

Kratos came awake with a start. It took him long seconds to realize he clutched a lovely woman by the throat. Her slender fingers trying to free herself were no match for his powerful grip.

Without realizing he was doing so, he had started to crush the life from her body.

“Please. Lord Kratos, do not kill her,” came the impassioned plea from the other side of his large bed. “She seeks only to serve you, not offend!”

Kratos released the death grip. The woman he had almost killed fell across his bare legs as she gasped for breath. He sat up and stared at her twitching body. She wore a thin garment of pale green silk that revealed her voluptuous curves. Struggling, she rolled off his legs, clutching her throat. The fiery red marks stood out in bold relief where his fingers had crushed into alabaster skin. Despite the nearness of death, the woman showed no fear of meeting Hades. Kratos read something different there, another emotion that infuriated him.

Let her be afraid. He was God of War. His enemies cowered before him!

But she showed pity for him. For him! The Ghost of Sparta!

“The dreams again, my lord? They still torture you? How may I ease your burden?” She moved to push away the sheets covering his midsection.

Her hot breath touched his belly and lower. Then there were two. The other concubine, the one who had begged for him to release the death grip, sought to give him pleasure, also.

“Away,” he roared. “Get away from me!”

“We seek only your comfort, Lord Kratos. We want to do whatever we can to soothe your troubles—and to replace them with delight. Let us do Aphrodite’s bidding and—”

Kratos swung his brawny forearm and sent both women tumbling away. They muttered to themselves. He stood, thin vestiges of his dream fading quickly until he found it difficult to remember exactly what had happened. A black plain. A cave that became a mountain and then something else. His head threatened to explode from trying to remember that encounter.

But he had no trouble remembering the feel of his sword driving into Lysandra’s body or the terror and loathing on his own sweet Calliope’s face as he killed her, also. The nightmares were as

permanent as the sky and earth and the Olympian throne on which Zeus sat.

“You promised to obliterate my nightmares if I did your bidding,” Kratos said, shaking his fist at the open sky above his sleeping chamber. “You lied, Zeus. You lied!”

“Master, please. We seek only to do your bidding. Tell us how!” The two women threw themselves at his feet. He kicked them away, went to the table where his armor was laid out with his simple clothing, clothing befitting a warrior, and quickly dressed. When the women came to aid him in his toilet, he drove them back with a dark glare. They huddled together, watching him.

He felt pity radiating from them like heat from the sun itself. He hated them for that. He hated himself all the more for ever believing Zeus. With a final jerk, he strapped on his armor and settled two swords in an X pattern across his back.

Kratos stormed from his sleeping chamber.

Massive shoulders rippling under his chased-gold armor, nicked in places from terrible battles fought and won, he used both hands to throw open the fifty-foot-tall doors leading from his chambers. The huge stone doors sent echoes reverberating throughout Olympus. As he strode along he never noticed the fine vases, the tapestries on the marble walls, the myriad tributes collected by the gods of Olympus from their mortal worshippers; instead he plotted and planned. These serene halls with clouds floating under terraces opening to the side were not for him.

He was a warrior.

He ran his fingers over the bone-white of his skin. His wife Lysandra’s and daughter Calliope’s ashes had been cast over him, forever making his flesh an unforgettable symbol of how Ares had betrayed him, tricked him, and led him to murder those he loved above all else. Even the bright red tattoo in memory of his brother Deimos and proclaiming him a soldier of Sparta seemed a mockery.

Kratos’ hand flashed to the hilts of the blades at his back when Hermes ran down the corridor, dancing about like some gaudy

butterfly. The Messenger of the Gods visibly paled and darted away. Such it was whenever another saw Kratos. Stride lengthening, he passed where other gods gathered in small groups of twos and threes. They turned their backs to him.

He heard Zeus' sister Hestia sniff in contempt and say to Demeter in a voice just loud enough for him to overhear, "Has your crop been ruined by *his* endless war?"

"My worshippers starve because of *him* and those terrible, brutish Spartans," Demeter said. She glanced sideways at Kratos, then turned quickly and took Hestia by the arm to guide her away, going in the direction already taken by Hermes.

Kratos' hands slid from the handles, and a sneer curled his lip, twisting his face into pure contempt. What did he need *their* approval for when he was greater than the lot?

Swinging about, sandals making slapping sounds on the travertine floor, he went to a huge vaulted atrium dominated by a circular aperture. Within the confines of the circle roiled a thin fog turned the color of blood. Distant sounds of battle heartened Kratos. The clash of sword against sword, shields deflecting blows and knives driving into exposed midriffs, the battle cries of the victorious and the lamentations of the vanquished. Men strove in his name. Armies swept across the face of Greece and laid waste to all they encountered.

The God of War favored Sparta and incited the warriors to destroy all armies, all cities, every man, woman, and child not of the city of his birth who refused to be subjugated. He had been called the Ghost of Sparta. Now he was God of War with a mighty sword-wielding army sweeping across the world.

The shrieks of dying men rose higher; music to his ears. For these were not Spartans dying but other, weaker men. The fog billowed higher and parted to give him a clear view of the battlefield below. A harbor. A city burning. Soldiers driving swords through leather armor into bellies and hearts. Spartan soldiers, invincible because of dedication and training—and his favor. " ... *Kratos, how could you kill me? ...*"

The whisper from deep within his nightmares was drowned out as he bellowed his approval when a Spartan unit marched forward, swords clanking against bronze shields. Their feet hit the ground in a marching rhythm that sent tremors of fear through the enemy.

“Allow no escape. Give no quarter!” His words filled the air and echoed throughout Olympus and to the world below. The Spartans dulled their blades on the shields and necks, the greaves and arms, of the enemy until the din of battle suffocated any voice in Kratos’ mind. He continued to direct the carnage, approving of his army’s fighting prowess.

Far below a young Spartan stepped from the fray and thrust his sword high in the air, toward Olympus where Kratos watched.

“My lord Kratos!” The words were caught on the din of battle and carried to his ears. “Another city is ready to fall! Soon all shall know the glory of Sparta!”

Kratos’ hands clenched into tight fists, and cords stood out on his forearms and in his neck as he tensed. Victory! He did not need Hermes to bring such glorious news when he could watch his armies from this lofty perch. But Kratos was never one to watch. The sight of skilled warriors battling the ever-weakening defenders of the harbor city of Rhodes pledged to Apollo told him he would have to hurry if he wanted to share in the blood and glory of victory.

A soft tread on the stone floor behind him caused him to straighten. His quick intake of breath filled his nostrils with the aromatic spikenard. Slowly turning, he faced Athena. The goddess looked up at him with a curious mixture of anger and pleading. Her sepia-tattooed lips parted, but she did not speak immediately. The intricate, swirling designs on her face seemed to take on a life of their own, as if those tattoos might possess her. But Kratos knew better. Of the gods, Athena was the most in control of herself. Her schemes were clever and subtle and had brought him to Olympus as a god.

Her elaborately engraved armor creaked slightly as she reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. He jerked free. His anger built anew.

“Enough, Kratos. The wrath of Olympus grows. Even I will no longer be able to protect you.” The delicate golden bands of her head decoration caught sunlight and made her look even more godlike. She wore battle armor, not as a fashion statement like so many other gods but because she was a warrior. He appreciated this and that she had worn the bronze-and-leather panoply to show how different she was from so many others who refused to even speak with him, much less confront him. But she was not his ally. She always took the side of Zeus and prattled about what was best for Olympus, as if he should care, too.

Kratos growled deep in his throat and pushed savagely past the goddess.

“I need no protection.”

“You forget that it was I who made you a god, Kratos. Do not turn your back on me!”

“I owe you nothing.”

“Then you leave me no choice.”

He ignored her, his stride long, sure, and directed toward a precipice ahead. The marble floor simply ended to give a dizzying view of the earth far below. Kratos paused a moment, the sounds of battle reaching him even at this great height. He drew in a deep breath and smelled the sharp tang of spilled blood. The battle would be over quickly. He wanted to be there to cheer on the Spartan soldiers—and to relish the victory over yet another city’s patron god, whoever that might be. Kratos neither knew nor cared. He stepped forward, fell rigidly at attention, and aimed his head toward the far ground. The wind caught at him as he arrowed downward.

“Kratos, no!” came Athena’s faint warning.

“Kratos,” Athena said, hand reaching out as if to stop him. But he had already plunged earthward, away from her and away from Olympus.

“Let the fool go,” came a voice like rocks being ground together. “I will greet him in the Underworld all the sooner.”

“He is a god, my dear uncle,” she said to Hades, not looking back at him, feeling his dark presence.

The whistle of Kratos’ passage through the air had faded now, replaced incongruously by the chirping of blue jays fluttering through the Olympian skies. If she had not known better, she would have thought all was at peace and that harmony reigned supreme on this lofty pinnacle. Soft winds caressed her decorated cheeks, carrying subtle perfumes and the sounds of the gods frolicking in their palaces. No hint of trouble reached her, unless she confronted Hades and his dourness.

“I will accept him gladly. Especially him. He eluded me before. No one escapes my domain twice. I don’t know how he succeeded in battling free of the Underworld, but he had help. A gravedigger. That makes no sense, but if I find him, he will beg to replace Sisyphus! Can I forget that Kratos killed my beloved Persephone?”

Before Athena could respond, Poseidon whirled up, his trident’s haft clacking on the marble floor.

“He is gone? Good riddance! I want nothing to do with that liar and thief.”

“Kratos is many things,” Athena said, “but never a liar. What has he stolen?” She caught her breath when Poseidon bellowed his answer. The scent of the sea and dead fish came along with his words.

“He duped me out of my Rage! I gifted him because he lied to you, Athena, he lied to you and you convinced me to aid him against my better judgment. Turning a mortal into a god cannot be good for Olympus!”

Athena remained silent. She had seen her other uncle in such self-deluding anger before and knew better than to argue. Kratos had required the Rage of Poseidon to recover Pandora’s Box, and she had been instrumental in turning Poseidon against Ares—if only briefly—in that quest.

The thought of Pandora’s Box made her frown. Before she could find her way through the mental maze born of that memory, Poseidon and Hades had begun arguing.

“Uncles, do not quarrel like this,” she said. Athena stepped between them before they could come to blows. Sometimes snappish and always testy, the two disturbed the seeming tranquility of Olympus. Or was it only a false peace since Kratos had departed? She chewed at her lower lip, worrying that she was missing a small detail—a detail possibly as important as Kratos being intent on the destruction of any city-state not named Sparta.

“How should we quarrel, then?” demanded Hades. He stepped up and thrust his bearded face into Poseidon’s. For a moment, the God of the Ocean’s seaweed beard mingled with the coal-black beard to ignite tiny orange and yellow sparks. Hades reached up to push Poseidon away, but Athena caught his thick wrist and prevented it. He jerked free and glowered at her.

“Do not think to appease me, Athena,” he said.

“Nor I,” Poseidon chimed in. “Kratos is a canker on the ass of Olympus and must be lanced!” His trident stabbed through the air with a shrill whine, the razored blades passing just inches from Athena’s face. Poseidon often lost his temper but not usually in this menacing fashion. He drew back and looked, for an instant, startled at what he had done, but he made no apology. And Athena expected none from the Lord of the Oceans.

“He goes too far,” Hades grumbled. He wrung his hands as if he held Kratos’ neck between them. “How dare he kill those who worship us, even if they are only mortals? Think of what Kratos has done to your precious Atlantis.”

Poseidon started to retort, then understood what was said. Rage clouded his face. “My brother, whatever you decide, count me in.” Poseidon slammed the butt end of his trident on the floor and sent cracks radiating from the point of impact.

The two went off, bickering. There had never been peace on Olympus—even Zeus could not forestall the ill temper of the gods with their petty concerns and small-minded plots. But her uncles were not acting in character.

She walked to the edge where Kratos had plummeted away. Far below raged the battle—perhaps the final battle in what would be

Kratos' mightiest campaign. His Spartan warriors had conquered all the other cities, save for Rhodes.

Her gaze hardened as she watched events unfolding far below, as if ants futilely battled with the towering Kratos stamping on them. She hurried to speak with Zeus but feared the Sky Father's patience had vanished. Kratos had to be stopped before he laid all the worshippers of all the gods in their graves. All save his own precious Spartans.



SHADOWS SLITHERED ABOUT the large chamber as if they were alive, but they were only possibilities, hints of what might be, as the Sisters of Fate huddled in deep discussion over their judgments.

Lahkesis held out her hands and created a small skein of glowing multihued threads, then batted it into the air, where it spun about, showering her sisters with sparks. From behind her iron-black mask with its short horns, her eyes shone like liquid silver. She spun about in midair, bare feet not touching the floor, her elaborately woven tapestry of a girdle spiraling outward to match the radius of her wings. Trailing downward from just beneath the juncture of her wings and shoulders cascaded a multilayered cape of fine cream-colored silk. Legs and breasts naked and copper-hued skin aglow, she made cutting motions with her short hooked shaft as if she sliced short some doomed human's life.

Atropos protested, catching the sparks in her hand and snuffing them out. She shot upward like a squid in the sea, black mist trailing where a mortal's legs should have been. Impossibly long nails stabbed forth accusingly as she tossed her head, yards-long streamers of white hair snapping like a whip.

"Be serious, sister," Atropos said angrily. "Such a fate is never to be suggested!"

Lahkesis laughed. “Must we always deliver such fearsome fates to those mortals—and gods? Why can’t we have fun breeding improbable lovers and then playing with their offspring? Remember the amusement Ixion and his cloud lover Nephele brought us? Zeus binding him to an eternally spinning fiery sky wheel provides me with enjoyment yet.”

“Isn’t our work amusement enough? Clotho spins the fate we decide, I measure the length of the thread, and you cut it.”

“I get bored quickly with routine and seek occasional diversion,” Lahkesis said. She smiled wickedly. “Surely, our threads are inventive, even elegant as they flow. Was it not great fun when I made that hideously ugly Pan irresistible to Nymphs?”

Atropos looked furiously at her sister. “He was hardly farcical when he aided the Athenians at the Battle of Marathon. You should have consulted Clotho—or me—before venturing beyond romantic trysts in the forest.” She sniffed indignantly. “Without Pan’s aid, they might never have won.”

Lahkesis shrugged off the possibility that Pan was all that interesting a destiny to craft.

“At least let us take another look at Hermes’ thread. He ought to be given something more interesting than what you have done with him recently,” Lahkesis said finally.

“Enough. You both need to tend to your chores more closely,” said Clotho as she shifted her immense bulk. Rolls of mottled flab bounced as thick arms reached out to her sisters. She shook an admonishing finger like a taloned octopus tentacle at them as she sided with Atropos. “The gods are becoming restive, and we will need to deal with that situation eventually.”

“One might even pay closer attention to our pet project,” Lahkesis said. Her sisters always insisted on work rather than enjoyment. Unlike Atropos or even Clotho, she wanted more than the satisfaction of a job well done. Duty? But why not stimulation as well?

“Yours. He is not *our* special scheme. Why do you even care about Kratos?” Atropos ran deft fingers along a thread extending from the Loom Chamber, measuring with precision using a notched talon to

find the exact point to impart small vibrations that would cause a war because of a momentary lapse of etiquette. She immediately turned her attention to another strand, then reached out and tugged on the thread Lahkesis studied so intently.

“You provoked him with that touch,” Lahkesis said, but she was not displeased. Kratos had grown too difficult to guide after becoming God of War. He had tried to wipe away the memories that Zeus would not banish for him through debauchery, and had failed. After he realized wine and the soft embrace of endless willing women would not give him surcease, he had turned to what he knew best: battle. Because of him, a dozen city-states lay in ruin. He—and the gods—could provide suitable diversion for some time to come.

“We need to discuss his fate if we are not to work at cross-purposes, dear sisters,” Clotho said. She worked on a dozen new threads, weaving them together and splitting another to birth twins, only to separate them, with each strand going onto a different spool.

Lahkesis nodded in approval. Such possibilities!

“I think the promise of Pandora’s Box is enough to keep us occupied for a while longer,” Lahkesis said. She whipped the thread of fate affixed to Kratos and sent him plummeting toward the earth and the battle to destroy Rhodes.

The sight of him plunging earthward ought to have delighted her, but rather it gave her an uneasy feeling she was unable to define. Lahkesis looked at her sisters, both diligently working at the threads stretching away to every point of the world. Neither shared her momentary disquietude about Kratos and his fate. And why should they? They controlled the world. They controlled Kratos’ fate.

Yes, his fate was sealed. She turned to other, more pressing matters. Being creator of so many destinies was a taxing chore, but she enjoyed it. Even if Atropos and Clotho were such unimaginative sticklers for duty.



AT RIGID ATTENTION, Kratos fell forward. His arms pulled in to his sides as he plunged headfirst toward the distant battle. The sounds of metal, flesh, and stone colliding set his pulse pounding. The smell of blood and the stench of death filled his nostrils as surely as he felt the bite of wind ripping past his face, across his shaved head. He had missed the tumult of battle while on Olympus, even as he guided his stalwart Spartans against one army after another to spite the gods who shunned him.

The ground rushed up, but Kratos had a chance to survey the fight. A smile of satisfaction pulled back his lips into what others might consider a sneer. His warriors fought well and drove the soldiers of Rhodes into an ever-tightening circle, making them fight back-to-back, surrounded by swords and eventual Spartan-delivered death.

With a deft twist, Kratos brought his feet under himself, letting his massive size demolish the roof of a palace. He recovered and stood to his full hundred-foot height, looking around. Carnage everywhere bespoke a victory that gladdened him. The bay was filled with ships sporting the orange and yellow stripes of the Spartan navy. Although unneeded, reinforcements were landing every few minutes. The ships disgorged troops, but these fresh warriors would be disappointed. Their brothers-in-arms had almost crushed Rhodes.

His gaze lifted from the ships to the immense bronze statue of Helios straddling the entrance to the harbor. Kratos would pull it down when the last of the Rhodes soldiers had died on a Spartan blade. It would be a fitting symbol of the utter defeat of the city.

He barely noticed an eagle flapping furiously from the statue's shoulder toward him. Even if this was a hunting bird, it could not harm a god. Kratos reached behind him to draw the Blades of Athena when the eagle swooped down to rake fierce talons along his shoulder. The electric jolt that snapped his back into an arch held him in a rictus he could not escape. As quickly as it had come the paralysis passed, but his entire body danced with blue-white flames.

"Athena, you conspire against me?" Kratos swatted at the eagle, but it flew back toward the Colossus. The talons trailed crackling blue sparks. Kratos reached out to grab it, but the bird flew too swiftly and evaded his grasping fingers. He staggered and almost fell to his knees as weakness seized him in a fierce grip.

The eagle landed on the shoulder of the Colossus and immediately transferred the shimmering energy—the energy stolen from Kratos!—to the statue. Kratos shivered and fought, but the web of scintillant electricity enshrouding him could not be shaken off. In a fury, he saw the statue begin to stir as his energy invigorated it; the unnatural movement sent the men on the scaffolding screaming to the ocean below.

The statue stepped out into the harbor, a giant bronze foot crushing a Spartan ship under its sole. The Colossus splashed water and capsized another vessel laden with soldiers. As it made its way across the harbor, the warships attempted to fight. Arrows arched upward, some ablaze, only to bounce harmlessly off heavy bronze legs. Then the archers and the ships carrying them were crushed beneath the juggernaut coming for Kratos.

Kratos tried to muster his strength. He was more than a minion of Ares now. He was the God of War! But the harder he attempted to lift his arms, to take a step, to draw the Blades of Athena sheathed at his back, the weaker he became. Then the ultimate humiliation was delivered to him.

He began to shrink. From godlike proportions he shriveled up second by second. Where once he towered over the buildings of Rhodes, he was now the same size. And then smaller. He crashed through the flooring and landed hard, the shimmering web that had sucked away his size now fading. He looked around the chamber where he found himself, still a giant among men but more of a size as he had been when he was mortal. Looking at his hands and powerful forearms, he knew he was still a formidable fighter, but lacking the full strength of a god would make combat more difficult.

“Athena, you will suffer for this!”

Then a wordless cry erupted from his throat. Being a god with a god’s power had lulled him into an existence that was soft, decadent. Being the size of a mortal once more, lacking full godlike strength, only made him more determined to slay his enemies. Doing so now would carry more honor and reflect glory on the army of Sparta.

He turned to see a handful of Rhodesian warriors enter the large chamber. They stared at him, wide-eyed, then one cried, “The Ghost of Sparta!”

Kratos gave them no time to recover from their shock of finding him in their midst. He strode forward and grabbed the first soldier by the throat. He squeezed down on the exposed neck so hard the man’s eyes bugged. Then his throat ruptured under the pressure, sending a geyser of hot blood down Kratos’ arm. He tossed the soldier aside in time to sidestep the sword thrust from the second warrior. Kratos’ blade cut cleanly through the soldier’s outstretched arm.

As he stepped away from the falling enemy, a grating sound drew his attention to a huge hand sliding along the outer wall of the chamber. Through a window he saw shining bronze and an intricate superstructure. For a moment, he frowned and wondered what this could be. Then a face peered in, eyes bright and blue in a face of immobile metal. The Colossus pressed closer to the window, trying to find Kratos in the relative darkness of the chamber. Kratos drew the Blades of Athena and advanced.

The Colossus might be hundreds of feet tall, but it faced the Ghost of Sparta.

Barely had Kratos taken two steps than he heard excited chattering and, “Don’t let him escape!”

“But we cannot fight a god!”

He turned and saw half a dozen Rhodesian soldiers pressing through a doorway, then fanning out in preparation for their attack. A quick glance at the Colossus showed that the metal giant still sought him. Kratos roared from deep in his gut and attacked, his blades leaving behind trails of eye-searing gold flame as he swung first left, then right. His first strike cleaved a man in half. His second gutted the officer commanding the soldiers. Then he ran forward, a battle cry on his lips as he engaged the remaining defenders of Rhodes.

He quickly pared his opposition down to a single soldier, who bolted and ran.

“Coward!” Kratos yelled after him.

As he turned, an arrow penetrated his armor. He felt the arrowhead’s prick, reached to the back, and grabbed the shaft. With a jerk, he pulled it free. The armor had saved him from more than a tiny cut—but half a dozen more arrows whistled past him. With blades swinging in a wall before him, he deflected several and found the source of so much feathered death.

Two archers fired as quickly as they could, having identified their target. So intent was he on the two bowmen that he failed to see the expressionless face at a large window. As Kratos rushed forward to engage the archers, blades whistling in a circular death pattern, the entire wall on the harbor side of the chamber exploded inward and a bronze arm crashed down, almost crushing him.

He rolled, slammed into a wall, and came to his feet, facing the Colossus. Tiny electric sparks danced along the arm and up to the giant’s head. The eyes were a guileless blue, but Kratos read danger there.

Throughout his thralldom to Ares and the ten years in service to the gods of Olympus he had fought Cyclopes and Minotaurs and monsters so vile they would have revolted a lesser man. The

Colossus of Rhodes lacked the speed and agility of any of those creatures. Kratos slashed downward on the exposed forearm and caused an immediate withdrawal from the chamber. The moaning of metal made him contemptuous of the poor caricature of Helios. That god had been no friend of Kratos' but at least was quick and quick-witted.

A ladder beckoned to an upper level that led out onto a balcony where several soldiers gathered. "We m-m-must stop him or all is lost! Kill Kratos and the Spartans will retreat!"

"But we cannot kill a god," protested a soldier almost the size of Kratos.

"Is he truly a god? He bleeds. See the cuts on his face."

"No, no, that's another's blood."

The first fighter took Kratos' measure anew and came to a quick decision. Puffing out his broad chest to look even larger, he pushed the others aside and stepped forward. "Do you pretend to be a god? You bleed like a mortal. Where are your powers, other than in your swords?" The soldier snorted as he hefted his weapon. "You're only a mortal—and you will die!"

The huge soldier rushed forward, thrusting with his spear while hunching down behind his shield for protection. Kratos stood his ground, acting only at the last possible moment. One flashing blade cut through the spear shaft. As he pivoted, his second sword tip sneaked under the shield and upward. For an instant, the soldier's armor held. Then Kratos felt the blade enter the belly and strike hard against the man's spine. Grunting, Kratos heaved and lifted the man high, still impaled on his blade.

The other defenders of Rhodes reacted as he expected. They began backing away, keeping their swords and spears leveled at him as they sought to retreat. Kratos dropped the still-living soldier and kicked him away—a distraction that almost cost him his life.

The great whooshing of metal sailing through the air gave his only warning. Instinctively, he dropped, rolled, and barely evaded the bronze fist as the Colossus smashed through the stone and mortar of the wall behind him. The Colossus recovered and slammed its flat hand down in an attempt to swat him like an

annoying bug. The stone floor shattered, and the shock waves knocked the tight knot of soldiers off their feet.

Every impact tore up more of the stone walkway and sent shards flying in all directions like deadly missiles. One long sliver of stone penetrated Kratos' armor and pricked his skin. He yanked it out. The needle-sharp tip was red with his blood. With a mighty heave, Kratos threw it at the Colossus, only to watch it bounce harmlessly off the metal chest.

It took all of Kratos' accumulated skill to avoid the metallic fist crashing downward again. Worse, as he recovered and hacked at the impervious arm, sending sparks flying in all directions, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Kill him and we'll be given more land than we can walk in a week!"

Four soldiers rushed him while he chopped at the arm of the Colossus, now sweeping along the stone walk in an attempt to bowl him over. Kratos vaulted the arm, rolled, and had a chance to attack the left forearm where some of the bronze plating hadn't yet been installed. The rods within the arm provided him with better targets. One stout rod parted with a loud snap, causing the Colossus to recoil, allowing Kratos to deal with the attacking soldiers.

They proved easy opponents. Whether they fought for land or honor or their city-state hardly mattered. One after another perished under the slashing cuts Kratos delivered. As the last warrior died on the tip of his sword, Kratos saw movement. The Colossus staggered back, clutching its left arm where the wrist had been severed, leaving only a stump spewing scintillant blue sparks and a soul-chilling glow.

The abbreviated arm swung around, sending the light searing through the air, sizzling and burning with the sweep of the arm. Kratos ducked beneath the deadly blue beam, hands gripping the blades as he readied for another thrust. But the Colossus moved with speed far surpassing what a monster of such metallic bulk ought to achieve. The severed limb swept around but the good right hand smashed down, as if swatting an insect.

Kratos jumped aside at the last possible instant, but the mighty bronze hand crashed into the terrace. The impact caused him to fly up into the air. With an agile twist, he came about and got his feet under him—only to find that he landed not on the stone terrace but in the now outstretched hand. With a clatter of sandals against metal palm, he landed hard. The fingers curled over as the Colossus made a fist, intent on crushing him.

Both blades drove upward. One penetrated a finger trying to clamp down on him and smash life from his mortal body. The other hacked off a chunk of metal from the adjoining finger. Kratos let out a bellow of pain as the Colossus squeezed and the fingers came down atop him. Only the small amount of bronze cut from the finger saved him. Rough edges tore at his body, but he fit through the hole he had hacked and came out atop the fist. Using his blades as poles, he drove them into the backs of two fingers and used this position to lever himself free.

He tumbled to the terrace, rolled, and came to his feet, weapons ready. The Colossus retreated again, stared at the nick Kratos had put into its finger, and then swung back its stump with the blazing light in a vain attempt to catch the God of War off guard.

Kratos jumped to a nearby platform where a ballista had been loaded with a huge stone spear. The crew had long since abandoned their post and their mission to heave the missile out and smash the incoming Spartan ships. The bowstring was only half pulled back. Kratos grabbed the winch and put his full strength to drawing the bowstring taut. This was normally a job for four men, but Kratos was up to it. Muscles bulged on his powerful arms and rippled across his back as he worked.

The string snapped into place with a solid *thunk*.

He turned and moved the ballista about, aiming it for the ponderous metal giant still struggling out in the harbor. Burning blue eyes fixed on Kratos, and the mouth opened in a parody of a human grin. Cerulean light poured forth as the behemoth lumbered forward to attack once more. Kratos watched, estimated distances—and waited even longer. The Colossus was too slow moving to dodge

the massive stone missile he was about to launch, but he wanted it to strike directly in the center of the metal face.

As the Colossus reached for him, Kratos triggered the ballista. The stone grated along wooden rails and erupted with a speed so great, it was hardly more than a blur. If it had struck any ship in the harbor, the vessel would have been doomed and sent directly to the bottom. But the heavy stone, despite its speed, did not strike the Colossus. Moving faster than it had any right to, the statue batted the stone away, delivering such a blow that the rock turned to dust.

Kratos recognized the danger he faced now. The essence that the eagle had drained from him had been fully transferred to the metal colossus. With every passing moment, the giant statue became stronger, faster, more capable.

“You will not defeat me this easily, Athena,” he said, determination hardening within his breast. “Taking my power will not succeed. I am the God of War!”

A huge bronze fist rose and fell, shaking the foundations of the building even as it destroyed everything in front of Kratos. He backed away, then took a running start and vaulted over the fist. Kratos landed heavily, facing three soldiers. With a mighty sweep of his swords, he sent two scurrying away, unwilling to engage him in combat. The remaining soldier died quickly, in time for Kratos to avoid another flat-handed smash from the Colossus.

The exposed left arm presented a tempting target, but he could not reach it with his blades. Instead, Kratos cut furiously at the right arm and produced a small nick—nothing more. As the metal giant reared back to strike again, Kratos jumped again to the ballista. There were no more massive stones to fling at the bronze statue—and there was no time to crank back the bowstring in any case. Kratos stood on the rails, pressed his back against the string, and used his powerful legs to push backward.

If he could not defeat the metal statue by brute force, he would attack in as unexpected a manner as possible.

Growling like an animal, he forced back the string inch by inch. Ahead of him, rearing up in the harbor, the Colossus returned to launch yet another crushing blow at him.

Kratos sagged when the bowstring snapped into place. But the lack of missile didn't deter him. He remained in front of the bowstring, armored back pressed firmly into the launcher. As the bronze man moved directly in front of the ballista, Kratos released the trigger once more.

The sudden acceleration took away his breath as he sailed through the air in a direct line ending at the head of the Colossus. But again, the god-power-endowed metallic statue reacted with astounding speed to bat him high into the air. Kratos found himself looking down at the monstrous figure, then tumbling through the air, writhing about to avoid being caught between grasping fingers. His own agility and fighting prowess landed him on the statue's cheekbone, near the glowing right eye.

"Graaah!"

Kratos' battle cry reverberated off the metal face and across Rhodes as he lifted both swords and plunged them deep into the right eye. The Colossus responded as an animal might. It grabbed for him and its injured eye, but Kratos was no longer there to provide a victim for the crushing might of the metal fingers. He slid downward, reached a slippery bronze shoulder where he could find some purchase, and began hacking away at the exposed neck. Scratches appeared, then deeper notches.

And then those fingers he had successfully avoided thus far finally found him, plucked him away, and flung him high into the air. This time Kratos screamed in frustration as he hurtled toward a stolid building on the far side of the harbor.



ATHENA PAUSED at the doorway leading into Zeus' throne room. The Sky Father sat rigidly on the edge of his raised throne, leaning forward as he listened intently to his brother Hades. Whatever they discussed provoked heated emotions. Athena found it difficult not to storm forward and interrupt, but a speck of caution remained and smothered her anger.

She pressed her hand to her cheek, trying to assure herself she was in full control. She had been increasingly irrational of late, and noticed it. It was as if she had somehow separated body from spirit, her body taking charge as her soul ranged wide and far, taking all logic with it.

Zeus glanced up and stared at her, but it was as if she did not exist. He turned back to his brother and shot to his feet. The low argument now boiled out loud and clear.

"You will do no such thing!"

"He cheated me! No one should escape the Lord of the Underworld. Tell me how it was possible that Kratos climbed back from his death in the Temple of Pandora without help. It wasn't Ares helping him. He was hotheaded but would have taken pleasure knowing his mortal irritant had been assigned to my realm." Hades held out a bony hand, closed it into a fist, and squeezed. Black dust cascaded onto Zeus' feet.

“What are you saying, my brother?” Zeus ignored the grave dust on his sandals.

“Athena thwarted me! She helped him escape the crossing of the Styx!”

Athena watched her father’s reaction and knew for certain that he had been the god aiding Kratos as the gravedigger. She had suspected but until this moment had no solid proof.

“Welcome, daughter,” Zeus said, looking back at her, as if seeing her for the first time. “Come closer. Your uncle was telling me of your interference with his realm.”

“It is of Kratos I have come to speak, Father,” she said. Athena nodded politely in Hades’ direction but did not address him. He had worked himself up into a fury, thinking she had dug the grave near the temple to allow Kratos’ escape.

“She champions his cause still! He has brought only discord to Olympus, Zeus. You cannot permit this to endure any more than you can allow Athena’s meddling in matters reserved to my kingdom!”

Hades was so angry that his dark face smoked, as if he were on fire within. He clutched his hands together so hard, a steady cascade of ash floated to the travertine floor in front of Zeus’ throne.

“My uncle should have been a poet, so great is his imagination. Perhaps you have been speaking with Homer as he explores the Elysian Fields?”

Hades brought his fist back to strike her but a dazzling lightning bolt rent the air above his head. Hades spun and glared at Zeus. Before he could say a word, a new flash caused Hades to step away. He spun about, rose into the air, and vanished in a sooty tornado. Zeus lowered the hand used to cast his lightning, then made a quick sweeping motion. The ash on the floor disappeared. Athena could not help but notice that the greasy blackness on Zeus’ sandals remained when he dropped back onto his throne.

Once more he was the stoic Sky Father, King of the Gods, looking regal and as if nothing had disturbed him.

“My daughter petitions for Kratos again?”

She started to agree, then shook her head. “No, Father, but I do beseech you to show mercy. Your plans for Kratos are hidden to me,

but through your good graces I was allowed to place him on Ares' throne."

"Ares' insanity destroyed him. Kratos provided only the final toss of the dice in a game Ares could no longer play."

"The other gods have humiliated Kratos," she began, but Zeus' deep-throated laughter stopped further words.

"Kratos humiliated? Never! His pride knows no bounds. It is *I* who am wronged. He refuses to obey and brings discord to Olympus. How often have I found him eyeing me with malice?"

"He is right to be angered that you did not give him surcease from his nightmares," she said.

"All I do is for a reason, daughter. He has chosen to ignore your warnings, and his behavior now threatens all in Olympus.

"All, Sky Father?" she said, staring boldly at him. "Or is there more? Do you fear your own creation and what he is capable of?"

"Like Ares, he refuses to obey me. Kratos did not seize the throne of the God of War. I *allowed* him to ascend. Am I not the Lord of Olympus? I control all that happens."

Athena did not answer this because her father's tone indicated he believed it. Or had he forgotten the role of the Sisters of Fate in the Titanomachy? If they had not been favorably inclined toward the gods during the Great War, the Titans would still reign supreme.

Rather, she said, "Discord spreads on Olympus, my father. You have seen how your brother, my uncle, acts."

"Poseidon is testy, also," Zeus said, stroking his long white beard of billowing clouds. Gold rings engraved with his name held thick strands together. With a toss of his head, he got his long white hair out of his eyes—pupil-less eyes that glowed the blue of the sky surrounding Olympus. An air of thoughtfulness descended. Athena wondered at what went on behind those blank eyes.

"Kratos is the cause. Speak to him, my father. Convince him with your eloquence to return peace to Olympus."

"Would he listen to me? He has scorned your attempt to aid him." Zeus answered his own question. A sly smile crept to his lips. "Of course he will listen to me. He needs to be taught humility because he reaches for that which he cannot have." His eyes darted to a

curtained alcove on the far side of the audience chamber. Athena watched Zeus' expression alter from one of confidence, even arrogance, to something ... else.

She looked over her shoulder as a gentle breeze blowing through the chamber stirred rose petals on the floor and the curtain. The glimpse of Pandora's Box caused her to stiffen with sudden apprehension that Zeus would notice her attention on the box rather than on him.

"What?" The question escaped Athena before she could stop. She took a step forward, one foot on the lowest step leading to the throne of the ruler of the gods.

"He seeks to depose me, just as Ares tried. No god—or goddess—will ever assume this throne. It is mine and mine alone to rule Olympus." His voice rose shrilly, and he half stood from the throne, his powerful body tense. Athena saw a touch of madness matching Ares' in her father, and it frightened her. A dozen thoughts tumbled in her head on how to forestall any attempt on his part to exert more control over the other gods. There were always plans and secret schemes brewing among the easily bored of Olympus, but Zeus was in a singular position of power.

Again Zeus looked past her to Pandora's Box, but he turned his attention fully on her before she could say anything more.

"Kratos has no aspiration for your throne, Father," she said, then paused, thinking about this. She shook her head as certainty settled on her about Kratos' motives. "He only makes war using his Spartan soldiers to strike back at offenses heaped upon his head by the others."

"I have treated him fairly," Zeus said.

"He does not see that," Athena said.

"He cannot. Therefore, I must make him, if harmony is to be restored in Olympus." Zeus settled back on his throne, arms crossed and tiny storms billowing in his beard of braided clouds.

Athena heard more than the tiny claps of thunder produced by those storms. She sensed violent winds blowing through her beloved Olympus.



“SUCH A LOVELY PATTERN,” Clotho cooed as she shifted her immense sluglike bulk to get more comfortable at her spinning wheel. Amid the whine of threads flying from her spinneret came far-distant cries of pain as entire armies met the fate decreed by the Sisters of Fate. “I cannot remember if I have ever spun such a fine design before. Have I, dear sister?”

Atropos looked up from her own work, measuring the length of a thread of destiny tied to a rod to maintain tension. If it slackened, she might have to remeasure and give the boon of a longer life to the young king tethered to the far end. Worse, he might die too quickly should impetuous Lahkesis cut prematurely because of the drooping fate. Atropos stretched out a talon-fingered hand, using her long nails to mark off the proper life-length on the thread.

“Why, sister, have you decided so quickly on this one?” Clotho asked, looking over from the spinneret snaking out destinies.

“I hope to toy with him a bit longer,” said Atropos, with a sigh. She rose into the air, black tendrils swirling where a mortal’s legs and feet would be. She whirled about, then settled down to stroke along another thread of fate spun by Clotho. “How long should this one be?” she mused.

“You’re asking my opinion?” Clotho laughed. “Of course not, dear sister. You never do. You are so dedicated to your work that you

never need advice.”

“We have enjoyment enough playing with the mortals—”

“And the gods,” cut in Clotho. “We need to spend more time with them and less with the petty mortals.”

“So say you. I find enough diversion with the mortals.”

Atropos ran her talons along myriad strands, some glowing gold and others plain and white, as of cotton or other mundane material, and finally plucked one.

“Kratos,” Clotho said, seeing the ebony thread that occupied her sister’s attention. “That one will give us trouble. I feel it. Let me—”

“Stop!” Atropos thrust out her long talons to prevent her sister from spinning a new thread of fate for Kratos. “We agreed, the three of us, about him.”

“He talks with Titans,” Clotho said.

“We defeated the Titans when we placed the gods atop Olympus. They are no longer interesting.”

“Do not become obsessed with him. Sister, return to your work and let Lahkesis tend to him. There are so many threads for us to spin and measure.”

“You are right,” said Atropos, ignoring Kratos’ black thread in favor of another, more interesting one. “I am concentrating on an important mortal. He wiggles and darts about but has no hope of evading the fate I have in store for him.”

“Not another of those tedious diseases you are so fond of?” Clotho reared back, her gelatinous body rippling, and looked at the tangle of destinies she had contrived to bring together. Nations were naught but intricate patterns of individual fates. She had fashioned a fine tapestry this time, one that would be remembered for all time by the mortals.

“War,” insisted Atropos. “I have found a new path to destruction that is fitting for this particular character.”

Clotho looked at the thread and sniffed in contempt.

“What? You do not think well of my work this time, Clotho?” Atropos plucked the thread and sent ripples down it. “I sank an entire continent this way!”

“Atlantis,” Clotho said reprovingly, “was hardly worth your effort when we have so many fine destinies to weave with the gods and the mortals who worship them.”

“The gods,” Atropos said almost sadly. “I have been disappointed in them. I thought Zeus’ victory over his father Cronos would have resulted in something more ... diverting.”

“For them it has, but they are only gods dependent upon us for their fate.”

“Lahkesis might be right about Kratos. Elevated to godhood after the destruction of Ares and then returned to a mortal state,” Atropos said, “might be interesting. I get so tired of delivering the same destinies to the gods, but especially to the mortals. Their lives are so short and violent.”

“You ought to decree more peaceful deaths for them,” said Clotho. “Otherwise, will you shorten their existences or make them suffer?”

“Oh, I suppose I could allow some more pain in their lives. You spin well, sister, but I worry about the length I afford them. It always seems so ... limited. Everything turns so ordinary over the eons.”

“I enjoy watching Hades receive them into the Underworld and the tortures he allows there.”

“Kratos,” Atropos said, coming back to the disturbing mortal. “We need to observe our sister Lahkesis at work with her pet mortal turned god.”

“I don’t think he is all that interesting,” Clotho said. “Better to invent a new creature for the mortals and gods to couple with. War, pestilence—there are so many possibilities for combining them to keep us occupied.”

“Is he a mortal? Or is he a god? Something in between?” Atropos looked pensive. As she considered the matter, her finger stroked the thread of destiny attached to the young king that had caught her eye before and produced a violent fate for the mortal affixed to the far end. Never slack, always under delightful tension, the poor wight afforded her the chance to think even as he suffered.

“A demigod? How ordinary. The gods mate with mortals endlessly. I get tired of spinning their fate for such unions.” Clotho

dismissed the notion out of hand.

Atropos plucked at the thread so expertly that a huge ripple followed it. She smiled at the desired fate delivered to the young ruler. He would reach old age, yes, with all his wit and intelligence, but her single design dictated that he would do so without legs. Exploring his character now would certainly break the sameness of their woven fates. It was good to pioneer new destinies for mortals.

“Lahkesis wastes her time with Kratos,” Atropos said suddenly. The words escaped her lips unexpectedly because her attention had been directed elsewhere.

“Nonsense, dear sister,” Clotho said. “She has something special in store for him.”

“What?”

“She claims it will be a surprise, a gift for us. So we should not intrude too much on the destiny of the mortal turned God of War.”

“Not meddle?” Atropos laughed. “Or not meddle too much? I see great entertainment for us with this Kratos.”

Clotho nodded, already distracted from the fate of Kratos as she returned to her tapestry, which decreed the inevitability of death for thousands. Despite what she said to her sister, a strand of disease woven in made the colors of fate more attractive.



KRATOS TUMBLED THROUGH the air, arms flailing until he regained control of himself. He had fallen headfirst from Olympus; falling to the far side of the Rhodes harbor shouldn't be as difficult, even if he had been robbed of his size and strength.

He tucked in his chin, swung about, and landed hard on a glass dome. For a moment he thought it would hold, then it shattered and dropped him directly downward into a limpid pool. The shock of breaking the glass dome was compounded by the sudden immersion in the water. Kratos plunged downward through the warm water until his feet touched the slick-tiled bottom of the pool. Powerful legs straightened and sent him arrowing upward. He broke the surface, gasping for air. The cloying perfume of the bath choked him.

He swam to the edge of the pool and pulled himself up, shook like a dog, and sent droplets flying everywhere, then raced up the stairs and onto a broad balcony overlooking the harbor. The Colossus thrashed about noisily, destroying wantonly as it searched for him, unaware that he watched from some distance. Even as Kratos stared with cold hatred at the metal monster, it turned. Its single glowing blue eye fixed on him, and its mouth opened to spew forth more radiance in a silent scream.

The sound of metal joints creaking warned Kratos he had only moments before he would again engage the statue in dire battle. He drew the Blades of Athena, widened his stance, and waited for his opportunity. The Colossus moved ponderously in the deep harbor, but Kratos had experienced its quick reflexes. As it approached, it raised an arm to smash down again. Kratos caught the right forearm in the X of his crossed swords and pulled with all his might. A deep, bright, jagged scratch appeared in the bronze.

The Colossus recoiled, then swung its left arm stump about. Kratos used the blades as climbing hooks to engage the exposed framework. More rods parted and the Colossus reacted as a wounded animal might. With a powerful overhead cut, Kratos drove the swords downward onto the exposed metal wrist. Sparks flew in all directions. He swung again, fighting to keep his balance. The God of War made his way up the injured arm until he reached a spot where he could cast out one sword in a tremendous upward sweep. It embedded like a fishhook in the metal cheek. A hard yank sent Kratos flying upward, using his other sword to deeply score the metal with a deafening screech and poke into the remaining eye. Once more the Colossus responded.

Kratos ducked under the wild grab, tore back a chunk of metal, and exposed a wound that oozed blue light just as the single eye and mouth did. He stabbed and slashed and found the metal yielding—and this almost proved his end.

So intent was he on peeling back the metal sliver to expose the inner face, he neglected to dodge the right hand. He screamed in pain as the metal fingers closed about him. And squeezed. Hard. Harder. The pain matched anything he had ever felt, but he refused to yield. Working on the top finger until he had almost severed it, Kratos gained leverage and used his prodigious strength, only to find himself once more flung through the air.

He crashed to a stone floor, rolled, and came to his feet. He stood, only to stare up at the sky, where storm clouds blew across the sun.

The lightning blast that rent the sky warned him an instant before a resonant voice rumbled, “Kratos!”

He glared at the clouds and responded, “I do not need your help, Zeus. I can take down this metal monster!”

“I offer you more than help, Kratos. I offer you power.”

Kratos threw up his forearm to shield his face as the clouds parted and a brilliant new sun exploded into being, a sun that fell from the sky. Squinting, he watched as what he had thought a lightning bolt turned into a long, scintillant sword. It embedded itself in a stone terrace on the far side of the harbor.

“I offer you the Blade of Olympus,” Zeus continued. “It was this blade that ended the Great War and defeated the Titans. Drain your godly powers into the sword, Kratos. Only then will you reach your full potential.”

Kratos stared at the distant sword half embedded in the stone, then lifted his gaze upward to the clouds, now ablaze with Zeus’ jagged, eye-searing lightning. The Colossus moved at the far side of the harbor, marshaling its strength for another attack—one that he would be hard-pressed to meet.

“Why do you aid me now?”

“What I do now I do for the good of all Olympus. Wield this weapon and all on Olympus will see you for who you are.”

Kratos was torn with indecision. He had no reason to believe or trust Zeus, but his burning need to lead his Spartans to victory—against Athena, the treacherous bitch—was foremost. Still, Zeus? The Sky Father was no more an ally than any of the other Olympian gods he so loathed. Zeus prided himself on his perfidy.

But if Zeus truly thought this was for the good of Olympus, he would aid anyone. Even the Ghost of Sparta.

Before Kratos could balance the risk of believing Zeus against the chance of some faithless offer, he found himself engaged with soldiers making their way up from the building’s interior. His swung the Blades of Athena about in wide, vicious arcs that ended one Rhodesian defender’s life after another. But their sheer numbers would eventually swamp him—and the Colossus once more moved toward him. Its unceasing attack had rallied the Rhodesian soldiers, who now pushed back the noble Spartans toward the harbor. For

them, Kratos could do nothing but provide an example. To achieve that victory he knew he must accept Zeus' gift.

The Blade of Olympus!

He made his way through the destruction left by his Spartans, only to encounter another tight knot of soldiers—and an archer.

Kratos glanced in the direction of the blue-glowing blade that was his goal, then lashed out with renewed fury. As he laid into one soldier, one to his left cried, "Beware! The Colossus!"

Kratos looked away from the fight for an instant. His entire body ached from his battles with the animated metal statue. Worse, his legs lacked their usual strength and speed of movement in his attacks.

Kratos looked. And almost had his head severed from his shoulders. It was a trick. The Colossus rampaged in the harbor but was no immediate danger. The soldier who had shouted afforded Kratos' opponent the chance to take advantage of the lapsed attention.

Kratos barely brought his blades up in an X to trap the descending sword that would have split his head in half. Ordinarily battle rage and his godlike strength would have easily prevailed. He was driven to his knees by the power of the blow. Worse, the distracting soldier attacked in concert with his companion. The two cleverly slipped their sharp-edged swords past Kratos' furious parries, scoring his flesh and creating rivulets of blood from their inflicted wounds.

Kratos looked past them to the Colossus—and to the aid Zeus had offered.

"Die, Kratos, die!" shrieked the soldier who had almost sliced his head in half.

Long before Kratos had become God of War or even Ares' minion he had been a fierce warrior. Old reactions replaced reliance on godlike power now stolen away. He yielded before the potent attack but turned it aside as it slashed down. Still on his knees, he released his grip on the sword hilts and drove forward, his shoulder in the soldier's groin even as his fingers circled the man's legs, seeking nerves in the muscular thighs and cruelly gouging. The soldier's legs

went numb, allowing Kratos to change the direction of his own attack.

He lifted the man on his shoulder, spun him about, and threw him into his battle mate. They fell in a confused, struggling heap, but again Kratos discovered how the fight against the Colossus had drained him. It should have been simple enough to dispatch the two helplessly flailing men before they could regain their stances. He missed the chance to use his swords, so Kratos flopped on top of them, driving them back to the floor.

His wrestling skills again saved him. A solid punch to one's throat caused him to choke, allowing Kratos to pummel the other into a stupor. Both men incapacitated, Kratos pushed himself to his feet, turned, and stared at his true enemy.

The Colossus returned to claim its victim's death.

This single-minded determination burned away any indecision. Kratos raced out an arched doorway and stared across a long, narrow stone bridge. The Blade of Olympus gleamed like a beacon on the far side.

And every joint in the Colossus creaked as it reared back and delivered with its stump a huge blow that crushed the stone terrace behind Kratos. He reacted instinctively. Legs driving hard, he sprinted forward across the bridge. Again the quickness of the Colossus almost sent him to the Underworld. Both the left stump and the right fist rained down on the stone bridge, shattering it behind Kratos. It collapsed faster and faster and only a final burst of speed sent the God of War forward onto solid stone flooring.

The Blade of Olympus was thrust point-first into the center of the terrace.

Kratos started for it, only to stop and face the Colossus. The metal statue clutched its stump, then beat both left forearm and right fist onto the stone, shattering the marble into channels. Dodging the cracks, Kratos attacked, his blades singing a hymn of destruction—but he found himself cut off when the Colossus thrust the glowing stump onto the flooring. The cracks filled with searing flame that charred his armor and turned the Blades of Athena fiery hot in his grasp. Kratos avoided the cracks, stared at the Colossus, and

unleashed the Rage of Poseidon. Kratos stood, arms held high, and felt the power build within. A nimbus of energy surrounded his body, crackling, sizzling, dancing about like evil insects set ablaze. He spun, then sent out a ring of the energy, fast, faster until it exploded like the sun itself. The Colossus recoiled, momentarily stunned, giving Kratos an instant to attack. He slashed and hammered at the Colossus' right arm, ducked beneath, then opened a long gash in the bronze midsection that spilled forth blue light.

Wounded, the Colossus clutched at the rent in its metal hide, giving Kratos the opportunity he had anticipated.

The God of War ran to the blade and tried to pull it free. It resisted his efforts, but he felt a pulsation in the blade, a growing sensation in his gut. He gripped the hilt with both hands and heaved. The Blade of Olympus remained stuck in the stone where Zeus had hurled it, but Kratos began to experience a curious weakness.

He released the hilt and stared at the blade. "Truly, do I need your help, Zeus? What will this do to me?" The sound of battle, of the Spartans being repulsed, of his brothers-in-arms being killed, decided him. Pushing his doubts aside, Kratos once more took the blade in hand.

Dizziness assailed him but nothing more. To draw the blade from the stone, he had to willingly surrender his power. As alien as the concept of surrender was to him, he knew it was necessary. Kratos closed his eyes, gripped the blade, and willed away his power.

The sword began to draw out his godhood.

The world spun, and he felt his belly knot violently. He would have puked had there been anything in his stomach. His muscles quaked, and weakness seized him.

His strength was now that of the Kratos of old, the Kratos who had been Ares' lackey—but also the Kratos who had slain a god.

The Blade of Olympus slid free from its stone sheath, all of Kratos' godly powers now residing within it. He lifted the sword and stared at it. He felt the power within quiver. That had been his power, and now he had given it to this weapon. The ponderous blade swung easily in his grip. Almost naturally.

The Colossus pressed its right forearm across the gash he had carved in its belly. The left arm waved about, spewing blue luminance as if it were arterial blood. Kratos rushed forward, the Blade of Olympus held high over his head for a killing attack. He dived forward, somersaulted, and came up at the edge of the stone terrace as that severed limb swung above him. The heat from the blazing light-blood melted parts of Kratos' armor, but he pressed on.

Rapid cuts to the Colossus' right hand further infuriated the statue. It swung its right hand up and dropped it heavily to shake the flooring under Kratos. He avoided the blow, stepped up, and judged distances. With legs like springs, he shot forward, the tip of the Blade of Olympus preceding him.

The blade opened the gash in the statue's belly even more, and Kratos tumbled into the huge animated structure. He followed the scaffolding around the innards of the statue, circling upward. The sound of grinding and grating gears drew him ever higher until he reached a platform looking out to a rotating shaft that drove the gears powering the Colossus.

Carefully balancing, he trod a beam to reach the center of power for the huge bronze automaton. Almost as if it had a mind of its own, the Blade of Olympus slid forward between the gears. For an instant Kratos thought the sword might break. Instead, the sword grew brighter as it sucked the life force from the Colossus—*his* life force that the eagle had transferred. Kratos watched in grim satisfaction as the blade absorbed the energy from the statue in the same fashion it had sapped his. The glowing shaft and gears turned dull and dark, only mechanical now.

He yanked the blade free and held it high above his head. It shone with the light of a hundred suns. There was no time to revel in the feel of such a potent weapon in his grip because the entire structure began to shake and wobble. Kratos jumped up to a scaffold and continued climbing until he reached a grillwork where he could peer out the statue's gaping mouth across the harbor. His sense of balance proved right. The Colossus was leaning precariously.

But it still moved. He saw its left stump rise and spurt out blue-white energy. Drained as it was by the Blade of Olympus, there

remained enough life energy to be dangerous.

From his vantage Kratos saw that the Colossus turned toward the harbor, where valiant Spartans had rallied and again pushed back the city's defenders. Pride in their fighting prowess filled him, but the steady gains being achieved once more would slip away should the bronze statue turn its focus to them. It had to be utterly destroyed to ensure victory for Sparta.

And to ensure his own victory over the treacherous Athena. Once his stolen power was reclaimed, she would come to regret her betrayal.

Kratos continued upward inside the head. Four more circuits of the statue's interior brought him to another gear-shaft nexus. Again the Blade of Olympus drank deeply. And yet the Colossus moved and struggled.

Before he could strike another blow, the Colossus shook all over as if it had a terrible fever. Kratos grabbed a rod for support and still lost his footing. He was slung out over the abyss in the center of the bronze statue. Far below he saw the jammed, sundered gears tearing off huge strips of brass as they grated against one another.

Swinging once, he kicked hard and sailed through the air to grab the edge of the eye he had put out in the fight. From this vantage he got a better look at the burning city and the progress his Spartans made against the defenders.

He exulted. The tide had turned in favor of Sparta! It was time he delivered the deathblow to the walking monstrosity and join with his men once again.

It was then that the Colossus reared up and toppled forward. Kratos saw the harbor water rushing at him—and then the statue slammed facedown in the water. The hollow insides of the metallic giant filled quickly with water, and the water began to boil as it touched the magically driven gears and rods within. Kratos felt his lungs approaching the bursting point as the Colossus dived ever deeper into the harbor. More breath escaped his lungs when ooze from the sea bottom filled the eyes and mouth of the statue. He tried to fight his way through, but he became dizzy from lack of air and it

proved impossible to penetrate the slippery ooze from the harbor to escape the Colossus.

Swinging his sword, refusing to yield, Kratos felt the blade impact metal and then sink deeply. As the last of his breath rushed forth, he found himself sucking in not water but air. The Colossus rose from its watery grave and again shook, as if it might dislodge him. He drove his blade deep into the inner cheek and held fast.

The statue creaked and groaned with metal tearing away. It went wild when Kratos twisted his sword about.

Leaning out and peering upward, Kratos saw what must be the brain of the animated killing statue. With a powerful jump, he soared into space, deftly caught a rope strung across the open central shaft, and made his way across to a ladder disappearing into the head above. He began climbing until he reached a platform looking out directly to a juncture where half a dozen shimmering beams joined in a single burning-bright gear mechanism.

A narrow walkway took him to the brain mechanism, with its reduction gears and potent energy beams stretching out in all directions to animate the statue. He ducked under a slowly swinging pendulum, then attacked the gears with a vengeance born of frustration and anger at how he had been used so grievously by the gods—by Ares and now by Athena.

He sliced repeatedly with the Blade of Olympus, each cut inducing a huge shudder in the Colossus. Torturing it thusly, Kratos continued to cut until pieces of the gears began to peel away. Each carried a little more of the life force with it, until the gears and shaft no longer rotated smoothly. Only then did he thrust the sword directly into the center of the brain mechanism. This time the feel of energy draining was extreme.

The Colossus shook as if caught in an earthquake, forcing Kratos to grab a stanchion to keep from being thrown from his precarious perch. He held the blade in the center of the gears, watching the bluish glow fade to a dull red and then vanish entirely. Cold satisfaction filled him at thwarting Athena and her bronze killer.

As the Colossus shook, the scaffolding circling its interior began to fall down the central shaft. Kratos withdrew the blade, and the shaft

that had provided the brain function with all its gears fell straight down. The entire structure was coming apart. Kratos circled the head and crawled out the mouth to the lips. The earsplitting sounds of tearing metal were overshadowed by a more ominous noise. It wasn't a burning or hissing but something more, something worse.

Kratos tumbled out past the lips and caught a gust of fresh air blowing across the harbor. As he turned to look upward at the Colossus, the odor changed to burning metal. With a powerful leap, Kratos sailed through the air. An instant later the bronze head exploded as if it had been packed with Greek fire. Bronze shrapnel blasted forth in all directions. The shock wave caught him in its grip and hurried him along his way. Kratos' legs pumped hard, as if he ran in midair. He landed in a crouch on a stone balcony, the Blade of Olympus blazing brightly in his grip.

He stood, threw back his head to face skyward, and bellowed, "Do you see, gods of Olympus? Do you need more proof than this?"

The whistle of metal in the air brought him around in time to see the Colossus collapsing toward him. Kratos thrust up the blade, but the bronze hand of the statue smashed him flat and sent the weapon sailing through the air.

As the Blade of Olympus left his hand, Kratos knew despair. All his godly power had been drained into it. Without it in his grip, he was mortal. Only mortal. He moved and felt liquid movement within his body. Organs had been ruptured. His muscles were puny and refused to obey. But even as a mortal, Kratos had more than simple physical strength. Indomitable will pulled him from under the bronze hand pinning him to the stone floor.

He dropped to hands and knees as he vomited blood. Pain racked his body, but the antidote for his problems was in sight. The Blade of Olympus had spun through the air and once more embedded itself in the stone. A dozen yards away. Only a dozen yards. He pulled his feet under him.

Dizziness forced Kratos back to hands and knees. More blood erupted from his mouth and nose to spatter wetly on the stone beneath him. He rose to his knees, armor falling from his body like autumn leaves from a tree. His injuries would have been far greater

without that protection. But now it only weighed him down, and its loss was a boon.

He looked up and saw Spartan soldiers gathering, just at the periphery of his blurred vision. They pointed, and he heard one say, "Kratos has fallen!" Another lamented, "How can this be? Why does our god struggle?"

He wanted to call to them, to assure them he would again be their god.

His legs wobbled under him as he stumbled painfully to his feet once more. Blood trickled from his nose, and bile burned in his throat. As he limped toward the blade, his wrath built anew. For an instant he had felt triumph, but now the old, familiar rage against the petty gods that had seared his soul for so many years returned to consume him. Survival drove him forward step by step.

"What power could possibly defeat the God of War?"

Kratos saw the Spartans start toward him, then stop and turn to meet an assault by a ragtag band of defenders of the city. The Rhodesian soldiers saw in his humiliation the chance for victory. They attacked with screams and flashing weapons. If he was to come to the aid of his devoted soldiers, he had to reach the Blade of Olympus.

As he approached the weapon, a huge eagle flew into sight, flapping slowly as it descended from above.

"You think to kill me?" Kratos grated out. He drew the Blades of Athena and faced the eagle as it screeched once and interposed itself between him and his goal. The eagle had sapped strength from him to animate the Colossus of Rhodes, and now it interposed itself between him and salvation, not only for himself but for his soldiers valiantly fighting and dying under the Rhodesians' onslaught. He struggled to lift the heavy blades. Muscles screamed in agony across his shoulders, and his arms turned weaker than a mewling infant's. Kratos stumbled forward a step and let his anger build. The blades came up in shaking hands, but if he must die, he would die a soldier.

The immense eagle landed, talons scratching the stone floor. Lightning bathed it as it changed form.

“Zeus!” Kratos tried to understand what was happening. The tips of the blades sank, no matter how hard he fought to lift them in his own defense.

“Yes, I am forced to attend to this matter myself,” Zeus said, striding forward. To reach the Blade of Olympus now Kratos would have to shove aside the King of the Gods—and he could barely stagger, so drained had he become from his battle with the Colossus. “Athena refused to undo her mistake. Imagine caring for a creature such as yourself.”

“Why? Why would you betray me?”

“It is *you* who would betray *me*! Am I to sit idly by as Olympus is threatened? Your hands are already stained by the blood of a god. I will not let Ares’ fate be my own.” Zeus grabbed the Blade of Olympus and drew it from its stony sheath.

“The gods are petty and pathetic, and your rule is weak.”

“I grow tired of this insolence. I am King of Olympus. And it is my way that is the way of the gods. You must vow to forever serve me!”

Kratos sneered. With all his strength, he swung the Blades of Athena back and forth in front of him, weaving a curtain of steel as he advanced on the King of the Gods.

“I serve no one.”

Zeus raised the Blade of Olympus, batted away his attack with contemptuous ease, and thrust it into Kratos’ face. Kratos did not flinch as the cold metal touched his cheek. His arms no longer carried strength enough to use his swords. He reached out with his empty hand and shoved the blade away.

“Then you leave me no choice.”

Zeus attacked, the Blade of Olympus slashing through the air—and Kratos’ chest. No armor could have protected flesh from such a powerful blow. Pain exploded within him as he staggered back.

“Submit!” Zeus roared and began advancing, his blade cutting away bits of Kratos with every slash.

Kratos was aware of the Spartans watching their god in battle with Zeus. He would not yield because of them. He would not yield because he was Kratos, Ghost of Sparta!

“I would rather die!” He blocked a thrust from Zeus’ blade but was pressed backward.

Zeus doubled the ferocious attack, forcing Kratos into an entirely defensive fight. Cuts appeared on his body and massive arms. Then Zeus thrust, pushing aside Kratos’ blades as if he brushed away blades of grass.

Kratos toppled backward and grabbed the Blade of Olympus with both hands to prevent it from piercing his chest.

“It does not have to end like this,” Zeus said.

The sneer on Kratos’ face sealed his fate if his words did not. “A choice from the gods is as useless as the gods themselves.”

Zeus roared in anger.

“Even with your last breath, you continue to defy me?”

He thrust forward, driving the tip of the blade through Kratos’ heart. For a moment Zeus paused, the blade remaining within. Then he yanked it free. A pulse of pure light rose from Kratos.

Zeus knelt and whispered, “Everything you have known, Kratos, will now suffer because of your sacrilege. You will never be ruler of Olympus. The cycle ends here.”

Zeus leaped to his feet, turned, and—using the blade that had defeated the Titans—swung it in a broad arc that sent coruscating blue energy slashing through the nearby brave Spartans. Dying screams were ripped from their throats. Kratos realized that these were merely the first to die by Zeus’ hand. Those Spartans, no matter where they were in Rhodes, would suffer a similar fate as the raging, unstoppable disk of energy sawed through them.

“You will pay for this, Zeus. Be certain of that.”

Zeus towered above him, then began to fade. Kratos’ vision blurred and turned dark.



THE EARTH SHOOK, as if shivering with a tremendous fever. Giant cracks appeared along entire continents, and small mountains rose as Gaia's spirit stirred. Formless, of the earth, *the* earth, and yet lacking in substance, she stretched and began to take note of the world as it had become after the war with the gods.

The Titanomachy, the Great War she and the rest of the Titans had lost.

Gaia looked about and saw small changes, but for a Titan they meant little. Her focus sharpened and found the mortal whose life she had followed from his earliest days. It had not been apparent why she showed such interest in this mortal until Kratos showed valor and skill in battle as a minor officer in the Spartan army. Eagerly, Gaia had watched his steady rise in the ranks until he became the commander of the most victorious army in the history of that city-state.

She had realized then the chance for power had returned, just beyond her grasp, but growing nearer by the instant. For a Titan, time was meaningless, and yet she had to abide since it was so important to the short-lived mortals. Worse, time had ceased to have meaning because her physical form had been ripped away, leaving behind only inchoate spirit.

His military career had soared even as his personal life proved tragic, but she saw how the gods played with their mortal pawn, cajoling and promising and manipulating him for their own ends.

Her anger had mounted as Zeus entered the drama, but still Gaia could do naught but watch and wait. The gods would make an error that could be seized upon, and the eternal struggle between god and Titan would resume. For the moment Zeus and the gods might hold the upper hand, but Gaia witnessed how they misunderstood what a deadly weapon they forged in Kratos, their new God of War. If they could not appreciate him, she would.

Gaia stretched and flexed her ghost-limbs, which extended to the core of the world, and now slowly rose to the surface once more as her anger mounted. She and the other Titans had been banished when Zeus had defeated them, but the opportunity presented itself anew to depose the ungrateful gods. Zeus, of all sitting on Olympus, ought to show remorse at what he had done to his father Cronos, to the other Titans. The Sisters of Fate had decreed the destiny of the gods, and Zeus now failed to appreciate their gift. The Sisters had chosen poorly the victor in that war.

His betrayal of Kratos and the confusion and ferment building among the gods made this the perfect time to strike. But gently at first, not to arouse their attention, slowly she must forge the weapon that first Ares had used, then Athena, and finally Zeus. Gaia had watched Kratos throughout his life and knew that now was the time.

Now.



“I NOTICED IT only a moment ago,” said Lahkesis, excited. “Seldom does a ripple return to the loom like this.” She floated upward, her scepter-mounted scythe flashing in the dull light of the Loom Chamber. Her skirts swirled around bare legs, and her upper garb draped down over only one breast, leaving the other exposed in the style of some mortal city-state—the style had caught her fancy, but she misremembered which it was now. Perhaps she had used the scythe to slice through their thread of fate and had long since removed them. At moments such as this, she appreciated the freedom such dress gave. She swung the scythe back and forth menacingly.

“Someone has evaded their destiny, the destiny *we* have decreed? Impossible!”

“No, not that. His fate is sealed, but the circumstances surrounding it are not what I expected.”

“You made a mistake?” Atropos was amused at her sister’s plight. “I have told you that you need to cut more carefully, think more fully, and only then begin your work. After all, Clotho spins the fate, I determine the duration, and you are the ... executioner.”

“Really,” Lahkesis said, sniffing in disdain. “I enjoy myself. You and Clotho are too earnest and never take any pleasure in your contrivances.”

“Contrivances? Is that what you call meting out destiny to an entire world filled with mortals and gods?”

“You neglected to mention the animals in the forest and the fishes in the ocean,” Lahkesis said.

“Only you take pleasure in deciding which of them end up as mortals’ dinner.” Atropos stroked along a thread of rainbow colors using one of her long talons, as if she caressed a small pet. The black fog that was her legs and feet swirled up around her waist, then settled back as she bestirred herself in this argument with her sister.

“Or as a mortal’s lover,” Lahkesis said, smirking. “Lest you forget some of my more memorable couplings and their offspring.”

“Only you could take pride in such things. Forging destiny is serious work, work you need to properly apply yourself to or the world will come crashing down. All must fit perfectly. The pieces cannot have sharp edges or the threads of our work might be sundered.”

Lahkesis dismissed such foolishness with a wave of her graceful hand. She had impossibly strong fingers, as did her sisters, if Atropos’ talons or Clotho’s bony appendages protruding from the mass of her corpulent body could be described in such a fashion, from their long centuries of toil at the Loom of Fate. But more than simple manipulation went into the tapestries of inevitability they created from moment to moment. Her sisters did not appreciate the necessity of enjoying one’s work and doing more than simply decreeing a death or a war’s outcome through valor or cowardice. They controlled the mortals, but the gods proved themselves even more diverting.

“The next thing you’ll say you want is to resurrect the Titans,” Atropos said.

Lahkesis thought for a moment. “The last war between god and Titan was amusing. It occupied our thoughts and work for some centuries.”

“But Clotho and I ended it. You would have allowed it to linger on. There is more than personal enjoyment to our duty.”

“What more can there be?” Lahkesis asked. “Look at the thread that so interested me.”

“The one that you mentioned?”

“Kratos is most fascinating. I know you’ve looked at it. Don’t deny that! A mortal, a mortal empowered by a god he kills, then a god himself.”

“Hmmm,” Atropos said, looking over her sister’s sloping shoulder and touching the ebon strand that had caused such a commotion. The vibrations damped out even as she pressed her thumb talon to the thread of his destiny. “He is dead.”

“Dying,” Lahkesis corrected. “He is bound for the Underworld and Hades’ ungentle tortures. I should—”

“You should pay attention to proper work and stop playing with this toy,” snapped Atropos. “The more you waste your effort on broken mortals such as Kratos, the greater the work Clotho and I must shoulder.”

“Kratos is an engrossing god. We ordained that he die and he has, but not in the fashion expected. How diverting! Zeus is becoming more irrational by the day and all the more fun to watch.”

“Work such as we do is not entertainment.”

“It doesn’t need to be completely tedious, either,” Lahkesis complained. “We need diversions from the tawdry, ordinary fate so many mortals endure.”

“You sound as if you long for the days of the Great War.” Atropos finished a new thread, half smiled in satisfaction at a job competently done, then reached over and touched the thread of fate wrapped around Kratos’ destiny. “Nothing. He is bound for the Underworld now and good riddance. He distracted you overmuch from your real work.”

“As you say, sister,” Lahkesis said. She waited for Atropos to begin a more complex measuring of the fate for a smallish volcano in that boot-shaped peninsula. Lahkesis nodded in approval. Many of the destinies ended with the mortals being encased in blocks of lava. She swung her crook about, the sharp inner blade coming down—almost—on many of the threads. If she did not cut, those in the lava blocks would not die but would remain encased alive. But which should deserve such fate? So much planning went into such a disaster. Mortals’ lives had to be plotted out and ended at the

precise instant, except those to be saved for more intricate diversions. Lahkesis wanted to play some with the survivors but knew her sisters would never permit it. They always denied her such explorations.

Did they consider her their equal? Lahkesis frowned as she wondered about this. Clotho's skill at spinning fate was great, but Atropos? All she did was measure the longevity of the mortals. Anyone could do that. Let them think as they would. She was more than their equal, doing what they would not—the actual deliverance of souls to Hades.

Lahkesis stroked the thread still binding Kratos to his fate. When Atropos looked away, again engrossed in her work, Lahkesis plucked it impetuously and let the faint vibration disappear into the Underworld itself. With a contented sigh, she knew the result would be short-lived, but it gave her a measure of exhilaration to meddle with that which Clotho and Atropos said was pointless.

There could be no doubt as to Kratos' fate. But there was no reason it could not also be amusing—even arousing—because it broke the tedium of controlling so many mundane dooms.



DARKNESS FILLED his universe. Kratos fought to move. Limbs refused him. A cry built within his throat, only to die in a bloody gurgle. Then he felt tingling across his legs. The feathery touches turned to stabbing pain that gave him hope that he still lived.

Then those touches worked to his thighs and his chest and across his face. He blinked open one eye and saw, just before blood blinded him, the dark Hands of Hades rising from the stone flooring beneath him, to engulf him and begin gouging into his inert flesh. Wisps of midnight fog touched his arms and legs, burned like fire, then tightened like chains on his appendages. More of the smoky tendrils rose from around him and beneath him, clutching his body. Where he lay, stone began to dissolve, allowing the Hands to pull him downward.

He screamed but no words came from his lips as the paving beneath him began to collapse. Even as he fell into the dark portal to Hades, the black tendrils gripped him more firmly and extracted an infinite amount of agony from him. Faster and faster the marble beneath his body crumbled and caved in and then he was falling downward at a speed that would have taken away a living mortal's breath.

Darkness shrouded him. From below came anguished cries he remembered all too well from his escape from the Underworld

before he had fought Ares. The stench of death filled his nostrils and made his tongue swell. Breath no longer filled his lungs. Fighting against the hands that clutched cruelly at his flesh, he looked down at his chest and saw ... through his body. Zeus had reamed out his midsection, leaving behind a hole bigger than his doubled fist. Kratos knew he was no longer among the living. The black tendrils hardened and dug even farther into his body until he was completely enshrouded. And then he fell, sightless, unable to move, robbed of all senses, completely helpless.

But he raged. Oh, how he raged! His body might have been stolen from him, but his mind fought against the injustice. Giving in easily was not locked in any fiber of his being. Even as he fell he vowed vengeance on Zeus and the very pillars of Olympus.

His wrath spilled over and suddenly he was no longer encased in the blackness but dangling above a fiery pit. Heat seared him and caused sweat intermingled with blood to drip from his flesh. Groping hands, now flaming, held him, limbs outstretched in midair. Every move sent new lances of pain into his body, but still he fought against the restraints. Pain gave him focus for his rage.

And then the rage was replaced by hollowness. His wife stood before him, imploring him, only to fade and be replaced by his dear daughter. The physical torture meant nothing to him, but this! The nightmares Athena and Zeus had promised to eradicate remained even in death! Now he was transported back to the village where Ares had duped him into killing both Lysandra and little Calliope.

"No, no," he gasped out. The scene turned again. This was hardly more to his liking because he lay flat on his back, the carnage of battle all about.

His valiant warriors were dying under the onslaught of the barbarians—and the Barbarian King towered above him, huge war hammer raised and ready to crush him.

Kratos tried to remain silent, but the words were still ripped from his lips.

"Ares, destroy my enemies and my life is yours!"

Those were the words that had placed him in thrall to the God of War for too many years, the pledge that had set his feet on a road of

butchery and soulless killing of any who stood against him—against Ares.

Kratos wanted it to be different this time, for the Barbarian King to slay him, but the giant of a man stayed his blow and looked back over his shoulder at the sky as the leaden clouds parted and the God of War appeared and ...

... Kratos screamed as the Blades of Chaos seared through his flesh and bonded with the bones of his forearms. No longer supine he swung the blades in vicious arcs, ending the Barbarian King's life and slaughtering the invading army ... and his wife. Lysandra sank down, mortally wounded from his mindless slash, and his daughter, his daughter fell, too ...

... and Ares laughed. The God of War towered above the burning Athens, threw his head back, and mocked the gods of Olympus.

Fight, Spartan.

Kratos knew pain beyond the physical. That he had learned to endure, but now? Now he was plunged once more into the patterns that had blighted his life. He fought to change what he did, but the forces surrounded him like a sea wave to drown him. He knew what was going to happen, hated it, could not stop it ...

The sharp command caused Ares to whirl about, his flaming beard sending out sparks, and his long golden hair whipping like a war pennant ...

... allowing Kratos to reach out and seize a handful of the Barbarian King's greasy hair with such force his neck cracked. The studded war hammer in the Barbarian King's grip dripped blood. Kratos focused on that. It had to be his blood this time. *This time!* Knowing what would happen if he prevailed tore him apart inside more than Zeus' thrust with the Blade of Olympus ever could.

But the giant was only stunned. The scene played out once more in his mind—in this reality of death—and he was powerless to stop it. His hands shook with the effort to release the giant to finish his death stroke. But Kratos kept his grip and smashed the warrior's head repeatedly into a boulder until the mica embedded in it glistened bright red with the fighter's blood.

Kratos panted with effort and rose, hobbling about amid the carnage. Blood up to his ankles was not as fearsome or frightful as the blood that would be on his hands when he killed his wife and child—unless he forsook victory now. But what a choice! All his life he had conquered. Victory for Sparta had been paramount in his thoughts and deeds, but if he died here, now, Sparta would lose.

And he would win a personal victory. He would not be tricked into killing his own family. Kratos used the blades now welded to his bones as canes to stagger away, knowing his defection meant defeat for Sparta. His life meant nothing, but his honor! Abandoning his comrades-in-arms was the worst a warrior could do.

Almost the worst. Kratos had endured the one thing that was worse. His family. Dead at his feet, by his hand, because he had agreed to this reckless alliance with Ares to avoid defeat. He would be branded a coward, but his wife's and daughter's lives meant more to him. Now.

The Barbarian King stirred. He was not dead. Kratos knew what would happen in his future if he killed the giant. The king must live and triumph on the field of battle, but the Blades of Chaos lifted, as if by their own volition, and swung out in a fearsome arc. With a scissors action, Kratos lopped off the Barbarian King's head. It rolled away in the gore and mud, a startled look forever etched on the face.

The sudden swirl, as if he had been caught in a waterspout, disoriented him.

Kratos wiped away blood from his eyes and cried out in despair at his failure to see his wife and child sprawled on the stone altar, partially dismembered by his fearsome hacks and slashes. The blood pooled away from their faces, and Kratos looked down and saw his own face reflected in their blood. He recognized it, and yet he did not. It was another Ghost of Sparta peering back. This one had not fully realized the depths of his failure and loss.

"No!" He cried out and ...

"You must kill Ares," Athena said urgently. "The existence of Olympus depends on it. Your very fate depends on his death at your hand."

“Athena,” Kratos grated out, fury building anew. He reached for her, but she seemed to melt before his eyes, her flesh flowing, changing, becoming a lovely naked beauty with hair flowing like a golden river, beckoning to him to join her. Her lips parted and she spoke to him alone.

Kratos, you are not meant to die here.

Death, even under Hades’ horrific dominance, was preferable, but he couldn’t turn back now. He had lost once more. In his victory over the Barbarian King he had lost everything—and now his punishment was to know it and be unable to alter his past, his present, or his future suffering.

A hurricane blew past the beauteous woman’s nude body, and once more Kratos faced Ares.

The God of War raised his arm for the death stroke. Kratos was so close he could smell the god’s sweat and blood and excitement at the impending kill. His sword lashed out and ...

... a blade drove upward into Ares’ throat. The God of War’s eyes went wide with shock. His streaming hair flapped about in the hurricane winds and he sank to the ground ...

... and Zeus screeched in insane fury. Like a rabid dog his mouth was flecked with foam, and he snarled and snapped and leaned forward, driving the Blade of Olympus deeper into Kratos’ chest. The pain ripped a new scream of fury from Kratos and ...

... Lysandra, eyeless and sockets dripping dark blood, stood behind Zeus. Calliope clung to her tattered, dirty skirts, and the child spoke ...

This is not the end.

The torment all about him disappeared as if fog drifted in to hide it, but his pain remained to remind him he dangled over the Underworld, bait for Hades and his eternity of tortures. Kratos could never expect mercy from Zeus’ brother.

He wished for death, then realized the fiery fog, the intense darkness, the parade of visions of his family’s death, had faded from sight. A distant scent came to his nostrils that was not blood or death, but fresh earth.

Kratos muttered, "Who are you?" He hardly dared to think that Hades would be the god to relieve him of his suffering. Hades delighted in devising new tortures, not relieving old ones.

He caught his breath as a huge face moved from the fog without dimension or color and took shape before him. At first he thought it was another hallucination, his imagination giving a face to a huge plain of dried mud. Brown and cracked, the face developed eyes and a flat nose and a mouth so wide that it might swallow half the world. Back and forth the face moved as the features hardened.

"I am the Titan Gaia, ever-present mother of the earth. I have watched you become a powerful warrior, and I have been with you through all the events of your life. But I can no longer simply watch."

Kratos gasped as he felt his lungs fill with air and his heart begin to beat once more, each throb an effort, a new agony, but also a hint that life had not been entirely sucked from him through his descent into Hades.

"We will help you defeat Zeus," Gaia said.

He closed his eyes and was whirled about into the void. He sensed rather than saw Gaia—and other Titans. Gaia lacked substance, reduced only to spirit. Cronos crept through the Desert of Lost Souls with Pandora's Temple still strapped to his back, and the others were similarly imprisoned. Hyperion and Rhea and Themis. Iapetus, forever doomed to Tartarus, and Mnemosyne beside her still pool of limpid water. Kratos reached out to her for the aid she could give. If he had to be dead, let him drink from Lethe to forget his past.

"Death is an escape, Kratos. You are a warrior of Sparta, not a coward. Only a coward accepts death."

Kratos kept his eyes screwed tightly shut, and still he saw the other Titans, all banished by Zeus after losing the Titanomachy, the lot of them staring at him as if he were still God of War.

"I am no coward," he said. "But I have suffered loss too great to bear."

"Reflect on your strengths, not your weakness. All have that within them they deny or do not wish to confront directly. Through

constant victory, you ignored those parts of you that truly made you a man.”

“I have lost them, by my own hand I lost them!”

“Do you allow the gods to use you like a slave? Is that the Kratos who became God of War? Is that the Kratos who vanquished those who opposed him?”

Kratos felt the desolation even more acutely.

“I alone cannot win against Zeus.” The revelation struck him as powerfully as the Barbarian King’s hammer.

“You do not have to fight alone any longer, Kratos,” the Titan said in a low voice that still rang like a bell and filled him with a touch of renewed confidence. “You will have more than an army of mortals striving with you. The Titans will aid you as you aid us.”

Kratos felt the undercurrent of power and promise in Gaia’s words, but also there was a touch of desperation that he shared.

“You must fight. I will show you the way to the Sisters of Fate. Only with their power will you defeat Zeus.”

Kratos screamed in pain and opened his eyes, looking down at the hole that Zeus had cut completely through his belly with the Blade of Olympus. As he watched, the wound healed and the pain receded—but the memory of what he had endured after falling into Hades remained and formed a steel core in his soul.

He struggled in the grip of the Hands but felt their hold weakening as he healed. A sudden spasm seized him, causing him to arch his back and thrash about as he became aware of his heartbeat and his lungs struggling like a bellows and blood pounding through his temples again. His hands ached and his arms and legs quivered with life.

“Ahhh!” The exultation escaped his lips as he knew that he lived once more.

Then he was falling, tumbling head-over-heels, the fiery mist all around filled with hands reaching for him. Fingernails raked at his flesh and clutched at his ankles but, no longer dead, he fought back. His meaty fists struck out and hit the thin arms trying to grab him. Twisting and kicking, he freed himself and fell but this time in such

a way that he could draw the Blades of Athena and use them as grappling hooks against the side of a cliff formed of other rock.

Kratos grunted as the shock of his descent ceased suddenly when the blades cut into the rock. Belly-first, he slammed hard into the face of the cliff, but instead of feeling pain he took heart in the fact that the gaping hole in his midriff cut by Zeus was no longer there. He kicked against the cliff until his toes found purchase, and he began climbing.

Slowly at first and then with greater speed as he built the rhythm, he pulled free one blade and swung it high above his head to penetrate the rock. His mighty shoulders took the strain of lifting his weight upward until he could free the other sword and then cast it above the first.

The flow of muscle and the smell of the world around him invigorated Kratos. His despair at being cast again into the Underworld vanished as determination replaced the memory of the ugly visions he had endured. His heart beat rhythmically and sent blood pounding through his veins. Seldom had he felt this way. Victory after a difficult battle approached the feeling, but what he experienced now was life, not dealing out death.

Purpose firmed within his breast as he considered how Gaia now aided him against Zeus.

High above he saw a faint hole opening to the sky. Smoke drifted across the opening, and he knew this way would lead him back to Rhodes. As hope flared that he would quickly be free of the Underworld and Hades' deathly grasp once more, the hands that had clawed at him before sprang from the rocks and again attempted to hold him, to pull him down, to fling him into the abyss toward the River Styx at the bottom of the impossibly deep chasm.

Kratos let out a cry that tightened his belly and coordinated his struggles to go higher. He alternated climbing, using the swords, with hacking at the hands, severing them at the wrists and elbows. He kicked at some trying to clutch his ankles, then cut faster at ones sprouting above him to block his exit. All that he had seen and endured in his fall toward the realm of Hades fueled his ascent now. He sliced with more power, climbed with greater speed, and then,

using a hand gripping his ankle as a stepping-stone, propelled himself upward. The hand trailed behind, feebly drawing him backward. Crossing his blades, he drew back hard. The hand was scissored cleanly from its arm, and he erupted upward to fall onto the lip of the hole. It was the work of a moment to pry loose the severed hand still clinging to his ankle.

As he stood, a wind whirled about him, driving him to his knees. Faster the tornado spun as the bits of rock and paving stone sailed past his head to fall into the hole. He looked down as the debris fit itself together perfectly and sealed the opening. As suddenly as the wind had begun, it died.

Kratos stood and looked around Rhodes. Everywhere buildings burned, but his eyes were not for the destruction of an enemy city but for the bodies of brave Spartan warriors slain by Zeus using the Blade of Olympus. He moved to a nearby soldier and saw that the man had been blasted by the powerful weapon.

Another soldier had been killed in a similar fashion. And another and another.

Then Kratos stopped beside a battered soldier who stirred. The man's eyes flickered open and fixed on him. A smile came to his lips as he looked up and saw Kratos.

The young soldier said, "My lord! I knew you could not be killed. I never lost faith."

Kratos gripped him by the front of his armor and pulled him upright.

"Return to Sparta and prepare for battle."

"But our brothers are dead!" The young soldier's face was covered with blood and dirt, and myriad wounds on his arms and legs made standing difficult, but he rose proudly before his commander.

"Spartans never surrender. You can still hold a sword. Do as your god commands!" Kratos reached out and gripped the soldier by the cuirass, then pushed him back to emphasize his orders.

"And what of you, my lord?"

They both turned as the sound of heavy wings beating against the air came from above. A few yards away a fiery-winged Pegasus came to a landing, hooves scraping across the stone. Its wings

stroked downward a final time and then folded as the creature patiently awaited its rider. Another gift from his new allies.

“I am going after Zeus.”

Kratos turned from the young soldier and mounted the fiery steed. With a powerful surge, Pegasus became airborne with its rider securely astride.



“THEY MEDDLE AGAIN!” Atropos complained. She crossed her arms and tapped her long talons in pique. “How dare they challenge their fate?”

“Yes,” agreed Lahkesis, “the fate we decreed for them.” She settled back, looking pensive. As her sister angrily tapped her long fingernails, so she ran her hand up and down the scepter that ended in the scythe used to cut the threads of destiny. It took considerable effort on her part not to give in to her own impatience. Then she pushed aside such rash behavior and thought more deeply. “Perhaps it is not such a bad thing for the Titans to challenge the gods again.”

“We settled this matter centuries ago. I won’t have my work undone.”

“Why not, dear sister? The world has become complacent. I would call it boring. This could add spice to an otherwise bland meal.”

“Meals, spice, I don’t understand you at times, Lahkesis. We decided the matter of supremacy of god over Titan. There is no second chance.”

“Because it has never occurred before doesn’t mean it shouldn’t now,” Lahkesis pointed out. They toyed with the lives of mortals, gods, and Titans and always decided in the same way, eon after eon. There ought to be some variation to give a moment’s thrill to their ceaseless work.

“What has gotten into you?” Atropos demanded. “Do I need to consult Clotho? She would agree with me that we have reached a final decision.”

“Yes, yes, the Titans were banished and the gods rose to Olympus, triumphant. It hasn’t been the same with Cronos and Gaia and the others in exile.”

“Nothing stays the same.” Atropos tugged on a thread and ended a life.

Lahkesis stifled a yawn. She almost pointed out to her sister that Kratos had avoided the fate they had set for him but held back the tasty tidbit. If Atropos and Clotho were going to be such drudges, it wasn’t her fault. She could have a bit of fun with the mortal turned god and finally returned to mortal. Such delicious fate!

“You need to attend your chores more closely, Lahkesis.” Atropos rolled up the thread into a tight ball, let it rest in her palm for a moment, and then it whooshed out of sight. Atropos might enjoy such petty displays but Lahkesis longed for more—and she would get it.

Reaching out, she found the thread controlling Hades’ destiny. A few tugs and a little stroke along the thread produced the effect she desired. The Lord of the Underworld was roused now and feeling the effects of a wellspring he did not even acknowledge. He was only the first of the gods that Lahkesis touched, since their fate was so exciting to manipulate.

“This is wrong. Clotho must weave new destinies. We cannot—”

“Oh, Atropos, you remember what gifts they brought. Why, Poseidon alone heaped riches up to the sky in an attempt to sway us.” Lahkesis chuckled. “When the gods triumphed, he thought his tribute had bought the day for them.”

“He is a foolish god. I never liked him, with that seaweed beard and bad manners.”

“Is Zeus better? His beard is spun from clouds and storms,” Lahkesis said. She cared little what the gods’ beards looked like, though Kratos’ was fetching. The small, neat triangle of a beard offset his strong-boned cheeks, and the darkness contrasted with the bone-white of his skin and shaved head.

“It was a nice touch having the oracle of the village forever stain Kratos’ flesh with the bone ash from his dead wife and child.”

“Kratos? You have real work to finish,” Atropos said. “We decided his fate. By now he ought to be safely in Hades’ embrace.”

“Yes, by now he ought to be in the Underworld.”

Atropos returned to her measuring of destiny for what would seem a chance meeting between Dionysus on the isle of Laconia and the king’s daughter, Carya. A smile curled her lips at the potential for a thrilling love affair, but Lahkesis rested her agile fingers on a particular strand. An ebony-black strand.

Kratos’.

It wouldn’t hurt the scheme of things if she toyed with him awhile longer. After all, he was only mortal, even if he could provide such a diversion. There would be ample opportunity for her to weave a new destiny for him and then return him to the fate decreed by Atropos and Clotho.

Lahkesis chuckled as she worked.



“YOU ARE MEDDLING!” raged Hades. “He was almost in my grasp and you let him go—again!”

“I did nothing but send him to the Underworld,” Zeus said, frowning. Was someone meddling? Athena? She knew better than to go against his wishes, though where Kratos was concerned, he felt a growing knot of skepticism.

Zeus looked up when Hades growled deep in his throat, more animal than god. He found his brother’s ire increasingly difficult to tolerate. He fingered the Blade of Olympus resting against his throne and considered how quickly this problem might be removed. A quick slash and Hades would follow Ares into the sky, dissipated and no longer annoying.

But he had decreed that one god could not slay another, so that he had to turn Kratos mortal again before running him through with the Blade of Olympus. Thus far, Zeus had enforced this edict and had agreed with Athena that it applied to all gods, the Lord of Olympus included. Still, Hades was unbearable.

“You rescued him. How else could he avoid the fall to the banks of the River Styx? I vow that he never arrived.”

“He does not lack for work,” Zeus said, his hand resting on the Blade of Olympus again. The power within it thrilled him and reminded him of the final battle against the Titans. With that

memory came an anger that knew no bounds. Cronos had not suffered enough. Zeus had chained Pandora's Temple to his father's back and forced him to crawl endlessly through the Desert of Lost Souls. After Kratos had killed Ares, it had been such a pleasure to banish Cronos to Tartarus for still more torture. He could revisit that decision, perhaps dangle a bit of hope out to Cronos that he would no longer suffer, then find a punishment even worse than Tartarus. To give hope and then snatch it away was the worst—the best!—of all tortures.

"You mean all the Spartans you sent to my realm?" Hades stroked his long, sooty beard.

"Many will be crossing the River Styx," Zeus said. He wished Hades would leave so he could ponder the matter of Cronos. The renewed energy in the Blade of Olympus reminded him of the Titanomachy and the greatest day for the Olympian gods. *His* greatest day of victory.

Since then, there had been nothing but petty squabbles among the gods to mediate, and the more serious matter of Ares wanting to kill his father to sit on this very throne had occupied too much of his time. Zeus had thought manipulating Athena to offer Kratos the God of War's throne would have returned peace to Olympus. If anything, it had made discourse impossible and battle inevitable.

"You can send all the armies in all the cities to me and it won't be enough, brother," Hades said. "Twice! Twice Kratos has cheated his fate."

"Cheated his fate," Zeus murmured. "That is impossible. The Sisters of Fate do not make mistakes."

"They favored us against the Titans. How can they favor Kratos, a mortal upstart, against us? They can't! It is *your* intervention that has rescued him. I know it."

"You know nothing," Zeus said coldly.

"I am sovereign in my realm yet you meddle in my affairs. Kratos is mine, and you stole him away. Twice!" Hades puffed out his chest and allowed fires to glow in his coal-like eyes. Smoke curled away from his body to the point that Zeus almost sent a lightning bolt to give reason for such behavior.

“Return to your domain, and let me deal with Kratos and matters of greater import in Olympus.”

“You order me away like some scullery maid? I am your brother, Zeus. You cannot—” Hades stepped back and glared as the Sky Father stood and grew until his head brushed the dome of his throne room. His eyes flashed like deadly beacons, and he fought to keep from violating his own decree against one god killing another. Hades read the message in his brother’s eyes. Zeus almost laughed when the Lord of the Underworld backed away, then bowed deeply.

“You have your own concerns,” Hades said. He looked up, and his submissive attitude evaporated like fog in the morning sun. “Don’t meddle with mine!” Hades stormed away.

Zeus took a step forward, arm cocked back to unleash a lightning bolt, but stayed his hand when he saw Hermes at the doorway, watching intently. The Messenger of the Gods retreated, then let his winged sandals lift him away.

Zeus started to order Hermes to return, then sat heavily on his throne.

“Kratos,” he said, his fury growing. “This is your doing. You will never return to Olympus to sit on this throne. On *my* throne!” Zeus then released his lightning bolt and blew a huge hole in the wall. Shards of stone and precious gems cascaded down, leaving behind a dusty cloud. With a huge intake of air, Zeus exhaled and blew it away in a furious windstorm, then sank back on his throne in a dark choler.



THE PEGASUS FLAPPED furiously to gain altitude, giving Kratos the chance to see the destruction that had been meted out to Rhodes. A coldness gripped his heart. His army had fought well. But it would take more than their strength to stand against the Blade of Olympus. The fires burning across the city caused huge curtains of choking, greasy black smoke to rise, but the Pegasus constantly banked to avoid the worst clouds.

Kratos saw the slaughtered army that had tried so unsuccessfully to defend Rhodes; then the flying horse spiraled upward enough for him to look directly down into the harbor. Kratos reveled in the sight of the bronze Colossus stretched out beneath water made so murky with shed blood that it was difficult to make out the statue's form. But he saw the severed left hand. The stump still radiated a dull red heat, but the head had been blown off and the bronze torso was crisscrossed with deep dents and more than one substantial gash.

Kratos reached over his shoulder and touched the Blades of Athena sheathed at his back. Those trusty swords had done great damage to the Colossus, but the real injury had come from the Blade of Olympus. Kratos' hands shook as he thought how Zeus had duped him into draining his godly powers into that blade.

The Sky Father's words rang mockingly in Kratos' ears: *Wield this weapon and all on Olympus will see you for who you are.*

Kratos could only wonder if Athena had approved. She had lied to him as egregiously as Zeus had. Was she laughing at him for assuming the eagle that had stolen his power and infused it into the Colossus was her totem? He knew now that Zeus had been responsible.

But Athena had to have known.

His strong knees pressed into the flying horse's shoulders, guiding the Pegasus away from Rhodes and toward Olympus. Distance still cloaked the immense peak in mist, but he imagined the outline. Atop the peak stretched the palaces of the gods, and the one on the highest elevation, the finest, the most opulent, belonged to Zeus. He would storm that palace and kill Zeus, no matter that the King of the Gods held the Blade of Olympus still infused with his own energy. Kratos' anger choked him and made him sure he could defeat any god, even Zeus.

"They will all fear me for what they've done." His lips drew back into a thin slash.

The powerful horse's wings began to flare. Before, the feathers along the trailing edges of the wings had emitted sparks, but now long streamers of fire exploded from the entire surface and swept back to leave a fiery outline in the sky.

"Faster," Kratos urged the Pegasus. He hunched over and gripped the mane with a ferocity that caused the Pegasus to neigh loudly.

The winged steed spiraled higher and then struck out away from Olympus. The more Kratos tried to force the Pegasus toward Olympus, the more the horse resisted. As a bird sheds feathers, the winged horse spewed additional sparks from its wings as its agitation grew.

"To Olympus," Kratos ordered. "I must face Zeus!"

The Pegasus refused to yield to his powerful direction.

"You defy the God of War?"

He pressed his knees hard into the animal's flanks to coerce its obedience, but he froze when the air began to boil about him. The sensation was like that he had felt while suspended high above the

Underworld. And the voice speaking to him was instantly recognizable.

“You are no longer a god, Kratos,” boomed Gaia’s resonant voice. “Zeus, Olympus, and the blade that holds all your power will forevermore be out of reach. Your only hope is to find the Sisters of Fate and the Island of Creation and travel back through time to the moment Zeus betrayed you, for only then will he be truly vulnerable.”

He settled down astride the Pegasus and glowered. Zeus would suffer for his treachery. Kratos would make certain of that—but what did Gaia mean about the Sisters of Fate and returning to the instant that Zeus had driven the Blade of Olympus through him?

Kratos touched the livid scar on his chest where the blade had penetrated and ripped a huge hole—and remembered how that wound had healed before he fought his way out of Hades and back to Rhodes. To heal him as she had done showed Gaia’s power.

She had done more than heal the wound. She had afforded him the chance to escape Hades’ clutches once again. He would not waste such a gift.

He stared ahead as the Pegasus flew with a steady, powerful beat of the wings. Kratos had no idea where the winged horse was taking him, but he knew it would not be a destination easily reached.

As his mind considered possible dangers, three griffins appeared in the air behind him.



ATROPOS STARED at the vast tapestry that was the world's destiny, but she didn't see the clever knots or intricate warp and woof that she and her sisters had created. What Lahkesis said bothered her. Lahkesis was always unsettled and unsettling, never getting down to the serious work of choosing the ultimate destinies for those most deserving. Still, what her sister had said caused Atropos to think more carefully about Kratos.

Nothing about his fate had worked out precisely the way she or her sisters had intended. More than once she had checked the strength of the thread binding the Ghost of Sparta to his fate, only to find fraying along the sides. Repairing those small imperfections had done nothing to alter his fate, of course, but it had changed the path to his eventual death.

"How long should I make his life before allowing Lahkesis to snip the thread?" she murmured. Atropos knew she was better at details than either Clotho or Lahkesis. Clotho viewed the whole and understood what was necessary to achieve their goals, while Lahkesis showed too much impetuosity for decent fates to play out according to plan. But Atropos knew she had to contribute the small points for the most detailed of the destinies. She was a tactician, and both her sisters were strategists. This had satisfied her until Lahkesis

had taken such an interest in the mortal Kratos and had apprenticed him to Ares.

Atropos could only think that Lahkesis had wanted Kratos to become God of War and further disturb the serenity of Olympus. The gods and goddesses had become too complacent in recent centuries and had come to believe the Sisters of Fate were their allies. She sniffed. She and her sisters did not take sides. Letting the gods triumph over the Titans had nothing to do with the merits of one side played against the deficiencies of the other.

But what was it that Lahkesis saw in this Kratos?

Atropos wound a few more strands around his thread of destiny to strengthen it and make his fate more certain. Sloppy work got them nowhere, not that her sister cared. She favored chaos over definite conclusions.

She watched the way the thread vibrated and expertly interpreted the countering shakes and quivers needed to produce an outcome more in keeping with the Sisters of Fate's overall view of the world. Removing Kratos might be necessary, though he had avoided such fate and had climbed out of the Underworld.

Again.

Atropos frowned at that. She carefully examined the first escape from Hades' clutches and saw that Zeus had intervened on Kratos' behalf.

"The gravedigger," she said. "An appropriate disguise and not lacking in irony." Without Zeus' aid, Kratos would have been forever consigned to some dark, dangerous corner of the Underworld. From the way Hades acted when Kratos' name was even mentioned, he would have consigned the Spartan to Tartarus.

This thought produced an even more intense frown to crease her face. Kratos imprisoned and tortured where so many of the Titans had been sent. That would not have been a good decision. Had Zeus realized this and saved Kratos because of it, or had the Sky Father simply acted from short-term petty motives? Killing Ares had been paramount. Zeus would not go against his own edict and allow one god to kill another, but Kratos had not been a god then. What more perfect instrument for the old God of War's destruction than to use

the weapon he had so carefully forged? Ares' mistake had been in forcing Kratos to kill his wife and daughter. Rather than temper the steel of his mighty sword arm, it had broken him for use by the god. A very costly mistake.

Atropos scowled as she studied Kratos' black thread. Her talons measured his life and saw that the thread had become distended from the original spinning. That could not be due to him losing his godhood. If anything, his thread of destiny would stretch even longer as an immortal. Why hadn't it shortened? She measured, then scowled more deeply. Zeus had killed Kratos. That had not been part of Kratos' destiny—nor his contact with Gaia. Atropos shifted position, rose on her pillar of black smoke, and bent almost double to peer more closely at the smaller threads spun together to form the larger.

New threads appeared, ones not of uniform black. The colors defied description. She caught her breath and recoiled.

How had Kratos done all this without the Sisters of Fate taking a more active notice?

Atropos' lips thinned to a knife's slash of a line. She floated upward to better study the dark thread of fate stretching away. After brushing back her trailing white hair, she settled lower again, her anger mounting. There was no way this could have occurred—unless one of her sisters had permitted it. Clotho had no interest in Kratos, but Lahkesis? Wasn't she always going on about how dull it was cutting the threads at the precise point Atropos determined? She had taken a fancy to the God of War and, from what Atropos could see, considered him a special project to be nurtured and coaxed into relieving her own perceived boredom. Such arrogance! Lahkesis should not meddle. Spinning, measuring, and cutting the lines of destiny was a moil they should share. Lahkesis should not tend to Kratos alone!

That must change. And Atropos saw part of the change had to come on Olympus. Zeus arrogantly thought himself above fate. Hubris among mortals made them aspire to godhood. And gods, given the time and overweening confidence in their own small abilities, thought to defy fate. That was the eternal dance she and

her two sisters attended, and always the Sisters of Fate were the only ones to continue after the last note died. They controlled fate, not the mortals, not the gods, and especially not the Titans.

Atropos reached out and caught up a special thread stretched to the breaking point. A tug, another, then a stronger one yet sent the message to the goddess on the other end. Hermes was not the only god privy to the secrets of Olympus. Iris was Goddess of the Rainbow and sometimes served as a messenger. Atropos lounged back, thinking about what might be done to alter the destiny of those dwelling on Olympus without infuriating her sisters because she had not consulted them. Fate was a dangerous process requiring considerable thought and discussion among the three, yet Atropos felt a hint of the excitement Lahkesis must feel as she ventured out on her own in this matter.

With exquisite care, she ran her talons along the threads, plucking out one here and another there, reweaving them so the length remained the same and yet the content was changed. Atropos tested the tension of a thread where it was tied to a post. She smiled at her achievement of altering the threads without leaving a trace either Lahkesis or Clotho could detect.

Fate determined by only one and not three. Heady power.

Before she could follow this logic and pursue it in other ways, she closed her eyes and sent forth her projection. The speed of her journey was infinite, and Atropos appeared in Iris' chamber, a ghostly image of herself. Atropos looked around the neat, well-appointed bedchamber high atop Olympus and immediately knew she had found the right place.

A shimmery curtain appeared across the chamber. A rainbow formed. Its misty substance brightened and turned solid, arcing from one side of the chamber to the other. Through this arch strode a smallish, pert goddess, but one well proportioned, wrapped in white clouds that constantly flowed to reveal delightful patches of bare skin and then modestly hide them again as she moved.

Atropos understood why Iris and Hermes had never become lovers. Each was too consumed in personal beauty and self-aggrandizement. But why hadn't Iris successfully challenged Hermes

as Messenger of the Gods? Using her beauty, Iris could certainly have influenced many of the gods—and possibly some of the goddesses—in the same fashion that Hermes used to cement his position on Olympus.

Iris stared at her with wide-set eyes in a round face. Her skin was the purest alabaster, causing the violet-colored eyes to seem more piercing than they were.

“Your rainbow is lovely,” Atropos said.

“Give me the message you wish delivered, and I will tend to it after a most magnificent storm in Crete that promises me the chance to display my full radiance.”

“Too busy to be civil? Do you know who I am?” Atropos wasn’t sure if she ought to be outraged or amused. This goddess showed no fear, but it might be due to lack of understanding who had appeared in her chambers.

“One of them. One of the Sisters of Fate. I guess you are Atropos since I have heard whispers that Clotho is ... different.” The goddess smiled sweetly. “Yes, Atropos. You measure duration of life for the mortals. Perhaps you wish me to add color to a life?” Iris held out her hands and produced a rainbow stretching from one palm to the other.

The Sister of Fate appreciated this outspoken goddess’ skills more by the moment. She would be most useful in shaking the foundations of Olympus, but in a good way.

“I come seeking a boon,” Atropos said.

“I hope nothing as grand as the Steeds of Time gifted to you by Cronos,” Iris said. “I am not so great and powerful to bestow such on you, but do not think that I will not give you all that I can.”

Again Atropos caught the hint of wariness in the goddess and perhaps a touch of sarcasm. She looked for advantage. And why not? A favor to one of the Sisters of Fate might give her significant benefit on Olympus. And for what Atropos had in mind, it would.

“You are ignored by the others because of Hermes,” Atropos said carefully.

“As is your will,” Iris said, equally as carefully. Both circled verbally, one dog sniffing out the other to find purpose and perhaps

gain advantage.

“I merely determine the result. How a mortal—or a god—reaches it is often quite a revelation. But they never fail to meet their fate. Ever.” Even as she spoke she wondered about Kratos. Lahkesis had aided him more than she let on. Zeus had helped Kratos escape the Underworld before, but had Lahkesis toyed with the god’s fate? The unrest rampant on Olympus after Kratos became God of War was certainly nothing Zeus could have wanted. The second sending to Hades’ outstretched arms proved that.

She quivered a little at the remembrance of the Blade of Olympus driving through Kratos’ midsection. She had had her fingers on his thread at that moment and had felt his life force ebb and then vanish as the Hands pulled him downward. But Lahkesis must have intervened to free Kratos from Hades’ clutches. The Pegasus awaiting him there had been something of a puzzlement, also. Because it would have amused her, Lahkesis would have forced Kratos to crawl on his belly afterward, not fly off as if he were still God of War.

“Then why have you come to me?” Iris asked.

“You have more important duties?”

The goddess immediately saw the trap in those words. A tiny smile lifted one corner of her perfectly formed bow-shaped lips.

“My concerns are but dust compared with your slightest whim, Atropos,” the goddess said.

Atropos nodded brusquely. Her mind raced as the plan formed. She needed to give Iris precise instructions to humble Hermes in the eyes of Zeus and yet do so without her sisters knowing. Lahkesis, particularly, favored Hermes with considerable attention. A bit of destiny changing might be done unobserved, but Atropos was unsure she could meddle with the thread attached to the Messenger of the Gods without notice. Yet having Hermes beholden to her would give great leverage on Olympus.

She spoke for some time, Iris absorbing the details. By the time she stepped back under her rainbow to deliver the message, the goddess beamed from ear to ear. Atropos nodded in approval at the goddess’ willingness to obey. With a bright flash, Atropos spun into

the rarefied air, the black mists of her lower body gathering for the journey back, then left Olympus and returned to the Island of Creation. With luck, Lahkesis would never know she had directed her attentions elsewhere. This was going to be fun, playing Lahkesis' game and her never knowing.



THE POWERFUL WINGS sped them forward, but Kratos' sharp eyes caught sight of the approaching danger. He was not the kind to evade his path when it lay straight ahead, even if he had been stripped of his godly powers. Gaia had told him he had to find the Sisters of Fate and go back in time. That seemed unlikely. No one changed his fate. Yet a Titan dared the wrath of Olympus *and* the Sisters of Fate to aid him. He could show no less courage, even if trusting Gaia did not come easily to one who had learned to distrust all but the strength of his own sword arm and the prowess of the Spartan army.

If he failed, the gods and Fates could do no worse to him than he had already endured—than he did endure in his nightmares. If he succeeded ...

The Pegasus' wings began beating faster, sending flaming feathers backward in a cometary tail. For a moment Kratos thought the burst of speed would take them past the approaching fliers, but it quickly became apparent there were too many to avoid.

He reached back, drew the Blades of Athena, and prepared for the fight—and was almost unseated when a griffin swooped down, attacking him from the rear. He glanced at the ferocious beast and caught the eye in its eagle's head. He saw no remorse, no mercy, no quarter to be given in that hot glare. That suited Kratos because he expected none—and gave none.

He ducked and let the griffin flash past. Its powerful eagle's wings propelled it with a speed equal to that of his Pegasus, but the lion's body afforded it better mobility. Kratos banked to the right and crossed the griffin's spiral an instant too soon. The creature's claws caught at his bare shoulder, raked along and drew blood. Only a powerful shrug and an upward thrust with his right blade fended off the lion-eagle. It screeched and beat its wings at him, only to have him slice off the end of a wing. The griffin spiraled away—and then Kratos faced half a dozen more of the savage aerial killers.

The Pegasus shipped air and went into such an unexpected tight spiral that Kratos lost his seat and flew through the air. With a powerful surge, he stretched out full-length and grabbed. His fingers closed around a lion's paw. The griffin, suddenly heavier by Kratos' weight, began to fall. With a deft spin, he came up and around, getting between its wings. Kratos placed one foot against the back of the eagle neck to prevent it from turning halfway around and snapping at him with its serrated beak. Gripping the side of its head with one hand and its beak in the other, he reared back, put the immense strength in his arms and legs to the test, and felt the neck snap. For a moment, he held the head, still attached to the body.

Then it tore off, spewing blood out into the air.

Kratos looked up and saw the Pegasus begin a dive past him. As the dead griffin fell away under him, Kratos reached out, caught the winged horse's mane, and pulled himself back up. The Pegasus smoothly leveled off and tried to get through the curtain of snapping beaks and clawing talons.

Kratos settled down, took his seat, and began swinging his blades with deadly efficacy. One caught a griffin's throat, hot blood gushing out and over Kratos. For an instant he was blinded, but he fought on through instinct. His left sword sank deeply into a griffin's breast, killing it instantly.

He was almost unseated as the Pegasus wheeled about and dived. With a savage swipe across his eyes, he cleared away the blinding blood and saw the problem. A griffin, far larger than the others, thought to attack from below. Pegasus and the griffin were on a collision course. Choosing his moment through long experience

fighting, Kratos launched himself into the air. The Pegasus wheeled in the other direction, away, its pinions snapping with strain and a blinding curtain of lost, fiery feathers floating upward.

The feathers momentarily confused the griffin, giving Kratos the chance he needed. He arrowed downward, twisted aside, and caught at the lion-bird's wing. Again he used his weight to his advantage and threw the griffin into a dive more like a falling leaf. The griffin snapped and tried to claw even as it struggled to right itself.

All Kratos did was concentrate on what he did so well: killing.

One hand kept purchase on the wing, preventing it from aiding the griffin in remaining aloft. His other pummeled the beast with brutal blows to the breast and back.

The griffin gave up all attempts to fly and simply fought. Its nimble neck swiveled about and a beak closed on Kratos' massive biceps. He knew the method of attack and risked all by simply releasing his hold on the creature. It tossed its head in an attempt to rip away muscle but only succeeded in flinging him about. He proved too heavy for the griffin to hold, and the pair arrowed downward ever faster.

The griffin released its hold on his arm, but Kratos had already drawn his blade and used it as a hook to catch onto the hindquarters. Instead of falling headfirst the griffin now plunged hindquarters-first.

Kratos used his other sword to pull himself up until he caught the lion tail flailing about like a slave master's whip. He grabbed it, got onto the griffin's back, reached up, and delivered a killing punch to the back of the monster's head. His hand sank into the braincase and came out dripping gore.

Then he was tumbling away from the slain creature.

Kratos resigned himself to the death fall. And again the Pegasus coordinated its flight to save him. He heard the wings, looked up, and saw a sky filled with flaming feathers. Before he knew it, the winged horse had swooped under him and then fought valiantly to keep from smashing into the sea below. So close did they come to ending up in the water, mist rose as the Pegasus' wings sent up clouds of steam from every touch on the surface.

“You will not claim me this day, either, Poseidon,” Kratos growled. They had avoided the Lord of the Ocean’s domain and once more flew high into the air. He bent forward and stroked the Pegasus’ head, causing small sparks to fly.

“With a hundred such as you, my armies would ride to victory every time!”

This brought a snort of fire from the winged horse’s nostrils and renewed effort to soar. Kratos alertly scanned the horizon and thought he saw a dark-robed figure riding a purple-and-green griffin, but the rider turned to a dot and quickly vanished in the distance.

“Is this our destination?” Then Kratos realized the question was meaningless. They flew there because the Pegasus weakened. The fierce journey had taken its toll on the horse’s energy. Kratos felt the increasingly irregular rhythm and knew they had to land, no matter if this was the Island of Creation.

He shifted his weight and used his knees to steer the Pegasus toward a gaping cavern mouth. Whatever awaited them there, he would meet it and then continue on his way.

To the Sisters of Fate and Zeus’ death.



LAHKESIS FROWNED as she stroked along the thread of fate connected to Kratos' destiny. It vibrated strangely, as if he had somehow come free for an instant. This was not possible. To break the thread of fate was ... unthinkable. She applied a small amount of pressure to the thread and finally smiled when she saw that her clever manipulation had brought about a near disaster, which was now repaired.

"Let him struggle," she said softly. It pleased her to think that she had not lost her touch. A different tug on the thread could end Kratos' life instantly, but he had robbed Hades of his soul twice. Doing what she could to discomfit Hades amused her. The entire pantheon of gods had done nothing to deserve her good services. Although she did not begrudge them their victory over the Titans in the Great War, as they so comically called it, they had done nothing to give her entertainment recently. If they thought the Titanomachy had been the Great War, she could quickly dissuade them. Ideas about intertwined fates and disasters of unimaginable scale raced through her mind and brought an even larger smile to her lips.

She controlled their fate. They were only pawns to be moved about as she saw fit.

Lahkesis frowned again when the ravens she sent against Kratos were thwarted. That should not have happened. He ought to have been sorely wounded in the first attack. New tugs and strokes on the

strand caused her a moment of panic. The strand normally felt like fine wool but now had turned into a silken cord. The slickness presented her with a question she had never faced before. Her skills were never to be questioned, so why did the texture change without her urging?

“Atropos?” She softly spoke her sister’s name, wondering if playing it safe had finally bored the usually diligent weaver of others’ fates. Lahkesis shook her head. This was possible, but she doubted Atropos would bother. She was a stickler for order and produced only straightforward destinies. Hadn’t she discounted the importance of Kratos, even when he had ascended the throne and had become God of War? “A mere mortal with pretensions,” Atropos had sniffed.

Lahkesis had noted Kratos long before his entry to Olympus, even prior to his outrageous pact with Ares to be the war god’s cat’s-paw. From his birth she had noted him. And why not? His birth had been exceptional. Keeping this tidbit secret had made her feel superior to her sisters as she plotted and planned. It was as if Kratos were her own special project, though that was not really possible since the Sisters of Fate collaborated on the biggest events dealing with mortals and gods.

Sometimes they had a contest to see which could come up with the smallest change that would give the greatest result. Lahkesis occasionally let her sisters win, though she always took note of their techniques and adapted the best to her own private intrusions.

“But are you the one, Atropos, who is trying to manipulate my Kratos by enforcing order when I seek diversion through a touch of chaos?” Lahkesis shrugged off the possibility. Her sister was a neophyte in comparison when it came to determination of ultimate fates.

Lahkesis studied the problem and nodded when she saw that Kratos had somehow found a Pegasus to bring him closer to the Island of Creation and eventually the Temple of the Sisters. The attacks while he had been airborne had driven him to Typhon’s Lair, but from her careful study of the threads weaving about, she knew

how that would turn out. Her eyes did widen when she saw one detail of Kratos' excursion into the lair.

"This might be serious," she said thoughtfully. "It is time to seal Kratos' fate." She clapped her hands and one of her Priests of Fate entered. He bowed his cowed head and held the posture, awaiting her orders.

"Summon the Warrior of Destiny," she ordered. "He is to intercept Kratos before he reaches the Island of Creation."

"You no longer wish to play with this mortal turned god, mistress?"

She stared at the still-bowed priest and wondered what thoughts ran through his head. He and the others toiled for her, doing her bidding, performing tasks that none should ever consider, and all for a small stake in determining his own fate. Never had she allowed this, but it did keep a steady river of supplicants flowing to her service, all expectant and fearful—and all foolishly optimistic that they could cheat their fate.

The fate she and her sisters spun for them.

"My whims are no concern of yours, priest," she said icily.

"I shall summon the Warrior of Destiny immediately." The Priest of Fate began backing away.

"Wait!" A thought occurred to her. "I want you to be certain he is given this, also." She rose and seemed to float ghostlike across her chamber to a marble column. Placing her hands on the ribbed column and pressing on a hidden catch caused a tall thin crevice to appear. Resting inside was a case made from obsidian, as long as her arm and as thick as her wrist. Lahkesis reached in and withdrew the case.

For its size, it was far heavier than it appeared, but she had expected this. Contained inside was a weapon of immense power and one that should be used only in the direst of emergencies.

What she had seen of Kratos in Typhon's Lair convinced her she needed to put this formidable weapon in the hands of her doughtiest fighter.

Lahkesis handed the obsidian case to her priest, who held it across his palms. She ran her fingers along one edge, finding the almost-

imperceptible latches. The lid opened. She caught her breath when she saw the contents. Even she, one of the Sisters of Fate, had to be in awe of such power.

She took it out and handed it to the priest.

“Tell him to use it well against Kratos.”



THE PEGASUS VEERED to the right so far that Kratos grabbed the mane and yanked out a handful of the spun-gold hair to maintain his seat. The horse immediately swung back and threaded its way deeper into a cavern festooned with icicles and a freezing blast that took away Kratos' breath. The rocky, dirty ice walls closed in, forcing Kratos to sway violently from side to side to stay astride the winged horse. From ahead, deeper in the mountain of ice and rock, came a stale, frigid breath that formed frost on his beard and caused the Pegasus' flaming feathers to flicker. The winged horse beat furiously, but its strength faded quickly. If it could no longer go on, Kratos had no need for it.

"Back," he cried, shifting his weight to send the Pegasus flying down a side corridor even frostier than the entry point. Rime ice formed on his outstretched arms, turning his flesh blue with the cold. Bending low, he tried to warm himself on the horse's flaming wings, but there was no heat to be found. The Pegasus weakened with every second, its flying rhythm now erratic. Kratos had to shift constantly to keep from being tossed off one side or the other.

They burst suddenly into a larger cavern, but the faint blue light made it difficult to see where they flew. Kratos cursed as the Pegasus wobbled from side to side, almost bouncing off one wall before veering in the other direction. The Ghost of Sparta was so

engrossed in trying to turn his steed, to fly through the chilling fog and retrace their path through the tight-walled passage, that he saw their danger too late.

The horse beat furiously to avoid a huge foot rising from a ledge of dirty gray ice. The Pegasus surged upward, past a statue come alive. The mouth opened, large enough to fly into. Kratos avoided the trap, letting the horse flap wildly away. A hand of frozen stone reached out and missed plucking them from the air.

“Get out of my sight, Olympian,” the Titan rumbled. What Kratos had mistaken for a statue was Typhon himself. The thumb and forefinger were immense, a dozen times Kratos’ height. The crashing sound as they ground together alerted Kratos to the true danger. Those gelid fingers, so immense, so deceptively slow moving, were deadly.

Bending low, Kratos guided the Pegasus away from the Titan Typhon.

“I will not help you, God of War!”

Kratos bluntly shouted back what the Titan could do with his aid.

The blue-skinned Titan looked more like a statue than a living creature. Kratos wondered what banishment had placed Typhon in this frigid cave or if the Titan hid here to avoid the wrath of the gods. Tiny pockmarks dotted the Titan’s visage, icy depressions that cracked open to send ice crystals tumbling downward in a feathery curtain. Kratos thought darkness stirred behind those frozen plugs as if trying to escape.

Kratos tried to grip tighter and found the freezing temperature robbed him of some strength. To fight now would be dangerous.

He guided the horse back around in a large ice chamber, his vision blurred by the ice forming on his eyelashes. Escaping this frigid lair was the only hope of survival, but the pale light made it difficult to avoid the sharp, dangling stalactites—and he dared not fly too close to the floor. The stalagmites glistened with razored edges.

The horse responded sluggishly to his urging, flying high once more inside the wintry chamber—but too near the face of the now animated Titan. From Typhon’s mouth gusted billows of noxious, icy

air. For the briefest instant, the horse's fiery wings faded. Kratos thought they would be extinguished; after they passed through the icy breath, though, the flames ignited anew. But not enough.

The Pegasus spun downward out of control and tumbled onto the stone ledge just in front of the slowly stirring Titan. Kratos somersaulted off and swung about to regain his seat when Typhon's fingers lifted ponderously ... and descended with startling speed.

The Pegasus was trapped under the heavy, cold palm.

Kratos considered leaving the winged horse, but how would he escape this freezing lair and cross the ocean outside the moat of frost and needle-like stone spires unless he flew? The piteous neighs from the horse meant nothing to him. The Pegasus was a means of transport and nothing more, but it was necessary if he wanted to deliver his vengeance on Zeus. He drew his swords and attacked a huge fingernail, only to be flicked back as if he were an annoying insect.

Kratos redoubled his attack. This caused the Titan to bend forward slightly. A new blast of cold breath engulfed Kratos and staggered him. More of the opening pockmarks showered ice upon him. He swung his swords and protected his eyes from the shards pelting him—but he misjudged his footing. He stepped back over the verge and tumbled downward, away from both the Titan and the imprisoned Pegasus.

Kratos reacted swiftly and got his feet under him in time to absorb the impact of the fall. He rolled and came to his feet uncomfortably close to a Minotaur. Kratos was surprised to see that any living creature had made a home of Typhon's icy domain. The hooved beast roared, lowered its head, and charged. Deadly black horns swung back and forth as the creature's powerful neck tried to drive them into Kratos' gut. The broad shoulders rippled with corded muscle, and the bull-man's armored arms groped for its opponent, intending to grapple Kratos and yank him into those horns. Broad nostrils flared, snorting flames, and a gut-shaking roar accompanied the clack of hooves against the floor as it charged.

Kratos looked back up the sheer wall and saw no way to scale it. There had to be another way up, even if it was through this

attacking creature. His blades heated the air with savage slashes in time to deflect a horn aimed to gut him. His other sword blade slashed along the side of the Minotaur's neck and opened a deep gash.

This infuriated the monster—and made it all the more vulnerable. Kratos' rage was more directed. He chose his targets more carefully, delivering a cut that severed the hamstrings of one leg. As the Minotaur keeled over, it exposed its bull neck. Kratos jumped up and drove his blade down into the unprotected flesh. The Minotaur was a potent adversary, and this did not finish it. Then Kratos planted both feet on its chest, raised his pair of swords high above his head, and drove them down into the Minotaur's mouth repeatedly.

It died.

He jumped down and once more surveyed how best to ascend the base of the Titan's stony throne. Kratos snorted, and plumes of frost formed. The warm Minotaur's blood that coated him kept the cold at bay for now, but Kratos did not think it wise to dally in this freezing prison.

Kratos ran down the cavern until he found a part of the ceiling that angled back toward the Titan. Using his swords as grappling hooks, he dug into the rock, climbed to the stalactite-crusted ceiling, and began crossing it. The swords penetrated the rock and held long enough for him to swing in the direction of where Typhon sat, blowing huge clouds of condensed breath like a forge billows. Kratos felt increasingly wary as the depressions on the Titan's face continued to become free of ice. Those cavities extended from the stationary Typhon out to either side, scarring the cavern walls. He had heard tales of creatures living in rock animated by Gaia and sharing their life force with the mountain housing them until the very earth shook and the mountain walked. The caves provided protection; the Sentries trickled out life.

As one blade entered the rock, an ear-piercing screech reverberated throughout the cavern, and blood trickled down the hilt and over Kratos' wrist. He drew out the blade and a rock-legged Sentry tumbled from its hidden lair. Contemptuously, Kratos flicked

the blood from the sword tip and continued toward the Titan, only to find that the inadvertent killing had roused other rock beasts.

The humanoid creatures popped out from their small caves, plumed gold helms shining in the pale light, and scampered after him like spiders on the rock overhang. But Kratos focused on their knife-like talons and war axes seeking to disembowel and dismember, to rend and slash. Hanging from one sword embedded in the ceiling, he fought with all his skill and strength. The gray-fleshed Sentries were not worthy opponents, but there were many and they stole away precious time. He was not certain how long the Pegasus could endure being crushed under Typhon's finger. One by one he sent the rock creatures to Hades' embrace until only eerie silence filled the cavern.

The Sentries kept Typhon from completely freezing, but there were too few of them for the Titan to escape his hyperborean imprisonment.

Just as Kratos neared the spot where he might swing back to the base of the Titan's throne, a section of roof collapsed and sent him tumbling to the cavern floor. The only way open for him amid the debris was to grab a chain fastened to the stone above. Kratos grabbed the chain and swung down and away. He hit the ground, tumbled, and came to his feet with a freezing wind in his face. For a moment he thought his joints would seize up. He turned his back to the gale and gathered his strength and warmth. Kratos flexed his fingers and squinted into the wind to see where he must go. Stepping forward, he found a snowy ledge stretching out into the gathering blizzard. The intense cold would kill him in minutes. As he turned to go back into the Lair of the Titan, a heavy door slammed downward, blocking his retreat. Kratos grunted as he tried to lift the door. Even if he'd had his godly power, he wasn't sure this door could be opened by simple physical means. He stepped back and looked up the face of the mountain, spotting a glacier high above festooned with snowy crevices. The storm built around the summit and pelted down snowflakes the size of his fist.

Before he could begin a climb up to see if there might be another way into Typhon's Lair, he heard a plaintive cry for help. Kratos

went to see who shared his dilemma of being locked outside. If they survived for longer than a few minutes, there had to be fire to warm their bones.

Tramping through the new-fallen snow, he walked out onto a carved stone hand, outstretched and palm up. At first all he could see was the broad back of a snow-white bird bent forward, eating greedily. Bloody gobbets of flesh were strewn about on the snow, sizzling as the heat was rapidly sucked away by the cold.

The muted cries for mercy let Kratos know that whoever the bird dined on still lived, while the curses that followed showed the victim still capable of fight and anger. Kratos' striding forward caused the huge bird to swivel its head halfway about and peer at him with incurious eyes. Strips of gory flesh hung from its serrated beak. With a single squawk, the bird flapped its immense wings and took to the sky. Kratos raised his arm to keep the snow stirred by the bird's departure from blinding him.

As he lowered his arm, he frowned. Stepping forward until he was only a few feet from a man with his intestines ripped out and other organs dangling from his body cavity, Kratos had to wonder how anyone could have survived such an attack. The bird's victim was chained with his hands held high over his head to stretch out his abdomen, providing the carrion eater with an easier meal.

"God of War, you live!"

"I no longer walk with the gods," Kratos said. He eyed the cruel brilliance of the torture. "Who has placed you in this torment?"

"Zeus!"

Kratos nodded. The only other god who could conceive of such a vicious fate ruled over the Underworld, and Hades would have kept his victim close to revel in the daily pain experienced. Added torture came from the fierce weather. The guts sizzled as their heat vanished into the hungry maw of the piercing wind.

"I am Prometheus and my only crime was helping mankind. When I took the fires of Olympus to the mortals, Zeus considered it a betrayal."

Kratos moved so that the setting sun was not in his eyes. The light from the bloodred sky caused Prometheus to almost disappear, his

blood mingling with that staining the sky. Snow fluttered all about, making it seem that the sky filled with dancing drops of gore.

“He condemned me to be savagely consumed every day by this cursed bird. And then with the fall of night, I am healed.” Prometheus coughed up blood and grayish lung tissue. He tried to lift his head but his strength, his reason for life, had been ripped from him.

“How long I have been here, how long I have suffered this curse, I truly do not know.” A massive shudder passed through his body and he died.

Kratos watched as the organs that had been yanked free from Prometheus’ innards slithered back into place. The missing intestine regenerated and curled up dutifully like rope coiled by an able seaman on a ship’s deck. When all the insides were restored, the belly and chest flesh slapped up into place. Soon Prometheus was entirely healed, not even a scar showing where the merciless gutting had occurred.

Prometheus let out a scream of pure agony and arched his back as he fought his shackles. His eyes flew open, and he gasped for air.

“The healing is worse than the death, but worse still is to awake knowing that I have nothing ahead but pain and suffering,” he said, panting harshly. He looked down at Kratos. “Please, Ghost of Sparta, release me from my torment.”

Kratos stared at Prometheus for a moment before coming to a decision. How he had suffered at Zeus’ hand! Seeing another who similarly suffered and demanded only surcease directed Kratos’ hand. He would give a wounded comrade grace in battle. Prometheus should be afforded no less.

Kratos stepped forward, his blades whining in the cold air. Sparks jumped away from the iron shackles as he severed one link after another.

Kratos stepped away as Prometheus tumbled forward, but Kratos quickly saw he had not freed the man. Prometheus slid through the statue’s fingers and dangled from the chain above a giant bowl ablaze with an eternal flame.

“The only way to kill me, Kratos, is to burn me in the Flames of Perdition!” Prometheus kicked feebly as he dangled above the fire. He strained to set himself on fire but could not accomplish this self-immolation.

Kratos stepped closer and let the heat rising from below renew his strength. He flexed his arms and stretched his legs until the frost melted away. He bent to better study the problem. A quick look at how the chains were tangled around Prometheus showed Kratos he could not send the affront of a death to Zeus as a message without going below. He slipped and slid down the frozen palm of the statue before dropping to another ledge below. Staring up at the dangling Prometheus, he knew there was no way to sever the chain and send him into the fiery bowl.

“Typhon’s Bane,” Prometheus grated out. “You must get the bow hidden in the Titan’s eye.”

Prometheus swung about in obvious agony, his flesh burning and healing, only to be burned again, but Kratos saw the former god staring toward a crevice some distance away. Putting down his head against the growing snowstorm, he slogged forward and felt air blowing from inside the mountain through the crevice. Turning sideways, Kratos barely fit into the crack in the rock. He found himself on a walkway that spiraled up from below and led to a stone bridge at Typhon’s eye level.

A bloodcurdling shriek brought him about. A trio of scrawny Harpies had been posted to guard the bridge. They let out a shrill screech as one and launched into the air for their attack. Leathery wings beat at the frigid air, and breath gusted out of twisted, broken noses as they clawed at him. Their stench sickened him. Kratos hated Harpies and their ferocious, mindless anger.

He ducked one’s attack, then drew his swords and pressed the others backward, down the ramp to a level area. Immediately Kratos saw his error. Now he faced not only the three Harpies but a Gorgon as well. He averted his gaze a split second before he would have been turned to stone. Lambent green light bathed his back and formed his shadow like a new warrior before him.

The Harpies shrieked and attacked. Kratos reared up, swung his swords in a broad arc to get their attention, then fell flat on his belly, exposing the Harpies to the Gorgon's deadly stare.

Where there had been three Harpies, living, breathing, deadly, now were suspended statues in midair, accumulating hoarfrost. As if moving through treacle, the Harpies twisted and turned, then fell with the suddenness of a hunting falcon to smash into a thousand shards at his feet.

The endlessly moving nest of snakes rising in anger from the Gorgon's head hissed and snapped futilely in his direction. All were following his every move. But the snakes were not what worried him. The Gorgon's eyes darted about, hot rays shooting forth that could turn any living creature to stone.

Kratos closed his eyes, rolled, and came to his feet. The temptation to look was great, but he knew the consequences of even a small peek. More than once in combat, he had fought blinded by blood, both his and that of others. He listened intently rather than looking as the Gorgon hissed and slithered directly in front of him. In his mind he pictured it rising on its powerful tail, like a cobra preparing to strike. Using the sounds of the increasingly angry Gorgon as a guide, he judged distances, then somersaulted forward. In the instant his body shielded his eyes, he saw where the Gorgon rose to initiate its attack and changed the direction of the roll. When he came to his feet, his eyes were once again tightly closed.

His blades rose and fell. The right one clattered on the stone floor. The left one dug deep into flesh and caused a shriek of agony that guided his redirected right sword. Two more quick cuts and the Gorgon lay dead on the cavern floor.

Running on the ice-slicked path, he found himself at eye level with the Titan. Hardly noticing it as he studied how best to attack it, Kratos grabbed a Harpy thinking to harm him. One wing in each hand, he placed a foot in the middle of its spine and then heaved. The wings ripped free as the backbone broke. Angrily casting away the severed parts, he saw a way to reach the Titan and attack.

Kratos froze in his attack when a deeply resonant voice filled the cavern. Typhon spoke.

“You cannot win, Ghost of Sparta. Surrender. Let me crush you quickly. I promise you a painless death before consigning your shade to the Underworld.” The Titan stirred but did not remove the finger pinning the Pegasus.

“Your mother, Gaia, has told me what I need to defeat Zeus. Will you oppose her?” Kratos called.

“Yes! My mother’s poor judgment doomed the Titans.”

“You hate Zeus, as do I. Let us work together.”

“No! I would kill him myself, not allied with a disgraced and fallen god such as yourself!”

Kratos worked into position, moving slowly, carefully. A quick look showed how difficult his path would be, but he also saw his goal. A slight shadow, a curve and nothing more, floated on the Titan’s eye. A second, longer study of the eye confirmed it. The bow moved as Typhon blinked slowly.

He exploded into action. Blades flashing, he hacked away at an icy spire until it cracked, tipped, and finally toppled toward Typhon. It fell onto a flat-topped rocky spire, giving him a bridge to get closer. Kratos took a step out, ducked back as Typhon’s icy exhalation threatened to freeze him where he stood, then ran at top speed up the bridge he had created. The ice beneath his sandals made the short journey treacherous, but he reached the flattened spire. He saw he dared not hesitate. Typhon sucked in a deep breath. If the Titan exhaled, Kratos would perish, flash-frozen.

Feet slipping against the ice, then pumping harder, he launched himself into the air and landed on the Titan’s cheek. Typhon roared and tried to shake him loose, tossing a bulky, frozen head about. The rime ice turned Typhon’s face slippery, but Kratos was too near a vulnerable spot to attack to give up. If he had simply stopped trying, he would have slid down the cheek like a mortal tear and landed far below where the Titan still held the Pegasus captive, no better off for his efforts.

Such a fall would end poorly for him, not only because of Typhon’s wrath but from more Sentries poking out from their depressions on the Titan’s face.

Using the Blades of Athena as hooks he clawed his way forward to the Titan's red-glowing left eye, where he had spotted the huge bow floating in the sclera. Kratos slashed furiously and blinded the Titan, causing huge gusts of ice cloud to be emitted from both mouth and nose. He ignored the rising cloud of gelid air, cut more of the eye, and then reached inside and caught at the bow. His fingers slipped on the first try. On the second he pulled the bow free.

The Titan rumbled and bellowed.

"I will slay you, Kratos. You cannot do this to me!"

"You of all the Titans have opposed Zeus."

"He imprisoned me here!" roared Typhon.

The entire chamber shook and rocks fell from above, forcing Kratos to shield his head. "Yes, I opposed him. It was my mother's will, but I did so willingly. He slew my brothers!"

"The Giants died at Zeus' hand," Kratos said, gripping the bow. Every turn made by the Titan threatened to send him flying through the air. His hands were cold, and there was little to grasp. If he were sent to the floor, the fall might kill him. Returning to the stony perch was his only chance—and Typhon turned his face away, making the leap impossible.

A huge tear formed in the Titan's eye and slipped forth. The icy liquid caught at Kratos' legs and threatened to freeze him to the spot. The poor purchase he had on Typhon's cheek was in jeopardy. Try as he might, he could not escape the tear. It froze about his ankles, then began to slip downward.

"I am Gaia's last child, and the one she burdened most with her schemes."

"This might be your only chance to escape this cruel exile," Kratos said. Bow clutched in one hand, he used his other hand to clutch his sword and use the pommel against the block of iced tear. Tiny cracks appeared, but it dislodged and slid so that it—and he—balanced precariously. Without straining he could look out and down. The fall was hundreds of feet to where the Titan still pressed down on the Pegasus and held it captive.

"And if you fail?"

"Victory will be mine!"

“So you say, Kratos, but I cannot risk it.”

“What do you risk? More imprisonment? That Zeus will torment you further?”

“My wife!”

“Echidna?” Kratos continued to hammer at the ice and freed his left foot. As Typhon swung his head around, a large piece went tumbling over his cheek to smash far below.

“My darling wife and children. After Zeus imprisoned me here, he allowed them to live in freedom, a challenge to future heroes. If he thinks I aided you, he would slay them all! Better I live in exile with my beloved family free than to oppose Zeus and have him slay them should you fail.”

“I did not know,” Kratos said. “Loss of your family is a terrible burden to bear.”

“You should know,” Typhon bellowed. His cold breath gusted out and swirled back to chill Kratos further. But a final blow of the sword pommel cracked away the last of the imprisoning tear. “Would you have me endure the pain you feel? Would you fail my family as you did your own?”

Kratos bristled with rage. Would the torment forced on him by Ares ever end?

“I will slay Zeus!”

Kratos went to his knees as Typhon began thrashing about, roaring about his love for Echidna, his hatred for Zeus—and vowing to stop any attempt to dethrone the King of the Gods to preserve his wife’s and children’s lives.

As the Titan’s fury became more violent, Kratos launched himself through the air, landing once more on the ice-covered spire. Slipping and falling to his knees, he found it impossible to regain his balance. From the Titan’s cheeks bulged round gray lumps that grew into Sentries determined to preserve their abode—Typhon.

Rolling, Kratos bowled over one Sentry, then grabbed it and used it to pull himself erect. With a savage twist, he ripped off its head. Two more grew like dark tears on Typhon’s cheek. If he continued to fight in this fashion, he would perish. He hefted the weapon he had snatched from its hiding place.

He drew back the bowstring and aimed for the Titan's eye. Although he had not nocked an arrow, when he released the string, a glistening ice arrow sailed true to the target. The arrow of wind embedded in Typhon's eye and completely blinded him. The resulting bellow forced Kratos back. He sat down and skidded along the ice bridge and found shelter against the Titan's wrath behind jutting rocks. Although he was unable to attack, Typhon unwittingly aided him. The thrashing about had dislodged the Sentries and, for a moment, distracted them.

The icy onslaught lasted for some time, but the Titan finally had to gasp for breath. The respite allowed Kratos to consider his predicament. There had to be a way to release the Pegasus and fly from this glacial prison. Attacking Typhon and his Sentries would not work, even using the bow. Kratos retraced his path to the crevice leading outside into the snowstorm and returned to where Prometheus dangled over the Olympian flame.

"Kratos," Prometheus cried out. "You did not abandon me."

"I seek to defeat Zeus," he said. "You must tell me how to escape this frozen prison."

"Free me from my torment, I beseech you! Give me surcease and I will tell you how to escape!"

Kratos drew back the bowstring, then released it. An icy gust of wind winged its way to ricochet off the chain holding Prometheus. A second arrow created a swinging target, but Kratos was expert in all weapons. Not needing to fall into the rhythm of reaching for a new arrow every time he fired, he filled the air with the icy missiles. One link began to yield. Kratos concentrated his fire on it.

The link snapped and Prometheus plunged downward into the center of the bowl. He landed on his feet and was immediately bathed in flames. He threw his hands high above his head and spun about to ensure that every inch of his body was exposed to the cleansing, killing fires.

"This gift I give you, Kratos, for you have given me the greatest gift possible."

Kratos recoiled as a cloud of ash rose from the smoldering body to rain down on him. He felt a tingling sensation that turned into fiery

pain, not unlike that when the old oracle had dusted him with the ashes of his wife and child outside Athena's temple. Kratos touched the bone-white skin where those ashes had forever branded him, but the new ash did not erase—or add to—his visible shame.

Deep within he felt a grinding, however, a grating of one internal organ against another, a power growing that could not be denied. Kratos gasped as his entire body quivered and shook. The ice that had formed on him melted away, and the red tattoo glowed with an inner light. Where he had felt enervated by the battle with Typhon, now he experienced only a lightness of body and spirit. He looked down and saw the white ash that had been his wife and daughter permanently marking his skin begin to shimmer until he had to close his eyes or be blinded.

He had felt despair at fulfilling Gaia's mission, though he accepted it as the only way of delivering to Zeus the fate he deserved. Now Kratos' new power also added to his resolve. He was the Ghost of Sparta, and victory would be his!

More than simple power, Prometheus' ash had imbued him with knowledge of the path away from this prison.

He turned and saw a dozen Sentries rushing forth, drawn by Prometheus' death cries. Boiling from within came a rush of energy. Expanding outward in a fan, that energy swept to—and through—the Sentries. They died in an instant.

"The Rage of the Titans," came a distant whisper from Prometheus. "Use it, Kratos, use it against Zeus!" And then the voice disappeared.

For a few seconds Kratos stood and allowed the power within—the Rage of the Titans—to build. He knew where its first real use would be. Never breaking stride as he reentered the Lair of the Titans, he marched to the stone bridge, only to find it in ruin. The Titan had thrashed about and used his cold breath to crack the stone.

Kratos backed away, found a dangling chain, and leaped. His fingers closed on the cold metal—and stuck. He pried them loose and made his way quickly to the base of the Titan's throne where the hand still held the Pegasus trapped.

“Release the horse, Typhon!” he bellowed. “Now!”

“I do not obey the likes of you,” the Titan said in his raspy, deep voice.

Kratos stepped forward and eyed the broken fingernail on the cold digit closest to him. He hacked away with his swords but produced no movement. He took a deep breath, then released the Rage of the Titans. The immense power broke the fingernail and caused Typhon to lift the finger. Kratos stepped forward and loosed the Rage of the Titans again. Typhon jerked back, his hand lifting from the winged horse.

The Pegasus scrambled to its feet and stumbled away, free. Within seconds its wings burned brightly. It made a few tentative flaps as if to test its pinions for any damage from the imprisonment. When it tossed its head and let out a loud neigh of triumph, Kratos vaulted onto the horse’s back and stroked his heels along the flanks.

The Pegasus shot into the air, flying furiously away from the Lair of the Titan. Behind, Kratos heard Typhon cursing him with an anger that Kratos knew well, an anger that came from having your life and family destroyed by the gods of Olympus. Yet leaving the Titan scarred but alive in the seclusion of its frigid lair was the closest thing to sympathy Kratos would show a creature who had chosen to oppose him.

Kratos, astride the winged horse, exploded out of the cavern into bright, cold daylight, darted upward, and flew on toward the Island of Creation.



GAIA STIRRED AGAIN from her slumber when the gods mentioned Kratos. Her interest had been piqued when not only Zeus but also Hermes began speaking of him. Now another goddess brought Zeus information that puzzled her enough to eavesdrop.

For anywhere there were trees and earth and rock, there was Gaia.

“Kratos has broken Prometheus’ bonds and freed him, Sky Father,” Hermes reported. His winged sandals whirled softly as he hovered a few inches above the floor in Zeus’ throne room. Over him fluttered puffy white clouds, but they took on leaden underbellies as Zeus glowered at him.

“How is this possible? Am I to get no relief from that upstart?” Zeus reached out and formed a thunderbolt in his right hand, playing with it and making Hermes uneasy.

From her vantage, Gaia held back a deep laugh, seeing the Messenger of the Gods become so nervous. Zeus might unleash his potent weapon at any instant and reduce Hermes to smoldering ash. That would provoke more than consternation among the Olympians.

“I killed him. I killed him with the Blade of Olympus,” cried Zeus. “How do you come by this knowledge? What god sent you with this message to provoke me?”

“I ... none, my father,” Hermes said. “I happened upon this information by accident and thought you should be the first to know. If you prefer I could tell it to someone else.”

“You were fluttering about as you do and you just happened to see Kratos release Prometheus? What a coincidence.”

“Please, Sky Father, it is true. I have no idea why I had to be near Typhon’s cavern, but I was.” Hermes looked frazzled and confused.

Well that he should, Gaia thought. *The Sisters of Fate decreed that he be there when Kratos released Prometheus.* She inhaled and mountain ranges rose. When she sighed, river valleys formed and continents moved. Gaia had hoped for his triumph, but now there was more than hope. Distinct possibilities existed.

“He could not free Prometheus,” Zeus said. “I bound him specially.” He sat on his throne, arms crossed over his massive chest. He tossed his head to flip his beard outside his arms, and his long white hair billowed.

“He used Typhon’s Bane to sever—”

“He took the bow from Typhon’s eye?” interrupted Zeus. The Sky Father leaned forward, his hands now gripping the arms of his throne. The mighty throne creaked under his weight as he half levered himself to his feet. “Impossible!”

“Not that impossible apparently. He used the bow to sever the chains holding Prometheus, and then—”

“Chains are not all that bind him,” interrupted Zeus again, “The eagle I magically attached to Prometheus will follow him no matter where he goes.” The King of Olympus looked more content until Hermes spoke again.

“If you let me finish, dear father, you would know that Prometheus fell into the Flames of Perdition.”

“How dare he release the Firegiver from his torment!”

“A better question is: How did he get a Pegasus to ride? There was none in Rhodes.”

“Someone in Olympus aids him,” Zeus raged.

Gaia appreciated the paranoia that seized Zeus now. He would blame others dwelling on Mount Olympus and never know that she had been the one who gave Kratos his winged transport.

Zeus snapped out of his reverie. "Who, Hermes, who on Olympus gave him the Pegasus?"

"I cannot say. No one has mentioned such a scheme to me."

"You're lying. You know! Why do you refuse to tell me?"

"I speak of only the things I witnessed with my own eyes," protested Hermes nervously. "I swear, Father, I would have told you!"

"Quiet!" Zeus opened his hand and loosed the thunderbolt. It crackled and then exploded, sending Hermes tumbling backward in the air, feet-over-head. "I will not tolerate your lies."

"It is my sworn duty to tell only the truth when delivering an official message," Hermes said, fighting to regain his composure. "While no other god or goddess entrusted this message to me, I vouch for its truth."

"It cannot be," Zeus said, settling down into a glum reflection.

"You are right, King Zeus. It is not so."

Zeus snapped upright to better see the newcomer.

"Iris, what are you saying?" Hermes cried. "I spoke only the truth to my father. I'd not dare to lie."

"But you would, Hermes," Iris said. She stepped forward, every footstep a glowing rainbow on the marble floor. "You think to ascend the throne and replace our lord Zeus!"

"I ... never!" Hermes bowed deeply in Zeus' direction. "I am completely loyal."

Gaia watched carefully. The gods fought among themselves!

"Prometheus was not released by Kratos, and there is no danger to you, Zeus."

"Why are you saying this, Iris? It's wrong!" Hermes failed to control his winged sandals and floated upward until a thunderbolt from Zeus' hand forced him back to a more subservient position at the base of the throne.

"Why are you filling Lord Zeus' ears with such drivel? You think to deceive him, then replace me?"

"No!"

"Quiet!" Zeus bellowed. He turned to Iris. "What happened?"

Iris began spinning a tale at odds with the truth. Gaia shivered with delight, then subsided when she realized that Iris had not thought to replace Hermes as the Messenger of the Gods on her own. But no alliance with other gods and goddesses was possible. Gaia thought deeply on this and realized that Kratos faced a more dangerous foe than ever.

The Sisters meddle again. What machinations have they set in motion? Why tinker with Iris' fate to cause dissension on Olympus? Is this their attempt to halt the Titans' rise to power?

"So you see, Sky Father," Iris continued, "Kratos is made powerless by the Fates. This I have learned and report to you." She looked at Hermes out of the corner of her eye, enjoying the god squirming at her lies.

"My powers are unchallenged, then," Zeus said when Iris had finished. He glared at Hermes. He slowly lifted his right arm and pointed. "I banish you to earth! Until I decree otherwise, you will not enter Olympus on pain of my wrath!" Zeus unleashed another thunderbolt that exploded above and brought down a rain of marble fragments and plaster as it opened a view to the naked sky above.

Hermes started to speak, but stopped himself, knowing there was no message he could deliver to change Zeus' mind. Instead he simply bowed his head as he backed from the throne room. In minutes he flew from Olympus and down to the grimy, petty world of the mortals.

Gaia watched the Messenger of the Gods—the *former* messenger—depart in disgrace, knowing that he would oppose both Iris and Zeus for this banishment. The more confusion that stalked the corridors of Olympus, the easier her task, but it worried her that she was not the only one seeking to sow chaos among the gods.



SIX DAYS. Kratos clung to the back of the Pegasus for six days as they flew toward the edge of the world and the Island of Creation. The flying horse seemed indefatigable after its imprisonment by Typhon, but Kratos grew weak from lack of food and water. As God of War he had no need for constant sustenance, but Zeus had stolen that skill along with the rest of his godly powers. More than once the Pegasus had swooped low over an isolated island to allow him to sample water, but the horse was as driven as Kratos himself.

The long hours and endless sea flowing beneath gave Kratos time to consider how he would best Zeus. The King of the Gods sought adulation, worship, total obeisance—and what did he give in return? Treachery. Treachery that had to be answered.

During his brief time as God of War, Kratos had rewarded those who had worshipped him. Sparta had sent out armies at his command and was conquering the world, taking spoils and sending the bounty back to the populace to grow stronger yet. He fought alongside the stalwart warriors and sought solace in battle. He would have found it had Zeus not drained his godly powers into the Blade of Olympus and used it to slaughter the entire Spartan army.

Every time Kratos remembered the carnage Zeus had caused, he hated the King of the Gods that much more. A soldier's destiny was to die bravely, in battle, for the good of the city-state, but not one of

the Spartans at Rhodes had a chance against a god. What made Kratos even angrier, Zeus had used Kratos' own power for the slaughter.

Kratos had another thorn of guilt festering in his soul, knowing his energy and godly powers had been responsible for so many deaths in his own army. For that and so much more Zeus had to be brought to justice—to receive Kratos' vengeance.

The Pegasus let out a loud snort that focused his attention on the path ahead. The sky was clear, but Kratos saw a distant spot growing larger. Griffins swept toward him, screeching like eagles, with talons clawing at the air as if his belly were underneath. He counted five, but there might have been more flocking up from the large island barely visible on the horizon. The Island of Creation. Just beyond the island was the edge of the world, with oceans falling off to either side, crashing into oblivion.

He had arrived. Now it was time to fight his way through to the Sisters of Fate and wreak revenge on Zeus.

As the flight of griffins closed on him, Kratos reached back so that Typhon's Bane came to his hand. The recurved bow bent almost double as he drew back the string and let fly one of the wind arrows. It distorted the bright sunlight as it flew like a mirage, then vanished in the breast of the lead griffin. The creature let out a squawk, flipped onto its back, and then fell headfirst to the sea far below.

He had not expected the other attackers to be deterred by the death, even of their leader. Two griffins formed into a team on either side as they attacked. Typhon's Bane sang as he unleashed one arrow after another. One griffin, quicker than the others, twisted its head about and caught an icicle. Eagle beak crushed the arrow, but the griffin had underestimated the power of the bow. The arrow shattered into a million shards, each of which turned into a smaller arrow. The griffin gurgled, and then blood poured from its nostrils and out its beak as the tiny missiles continued their flight. It was punctured by thousands of tiny projectiles.

Kratos swayed easily to the other side and caught one attacker in the eye with an arrow. Before he could swing Typhon's Bane about

for the remaining griffin, it surged forward and snapped viciously at the Pegasus' wing. Bits of feather and fire scattered behind as the Pegasus continued toward the Island of Creation, but the griffin refused to yield.

Kratos got off shot after shot from the bow, but the flying monster was clever—and lucky. It swung beneath the wing it attacked so he didn't have a direct shot. Using his knees, he forced the Pegasus to turn so he could tumble off and dive through the air. As he passed the griffin, intent on snapping away more of the flying horse's wing, Kratos reached out and grabbed a wing of his own.

The griffin released the Pegasus and fell like a leaf, Kratos hanging on and being swung wide. Kratos grated his teeth and worked his way up the wing until he reached the griffin's huge body. Quick, vicious stabs where the wing attached to the twenty-foot-long body rendered the appendage useless. This let him climb onto the griffin's broad back, grab the wing, and yank as hard as he could. The wing tore free.

Unable to fly, the griffin began tumbling and Kratos was tossed into the air. He fell only a few yards before the Pegasus swooped beneath him and once more they flew for the island, no longer on the horizon but directly under them now. The aerial battle had not prevented him from approaching the Island of Creation after all but had allowed him to get close enough to hunt for a landing place.

Before he could locate a decent spot, the Pegasus gave two powerful flaps and rocketed upward.

"No, down!" Kratos protested. Then he saw a new defender of the air.

Purple-and-green flashed above in the sun, and then the griffin rider rode close enough to reveal details. The rider wore a plumed war helm that hid his face, heavy body armor, and greaves that glinted as if they were fashioned from pure gold. At his belt depended an axe on one side and a short spear on the other. Kratos flew closer.

As the rider bore down on Kratos, he lifted the axe.

And then the griffin rider flashed past, giving Kratos a better look at his adversary.

Determination rose in Kratos as he wheeled the Pegasus about. He had seen his opponent days earlier, before he had entered the Lair of the Titan. He had been a tiny speck in the distance and had avoided a fight. How fearsome could a soldier be who ran from battle?

“Be wary, Kratos,” came Gaia’s voice in his ear. “This warrior is the minion of the Sisters of Fate. He has been summoned from afar. They do not send him to do their bidding lightly, not when they control fate itself.”

“What is his weapon?” Although the axe blade gleamed sharp and deadly in the sunlight, Kratos instinctively knew the real weapon was the short spear thrust into the warrior’s belt. It had the aura of power, deadly power, about it.

“The Spear of Destiny,” Gaia said. “Fear it, Kratos. Do not let it touch you!”

“He cannot stop me!”

“He is a more dangerous foe than you realize, Kratos. The Warrior of Destiny would prevent you from reaching the island and the palaces of the Sisters of Fate. You do not want to fall to him or your shade is forfeit for all eternity!”

Kratos barely heard Gaia, because he was so intent on the Warrior of Destiny flying directly at him. He had been overconfident when first he had seen the Warrior, but now took to heart Gaia’s warning about the spear since he felt its power even at this distance.

If his encounter with Zeus had taught him anything, it was to be wary of strange weapons.

His blades flashed through the air, engaging the battle-axe and cutting away part of the Warrior’s helmet to expose flesh the color of corroded copper on the scalp. Then they soared past each other, but Kratos guided the Pegasus in a tighter circle and attacked the Warrior’s griffin from below. He stared up at the purple, green, and tan belly where feathers smoothly flowed into the tawny hindquarters of the huge creature. The Warrior sought him but could not find where Kratos hid.

Then the Warrior of Destiny knew. Kratos stood and stabbed upward with both swords to gut the griffin as it surged above him,

blotting out the sky with its immense bulk. A shower of blood splashed into his eyes, blinding him. The Pegasus broke off the attack, banking away.

Kratos used his forearm to wipe away the griffin blood, taking care not to injure himself with his chain-wound wristbands. The wind whipped past and caused his eyes to water, which helped remove the blood. By the time Kratos saw clearly again, the Warrior of Destiny had come about and, despite his mount's grievous wounds, flew close behind. The Pegasus immediately started a tight downward spiral.

As they followed the descending spiral, Kratos saw his goal passing by below every few seconds. The Island of Creation!

But he could not reach it without dispatching the Warrior of Destiny. He saw that the Pegasus' tactic was sound. To break out of the leftward spiral would allow the Warrior to attack directly rather than being forced to follow them along the airy curve.

The sea rushed up quickly, warning Kratos this tactic had to end quickly or they would find themselves in Poseidon's realm.

He gripped the horse's mane, leaned forward, then guided the Pegasus out of the spiral. Sharp pain lanced into his left shoulder as the Warrior rushed past, his axe slashing out, but Kratos had successfully pulled out of the dive, and the Pegasus fought valiantly to climb once more.

The Warrior followed more slowly.

With every move, Kratos found new vulnerabilities in his opponent. The wounds he had inflicted on the griffin must slow it and rob the beast of climbing strength. But the eye-dazzling Spear of Destiny thrust into the belt around the Warrior's waist was an ominous warning of death to come should Kratos flag for even an instant. Within its crystalline depths danced tiny motes every color of the rainbow, some combining into larger specks only to explode. The Warrior had not used the spear for a reason, and Kratos knew it. To fling the spear and miss meant the loss of a potent weapon. Better to engage with a battle-axe until a spear thrust was certain to find its target.

The fliers leveled off; Kratos saw his chance. The Pegasus flew faster and showed greater maneuverability than the griffin, giving Kratos a split second to act. He gathered his feet under him, then shoved hard and launched through empty air.

He gripped the griffin's leonine hindquarters and clawed his way to stand on the broad back. Ten feet ahead of Kratos at the front shoulder, the Warrior of Destiny turned, saw his danger, and recklessly flung his axe over his shoulder. Kratos easily avoided it as he walked forward on the griffin's back, swords thrusting in front of him. The Warrior got to his feet in time to take a blade deep into his chest. He staggered back, clutching the wound spewing greenish blood.

Kratos wasted no time pressing his attack on the wounded Warrior. The armored figure fought to remain on his feet atop the bucking griffin. Kratos blocked a halfhearted advance with his swords and thrust again, hot metal finding a new berth in the Warrior's upper left arm. Seeing weakness, Kratos surged ahead for the kill.

The Warrior of Destiny was stronger than he appeared and grappled with Kratos. The two struggled, strength against strength, until the Warrior swept one foot out and around a leg, tripping Kratos. They fell, the Warrior atop Kratos who lay on his back. Then Kratos saw the real danger. The Spear of Destiny had somehow flown from the belt to the Warrior's hand.

He held the spear aloft so that the Ghost of Sparta saw its every detail. It was a short thrusting spear, but the tip sizzled with electric energy. Something about staring at the point confused his senses and made him dizzy. He looked away, at the ebon shaft, the way the power flowed around the spear and down the Warrior's arm.

"Time to die," the Warrior of Destiny said, his voice hollow. For all his fighting prowess, he held the Spear of Destiny gingerly, as if he feared using it—or was personally afraid of it.

Kratos lifted one foot and slammed the heel down hard on the griffin's back. He was rewarded with a sudden aerial lurch. He had been right that the beast was sorely wounded from his first attack and only flew on with great difficulty. The griffin's shift unseated

the Warrior, giving Kratos the chance to swarm atop him and try to pin him down.

The unsteady flight of the brightly colored griffin that had allowed him to turn the tables an instant before now worked against Kratos. The griffin faltered and went into a steep dive, forcing Kratos to concentrate only on grasping the Warrior's wrist to prevent a quick thrust with the short spear. Despite the Warrior's wound, he had enough strength to slowly lower the spear toward Kratos' face.

Kratos kicked again with his heel and caused the griffin to veer in the opposite direction. With a tremendous surge of power, Kratos forced back the weapon and twisted hard on the sinewy wrist holding it. The Warrior yelped in pain and released the Spear of Destiny.

Kratos grabbed the weapon and thrust with it. The Warrior jerked back, tried to maintain his balance, and then fell away to splash into the sea far below.

"Poseidon take you," Kratos snarled.

He held the Spear of Destiny and felt it quiver. Then he reacted instinctively as the griffin twisted its head around to snap at him. He thrust the spear through the flying creature's neck. The griffin gave a convulsive jerk that sent Kratos into the air.

He watched as the griffin, spear impaling its feathered throat, smashed into a balcony at the very edge of the Island of Creation. Then he realized he was plunging to his death also since the Pegasus was nowhere to be seen to provide an aerial rescue. He let out a loud, long battle cry, drew both swords, and turned headfirst to plummet toward the Island of Creation.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

“THE PANTHEON CANNOT remain unfilled,” Zeus said, stroking his beard.

“You are wise, Sky Father,” Iris said. “The mortals will come to wonder why there is indecision in Olympus if you do not choose a new God of War soon.”

“There is no lack of war below,” Zeus said, chuckling. The beginning of a laugh died quickly. He looked up at Athena standing silently before his throne, then at Iris, at his right hand. Who could he trust? Athena was the Warrior Goddess, but she had chosen Kratos to strike down Ares. He had approved and had aided her, but she had manipulated him. It had to be that way or the outcome with Kratos would not have been so disastrous.

“But the mortals need a god figure to worship—in addition to you, mighty Zeus.”

“Yes, you are right, Iris. A new God of War is needed, but which god would forsake his current position to sit on the throne that so recently held Ares and Kratos?”

“I can spread the word for you,” Iris said. “Allow me to race to the far corners of the world, to every point in Olympus, to the Underworld and the depths of Poseidon’s realm—everywhere!—and proclaim a contest to choose a new God of War.”

“A contest?” Zeus frowned. “What need is there of a contest if I am to decide the matter?”

“You want the *appearance* of it being open to all, but of course it would be *you* who decides. After all, who is wiser atop Mount Olympus?” Iris moved closer and whispered, “You might use this as a way of seeing who is loyal to you and who is ... less so.”

“What’s that you say? Who is disloyal?” A thunderbolt formed in his hand. “Tell me the name, and I’ll strike them down!”

Iris coyly looked over her shoulder in Athena’s direction, then said, “Your edict still stands, Lord of All the Sky and Earth. No god can kill another. You should not exempt yourself from this.”

“Why not? I’m king. I can do as I please!”

“You are the mightiest of the mighty, but you cannot stand against all the gods. Many plot and scheme against you even as we speak.”

“Tell me who they are! I command you, Iris. You are my Messenger of the Gods. *Mine!*”

“I am not like Hermes,” she said, bowing deeply and sending small sparkles of rainbow bits to the base of Zeus’ throne. “It is painful for me to relate this, since I do not care to speak ill of another god, but Hermes is secretly known to divulge the contents of his messages to others, sometimes out of friendship but other times from spite. Duty and honor bind me to my job as surely as love and respect bind me to you, Zeus. Any missive entrusted to me will be delivered ... only for your eyes and ears.”

“Tell me,” he said, staring hard at Athena. Iris sidled closer and whispered so that only Zeus could hear.

“You are wise, Sky Father. You know the answer. There is no reason for me to break my most sacred oath.”

“No, you’re right, Iris. No reason.” He glowered at Athena. “Especially when I can imagine who might be spreading lies about me and aspiring to my throne.”

“None will ever sit on this throne, in this chamber, but you, my king,” said Iris.

Athena strode forward and stopped at the base of the dais. She put hands on her flaring hips and stared at him, anger in her eyes. Zeus wondered if she led a cabal against him or foolishly thought she could depose him alone.

When he did not speak, Athena called to him, "My father, allow me to approach your throne."

"You are close enough."

"Very well. I petition you to spare Kratos. Restore him to his place as God of War. While I abhor the turmoil he has caused while a god, the lack of one sitting on that throne is far worse. For the good of Olympus, for the peace among all the gods and goddesses, restore him."

Zeus reached down and grabbed the Blade of Olympus. He thrust it high in the air, as if stabbing the sky itself.

"He allowed his godly powers to be drained into the blade. He had his chance to serve me, to serve in Olympus, but he had only impudence, insults to offer when I extended my proposal."

"He is a proud man—"

"Proud? Athena, you name him a proud man. He was an arrogant god! I could no longer tolerate this. He refused to bend his knee to me as King of Olympus!"

"So you killed him and set in motion designs of which we know nothing. He escaped the Underworld. How did he do that a second time? Kratos is a clever man and a warrior second to none, but he was aided in his escape from Hades."

"What are you saying, Athena?" demanded Iris. "That Kratos is braver and more skilled than Zeus? Never!" Iris glanced at Zeus, who did not hear her praise. He focused on Athena alone.

"You mock me, daughter. You deride me and belittle me."

"I think only of Olympus, Father," Athena said. "Since Ares died, things have been unsettled. It is up to you to put them right."

"And returning Kratos to the throne of the God of War will do that?"

"It will," Athena said.

"I suppose you want Hermes' banishment reversed, also," said Iris.

"Be quiet," Zeus growled.

"I meant no harm, mighty Zeus," Iris said, cowering away. Although her tone was contrite, her eyes fixed on Athena, weighing every nuance of expression.

“Where is Kratos? I would destroy him—again!” Zeus jumped to his feet and cast a thunderbolt upward, where it exploded above Athena’s head.

Iris stepped back to his side and said, “There is no need for you to rely on her for information, Lord Zeus. Your loyal messenger can tell you all. Kratos sought refuge on the Island of Creation and foolishly perished.”

“What?” Athena took two steps up to the throne before checking herself. “Kratos cannot be dead!”

“What if it is my will, daughter? What if your king, the all-powerful thunderer, Zeus, King of Olympus, has decreed it? Would you go against my wishes?”

“No, Father, of course not. All that matters is Olympus.” Athena backed away, turned, and fled the audience chamber.

Zeus turned to Iris. “If you have lied to me, Hermes’ fate will seem mild.”

“Kratos is dead,” Iris said firmly.

Zeus sank back to his throne and smiled. “Good. Now Olympus is finally safe.”



KRATOS FELL HEADFIRST from the great height, swords drawn and flaming as he accelerated downward to his death. The thought of dying after all he had been through angered him. He roared in defiance. If he died now, Zeus would win. The gods of Olympus would continue to rule, and the deaths of so many brave Spartans in Rhodes would be for naught.

The wind ripped past his face and pulled his arms away from his body. He forced the swords together in front of his face and felt a lift that twisted him around so his feet aimed at the rushing ground. Kratos spun around and found he could maneuver just enough to carry him over the building constructed at the edge of the Island of Creation. Then he knew he was not going to die. Not here. Not now.

He clenched his fists and made the silent vow, “You will die by my hand, Zeus. I promise!”

The promise came easily, but denying Hades another resident in the Underworld proved more difficult. Kratos continued to slip toward the island and the palace balanced on the cliff’s edge. The terraces rushed up ever faster, and then Kratos swung out with his blades to leave deep cuts in the stone. Sparks trailed behind and dust exploded from the deep grooves he gouged. As he slowed, he ran out of wall. He fell freely again, but his reflexes were superb. Rather than continue his downward tumble, he stabbed upward and

caught the overhang. His sword drove into stone and hooked into the bottom of the stone terrace. The momentum of his fall checked, his arm aching from the sudden stop, he stabbed upward with his other blade.

For a few seconds he gathered his strength, then worked his way along the stone slab above him until he reached the side once more. From there it took only seconds to climb to the terrace. Kratos swung out, then froze.

From a great distance he heard a whisper that grew louder by the instant. Then Gaia spoke.

“Kratos, behold the Island of Creation, home to the Sisters of Fate. Here, the path to your true destiny begins.”

Kratos heard the steady *click-click* of feet marching toward him. He shrugged and settled the hilts of his swords in his palms just as two sentries came around a corner on the walkway. Armed with two-edged battle-axes and clad in shining armor and crimson livery, they advanced on him with easy contempt. Kratos doubted they were required to face true warriors. Their helms sported bristled crests; their greaves were spotless and the sigils on their armor unsullied by anything as taxing as combat.

Kratos rushed them, swords flashing in the sunlight. He killed one soldier before the sentry realized he was under attack. The few seconds it took to dispatch him gave the other a chance to defend himself. Kratos squared his stance, took the measure of his enemy, and skewered him with a single thrust. With a snap of his wrist he flicked off the blood from the Blades of Athena.

“As you are discovering, the island is fraught with danger,” Gaia went on. “It was created to prevent all from reaching the three Sisters of Fate.”

“What must I do when I find them? How will this aid me in defeating Zeus?” he demanded.

“The power of the Sisters will allow you to return to that moment when Zeus betrayed and killed you, Kratos, thus changing your fate ... and the fate of others.”

He started to ask, *What others*—but what difference did it make as long as his quest for vengeance against Zeus and the other gods of

Olympus found completion? His path was clear. He had landed at this palace and now must find the way to the Sisters of Fate. With a sure stride and firm resolve, Kratos began exploring.

He went around the corner expecting more soldiers. Nothing. There seemed no way off this terrace other than to go up a ladder. Kratos wasted no time ascending. The higher he went, he knew, the closer he got to the tallest spire in the palace, where the Sisters of Fate likely made their lair. At the top of the ladder, he climbed over to a stone terrace broader than the one below where he had left the sentries dead. At the side of the chamber was a heavy stone door that he could not force open using only brute strength.

Frowning, he explored and found a trip plate near a lever that slid along a long rail. Stepping on the plate caused a grinding of stone against stone. Beyond the now open stone portal a steel grating blocked the way. He stepped off the plate and drew back the lever. The metal grate opened. He took a step toward the pair of opened doors, only to see that the stone door slammed before he could reach it.

Kratos frowned as he studied what lay before him. Brute force would not suffice. He tested a theory and saw that the plate rose when his weight was removed. Looking around, he hunted for something to hold down the pressure plate while he drew back the lever. The way ahead required something more than could be found at hand. Leaving the chamber, he went back down the ladder, caught up the corpse of a sentry, and climbed back to the chamber. Grunting, he dropped the body onto the pressure plate. With the deadweight holding the plate down, the heavy stone door opened. He drew back on the lever, sliding it the entire length of the rail.

The instant he released the lever, the steel grating began to slide shut. Kratos reacted with battle-hardened reflexes, running to the door after pulling the lever back as far as he could. The closing grating forced him to somersault through. The steel bars slammed shut behind, but he had passed through to a narrow corridor that led to another door.

Unable to go back even if he had wanted, Kratos pressed forward. He braced himself, gripped the lower edge of the door, and exerted

his full strength. Metal and stone creaked and broke, dropping the door down to reveal a bridge.

A bridge that ended only a bowshot away. Kratos strode out and stared down a thousand feet to the boiling sea. The water swirled around this island, the Island of Creation, to cascade over the edge of the world. Beyond, where the bridge ought to have led, he saw what had to be the Island of Fate where the Sisters of Fate resided. The cliffs around that island were unscalable from the ocean, sheer, rugged, and dotted with waterfalls that would sweep any man to his death should he venture too close.

The only way to the island was across a bridge that did not exist. Kratos paced back and forth as he examined possibilities for crossing the chasm. Then he began judging his chances of crossing the straits between the islands or finding the Pegasus and flying across. Where it had gone after his aerial battle with the Warrior of Destiny he could not say, but it had been increasingly feeble during that battle. He could not fly, then, and he could not cross in any other way. Retreat was impossible, as the way back was blocked. Frustration mounted because he knew reaching the Sisters of Fate was beyond his ability and he must ask for assistance. It had not proven to his benefit when he had implored Ares to help him on the battlefield, but he had little choice now except to reach out to the one who had brought him to this impasse.

He turned his face upward and cried, "Why did you aid me before, Gaia? Will you help me across to the Sisters?"

"I aided you because Zeus must be stopped, Kratos. This story of revenge has been told before."

Kratos stared across at the Island of Fate and felt a smoldering rage that would never be extinguished until the Sky Father truly died.

"There are many stories of revenge, Gaia," he said. "I have my own. Help me!"

"You know of the mighty Titan Cronos," Gaia went on, as if she had not heard.

Kratos stiffened as his mind was hurled away from the sundered edge of the bridge to a time and place beyond his reckoning. It was

as if he had returned to Olympus and looked down on the mortals, but the woman holding the baby in swaddling was something more than a mortal. She stood on a plain dotted with ruined temples. Three columns with a lintel remained intact to one side, near a stone altar, but all else lay in rubble. She bent and gently kissed the baby on the forehead, and beams of light drove through leaden clouds to illuminate it.

“So fearful was Cronos of the oracle’s prediction that his own children would rise against him, he decided to imprison them all in his belly.”

Kratos grated his teeth when he saw an eagle flapping toward the desolate plain, an eagle so similar to the one Zeus had sent in Rhodes that he reached for his swords. But he could not move. He was an observer in this drama, not a participant.

“Rhea stood by and watched as her children were devoured one by one. But when the time came for the last of her children to be eaten, she was unable to bear another such loss and devised a trick to save the baby Zeus.”

“Zeus.” The name came out of Kratos’ lips as a snake might hiss.

The eagle swooped down and caught the baby in its claws. Rhea stepped away, her arms falling limply at her sides. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out, for in the distance came Cronos. The immense Titan lumbered toward her on that barren mountaintop, coming for the baby now hidden among a flock of golden eagles high above. Those powerful birds would take the baby to an island far beyond the spying eyes of Cronos.

“It was I,” Gaia continued, “who cared for him. It was I who kept him safe.”

Rhea dropped to her knees and grabbed a large stone about the size of her infant son and quickly wrapped it in swaddling. A quick look warned her that Cronos was almost to the plains. The Titan blotted out half the sky as he rose hundreds of feet above, thick-fingered hands reaching toward her.

Rhea hastily laid the swaddled stone on the bloodstained altar and backed away. Then she watched as Cronos knelt. His immense hand closed over the altar and took away the stone hidden by cloth.

He held it up, as if contemplating a delicate morsel of the finest food, then opened his gigantic mouth and popped in the treat.

Rhea fought to keep from laughing hysterically, from crying, from doing anything save staring at the immense Titan towering above her.

“Zeus should have died then!” Kratos called out, but neither Rhea nor Cronos heard. The vision of that lonely mountaintop faded, replaced by a beach and the warm sea beyond. Gentle waves lapped on the sand, and childish laughter came from within the darkness of a cave opening onto the beach.

Zeus, young, fit, the source of the laughter, emerged from the cave.

“I nurtured his desire to free his brothers and sisters from Cronos, but my foolish act of compassion would haunt the Titans forever.”

Kratos could only watch as Zeus rode on Gaia’s back. The cave was thrust upward away from the sea, a mountain formed beneath Gaia—a mountain formed *from* Gaia. Zeus, long white hair blowing in the stiff breeze, stared down at the creation of a towering mountain, waterfalls tumbling down its sides, trees and grass growing amid the rock. Kratos wanted to kill him anew as a sneer curled Zeus’ lips.

“For in sparing Zeus, we allowed him to return to us with vengeance in his heart. He betrayed all the Titans for the sins of just one—the sins of his father, Cronos.”

The scene faded and Kratos slumped, once more faced with the impossible task of crossing to the distant island. How Gaia’s tale was supposed to provide a way across he did not know. He turned and went back to study the steel grate but found no way to open it to retreat the way he had come. Returning to the bridge, he saw a walkway circling the spire. He stepped onto the stone walkway and tested it. Bits crumbled beneath his weight. Kratos stepped back, judged what had to be done, and ran forward as hard as he could.

The stone beneath his feet crumbled as he ran, coming closer to sending him tumbling to his death far below with every instant. When he felt the stone walkway vanish beneath his left heel, he gave a mighty jump and sailed through the air, barely catching the

still-solid stone of the walkway ahead of him. The sound of hundreds of pounds of stone and cement crashing to the ground far below warned him he could not linger. Shoulders straining and back muscles protesting, he heaved himself upward and landed on more solid footing some feet away from the deadly brink.

Kratos vaulted over a low wall and found himself in the middle of a circular chamber. His nose wrinkled when he caught a smell that revolted him.

Cerberus hounds, three-headed monsters with teeth so sharp they could rend a man's arm off in a single snap.

Before he could whip out his blades, two Cerberus pups attacked. These were smaller monsters, single-headed with matted manes, but no less dangerous to him. They moved faster than the hound they would grow up to be and seemed to compete with each other to be the most vicious. Kratos spun, kicked one high into the air, and caught the other by its corded, muscled neck as it leaped for his throat. It thrashed about, and his grip began to slip because of the gore matting its mane and the fur under its throat—so great was the blood, the pup must have recently feasted. But it was clear the cur was still hungry from the way its sharp teeth snapped at Kratos, not knowing that whatever it had recently devoured was to be its last meal. Holding it at arm's length, he made a single pitiless jerk and tore off its head. He cast it aside to go after the whimpering pup he had kicked, only to find himself circled by three more of the deadly little monsters. Spines rose along their backs as they circled him, coordinating their efforts so all could share in his flesh.

Kratos let out a battle cry, spun his swords in a complete circle around him, and dispatched them. Intent on killing the one he had kicked, he neglected to look behind. Fierce jaws clamped on his shoulder and lifted him from his feet. Dangling from the thrashing jaws so all he could see was the dome above the chamber, he began anticipating which way the jaws would toss him in an attempt to rip out his shoulder blades.

When he found the proper rhythm, he jerked hard, forced his shoulder deeper into the middle mouth of the full-grown Cerberus, and felt a weakening. This was all he needed to smash his fist onto

the top of the dog's head and gain his release. He was thrown to the floor. Looking up at the Cerberus towering above him, all three heads snarling and snapping, he did nothing. He remained in a crouch, frozen. Its heads weaved about on independent necks. The dorsal spines on the pups were only a few inches long; on this creature they were fully eighteen inches. Any one of them could impale a careless man. Kratos kept his gorge down as the creature roared and sent a gust of fetid breath into his face. The yellowed, broken fangs in each mouth dripped with saliva. The Cerberus reared and dropped hard to the floor, voicing a guttural cry intended to cow him.

As Kratos had hoped, the Cerberus thought its prey to be paralyzed with fear. It was careless in its attack, allowing Kratos to duck under the central head and thereby block the head on the right as he seized the bottom of the left head's jaw in one hand and drove the fingers of the other into exposed eyes. With a sturdy grip, he wrenched back and away and tore off the head. Warm blood sprayed onto him and caused him to slip. If the Cerberus had not been so sorely wounded, Kratos would have perished.

But the pain of losing a head deterred it. The Cerberus realized its opponent was not as vulnerable as it had thought. Snarling, it advanced. Even wounded and wary, it moved with startling speed and head-butted him. Kratos threw himself backward at the last possible instant and only endured a hard blow to the chest, hardly more than a soldier's fist wrapped in chain might give.

He recovered and saw a new attack. The Cerberus reared back on its hind legs and spat forth a fireball. Kratos turned aside, and the deadly fire passed by him. He spun in the other direction to avoid a second fireball, but this one came closer and raked his back, burning the bite wounds the hound had inflicted in his shoulder.

They circled warily, each looking for the other's weakness. Kratos had the advantage. He had faced other Cerberus hounds before. And this one had never fought him. Nor would it have a second chance.

Kratos drew his blades, attacked with an earsplitting cry, and severed the right head—but not cleanly. The head still snapped and yowled but was held to the body only by its spinal cord. The

flapping head distracted the remaining central head long enough for Kratos to duck under a reflexive, toothy snap of its jaws and grab its chin.

As he had ripped away the first head, so he dealt out death to the third. His muscles bulged as he exerted himself. The central head was stronger. He shoved his foot into the Cerberus' chest to get better leverage. This time the head tore free of the body. So much blood was spilled that the head slipped from his grasp and went bouncing across the floor.

It stopped in front of the mewling pup he had thought to kill earlier.

The Cerberus pup's back legs had been broken by his earlier kick. Kratos walked over and looked down into the yellow eyes filled with nothing but hate. He tentatively reached out and let it strike at his hand. He kicked it back to land beside the thrice-beheaded Cerberus in the center of the chamber where it could die in its own time.

Panting from the exertion, he surveyed the room.

He saw only one exit. If he wanted to reach the Island of Fate he had to take it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

STRAINING, EVERY MUSCLE at the breaking point, Kratos shoved the huge stone block across the chamber, grinding the bodies of the Cerberus pups beneath it to leave a blood-smeared trail. When he positioned the block properly, he jumped onto it, caught a railing, and pulled himself up and over to a walkway around the palace that hadn't collapsed.

He edged around and got back to the collapsed bridge, staring at the island beyond. There had to be a way. As he turned to explore further, an arrow whistled past his ear.

"There's the intruder," cried an archer, pointing with the tip of another arrow being nocked. "Be cautious. He's the one that killed the Cerberus and her pups!"

Another archer joined the first, speaking in a low voice. Kratos didn't have to know what they were saying. Their mistress had to be one of the Sisters of Fate.

"Hold! Wait!" Kratos called to them. "I would speak with—" He got no farther. Both archers let fly with their arrows. He batted one aside with the flat of his hand. Moving his head slightly allowed the other to slip past harmlessly. Being allowed to speak with their mistress was not going to happen.

He grabbed Typhon's Bane, drew back the string, and let fly before he recognized the target. The icy gust flew off and to his left

to impale an archer. Beside the dead archer were two others preparing to loose their missiles. Kratos gave them no chance. Four quick releases of the string sent two arrows into each, killing them.

He surveyed the way over to the terrace from which the archers had fired. That provided him as good a direction to explore as any. The archers had to be guarding something important. And if he approached cautiously enough, he might find a way to declare his intentions of speaking with the Sisters of Fate so he would not have to fight his way through a phalanx of other guards. Going to the side of the bridge, he judged distances and how difficult it would be to reach that terrace, drew the Blades of Athena, and then leaped into space. The blades dug into the ornate stonework facing the palace wall. He swung from one position to another until he reached the other parapet and pulled himself up.

Kratos expected opposition and got it immediately. A tall soldier screamed and attacked with a curve-bladed axe. Rather than use his swords, Kratos judged distance and speed, ducked at the last instant, and tore the axe from the warrior's hand. He shoved hard and sent the creature falling onto his face. A quick downward swing with the axe ended any opposition. Kratos had not even broken into a sweat from the exertion.

Long strides took him into the palace and down a corridor to a chamber far removed from the others behind the sundered bridge. He found a lever in the center of the chamber and shoved it hard. The floor quivered under his sandals and then began sinking faster and faster. If he wanted to cross to the other island, he had to reach sea level.

As the elevator came to a halt, Kratos stepped off warily and looked around what seemed an empty chamber similar to the one above, but his nostrils flared at a peculiar odor. Making him certain he knew what he faced, he heard a small hum, a tiny sound that would have meant nothing without all the other clues. Kratos grabbed Typhon's Bane and began firing across the chamber toward an intricately carved marble column casting shadows—which moved. And sang.

“Siren,” he muttered. He kept firing the bow, sending one wind arrow after another toward the sinuously moving, ethereal creature. Taller than Kratos by half, the thin creature reached out arms wearing golden bands at the biceps and hands ending in fingers so long they rippled like tentacles. Eyes of fire burned with an intense blue light as she reared up, like a sea horse, no legs or feet visible under a diaphanous gown that swirled about like pale smoke. She slipped forward, the gown of silk sliding in a soft whisper across marble flooring, and began her song in earnest.

It rose in pitch, beguiling, hypnotizing. Kratos tried to fire another arrow but found himself immobilized by the sweet, clear voice.

“My lover,” came the words intertwined with the song’s notes. “Come to me. I want you. I want to love you.” The Siren held out her arms and how could Kratos resist? Why should he? She was his lover, his love, the only one he cared about or who cared for him in the entire world.

He walked to her slowly, every step an agony.

“Embrace me, my lover, my brave Spartan warrior,” the Siren called.

He tried to fight but his body refused to obey. He neared her, heard her beguiling song, knew that death was close at hand. Kratos struggled to lift a sword, to punch the lovely woman reaching out to him. He had never seen a woman as beautiful or desirable. Her song touched his most primal urges and pulled him closer.

Their lips touched. Kratos felt as if he had been caught in a raging river and was being carried toward an immense waterfall. Her lips caressed and aroused—and sucked the life from him.

He fought to no avail. Strength drained from him until the Siren no longer kissed him.

“You are weaker than a mewling babe in arms,” the Siren said. “I like for my ... lovers ... to appreciate me.”

Weak though he was and his godly power drained, he still possessed twice the stamina and strength of a normal mortal.

“You will become a husk. You will—”

The Siren screamed, the sound so shrill Kratos’ ears bled from the noise. But it was sweeter music to him than her entrancing song. It

was her death cry. He brought his swords up through her gut and continued to strain, slicing his way through her torso; then each blade departed the body at the shoulders. The Siren fell in three pieces, but she continued to shriek.

“I love you,” the Siren said, words he had not heard since the death of his wife, Lysandra. But the blood pumping into her lungs from the sword thrust through her chest robbed the words of any magical power.

Kratos bent, gathered her in his arms, and held her so her face was near his for a moment.

“Die” was all he said as he tightened his grip around her back and snapped her spine like a dried twig. Her death cry reverberated like thunder and shattered a wall hiding a corridor along the far side of the chamber. He hated Harpies as much as he did Sirens, though a Harpy could never insinuate herself into his mind and emotion. Kratos kicked the body aside, then went and looked through the archway over the backs of four immense horses hitched to the side of the building by chains with links thicker and heavier than Kratos’ own body.

“The Steeds of Time,” came Gaia’s rumbling voice.

“What of them?” Kratos asked.

“You must go to the steeds if you want to reverse all that has happened to you,” Gaia said. “Mount the steeds!”

Kratos wanted to ask more of the Titan but sensed she would not give a satisfactory answer. The lack of hospitality shown thus far told him the path to the Sisters of Fate would be a bloody one and that he would not be greeted with open arms, only drawn weapons.

The Island of Fate lay to his left and the Steeds of Time directly ahead. From here, he could not judge how large those bronze statues of the four horses were, possibly hundreds of feet tall with their hooves extending downward to the sea and their proud heads lifted to the heavens. The dull gleam from their flanks showed corrosion and age. Wondering what use statues might be to him did not stop Kratos from venturing out. He could ride these huge horses to his goal, and none could stop him. But how? Bringing them to life

was a matter to concern him later, but reaching them presented an immediate problem.

He looked down. Twenty feet below, one of the chains that served as tether for the team stretched wider than most bridges. Taking a running leap, Kratos launched himself into the air and landed hard on the metal with a resounding clang. The width of the rein—the chain—was more than triple his height.

The steeds stood quiescent more than a mile away at the other end. Kratos looked back at the island with its towering spires and immense temple, the craggy rocks below, and a magnificent waterfall cascading into the sea to the right. He might lose himself in the maze of that temple and never have a better chance of reaching the Sisters of Fate than continuing to the steeds. So far, all that Gaia had said had proven useful to him. If she meant him harm, he could have perished at any time because of a casual lie.

He turned from the island and stared along the length of chain to get a better estimate of how truly tall the horses had to be. Five hundred feet or more from the chain to the sea below gave perspective to the size of the steeds. He began running. The chain beneath his sandals never swayed from his rapid passage, so massive was the cable. When he reached the armored rear of the horses, now towering far above his head, he looked up and wondered if he needed all four or if a single horse would serve him.

But how to unhitch a single horse when they were so securely fastened with the immense chains?

Kratos walked along the traces and studied the steeds from a vantage point at their shoulders between two of them. Seeing nothing that would drive them forward—or bring the stolid statues to life—he climbed a ladder up over the mane on the horse to his left and reached a large structure. He walked around it, looking for an entrance. When he came to a large bronze door he tried to open it. The door rattled but did not budge.

“You need the Horsekeeper’s Key to enter,” came a baritone voice from behind. Kratos turned and then looked up at a giant of a man outfitted in the finest armor possible. He wore the armor of a king. A king of Athens.

“The Ghost of Sparta,” the huge warrior said, sneering. “Then what they say is true.”

“Theseus,” Kratos said, no friendliness in his tone.

“Of all the fools who try, you are the last one I would expect to seek an audience with the Sisters of Fate.”

“And you are the last one I would expect to become a servant of the Fates.”

“I serve and protect the Sisters of Fate for the glory of Zeus!” Theseus spread his arm wide and implored the skies. Kratos made no effort to hide his contempt.

“The time of Zeus is coming to an end,” Kratos said.

“Hmmm, you seek the Sisters to kill Zeus.” He laughed uproariously. “You no longer possess the powers of a god, Kratos. I doubt you are capable of killing me, much less Zeus.”

“Let me pass and I will let you live, old man.”

Theseus laughed again.

“That is your choice.” Theseus swung his staff about, the tips glowing with dancing blue magic. Wicked edges along the shaft gleamed in the sun as he spun it about easily, spinning it in a circle that came close to Kratos’ face.

“There is more to your sentry duty, Theseus,” Kratos said, circling the immense man. “What do *you* seek from the Sisters of Fate?”

Kratos drew his blades and squared off against the Athenian king. Theseus backed away and could not meet Kratos’ direct gaze. He lowered his staff, keeping the point aimed at Kratos’ chest. His entire body shook with emotion. He spoke softly, so low that Kratos strained to hear.

“Dionysus,” he choked out. The hero king of Athens looked up, stricken. “Ariadne saved me from the Minotaur, and I loved her. She loved me so much she risked her life to give me the twine I used to guide myself out of the Labyrinth. Her father, King Minos of Crete, allowed none to escape his prison, but I saved the Athenians before they were fed to the Minotaur. Ariadne saved not only me but also my fellow citizens of Athens,” he said. “But Dionysus claimed her.”

The king’s face hardened, and Kratos saw resolve. He knew what went through Theseus’ mind now, for it ran through his as well.

“That is your reason for being a lackey to the Sisters of Fate?” Kratos asked.

“I want Ariadne’s love and ... my father’s life.”

“You sacrificed your lover for what?” Kratos said. “Dionysus is not known for his fidelity. You want the Sisters to change fate by giving him a new lover so you can again have Ariadne in your bed?”

“He forced me to leave Ariadne on the isle of Naxos and ... and she cursed me as I sailed back to ...” Theseus turned forlorn; then his face hardened with bitter memory.

“When I returned triumphant to Athena my father Aegeus thought I crept back as a failure. I was to hoist a white sail, but the curse turned it black,” Theseus said. “He saw what he thought was his worst nightmare, my death and that of the army, and cast himself from the cliffs into the sea.” The Athenian stood straighter and gripped the spear even tighter. “I demanded that the sea be forever known as the Aegean. And I will never get my Ariadne or my father back unless I serve the Sisters of Fate and they grant me this boon.”

“Unless the Sisters of Fate change your destiny,” Kratos said sarcastically. “How long have you waited here for the summons to their throne? What menial tasks do they ask of you, you who were once a king?”

“I am the Keeper of the Horse Key,” Theseus said, thrusting out his left arm as if it were a sword. On the forearm gleamed a golden plate intricately wrought with bas-relief horses. “It seems my duty to the Sisters is now to kill a former god!”

A spear whirled about, leveled, and drove directly for Kratos’ midriff. But Kratos had seen the resolve harden in the Athenian and was already backpedaling. As he deftly avoided the sharp thrust, he swung his swords about and deflected the shaft. Magic collided with magic. His Blades of Athena crashed into steel when he struck the shaft of the Athenian’s spear.

“If you die, perhaps then I can petition the Sisters of Fate and change my fate,” Theseus said.

“You delude yourself if you think you can defeat me.”

“How can I not? Fate is on my side.” Theseus picked up the pace of the battle, thrusting, blocking, advancing, always pressing Kratos

back toward the edge of the platform on the back of the immense horse.

Kratos allowed Theseus to herd him—for a few more steps. Then his blades crossed into an X. Kratos caught the spear at the vertex and lifted hard. The spear tip pointed skyward, giving Kratos a chance to kick out. His foot landed on Theseus' heavily armored belly. The kick staggered the Athenian. Kratos surged forward, got past the spear, and found he was too close to use his swords.

Kratos began pounding Theseus with his fists, opening cuts on his foe's face and stunning him. When he tried to grab Theseus' chin and wrench his neck around, he caught a knee in the groin that lifted him off his feet. He fell heavily to his hands and knees.

Theseus whirled the spear around but missed, stumbled, and then ran from where Kratos fought to regain his feet.

"Come and fight, craven!" Kratos bellowed.

It was then that Theseus tapped his spear to the ground, and a creature made of ice burst from the floor like volcanic islands pushing upward from the sea. But unlike a stolid island, the ice creature showed jagged weapons and moved with stunning speed. Theseus tapped his spear on the floor twice more, and Kratos faced a trio of the elementals. They roared and charged him, ice-splintery feet clacking against the stone.

Typhon's Bane came easily to hand. Kratos unleashed a flurry of icy arrows to meet the attacking ice elementals. The temperature on this battlefield dropped as he moved about, shooting quickly to hold the three creatures at bay.

"You are a coward, Theseus. You let your minions do your battle!"

All he got in reply was a harsh laugh. Theseus had climbed to the roof of the structure and pointed his spear. Kratos somersaulted away from where the lambent energy touched—and a stalagmite thrust up from below. If he had remained in place, he would have been impaled.

Kratos dashed about, firing his arrows at the ice elementals and avoiding the sharp upthrusts of ice from the floor as Theseus tried to

stop him. Kratos shifted his attack to Theseus again, the arrows forcing him to cease the summoning of the stalagmites.

The instant the Athenian king stopped this assault, Kratos turned to the frozen monsters. Using his swords, he attacked. The first shattered. The second and third thought to encircle him. Kratos was too cagey a fighter for that, battle-hardened and aware of every tactic. He turned and kept one blocking the other's attack. He eventually wore down the first and dispatched it. Then he lowered both swords and thrust with them simultaneously. The final ice creature exploded.

"Theseus!" Kratos called to his opponent. "Fight me. You said I was no longer a god. Do you fear a mortal? Just like an Athenian!"

Kratos swung the bow around and got off a perfect shot. He saw the sunlight glisten on the arrow of wind and then it disappeared into Theseus' throat. The Athenian hero grabbed for the deadly shaft, then fell forward.

He dangled by a lace tangled around his ankle, feebly struggling.

Kratos swung his sword and cut the lace, dropping the Athenian onto his head.

"You are pathetic," Kratos said, kicking Theseus until the man curled up and tried to move away from the punishment. A final foot to Theseus' head slid him across the floor to lie motionless. Kratos stared for a moment at his fallen opponent, feeling nothing but contempt. Kratos seized Theseus' left arm and pulled it up so he could pry loose the golden armlet.

The Horsekeeper's Key.

He turned from Theseus and went to the door, a solid bronze plate with intricate bas-relief horses cavorting across it. Kratos ignored the artistry as he ran his hand over the cool, sharp-edged metal until he found the keyhole. A quick move inserted the key. A savage twist opened the lock, allowing the door to swing open a handbreadth. Before Kratos could step through, Theseus groaned and slid forward, leaving a bloody trail, fingers groping. One weak hand grabbed Kratos' ankle. Rather than kick him away, Kratos jerked hard and slid Theseus forward.

Kratos opened the door, then twisted free as he slammed it hard against Theseus' head. Blood spattered. Kratos slammed it even harder. Over and over until Theseus was almost decapitated, his head in gory ruin.

He slammed the door on Theseus' head one final time before stepping into the room beyond the door.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“SHE LIES!” Hermes stamped his foot and crossed his arms over his chest. His almost beautiful face carried worry lines and the cloud of permanent anger. “I want her dead!”

“Zeus still adheres to his edict. No god may kill another,” Athena told the deposed Messenger of the Gods. The earthly sylvan glade was at odds with the fury vented by Hermes, and she had to admit she shared it. Watching Iris insinuate herself into Zeus’ every decision had been painful to watch, but now the Goddess of the Rainbow had attained far too much power. Zeus refused to rule without first consulting her.

“All Olympus is in an uproar over this,” Hermes said. “They want me back but are too fearful to petition Zeus.”

“With Iris at his right hand, such a petition, even by all the gods, would fall on deaf ears,” Athena said. “She claims her messages are delivered more quickly and accurately than yours and without bias.”

“Without bias? That’s all she does. I heard one she delivered to Hades. It was packed with innuendo and caused Hades to consider declaring war on Helios. She sows discontent like dragon’s teeth!”

Athena could not argue but saw no way to either depose Iris or cure the malady afflicting the Olympian gods. Fights were common. The gods were increasingly fearful, especially of being spied upon and betrayed through such ill-gotten knowledge. Even Aphrodite

had taken a vow of chastity, though Athena was doubtful it would be kept long.

Since Kratos had been turned back into a mortal, conditions among the gods had worsened. Or had the cancer started growing when he killed Ares? Or even before? Athena had been used by Zeus to eliminate Ares. She saw that clearly enough now and worried her father would try to use her again, but to what end? The damage had been done, and now the gods were openly suspicious of one another.

Athena laughed harshly. They had never been friendly, for all the familial relations, but the outright hostility was new and growing like a poisonous weed.

“Help me, Athena. You have always liked me, I know.” Hermes tried a lewd wink but did not succeed. “Help me, and I will finally let you have your way with me as you have always desired.”

“If I did desire an end to my chastity, Hermes, it certainly would not be with you.” Her ire rose at such a blatant lie by a god whose trade ought to be in the truth. She caught herself, wondering at the source of this growing anger. It wasn’t that Hermes insulted her. He spoke as he always did, and with his situation as desperate as it was, she could afford even more latitude in his speech. There was something more at work.

He reached over and took her arm, gently shaking her.

“You must help me get back in Zeus’ good graces.”

The touch broke her thoughts. She pulled away from him and nodded.

“I will do what I can. What have you found?”

“Many of the gods refuse to even acknowledge my existence,” Hermes said in a conspiratorial tone, as if this was important news. His voice merged with the soft wind blowing through the elder trees and scattering the white blossoms and pinnate leaves like tributes to the gods. Athena looked around to be sure that Artemis was not hiding in a nearby stand of trees, spying on them. Artemis had become fast friends with Iris, the pair sharing a love of rain and the smell of a shower-drizzled forest. Athena was not sure Iris

appreciated the animals and forests, but there was no denying her rainbow could not exist without a storm.

That started Athena thinking in another direction. Could Iris be removed if the Anemoi could be turned against her? The wind gods seldom entered Olympus, Zeus decreeing only sunny days at a temperature that pleased him throughout the home of the gods. Would it matter, since Boreas and Zephyrus were so lacking in power and prestige?

“Your pet mortal tries to change his fate.”

“What?” Athena’s thoughts had uncharacteristically become unfocused, but Hermes shocked her into attention now. “He has reached the Sisters of Fate?”

“He must venture to their Island of Fate, but he is close. He fought their Warrior of Destiny and defeated him.”

“Then the Sisters know he seeks them out?”

“They must,” Hermes said, shrugging. “What if he succeeds in winning their support? Zeus’ life would be forfeit.”

“Kratos or Zeus,” Athena said, thinking about the difference of one or the other on the throne of the King of the Gods. “Is one better than the other to rule Olympus?”

“Only if Kratos will reinstate me,” Hermes said.

“Zeus will see the error of his ways and retract your banishment,” Athena assured the fretting god.

“You think he will? Soon?”

Athena was not certain this would happen soon, but a sense of impending doom filled her and made her wonder if an oracle might assuage her growing fear of the future. Or would an oracle only make her fear worse?

“I must return to Olympus,” she said. “Before Zeus notices I am gone.”

Hermes impulsively clutched her. Athena forced herself away, then spun about and returned to Olympus. Heartsick, she quickly realized that the atmosphere of distrust had magnified even in the short time she had spent speaking with Hermes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KRATOS STEPPED FORWARD, only to jerk back when he got a shock from the Horsekeeper's Key and the spark it emitted. The dancing blue energy from the key spread rapidly until the entire door was bathed in the potent energy. Kratos glanced over his shoulder at Theseus' body, now limned with the energy from the door. Flesh sizzled and burned from his skeleton. Realizing this was likely his fate, too, if he tarried, Kratos entered the low-ceilinged room.

Only quick reflexes saved him from being skewered by a rising spear of ice, matching the ones Theseus had used outside. Kratos watched carefully for a pattern, but could find none. There must be a safe path, if only he could find it amid the small facts that he knew. He stepped back and studied the key in the lock. New markings appeared on the visible portion of the key.

"There are many ways a key can unlock the path," he said aloud, grabbing the shaft of the Horsekeeper's Key and yanking it from the lock. A jolt slammed into his hand, his arm, his shoulder, but the deadly blue glow faded. In seconds only cool metal rested in his grip so he could hold it up to study the engravings more carefully. Kratos turned it around in his hand, then lowered it until the broad part of the key was parallel with the chamber floor. A simple turn matched the pattern to the one there. The voids on the key offered a map to

the safe areas on the floor. He moved quickly, stepping on the areas not afflicted with stabbing icicles.

Kratos worked his way deeper and found that the air inside the room was close, musty, as if the door had not been opened in years. A low stone altar at the far end held a bowl shimmering with flame. Words had been chiseled into the stone, but Kratos was unable to read them from this distance. He approached it carefully, studying the sigil and the text embedded on the front of the altar.

As he came within arm's length, a white fog began to coalesce behind him. The fog swirled and sizzled and took form.

Cronos' immense head spoke.

"Our destiny has brought us together, warrior. For the good of the Titans, I now bestow on you what is the last of my power. Use my Rage against Zeus."

Kratos tried to move but found himself transfixed by the twin ravening beams of energy pouring from Cronos' eyes. He was lifted from his feet and arched his back as the power blasted into his body, forging a hot spot near his heart. Turning slightly as he was suspended in midair, still held captive by the twin beams, Kratos felt as if he grew in stature. Any weakness within disappeared, and he trembled with newfound ability.

The eyes winked out, freeing Kratos from his rictus. He collapsed to the floor, landing on one knee. Hand braced on the floor, he recovered his senses, then stood. The white fog had vanished, taking along with it Cronos.

Kratos turned back to the altar and saw six Guardians crowding into the room, carefully avoiding the spots where icy spears might erupt. Each was as tall as he and carried wickedly curved swords, helms dull and body armor shining. Kratos sneered at them. More garrison soldiers. They looked good in formation but they were not likely good fighters.

His opinion of their prowess changed when they split into two groups, three coming at him from the left while the other trio on the right waited to see how he attacked. Whichever group he fought first would draw the other to his exposed back. He appreciated their tactic, but fighting so many slowed him. He felt an urgency growing

to have the Sisters of Fate give him what he needed, what Gaia had said could be done, or to force them to alter his destiny and that of Zeus.

Unbidden, the white-hot star burning in his breast burst forth and exploded in the midst of the leftmost trio. They stopped their advance, stunned as the power of the Titan coursed through them. Kratos let out a cry, drew his swords, and made quick work of them before the other three could recover from the shock of seeing their companions so easily defeated. Before the last soldier collapsed dead to the floor, Kratos turned and once more unleashed the Cronos Rage.

The remaining Guardians staggered under the blast, disoriented and unable to fight. Kratos killed them with contemptuous ease. He kicked one corpse out of his way as he returned to the altar. Bending down, face close to the sigil, he deciphered the words. When he stood, he knew how to use the Steeds of Time to reach the Sisters of Fate.

He stepped over the bodies and shook off blood he had gotten on his sandals, then stepped out into the bright light of day. Somehow, Cronos' gift to him made his step lighter and his sword arms stronger even when he was not unleashing the power against enemies. Kratos ran to the yoke between the two center horses and saw that four winches had to be turned to release each horse in turn and then the brace for the platform where he stood. Applying his mighty strength to the first crank produced a river of coruscating red energy down the martingale of the horse to his left. The horse began to stir and strain at the harness. Kratos repeated the release for each of the other three horses until they reared, struggled in harness, and neighed loudly.

He bent, grabbed the bar in front of him, and heaved. The brace rotated forward like the helm of a ship. Then the platform dropped precipitously, making Kratos think he had fallen into a clever trap. But the platform rotated around, came up and then down into place at a higher level, almost level with the backs of two of the horses. A crackling noise came from a box to one side. Kratos kicked it open

and saw curled up two long whips of the purest yellow flame. He grabbed the handles and swung them about, one in each hand.

The whips of fire cracked loudly and the horses responded immediately, pulling forward. He used the whips against their armored flanks and sent bits of bronze flying in all directions. He ducked, then applied the whips to both nearby horses with a fury until not only the pair he lashed but all four began pulling in unison. Kratos continued to crack the whips, and the Steeds of Time began straining to pull harder. The chains that made up their harnesses creaked ominously, as if the steel links might not be strong enough to endure the pressure.

Kratos glanced behind and saw the Island of Creation being pulled along at the far end of the chain. Rocks tumbled into the sea, and the temple perched on its rocky pinnacle trembled but remained intact, save for small bits of wall that crumbled from the nissus of the gigantic team. The Steeds of Time neighed and every step sprayed up curtains of water from the sea. He continued to use the whips until the horses stopped and no amount of urging on his part stirred them to greater effort.

Behind, the islands had been pulled together, like sewing one piece of cloth to another.

“You must return to the islands, Kratos. Return to the Temple of Lahkesis,” Gaia said.

“Where I first landed on the island? What will I find there?” He received no answer, nor did it matter. The Sisters of Fate had to be convinced—coerced—into returning him to the instant that Zeus killed him. With that aim burning like a coal in his brain, he jumped from the platform between the horses, found the immense links that made up the chain, and began running back, the distance now twice as long as the way out before.

As he neared the temple, huge portions of the wall collapsed. If he had been only a few feet closer, he would have been carried from the chain and dashed against the rocks at the base of the island. He edged past and worked his way through the rubble to climb into the temple itself. The Temple of Lahkesis, Gaia had named it, for it being sacred to one of the Sisters. It lay partially in ruin from the

Steeds of Time drawing the islands together, but Kratos felt that there had been few people here to maintain it prior to the destruction he had caused.

From the sentries who had tried to stop him to Theseus and the Guardians intent on keeping him from finding how to use the Steeds of Time, it was apparent visitors to the Island of Creation were not highly valued.

He advanced into the huge vault of the temple. A statue dominated the far end, its hands held out as if in supplication. A diadem shone in the center of its forehead. Light from the sky silhouetted the head, but Kratos was more interested in exploring the temple itself. It took some time before he came to the conclusion that no obvious exit presented itself in the temple, other than the way he had entered.

He circled the statue, looking for the best spot to begin his climb on the smooth stone. A single footstep changed his plans for using his swords to climb the slick statue. As he stepped onto a pressure plate at the end of a long elevated walkway leading to the replica of Lahkesis, the statue arms lowered and the hands were outstretched as if begging for tribute. By riding upward in those hands, he could emerge on the statue's shoulder, behind which opened the wall to the sky beyond, the only way forward through the temple.

Kratos ran when those supplicating hands began to rise once more. He halted far short of reaching the base of the statue, returned to the pressure plate, and stood on it. Again the hands lowered. Even at his fastest run, he could never reach the hands before they lifted back up. He bent and examined the plate. It might be possible to cram a thin blade between it and the surrounding stone to hold it long enough, but all he had were the Blades of Athena. If only he had a corpse as before, or at the very least some more fool sentries with which to make a fresh one. He rubbed his hand across the plate and made out faint lettering. Closer examination revealed a short message he did not understand: THE

AMULET OF THE FATES.

He had heard of such a magical amulet but had no idea how it could be used to hold down the plate. Kratos stood, stepped on the plate again, and watched the statue's hands lower.

The intent was obvious. The way of achieving it was not. He went to the base of the statue and looked up, thinking once more to scale it. His swords did not penetrate the stone but bounced off, ending any hope of using them as climbing hooks. He looked over the side of the elevated walkway and saw dusty floor below. He jumped, hit, and rolled, and came to his feet in front of a steel grating.

Beyond stood a life-sized statue with a gleaming stone clutched in one hand. He stared at it, and felt a tiny tingle deep within his breast as if the stone somehow tickled the Cronos Rage, yet the prodigious power was not unleashed. He stepped back and the tingling sensation faded. Whatever the green stone might be, its magical properties and those he had acquired from Cronos were compatible.

"Might this be the Amulet of the Fates?" he wondered. Seeing nothing more he could do, Kratos grabbed the metal bars, bent his legs, and heaved. He might as well have tried to move the entire earth. The grating refused to budge. He tried his swords on it but could not even nick the solid metal.

He snarled at being thwarted in this fashion. The statue in the barred room held what he thought necessary to continue his quest to reach the Sisters of Fate, and he was being locked out. Kratos paced like a caged animal, studying the small chamber and the flooring just in front of the statue. He saw what might be a recessed pool.

Judging distances, he took a deep breath, expanded his barrel chest, and then dived cleanly into the pool. Quick strokes took him to the bottom, but a wall blocked him from swimming in the direction of the statue room. Running his fingers up the surface of the barrier, he spied a fine crack in the wall and used the pommel of a sword to shatter it. Before the debris had finished floating down to the well bottom, he scissor-kicked twice and used his powerful arms to stroke ahead. He burst out into the room, on the proper side of the grating.

He pulled himself up and studied the statue. Seeing no reason not to take the green-glowing gem in the statue's outstretched hand, he swung a blade and severed the entire limb. He caught the arm before it, with its precious gem, could strike the floor. Kratos held up the green jewel and examined it. It would have looked striking on a gold chain nestled between Lysandra's breasts. She wore so few jewels, even when he brought back the spoils from a defeated king's treasure-house, because such trinkets mattered less to her than love of family, of country. Like her, he had no lust for precious stones, either as decoration or for what they could buy. He had been a god and needed only to ask to receive anything he craved. When he had fought for Sparta—when he had been Ares' lackey—wealth had meant nothing to him. Battle prowess had been all he sought, all he cared for to achieve victory.

Turning the gem over and over, he studied the sharp planes, the gentle angles, the illuminated depths.

"The Amulet of the Fates." The words came unbidden to his mind, though no words had been spoken. The longer he gazed into the interior, the clearer it became what usefulness the jewel might provide. Time became sluggish, if not entirely halted.

He blinked his eyes and saw only the green gem. With a lithe dive, he reentered the underwater passage and emerged on the other side of the grate. He had to exit this level, go back outside, and see where he had originally entered the Temple of Lahkesis above. It was the work of only a few moments to scale the wall and once more face the towering statue with the diadem in its forehead.

Kratos purposefully stepped onto the pressure plate. As it yielded under his weight, the statue's arms lowered. He knelt to see if there might be a spot to wedge the green stone but found nothing. But the magicks within him stirred, fed by the Cronos Rage and yet not blasting forth the destroying energy. Rather, one magic fed the other. He looked up at the distant statue. This time he did not attempt to run forward and reach the rapidly rising hands. He held out the Amulet of the Fates. It vibrated and turned warm, and then he felt as if he had been plunged into some netherworld.

The room turned a green reminiscent of the angry ocean, and movements all around were slow, as if everything floated in honey. His movements were precise, easy. The world—time itself—had been slowed.

He saw the outstretched hands begin to rise. Kratos strode to the statue, stepped up, and then did away with the time-slowng spell. The speed of the rising hands made his knees buckle slightly.

The hands stopped when he was face-to-face with the statue. The diadem in its forehead blazed with eye-searing brilliance. As he reached out to pluck the jewel from the stony brow, the statue spoke.

“Hear me, fallen god. None defy what the Fates decree!”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“WIPE THEM ALL OUT,” Clotho said. “Now that the matter is settled, I need to return to more serious work.”

“Wait!” Lahkesis cried. “Sister, it isn’t that easy.”

“Why should it be easy? But it is simple,” Clotho said. “The gods are misbehaving grievously, and we know why. The Titans are stirring after the Great War and threatening Olympus. Do we want to oversee such a conflict again?”

“The Titanomachy set the world spinning in a different direction,” Lahkesis said. “Was that so bad? Why should we try to keep the peace, to keep everything ... staid?”

She saw a different problem, and it was one her sisters avoided even mentioning.

The Titans were growing bolder after so many centuries of imprisonment, servitude, and solitude. It did not surprise her that Gaia was responsible for shepherding Kratos from Hades’ arms all the way to the Island of Creation. What did surprise her was how this could have happened. She and her sisters worked as a team.

She frowned because she did not understand how Kratos had defeated the Warrior of Destiny so easily. The threads intertwining the two destinies should have merged, with only that of the Warrior continuing. She shook her head, the black horns on her helm reflecting rays as dark as her thoughts. That meant Clotho or

Atropos had been responsible for the defeat of their most significant confederate.

Even one of them becoming independent ruined the Sisters of Fate's control over the world. Lahkesis considered the possibility that more action on her own part might be required. She had no love for her sisters, but they *were* her sisters, chained together by a Fate beyond their control. A niggling thought refused to allow her return to duty, to the routine her sisters appreciated so. The time might have come for her to break free of their hitherto seamless collaboration and strike out on her own.

"You relish routine. I am the one who sees danger because it is always out of the ordinary," Lahkesis said. Who would react? Could she determine which of her sisters had meddled ... in her own meddling?

"You see danger everywhere," Atropos said glumly. "As you did when you sent the Warrior of Destiny to fight Kratos."

Through long eons Lahkesis had come to know her sister's every reaction, the slight twitches, the feigned interest or boredom. The simple statement left her speechless, however. How could Atropos know of the Warrior of Destiny's failure? Lahkesis had been improvident and had reacted rather than thought through her actions—not as either of her sisters would have. But the impetuous decision had invigorated her and made her dreary existence a little better. Was Atropos only guessing as to her role, though, or had she followed a thread of fate and knew the truth?

Or was her role more active? Were the Sisters of Fate capable of spinning their own destiny, or did some higher power determine *their* fate? Lahkesis immediately discarded such a fantasy. Over the centuries there had been no such indication—but they had worked together in unison until now. She found it difficult to believe that Kratos was the agent of their disunity. But was he the unwitting dupe used against them by someone beyond the Sisters' control?

It could not be. The core of the dispute was lack of coordination. It had to be.

"Why do you go on so?" Clotho asked. "I am returning to the Loom Chamber to work. I suggest you both do likewise." With that

Clotho left.

“Kratos is more dangerous than you can imagine,” Lahkesis said to Atropos, when their sister had left. “Leave him to me. Keep yourself content with petty routine.” The more she could do to keep Atropos busy, the easier it would be to remedy the problems she had caused through her impetuous casting of fate.

“You think to dismiss me so easily?” Atropos flared. “I am not some simpleminded creature who does nothing but measure for your cut on the threads of destiny. You mock me when I try something more.”

“We all decide on the destinies,” Lahkesis said warily, noting how her sister had admitted to independent action and not informing her sisters. “Then it is up to each of us to spin, measure, and cut.”

“I would do more,” Atropos said. “This meddling of yours with what the three of us have decided is wrong.”

“So wrong?” Lahkesis said, uneasy at her sister’s vehemence. It was as if she had been caught doing something illicit. “So wrong that you wanted to try it, also? What have you done?”

“Kratos is not yours alone,” Atropos said. “I don’t find him as interesting as you obviously do, but he is diverting. For a while, at least.” She crossed her arms, talons pointing downward as she rose haughtily on a column of black fog.

Lahkesis started to press the matter, then remembered that discord among the Sisters only caused woe. The times they had argued, the world had spun away in chaos, order failing and the mortals doing as they saw fit because of neglected threads. Better to placate Atropos and find—and correct—what she might have done to Kratos’ destiny. Her tinkering was hardly ever useful or productive, because she hadn’t the practice at it Lahkesis did.

“We need to widen our view of the world,” Lahkesis said, thinking this would divert her sister.

“What of the Titans and the Olympians?” Atropos seemed willing to pursue destinies other than that of Kratos.

“That is worth considering—later. For the moment, I will guide more carefully what you call my pet, Kratos, and examine how Gaia supports his quest.”

“Why does he come here? We will never change what we have already spun for him. Zeus killed him. That should be the end of it.”

“But Gaia meddles.”

“Should we then launch a new Great War?” Atropos asked, flustered.

Lahkesis wondered if she ought to take advantage of her sister’s confusion at this and pry from her what she had done with Kratos’ thread of destiny. Lahkesis’ irritation with her sister grew. Routine chores were perfect for Atropos, but when something fell out of that wonted warp and woof, she became frantic. As she was now.

“There is no need for such desperate moves. Small changes in destiny, that’s what is required. We must agree on a course of action, a destiny we all approve.”

“Like the game we played before? The one where whoever could make the smallest change and produce the greatest result wins?”

Lahkesis remembered the Trojan War with some fondness. She had won by introducing a single golden apple into mortal society. The war had killed heroes on both sides and was still talked about by the poets.

“Yes, Atropos, something like that. But Kratos has loosed the Steeds of Time and is now in my temple.”

“What! Why wasn’t I told? We must—”

“*You* must do nothing. I will take care of him. What is he, after all? Nothing that we didn’t make.”

“He cheated his fate,” Atropos insisted. “That makes him dangerous. He was a mortal and killed a god and became a god and —”

“And he is once more mortal.” Lahkesis stiffened. “I must issue a stern warning to him. He has found my statue in the temple. Go, Atropos, go and tend to business while I speak with our Kratos.”

Atropos left, muttering to herself. Her boneless fingers moved sinuously, creating knots of destiny and as easily undoing them in a nervous gesture. Lahkesis forced herself to ignore her sister and devote her full attention to Kratos. She cleared her throat and spoke.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“NONE DEFY WHAT THE FATES DECREE.”

Kratos glared at the talking statue. Its eyes blinked and its lips moved, but it was stone, not living flesh. Lahkesis might speak through the likeness but the Sister of Fate was elsewhere. This infuriated him. There was no reason for her to be distant. Let her face him and not use a stone surrogate.

“That is how it must be. Only death awaits you at the end of your journey.”

“My death is what *began* this journey,” Kratos said, fists clenched tightly. He stepped forward and wanted to strike out—but he also wanted to hear what Lahkesis had to say. Gaia had said that the Sisters of Fate alone could return him to the precise moment needed to save himself and kill Zeus on that desolate, devastated terrace in Rhodes.

“The Fates have not deemed victory for you. Your soul will never find peace for what you have become.”

“I am what the gods have made me!” He could no longer contain his anger. Swords flashing, he cut across the statue’s cheek, sending bits of stone and rock dust to the floor far below.

His fury mounted at being thwarted by Lahkesis. A second powerful slash cut the nose off the statue. The diadem in the forehead glowed more brightly, a blinding green that caused his

innards to burn with a fire that threatened to consume him. This spurred Kratos to even greater acts of violence. Cheek and jaw, throat and each side of the head. He hacked until his muscles bulged and the helmeted head of Lahkesis slid backward, finally severed from the body. Kratos reared back, placed his foot against the ravaged stone face, and pushed hard. The head grated along a few feet, then toppled to the floor behind the statue and shattered into a thousand pieces.

Kratos vaulted down, walked around the remnants of the statue's head, and saw a ghostly face in an arched portal to one side.

"You will die here, Kratos. We will never allow you to reach our sacred temple."

Kratos turned away, ignoring Lahkesis' phantasm. He stopped and drew his swords when a pair of boars snorted, snuffled, then brandished their curving tusks before charging him. He stood his ground, waited for one giant boar to leap, and then dodged to one side. Four-legged animals, once committed to such an attack, could not recover or change direction easily.

Kratos gutted the boar as it flashed past him.

The second boar learned from its companion's death and did not leap but stayed on the ground, head low as it charged, ready to lift its head and catch him on vicious, yellowed tusks. As dangerous as this attack was, Kratos dealt with it easily enough. Rather than use his sword he bent down, grabbed hold of the boar's ear and one saliva-wet tusk, and jerked to one side. The heavy creature flopped onto its side, kicking and squealing. Kratos balled one hand into a sledge of a fist and smashed the pig in the throat. It died, drowning in its own blood. He picked it up, turning toward the doorway, where the eerie outline of a woman's face still shimmered.

"Here, Lahkesis," Kratos called. "Take your servant!" He hurled the boar through the face. It flared as if he had disturbed a desert mirage, swirled about inchoate, then coalesced back into a taunting visage.

"We will never alter your fate, Kratos. You were meant to die by the hand of Zeus!"

Kratos turned away. The illusory face of the Fate could not harm him. If Lahkesis could have become corporeal, she would have died by his hand. From what she had said, she cowered in her palace with her sisters. Kratos needed only to find the palace and the flesh-and-blood bodies of the Sisters to persuade them to alter his destiny.

His swords clacked together to reassure himself of how that “persuasion” would be accomplished.

Having his blades already drawn saved him. A towering Cyclops dropped from a walkway above and crashed into the stone floor not ten feet away. For the immense one-eyed monster, such a distance was hardly more than a short reach. It grabbed for Kratos. Only his swords blocked the questing fingers.

He lopped off two, sending the sausage-thick fingers spinning away on the marble floor. Although the Cyclops’ body blocked his view, he knew what else he faced. He heard the squeals and snorts of more boars as they devoured the severed digits.

The Cyclops let out a roar of pain and fury and charged. Kratos spun his swords about, stabbing, hacking, slicing. And then he was forced to retreat under the fierce attack. The single bloodshot eye fixed on him with an intensity that would have frightened a lesser man. For him, it meant only that he had an eye to blind.

As he prepared for the leap that would send him aloft and his blade into the Cyclops’ giant eye, a boar attacked. Kratos was bowled over. His swords held the four-legged killer at bay long enough to somersault and come to his feet.

The Cyclops sucked on its severed fingers, then reached down, grabbed another boar, and ripped its head off. Kratos wondered if the Cyclops had become confused as to its enemy. Then he saw that the creature was simply using the weapons it had at hand. The powerful shoulders bunched, and the Cyclops threw the still-kicking headless boar at Kratos. He ducked and dropped to one knee.

Then he found himself under full attack by the roaring, gibbering Cyclops. Hairy arms batted at him, leaving him staggering and dazed. A fist larger than his head smashed into his back and pummeled him until he fell onto his belly. Then the Cyclops kicked him, lifting him off the floor and sending him crashing into a wall.

Eyes blurred from the punishment, Kratos saw the Cyclops lumber toward him, hands grasping for its enemy. All Kratos could see was the hand with the two fingers cut off. He shook his head clear and then released the spell contained in the Amulet of the Fates. The Cyclops' headlong charge slowed to nothing. In the greenish light permeating this world, its bloodshot eye seemed to turn into diamond. Aching, muscles protesting, Kratos got to his feet, drew his swords, and then chopped off the already finger-deprived hand.

Then he released the magical spell and stepped to one side. The Cyclops roared in pain and disbelief that its hand had been hacked off. The pain broke its concentration, giving Kratos the opportunity he needed to slip around behind the monstrous creature, clamber up its back, reach around the bristle-haired head, and dig his fingers into the eye. The Cyclops went wild, thrashing about and trying to dislodge him. Kratos rooted about until he grabbed the tendrils at the back of the eye to pull it free, then crushed it.

As the Cyclops opened its mouth to screech in pain and fury, Kratos placed one hand at the back of its neck and with the other grabbed its tongue. With a sudden swift circular yank, he not only broke the Cyclops' neck but pulled out the tongue as well. The monster stiffened and then fell like a tree with its trunk sawed through.

Kratos lightly jumped off and stared at the fallen giant for a moment.

"You cannot change your destiny," the ghostly outline of Lahkesis' head cried.

He threw the Cyclops' tongue through the doorway, through Lahkesis' ghostly face, and onto the path beyond. For a moment, he thought Lahkesis would return, but the image had disappeared for good. Along the path now opened lay a steamy, stinking bog. Corpses dangled from banyan trees on either side. Carrion birds pecked at the fresher bodies, one possibly still alive though Kratos never slowed his advance to see. Those strung up in the trees were of no concern to him.

On the other side of this bog rose the sky-gutting spire of the Palace of the Fates.

He was ready to meet the Sisters.

He was not ready for the chain whistling through the air and circling his neck. Kratos choked and then was dragged along on his belly behind a huge horse that galloped through the swampy terrain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“THE WORLD BELOW is in turmoil, my father,” Athena said.

Zeus sat back, apparently unconcerned. He made vague brushing motions with his hand, as if she were nothing more than an insect to be shooed away.

“It comes from unrest in Olympus,” she went on. “There cannot be such upheaval among the gods and goddesses without repercussions.”

“You fear for my throne, daughter?” Zeus laughed harshly. Athena heard no humor in his tone. He had always treated her well before, even causing other gods to claim he favored her above them. She remembered how Ares had tried to use this as a lever with Zeus to gain more power. It hadn’t worked with the former God of War and from what she could tell, nothing she might say now would hold sway with Zeus.

“I do, Sky Father,” she said. Athena saw Iris peeking out from behind a large pillar at the side of the audience chamber. The instant the new Messenger of the Gods realized Athena saw her, she ducked away, as if this would take away all memory of her eavesdropping. “There are those atop Mount Olympus who would steal away your power, if not your throne.”

“You are not the first to speak of this, daughter. I am King of the Gods. None dares oppose me!”

Athena bowed slightly to hide the sour look on her face.

"All are daring. You must find a middle road to walk if you want to restore order."

"*All*, daughter? You say *all* are plotting to usurp me? What is your plan to rob me of my power?" Clouds began forming at the domed ceiling, lightning crackling without striking. Zeus held out his hand, and a thunderbolt formed there.

"You would strike me down, Father?"

"Do you oppose me, Athena? *Do you try to steal my power?*"

"I seek amity among the gods, Father. Nothing more."

"Kratos is the source of this cancer growing in Olympian guts," Zeus cried. "I will see him sent to the Underworld!"

"The Sisters of Fate protect their realm jealously, Father," she said uneasily. Try as she might, it had been impossible to send a message to Kratos. "If he remains on the Island of Creation there is nothing that can be done."

"I am a god. I am the King of the Gods!" Zeus stood and shook his fist at the heavens. Through the open ceiling in his throne room came small thunderclouds. "Petition the Fates. Or do they seek a champion against me?" Zeus sat and looked around, as if Kratos was spying on him.

This bothered Athena greatly. Her father seemed hesitant, hesitant and fearful, then would act precipitously. His mood swings grew greater by the day.

Athena jumped when he slammed his fists down on the armrests so hard that twin fissures opened from the throne all the way across the audience chamber floor, isolating Athena on a small island between.

She was startled to see that this destruction flushed out not only Iris but also Poseidon from hiding places around the audience chamber. More than the Messenger of the Gods spied on Zeus' audiences.

"What do you want, brother?" Zeus held up his hand, now a fist oozing misty dark clouds from between his fingers. He grew in stature until his head brushed the dome above. Not content with this, Zeus smashed the dome with his fist and sent a cascade of glass

and stone raining down. He puffed himself up even more until his girdled waist came level with the now destroyed dome.

"I have come to protest an invasion of my realm, brother," Poseidon said. He started growing, then realized there wasn't going to be room, even if he punched a hole in the audience room above his head. "Return to a more civil size."

Zeus shrank back to a size more in proportion to his audience chamber. He grated his teeth together as he fell heavily back onto his throne.

"Do I have your permission to sit on my own throne, brother? Or have you come to depose me?"

"I have my own realm beneath the sea, Zeus." Poseidon strode up, rudely pushing Athena aside. She stepped away. Iris moved closer so as not to miss a single word of the exchange. Athena worried that Iris would find even more in this exchange to turn to her own advantage. It was an exaggeration to claim that Iris alone was responsible for the disquietude among the gods, but she contributed to it with her rumormongering, her half-truths, and the constantly formed alliances that she respected only until they no longer gave her power. Iris was a cause of the distrust spreading through the Olympians like an unchecked plague, but she was not solely responsible.

"Why not return to it?" Zeus said. "I need some peace to properly rule."

"Peace," snorted Poseidon. He spat seaweed onto the floor and squeezed out his dripping beard before going on. "The mortal philosopher Plato said it too well. 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.' I find an invader challenging my rule of the sea."

"Kratos?" Zeus laughed harshly. "He has become a will-o'-the-wisp with everyone seeing him still on Olympus."

"Not Kratos," said Poseidon. "Oceanus. The Titans become bolder. He thinks to regain transcendence over *my* realm."

"You are unable to fight him? A Titan who has been stripped of power and discredited for so long? You are no brother of mine if you cannot chase him away, back to the dark realms of Tartarus."

Oceanus,” Zeus said, snorting in contempt. “He was the least of the Titans.” He turned dark as he added, “Unlike Cronos.”

“I have your permission to do as I see fit?”

Athena started to warn her father not to give Poseidon unlimited power. Her uncle was cantankerous and quarrelsome, but he was also ambitious. Poseidon on the throne of the gods would create a war among them that would never end. Poseidon lacked any hint of diplomacy in his soul. Zeus might rankle, but he could be subtle and clever when the need arose. His succor of Kratos in the guise of the gravedigger before the battle with Ares proved that.

She just hadn’t seen that facet of her father’s character recently. Not since Kratos ascended the throne of the God of War.

“Defend yourself as you see fit. You don’t need my good wishes for that, brother.”

Poseidon wrung out his beard again to hide the broad smile. Zeus could not see it but from the side of the audience chamber Athena did clearly. So did Iris. The Messenger of the Gods hurried away.

It was as if Ares’ death had released ambition unseen among the Olympians before. While many had complained about Zeus’ rule, they had acceded to it so that they could pursue their own pleasures, both on Mount Olympus and among the mortals. But now? More than Poseidon and Iris aspired to the throne, and Zeus continued to direct his wrath against a mortal.

Kratos might have been a god, but he presented less danger to Zeus than many of those who remained gods.

Athena left Poseidon and Zeus trading barbed comments, wondering what she had to do to restore order among the gods. Should she depose her own father? Or should she aid Kratos in his quest to slay him? She caught her breath as she realized the direction her thoughts were taking. There had to be another course that did not force her to oppose her father—or aid those who did.

There had to be.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE CHAIN SNAPPED tight around Kratos' thickly muscled neck and yanked him off his feet. He hit the ground hard, and then was dragged behind an immense galloping paint horse. The patches of color on the horse's flanks were fire-bright. The hooves kicked back at Kratos, but the chain was long enough to hold him at a safe distance—if *safe* could ever be used to describe being strangled to death by the ever-tightening chain.

He grunted as he hit a dead tree and flew high in the air. He landed hard but caught a quick glimpse of the rider. The man wore a barbarian's armor, heavy metal leaves across the shoulders and chest, bare arms save for furred wristlets, leggings that might conceal greaves but probably not. Despite the barbarian not wearing a helm, Kratos failed to see his face. What mattered more was the speeding terrain under his belly, ripping at his flesh as he was pulled faster and faster behind the warhorse. Kratos grabbed the chain with both hands and pulled, trying to dislodge it from his throat. He felt the links cutting into his flesh—and cutting off his air.

The world turned a bit darker as the horse sped along a trail. For a boggy stretch he landed only on hard spots. Rocks, stumps, debris, it all tore at Kratos' flesh and distracted him from the one act that

would save his life. If he didn't get the chain unwrapped from his neck, he would die.

The horse jumped over a fallen tree; Kratos slammed hard into the log and then was airborne. For this brief instant, the tension slackened in the chain. He ducked his head, unwrapped a turn of the metallic leash, and shoved his right arm up so the chain snapped tight on his forearm instead of his neck. Then he hit the ground, and the air gusted from his lungs on impact. He was dragged for another hundred yards and then regained his senses enough to reach back, draw a sword with his left hand, and then bring it down with all his strength against the chain.

One instant he was sliding along—then he was sitting up on the path, trees on either side and the fire-branded horse galloping into a glade without Kratos' weight holding it back. The rider sawed on the reins, forcing his mount to dig its hooves into the soft earth. Dirt flew up into a cloud, then the rider swung about and trotted back to where Kratos now stood with a blade in his hand.

"By the gods, it is true!" the rider marveled, staring hard at Kratos. "The Sisters are smiling upon me today. I have fought my way through the Guardians of Hades, crawled my way out of the fires of torment, all for a chance to change my fate. And what better place to start than by taking the life of the man who stole mine?"

"You," Kratos said, sneering. "How many times must I kill you?"

The Barbarian King threw back his head and roared in defiance. As his head tipped back, Kratos saw the white scar on the barbarian's throat. He had severed the warrior's head and sent it into a mud puddle when last they had faced each other. The thick black beard once more hid the scar caused by decapitation as he lowered his chin to peer at Kratos from under beetled brows. Kratos could hardly see the eyes in those hollowed pits, but he thought they burned with more than bloodlust. There was cunning focused solely on his grounded foe.

"For my efforts the Sisters shine their light upon me, delivering the very object of my vengeance: Kratos!"

Kratos staggered slightly as the world spun about him, the dim light of fading twilight and the noxious rising bog gases replaced by

the heavy scent of spilled blood. A battlefield ankle-deep in dirt, turned to mud by so much spilled blood. He had been ripped away from the world he inhabited and sent into that of dream—of nightmare!

Kratos was part of the illusion and yet stood away from it, facing the Barbarian King as he had once before.

“Alrik,” Kratos cried. “I will shorten you again! Come to do battle!”

“You will fall this time, Ghost of Sparta. You drank the ambrosia and robbed me of my father’s life.”

“With him dead, you became king,” Kratos said. “Could it be that you let me do your killing for you to save yourself the trouble?” Kratos sought to goad the barbarian into thoughtless attack. It worked.

The Barbarian King rushed forward, but the battle did not go as Kratos expected. Alrik was immense and immensely strong. He swung his war hammer with skill and power, driving Kratos back and then to his knees. Alrik swung the haft around and caught Kratos under the chin. The Spartan’s head snapped back, and he flopped onto his spine so that he stared up at Alrik as he used both hands on the war hammer to lift it high. Muscles rippled as Alrik prepared to bring it crashing down onto his foe’s skull, but all Kratos could see was the intricately braided beard and the human knuckle bones woven into it.

Kratos called to Ares for succor and relived the unholy bargain he had made with the God of War. And the fight swiftly changed. Ares slew the barbarians freely, easily, and Kratos found himself possessed of renewed strength—and the Blades of Chaos welded to his arm bones by lengths of chain. The fight became one-sided, and Kratos sent Alrik to the Underworld where he belonged.

He stumbled and found that he no longer waded about in the ankle-deep bloody mud of nightmare. Reality now matched his hallucination.

Alrik had returned from Hades’ clutches.

“We have some things in common,” Kratos said.

“Hatred of each other?” the Barbarian King called.

“Yes. And we have both left the Underworld behind.”

“There is one more thing we have in common,” Alrik said.

Kratos said nothing. He clutched his swords, evaluating his best attack of this mighty warrior returned from Hades.

“My father’s death! I will not die until you pay for killing him,” Alrik said.

Before Kratos could attack, the center of the glade began to change. The rapidly opening hole warned Kratos he had no time to spare. Leaping over the gaping maw that stretched all the way down to Hades, he swung, but Alrik was too intelligent a fighter for such an obvious attack to succeed. He galloped away, out of Kratos’ reach.

Kratos reached behind and drew Typhon’s Bane. He began firing the arrows as quickly as he could. Alrik batted away one or two of the icy missiles, but a few more embedded in his heavy armor. The attack produced a deep-throated laugh.

“Is that the best you can do, Ghost of Sparta?”

The horse galloped toward Kratos, its rider wielding the mighty war hammer. Kratos somersaulted to the left side of the fiery steed, forcing Alrik to swing the hammer across his body. This shortened his reach and afforded Kratos a few inches—which saved his life. The spiked hammerhead grazed his back, but then it was too late for Alrik to attack in any other way. The Barbarian King depended on his horse to carry him out of range for any attack Kratos could launch.

Kratos used his swords on the horse’s legs, chopping the hooves off just above the fetlocks. The cannon bones snapped and the horse fell headfirst onto the ground, sending its rider flailing through the air. The horse’s body prevented Kratos from instantly following up his attack and putting an end to Alrik once more.

Single-mindedly, he went around the mutilated horse, his eyes only on Alrik. This almost brought him death.

Alrik swung his war hammer in a whistling arc to hold Kratos at bay. He clenched his teeth, then let loose a heart-stopping roar. “Attend me, my warriors. Come to your king and fight once more beside me!”

A sudden stench filled the air, which made Kratos' nose wrinkle. The smell was too familiar. It was present in cemeteries and on battlefields and anywhere else that death held reign. In front of him opened the hole again, allowing the dead barbarians slain by the Spartans to creep out from the Underworld. One grabbed Kratos' leg and tripped him. With the agility of a cat, Kratos hit and rolled, came to his feet, and swung the Blades of Athena with deadly accuracy. The dead barbarian's head exploded from his shoulders, bounced once, and then disappeared back over the edge and down to Hades. The body continued to fight. Kratos kicked out, tripped the flailing soldier, and sent it after its head.

He recovered in time to see Alrik shaking off the effect of his fall. With contemptuous ease, he swung his war hammer about. The spikes embedded in the head glistened with fresh blood. Kratos wondered where it had come from, then realized it was his own. Alrik had not connected squarely with his blow but had drawn blood. Kratos felt the large round spot on his back beginning to throb from the injury.

Kratos started for Alrik, then stopped. The Barbarian King placed the haft of his hammer on the ground, then tapped it several times with deceptive gentleness. The earthquake that radiated outward would have knocked Kratos from his feet if he had not jumped as hard as his powerful legs could propel him. When he landed, the ground still shook but the worst of the quake had passed.

A well-aimed sword cut opened a long gash on Alrik's cheek, but the Barbarian King paid no heed. He swung his ponderous war hammer about and knocked Kratos' swords away. The defensive move left the huge man's body open to Kratos' sudden rush forward until the two men were within inches of each other. Kratos slugged him with the pommel of one sword and his right fist. The solid blows forced Alrik away. Kratos followed, this time with both swords swinging.

The two crashed together in fierce combat, each strong, both determined to kill the other. Locked together, straining, Alrik grated out, "The Sisters promised to change my fate. I won't let you, Ghost of Sparta, steal away my chance for life!"

Kratos heaved, sending Alrik back. The barbarian was too strong for him, and the risk of what he had to do seemed suicidally high. With blades in front of him, he marshaled his energy and let the burning white spot deep within his breast grow. As the power focused in that scintillant spot, his legs wobbled.

“You fear me, Kratos? I knew it!” Alrik rushed forward.

His arms mimicked his legs as the muscles turned to water. The barbarian shrieked his battle cry and lifted his war hammer for the killing blow. Too weak to do more than wobble on his feet, Kratos looked within his body and spirit and unleashed the Rage of the Titans. The powerful shock wave knocked Alrik back so hard it took him off his feet. He sat down and skidded back a few more feet. For the first time, something more than hatred glowed in the king’s eyes.

Kratos saw fear.

“You won’t get past me to the Temple of Euryale. I will stop you and claim my reward for serving the Sisters of Fate!”

Blades swinging in a deadly arc, Kratos pressed forward and left bleeding gashes in the Barbarian King’s arms. Seeing his chance, Kratos reached up and grabbed the shaft of the war hammer in an attempt to wrest it away. He shoved his feet into Alrik’s chest, then straightened his body as he wrenched the hammer free of the warrior’s grip. He flew through the air and landed heavily.

Before he could regain his feet, Alrik swarmed over him, a heavy knee pressing him into the ground. Alrik snatched back the war hammer. Kratos rolled over and over until he was some distance away and got to his feet. He was barely beyond the radius of the hammer’s swing. Hot air gusted against his face as the spike-studded hammerhead passed within inches of his face. If the blow had landed, his head would have been turned to gory pulp.

Kratos attacked, his swords flying faster than any war hammer could possibly block. Alrik exerted his immense strength and used his long arms as effective levers to change the direction, but it was too late. Kratos was inside the giant’s guard. His swords stabbed forward and into the Barbarian King.

Alrik never reacted to these wounds. But he did when Kratos once more grabbed the haft of the war hammer and wrenched it away. Real fear mingled with utter hatred for a brief instant before Kratos swung the hammer about and caught Alrik on the side of the head. The blow knocked him facedown to the ground. Kratos squared his stance, judged distance, then brought the hammer down in the middle of Alrik's shoulders with every ounce of energy locked in his battle-hardened body. Blood splattered as the spikes dug in and the spine cracked. Kratos swung again. This time he aimed lower. The spine broke. But still Alrik flopped about. Another blow. Another and another left Alrik still on the ground.

Kratos held the captured war hammer high over his head and roared in triumph. Then he kicked the body to the edge of the Hades hole and finally into it.

Kratos allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. Before, Alrik had outfought him and only Ares' intervention had saved him. Rather, it had resigned Kratos to a life of servitude to the God of War. The *now dead* God of War.

He had no more time to relish the victory. The undead barbarians continued to crawl forth from Hades. He hefted the war hammer and swung it in a wide circle, knocking two back into the hole. He heard their anguished cries as they once more fell to the Underworld.

When the last had been dropped back through the hole, it began to close. Kratos placed the war hammer on the ground and leaned on it. Blood trickled from between the spikes. Kratos swung the hammer about and slammed the head down to wipe off Alrik's blood, causing an earthquake. He grunted without humor, and hefted the war hammer so that it rested on his shoulder. Then Kratos triumphantly slid it behind his back, where it magically reposed with the other gifts he had received from the gods.

He looked deeper into the bog and saw the dark spire rising above the Temple of Euryale. Alrik had protected that for the Sisters of Fate. He had been promised a new fate if he kept Kratos from reaching the temple, for all the good that it did him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“WHAT HAPPENED?” Atropos shrieked in frustration. “You were supposed to remove him!”

“Kratos?” Lahkesis waved off her sister. “He might have destroyed my statue, but that doesn’t matter. Alrik will stop him in the Bog of the Forgotten.”

“Oh?” Atropos stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at her sister. “How do you think that is going to happen?”

“What do you mean? Alrik has been a faithful servant, if a foolish one. He thinks we will examine his plight and save him. Ares gave Kratos the weapons and strength to smash him. There is no reason to give Alrik any new audience.” Lahkesis laughed lightly. “There is no reason, since he does our bidding without ever demanding that we *do* anything for him.”

“You think Alrik will stop Kratos?”

“What is wrong, dear sister?” Lahkesis was beginning to feel a touch of anger at the way Atropos was acting. “Did one of your strands of fate break? You always put so much effort into making each perfect.”

“Perfect,” Atropos said bitterly. “You should pay half the attention to your work that I do. If you did, you would know.”

Lahkesis spun and stared at Atropos. No words came to her lips.

“That’s right,” Atropos said. “Kratos not only fought the dead men-at-arms from Alrik’s army but he fought Alrik all mounted on his fine, prancing warhorse. He sent them all back down the hole into Hades’ arms.”

“Kratos killed Alrik? Again? But I—that wasn’t supposed to happen.” She felt a passing dizziness. This was not the way her well-spun thread of fate should have played out. Kratos destroying her statue had been a surprise, but she had examined how she had cast his fate and saw nothing to preserve the statue. She had warned him.

Lahkesis reached out to pluck one hair-thin string determining the fate of both mortal and god after another until she found the proper one. Kratos’ thread was a different texture. Lahkesis held down her anger directed at her sister. Atropos had meddled in what should have been a diverting fate. Kratos had always been a special favorite of hers because he did the unexpected—but he had always ended up fulfilling the fate she had decreed.

Not now.

Stroking the strand, smoothing the lumpy sections, tugging a bit, she worked to determine the proper fate.

“You play with him. End his life now.” Atropos made cutting motions with her talons as she glared at her sister.

“I have. Zeus killed him. Only Gaia’s tampering with his destiny rescued him from Hades. That will not happen again. I assure you of that.”

“As you thought you had taken care of the matter in your temple?”

“I toy with him for my own amusement, nothing more,” Lahkesis said. “And it is not my fault Alrik failed. Did you spin his thread?”

“No,” Atropos said. The Sisters stared at each other. “Do you think Clotho decreed that Kratos return Alrik to the Underworld?”

“Why would she?” Lahkesis thought hard on this matter. She was capable of seeing the interaction of thousands of intersecting destinies and keeping them straight—or knotting them permanently, although the thread of Gaia had been increasingly difficult to cope with.

In the past, the thread had been an earthen color, tinted with greens, but recently she had tried to trace the thread—immediately after Clotho spun it—and found the task difficult. The thread had become slippery and difficult to sever. On impulse she had sliced through, only to find that her shears had passed through as if cutting mud. An attempt to re-form had been unproductive. Moreover, Atropos had come into her chamber on some errand or another, and she had hidden her attempt at the slicing.

But how had the thread become so insubstantial? Clotho's skills were unquestioned. Could Atropos have meddled once more where she had no business? Her sister increasingly intruded, as if spying.

Lahkesis worried that Atropos would find her thoughtless decision to send the Warrior of Destiny against Kratos. A valued ally had been defeated. Was Clotho interfering? Weren't there enough mortals, gods, and, yes, even Titans, to keep Clotho and Atropos busy? Lahkesis' resentment grew that the burden of untangling the skeins of fate fell to her and her alone.

"She might have seen how badly you handled Kratos and thought to put it right. End his life now, Lahkesis. He has gone too far. The Steeds of Time. Your temple has been desecrated. Alrik. End the thread now."

Lahkesis felt her hackles rise.

"Who are you to tell me what to do? I know how to spin destinies. Better than you *or* Clotho!"

"Should I do your chore?" Atropos reached for Kratos' thread of fate.

Lahkesis jerked it away from her sister's groping fingers. Atropos lacked imagination and would only put an end to Kratos in a way sure to create ripples along other strands. Such a disturbance might take years to resolve.

"I'll do it. He will never reach us, sister. He will be stopped at the Temple of Euryale."

"You are sure?"

"You insult me and my skill, dear sister." Lahkesis made no effort to keep the sarcasm from her voice. Clever fingers plucked at Kratos'

fate. Gorgon heads. Skeletons. The key. There would be no possible way for Kratos to avoid his fate now. None.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“HIDDEN DEEP WITHIN the spire lie the Sisters. They control the threads of fate. Gain control of your thread and you will be able to return to the moment when Zeus betrayed you.” Gaia spoke softly to Kratos.

The Temple of Euryale rose ahead. He strained to see the spire poking up above the sad trees with the drooping limbs. He snorted in disgust. Little wonder this was called the Bog of the Forgotten. Corpses dangled from the limbs of nearby trees, and the stench of decay pervaded everything.

“Kratos,” came Gaia’s soft voice again, this time with a hint of urgency that it had not carried before. “You must beware. What lies ahead is a trap.”

“Why do you tell me the obvious?”

“The Sisters will not allow you easy entry to their inner sanctum. The Chamber of the Loom is sacrosanct. No one but the trio ever enters. No one save the Priests of Fate.”

“I fear none of them.”

“You have done well, but you must not become careless. Hubris destroys mortals.”

“I became the God of War, and it did not suit me. All I want is to kill Zeus for what he did.”

He spoke only to the souging of wind through the banyan trees and the creaking of chains and nooses around the dangling corpses.

“Never retreat,” he muttered. He had come so far in his quest to find the Sisters of Fate and force them to send him back in time that he had nowhere else to go. Retreat? His life lay ahead.

He started along the trail, wary of a trap. Alrik had been a surprise, but Kratos found that he had enjoyed the combat again. The first time they’d met, when Alrik commanded his entire barbarian horde, Kratos had been weaker. His arm had been strong and his sword swift, but he had given in to Ares, pledging his servitude in exchange for victory.

Beseeching the gods for aid gave nothing to a true warrior. He was Spartan and needed only his own skill and bravery.

The faint dripping of water into a pool was now the only sound he heard. Even the wind had died. Clutching the war hammer he had won in combat, he advanced, rounding the bend in the trail and seeing the grim tower.

He saw the entrance immediately. A large bronze door was the only entry point. As he started for it, stepping over skeletons scattered all around, he slowed. Gaia had warned him of danger.

With a powerful leap to his left he sailed through the air just as a ghostly Gorgon’s head formed in front of the door. The face, limned with crackling green electricity, looked as if it was about to speak but only a deadly gaze sought to envelop him. He somersaulted and then swung about to face the Gorgon. Its eyes could not follow him due to walls forming an entryway to the bronze door.

If he had to enter the temple, he had to find a safer way inside.

As he stepped on a bone and broke it, he froze. The sound of the bone was wrong. The skeletons in front of the Gorgon’s gaze began shaking and sliding along the ground. Kratos watched the bones attach themselves and the skeletons begin to assume a more human form. Then the bones snapped upright, reached for discarded swords, and stood. Kratos saw several skeleton warriors still forming and knew he would be overwhelmed unless he acted quickly.

With a roar, he charged forward, war hammer swinging. The first skeleton's head exploded from its spine as his sharp-edged blade cut accurately. His second slash cut the legs off a second skeleton, sending it flailing backward to explode into separate bones again. Kratos avoided the Gorgon's deadly aspect, kicked apart other skeletons forming, and heard bone grating against bone behind him.

Kratos felt a sharp pain across his shoulder as the skeleton's sword cut at him. He ducked low, then thrust upward through the rib cage and into the skull with the butt end of the hammer's shaft. Once again, the skull blasted from the skeleton's spine. Kratos saw that the second skeleton he had already dealt with had regained its legs and clumsily stood. Using the pain of the cut on his broad back as a goad, Kratos spun about and demolished his bony foe. Not stopping once he had spread its bones about, he stamped down hard and crushed the chalky arm and leg bones under his sandal. Spinning about, he dismembered the skeletons coming after him. Realizing how they re-formed, he splintered the bones until only dust remained. It was the work of moments to pulverize them, leaving only a few knuckle bones and other smaller ones that would be no further danger.

Kratos worked his way through the ruins, jumping over pools of scummy water and finally finding what must have been an arena at one time. The walls were collapsed on one side, but higher up corridors and ledges remained. As he looked around, he heard a faint voice.

"Warrior!"

Kratos turned toward the far end of the arena. At a level too high for him to reach, he saw a man struggling forward, pulling himself along as if his legs were broken.

"Warrior, help me. I beg you, help me!" Two horned creatures grabbed the man and dragged him out of sight.

Kratos shook his head. By the time he reached the upper levels, the man would likely be dead. He looked around the floor. Puddles of orangish muck emitted vapors that caused his breath to catch in

the back of his throat. He stepped back to be sure he was not falling into a trap. All he heard were the obscene bubbling sounds from the muck pools.

The near silence was broken by a shrill horn blast. A Beast Lord emerged, a summoning horn pressed to its lips. The huge potbelly was armored, and the horned helmet hid both head and face. Its claws curled into the stone flooring and left deep scratches as it rocked back to give another long, mournful summons. As God of War, Kratos had seen the likes of him before and waited for what had to come.

The lord tossed aside his horn as an immense Cyclops crawled up from the ruins beyond. Using hooks, the Beast Lord scaled the Cyclops and stood on the broad back, which had grapples fastened to the powerful shoulder muscles. Both Beast Lord and Cyclops roared a challenge that Kratos was ready to answer. Guiding the one-eyed monster as if he rode a chariot, the Beast Lord jerked hard on one grapple to bring his mount around.

The Cyclops howled and charged Kratos. Seeing the real danger, Kratos somersaulted forward under the creature's club and slashed furiously at the exposed legs. The Cyclops dropped to its knees, giving Kratos the chance to swing his swords at the mounted Beast Lord. One blade tip slid under heavy armor. The Beast Lord lost his grip and fell from his one-eyed mount to crash to the uneven paving. The Cyclops was dangerous but the Beast Lord was cunning and could direct the fight in ways Kratos wanted to avoid.

Kratos advanced on the Beast Lord. He had injured the creature. Now he stabbed hard and drove his blade under the armpit and into important territory. A geyser of arterial blood exploded outward.

The Beast Lord groaned and rolled away. Kratos was merciless in his attack. He pressed the Beast Lord hard, only to have his killing blow deflected. The Cyclops had rejoined the battle. Its club almost knocked the weapon from Kratos' hand. He whirled and slashed at the Cyclops, then realized his error. The Beast Lord attacked him from the rear.

New wounds appeared on his broad back. The pain from the deep cuts tore at his battle concentration. A lesser warrior would have

died. Kratos had experienced worse pain. He was a Spartan. He was more. He was the Ghost of Sparta.

Taking more wounds to his back, he focused entirely on the Cyclops and its swinging bludgeon. He avoided a downward swing that would have crushed him to bloody pudding. Stone splinters erupted upward as the club destroyed more of the paving stones. But Kratos was within the circle of the Cyclops' arms, its belly exposed. Using a double-handed thrust, he drove his swords inward, upward—and outward. He carved a huge chunk of bloody flesh from the belly, causing the Cyclops to shriek in agony and drop its club to clutch its sundered abdomen.

Kratos was now free—for an instant—to kill the Beast Lord behind him. The armored creature had continued to attack his unprotected back. Kratos felt rivers of blood tickling as they ran down his skin. He drove the Beast Lord's face down to the stone flooring, then stamped down hard on his head, squashing it. He stepped back and sneered at the fallen creature. Kratos shook himself and sent his blood spraying in all directions.

He turned and saw that the Cyclops refused to die. It came for him. Digging his toes in against the edge of a broken paving stone, he got purchase despite his sandals being slick from blood. He waited until the Cyclops came close enough, then launched himself forward. He climbed the front of the Cyclops by grabbing handfuls of flesh until he stared into the single huge eye. Kratos drew back, then punched hard. His fingers drove through the eye's viscid innards, then he grabbed and yanked. The eye popped free.

Sightless, the Cyclops easily fell to him. As Kratos stepped away from the body, he saw faint twitching in the Beast Lord's body. He stamped several more times. It was only when he stopped that he heard the sounds of a fierce battle being waged. Kratos stepped to the archway looking over a river of sludge with circular metal islands and saw the warrior who previously had cried for his aid battling a pair of Minotaurs on the far side high atop a stony ledge.

Kratos jumped down to the first round island, saw chains and sprockets on the side, then began pushing a long handle. The entire

platform rotated and moved toward the far side of the putrid river. If he reached the far side in time to save the warrior, he would.

If he failed, that did not matter. This was the way forward. Kratos put his back to the lever and began rotating the metal disk under his feet when the water began boiling all around and eight sentries rose out of the water and slipped onto the disk. Somehow, he didn't think they had come to help with the lever.



“HE WILL TAKE ME BACK if I give him this news,” Hermes said.

“Hold,” Athena warned the Messenger of the Gods. “Zeus is in no humor right now. The other gods are restive and ... there are the Titans.” She looked around Hermes’ chosen place of exile. He punished himself unduly remaining in the Egyptian desert rather than along the Nile Delta where it was cooler and populated with people rather than sand fleas. Still, the purity of the sands appealed to her—and the absence of destruction. Perhaps this oasis free from Olympian strife, temporary though it might be, soothed Hermes.

“What are you talking about?” Hermes stared at Athena. “Gaia? She is powerless. Cronos was exiled to Tartarus after Kratos returned Pandora’s Box to Olympus.”

“But Typhon has been woken from his mountain sleep, and Oceanus starts to make trouble in our uncle’s domain. There is much yet that I do not understand,” Athena said, ignoring Hermes. “We must be certain what we say when we speak to Zeus.”

So much had slipped beyond her control. Her favorite town still lay in ruins after Kratos had battled Ares. Her worshippers had begun to restore the temples and shrines devoted to her worship, but they were chary now. Sparta had spread its military tentacles—with Kratos’ blessing—and would destroy any city that might challenge its power. But there was more. More that even the usually

wily, all-seeing, all-eavesdropping Hermes had missed in his frantic need to regain his status on Olympus.

Some of her worshippers had built shrines, small to be sure, celebrating Gaia. It was as if they chose to return to olden ways they could not possibly remember. Or was there something more happening that she was unable to understand? The Olympian gods made their presence, their power, their authority known, though less often now than before Kratos had been made God of War. Somehow, the mortals sensed the unease in Olympus and sought other deities.

But the Titans? Athena could not understand this. The Great War had been fought and won. Zeus had forever banished all the Titans for what Cronos had done to him, even disgracing Gaia despite her role in raising him. The King of the Gods' fury knew no bounds. That burning rage no longer smoldered in his breast but increasingly burst forth.

Did the mortals sense how easily he might destroy them and thus seek out other gods to protect them?

But the Titans!

"I can tell him of Kratos and how he has reached the Ruins of the Forgotten."

"What?" This startled Athena. "He has gone so far?"

"You won't tell Zeus? Will you? The more I can give him, the less likely he is to favor Iris."

Athena heard the suspicion in Hermes' voice.

"No, I will not tell him what you have learned." She saw that her promise did not ease Hermes' concern. It would take very little for him to turn on her. If he thought Zeus would restore him to his previous status between the gods and goddesses, betrayal would come as easily to his lips as his winged sandals carried him faster than thought throughout the world.

She needed to be on guard. And Kratos? Should she aid him when he sought only to kill their Sky Father? Athena shook her head. Peace among the Olympians—with Zeus on the throne—was their only hope for survival against such mortal determination as the Ghost of Sparta displayed.

“Wait until I speak with the Sisters of Fate and plead your case,” Athena told Hermes.

“You would do this for me? You would ask for their forgiveness?”

Athena felt a coldness within as she thought of approaching the trio whose weaving of fate controlled the entire world of both mortal and god. She could plead for Kratos.

Or she could plead for Zeus. She thought that her father needed succor far more.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE SENTRIES CIRCLED Kratos and backed him to the lever he had been pressing to move the circular metal island. His blades sang out and forward, but the muck-dripping creatures were too quick. They easily danced back out of range of his fiercely swinging weapons.

When the lever nudged him and the chains linked through the sprockets on the side of the metal island began to groan, he realized his progress to the far side of the swampy river would be for naught. Only constant pressure on the lever kept the circular plate from returning to the wrong side of the river. The longer the fight raged, the farther he got from the shore he desired.

A quick glance up to the stone ledge high above showed the warrior still battling. Then Kratos ignored the fighter's plight because of his own. The sentries moved forward again, their swords and scythes hissing as they cut the air.

Kratos closed his eyes to concentrate his power, then released the Rage of Cronos. The magicks radiated outward and momentarily stunned his attackers. With a mighty exertion, he swung the Blades of Athena and cut through the midsection of the closest four sentries. Two quick steps put him into position to dispatch three more. With only one remaining, just out of reach, he squared his stance for the final lunge, only to find that the magic had already faded. The sentry bellowed and rushed him.

Catching the creature's blade in the X of his own crossed weapons, Kratos fell backward, then lashed out. One foot looped around the sentry's ankle. The other viciously kicked against the kneecap. The dull snap of breaking bones could be heard over the soughing of the defiled river around the island. But the next snap—as Kratos lifted the struggling creature high over his head and then dropped him over his knee—came as loud as any thunderbolt.

Kratos kicked the body into the water and returned to his task of pushing against the river. He quickly reached the far side, hopped lithely up, and scrambled forward, going deeper into the ruins. Barely had he reached a decaying, vine-draped area than he heard the faint moans of a human. He looked around.

“Warrior, help me.” The plea was so faint even Kratos' keen ears almost failed to hear it. He turned in the fetid jungle and, amid the thick vegetation, saw movement both bright and shining. Kratos ran forward, pushing his way through the vines. When he saw the warrior who had called out to him before, he stopped.

The warrior wore Athenian armor, a bright red plume on the crest of his helmet. A quick look around convinced Kratos this soldier was not bait for a trap. He advanced, dropped to his knee, grabbed the soldier by the cuirass, and brought him to a sitting position. Blood flowed from a dozen wounds, any of which would be fatal. Kratos had seen the soldier battling Minotaurs. A deep gouge in the belly showed where one had gored him, then left him for dead. Kratos shook the man to loosen his tongue before his soul departed for the Underworld.

“God of War,” the Athenian grated out. Blood gurgled in his throat, another sign he was soon to be ferried across the River Styx. He tried to point. “Jason ... that beast took him!” The soldier clutched Kratos' forearm with surprising strength. “All our men are dead. Jason has the fleece to turn back the Gorgon's stare. You must save him!” Blood trickled from the corner of the wounded man's mouth, and Kratos caught the stench of imminent death. The man sagged, exhausted from the effort of giving Kratos this warning. Kratos shoved him back to the ground and stood, looking down as

the man gasped for breath. Every intake of air was raspy and tortured. For an Athenian he had fought well.

Kratos turned and looked down the path the soldier had indicated.

“Help him,” came the faint cry, almost inaudible.

The fallen soldier had said Jason fought some creature. Drowning out further entreaty came a lewd sucking noise, a gobbling, a vile feasting.

Kratos ran down the path toward the sounds of an animal rending flesh, only to dodge to one side as a Gorgon Assassin reared up on its snake’s tail to block the path. The eyes on stalks weaved about, this way and that, as the ineffectual hands reached out for him while it slithered closer. The deadly eyes swept past him. He foolishly looked and felt his arm turn to stone. One instant it had been muscular, powerful, capable of wielding any weapon. The next saw it numb and cold as if he had been sculpted from marble. A powerful flexing of his shoulder and upper arm shattered the stone and restored his arm, but it felt curiously weak. He flexed it again, drew his blades, and rolled forward, ducking under the Gorgon’s deadly stare. He slashed furiously with both swords and produced an earsplitting shriek that almost froze him as surely as the Gorgon’s gaze.

The Gorgon reared again on its snake tail, towering over him. He thrust, drove one tip a few inches into flesh protected by a horny hide, then tried to scream as the gaze fell upon him fully. His arm had lost circulation before. Now his entire body did. A moment of panic passed as he realized he was encased in stone, not turned to stone. With a mighty heave, he arched his back and brought his arms around. Bits of flying stone tore at his flesh as he broke the enshrouding marble. Kratos paid no attention to such minor injuries. The true danger lay in front of him as the Gorgon reared back and brought around the twin beacons of death. Capture him in stone again and he might be unable to break free.

He leaped into the air and brought both blades down on the Gorgon. The creature sinuously wiggled away, only slightly injured. With his sword edges trailing fire from the force of his attack, Kratos

again hacked at the monster. And again, his body became cold and immobile. The gaze had bathed him in hideous transforming green light. Kratos crashed to the ground, solid from the Gorgon Assassin's glance.

Luck kept many a warrior alive. So it was with Kratos now. He had landed heavily on a rock in the swampy path. The rock cracked the casing around him and once more afforded him a way of breaking free. Shards flew in all directions, but another stone imprisonment could spell his end.

With full fury, Kratos attacked, jumping high into the air. The Gorgon's eyes followed him. He drove the tips of his swords downward into those blazing watch fires of death, blinding the Gorgon. It screeched and tried to flee.

Swords no longer good enough, Kratos grabbed the Gorgon around the neck and squeezed. He felt snake-cool scaled flesh beneath his fingers. He squeezed. The Gorgon choked. He squeezed harder as the creature thrashed about, then gave a savage jerk and beheaded the monster.

He swung the Barbarian King's war hammer around and smashed into the gears, reducing them to dust. The calls for help came louder now that the way had been cleared of the gears.

Kratos stopped in front of an iron grating. On the other side a broad-chested, dark-furred Cerberus tossed its center head and ripped an arm off a fallen man. Blood rained down in the sandy arena, and the gobbling sound made by the three-headed monster drowned out the moans of pain from the now one-armed man. The monster saw Kratos and roared. Its claws ripped at the ground and its spiked tail whipped back and forth in anger.

Kratos bent, grabbed the bottom of the grating, and heaved, sending the gate upward. Kratos thought all three heads smiled, even the one still holding the severed arm, as the monster shuffled around to face him.

Turning his back to the dark Cerberus, Kratos held the war hammer in a loose grip. He lowered his head and waited. The Cerberus was puzzled at his lack of aggression. Impatience caused the three-headed dog to race forward. Kratos tightened his grip,

tensed his muscles, and began a swing. By facing away, he had given himself a full half circle's added momentum. He spun and sent the hammer with all his prodigious strength into the head still gobbling at the human arm. Blood exploded in all directions as the spiked hammerhead met the Cerberus' head.

The dark Cerberus stumbled and leaned to one side. Kratos recovered, swung his hammer in a wide arc, and again connected squarely, this time just behind the dog's muscled shoulder. The shock went all the way up into his arms, forcing him to step back to recover his balance.

Kratos almost died.

The dark Cerberus spat out a fireball from its second head. Kratos lifted the hammer and deflected a portion of the liquid fire aimed at him. The foul, fiery sludge coated his hammer and burned at the haft. Taking two quick steps, he somersaulted and avoided another fireball attack, coming up next to the one-armed man.

"Kill it, God of War," the injured man urged. Kratos looked at him without curiosity. "Kill it and you will have the thanks of Jason of the *Argo*."

"You have the Golden Fleece?"

Jason shook his head. With his remaining hand he pointed. "The Cerberus swallowed it. Get it back. You have to."

Kratos roared and attacked. The Cerberus swiveled its heads about and finally spotted him. He saw that the creature had momentarily blinded itself with its own blood, but its eyes were clear once more. Knowing the dog moved sluggishly to the side because of its four-legged stance, Kratos forced it to pivot on its back legs by circling. With a powerful double-handed grip on the war hammer, he slammed it into the ground between him and the Cerberus.

The hammer blow to the ground sent ripples earthquaking in all directions. Kratos staggered and went to one knee, but the temblor toppled the dog. It crashed to the ground and bounced about as the quake died down. On his knee, Kratos swung again. The war hammer crushed the second head. Only the third head remained.

From the piteous howls coming from that head, Kratos had wounded it grievously.

The creature struggled to regain its feet so it could rear back and spit forth another deadly fireball; Kratos shot to his feet and surged forward, taking advantage of another fiery attack that exposed its throat. His swinging hammer caught the dog just under the jaw. Its head snapped back.

Being too close to use the long-hafted hammer, Kratos grabbed with both hands and clawed out gobbets of flesh from the dog's throat. The Cerberus went berserk, thrashing about, clawing with taloned legs, trying to snap at him with its remaining head. An agile twist brought Kratos closer. He rammed one forearm into the dog's throat and reached around behind its head with his other. Catching it in a deadly grip, he used every ounce of strength to jerk. A sound like thunder filled the arena as its neck snapped under his stupendous killing move.

Kratos stepped away when the Cerberus crashed to the sandy ground, twitching violently as death slowly possessed every inch of its muscular body. Not waiting, Kratos gripped the jaws and forced them open, then plunged his arm down the monster's throat. His fingers tingled as they touched a thick wad of fleece from the magical ram. With a quick yank, Kratos pulled out both the Golden Fleece and the dog's esophagus, which he cast aside. He held the fleece above his head, stared at its shimmery golden strands woven into shoulder bracers for armor, and felt the power filling his entire body.

"You've done it, Ghost of Sparta. You've recovered my fleece!"

Jason made his way painfully toward Kratos.

"Return it to me and be blessed by the gods."

Kratos spat.

"I want nothing to do with the gods of Olympus other than to kill Zeus."

The words shocked Jason. His eyes went wide and his mouth tried to form words. He clutched at his severed limb with his good hand. Blood oozed around his fingers.

“You cannot mean this,” Jason said. “The ram that bore that fleece was slaughtered in tribute to Zeus.”

“Just as Zeus will be slaughtered in tribute to me.” Kratos slowly rotated the fleece so that it shone like a small golden sun.

“The fleece is a holy relic. You cannot pervert it to your needs, God of War,” Jason said.

“I am not the God of War!” Kratos bellowed. “The Sisters of Fate will grant me a different destiny—one that sees Zeus dead! Never again will I sit upon the throne of the God of War!”

“It is my fate the Sisters will amend. Why else would they block the path with a magic that only my fleece could destroy?” Jason said, his voice stronger. “My Argonauts and I dared a dragon and treachery to steal it away from Aeëtes of Colchis. It is mine!”

Jason made a clumsy grab for it. Kratos stepped away and let the Argonaut fall past him, landing on his knees, propped up on his good arm, on the sandy ground. Jason looked up, imploring Kratos for mercy. He knew nothing of the man he beseeched if he thought charity or even a spark of compassion burned anywhere in his tortured soul.

“I must possess it to reach the Sisters of Fate!”

Kratos stepped away from the man as he struggled to his feet. He had no cause to bandy words further with Jason.

“My fate must be changed. The fleece will gain me entry and be my gift to them to change my destiny.” Jason’s jaw tightened and a hardness came to his aspect. His remaining hand tightened into a fist so hard that his fingernails cut into his callused flesh and caused drops to fall into the thirsty sand of the arena floor.

Kratos touched the spot on his chest where Zeus had run him through with the Blade of Olympus. If his resolve had ever faded in his quest to reach the Sisters, this memory had renewed his determination. Zeus would die at his hand.

“Medea.” A small catch came to Jason’s voice. “She was my lover, my all. She was a witch and the only woman who ever truly loved me.” Jason straightened. “She killed her brother to aid in the theft of the Golden Fleece. She convinced my uncle’s daughters to murder

and eat him when Pelias thought to betray me because of a false oracle's prophecy."

Kratos lowered the fleece and held it at his side, watching the Argonaut closely.

"Medea convinced my cousins that the murder of my uncle and devouring the chopped-up pieces would rejuvenate him from serious illness." Jason's lip curled. "He—they—deserved their fate."

"So why do you wish the Sisters of Fate to change it? You have changed your mind?"

"Never! Medea did this for me and I forsook her. I pushed her aside for the daughter of King Creon. Creusa was to be my bride, but Medea sent her a wedding robe that burst into flame that none could extinguish, which consumed her on our wedding day." Jason squared off as he faced Kratos. "After she cut the throats of our children she fled to Athens."

Jason paused, ground his teeth together, then said, "I would have her back. I want the Sisters of Fate to return me to Medea's bed."

"To kill her?"

"No! I was a fool to believe Creusa could love me more. I miss my children, and Medea haunts my dreams, her smile, the soft touch—" Jason reached behind, drew a wickedly sharp dagger, and launched himself at Kratos. Years of fierce battle had honed Kratos' reactions. The gleam of the blade that should have driven deep into his chest missed by a hairbreadth. He reached out and caught Jason by the throat, squeezed, and then heaved, lifting the Argonaut off his feet. Jason stabbed out with the dagger, but it was a feeble attempt. Kratos' powerful grip turned the blade around and drove it into Jason's heart.

When the man stopped struggling, Kratos cast him aside.

"It is best to die in combat," he said by way of obituary for the dead hero.

He lifted the fleece and spread it across his shoulders in a golden display.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ATROPOS MANIPULATED her projected image to twice her real height and looked down her nose at the god. She wanted more fear in him, but there was only a curious eagerness, or perhaps it was anticipation. With a single pluck on the thread that bound Hermes to her loom, she could change his destiny, but he did not look as if he worried about his own fate.

Yet he did. Otherwise, why would he be on his knees in the Egyptian desert to petition the Sisters of Fate?

Atropos looked around, wondering if Lahkesis and Clotho would come to see the god and make him grovel. Lahkesis enjoyed venturing away from the Island of Creation through her projections, but Clotho was loath to do so, preferring to remain in her chamber, both in body and in spirit. She was a little uneasy ever since she had learned that Lahkesis had sent forth the Warrior of Destiny and Kratos had vanquished him so easily. Oh, it had been a hard-fought aerial battle but the griffin the Warrior had ridden was an inferior mount; it should have been far more agile in midair than the Pegasus Kratos had used to reach the Island of Creation. What had Lahkesis been thinking?

“You know my plea, sister,” Hermes said, bowing deeply. The wings on his sandals whirled softly, keeping his feet just above the desert sands as if he was too good to walk where camels did.

Atropos found her ire rising, and she had no idea why. She considered grounding him by clipping his winged sandals to teach a lesson in humility. She held the power over the Olympians. She held power over the entire world! Hadn't she, with her sisters, brought down the Titans in the Great War? The Olympians and Zeus in particular owed them for the position and power they had enjoyed ever since.

"I cannot change your destiny, god of Olympus," she said pompously. She wanted him to become more nervous and perhaps offer her great tribute as Cronos had done in the past. Gifts given in fear were always so interesting, reflecting on the thoughts of the giver. "Rather, I *will* not. It is not my pleasure to change what has already been spun so lovingly."

"Your choices confuse me, sister," Hermes said.

"They are not meant to be understood by mere gods."

"Why do you allow Kratos to possess the Golden Fleece?"

"He doesn't. Jason is attempting to reach us with that bribe, as if we had any use for the Golden Fleece."

"If you do not accept Kratos' gift of the Golden Fleece—"

"*Jason* brings the fleece, not Kratos. Kratos has been thwarted in his attempt to reach the Palace of the Fates. We do not permit mortals—or gods—to enter the palace unless we deem it their destiny."

"Not so, sister," Hermes said. Now he became more confident, and this perplexed her. It irritated her even further. Too much slid along a string of fate bouncing and bobbing in unexpected directions. The outcome would be the same, of course, but those ripples gave too much unpredictability to allow her peace of mind. Lahkesis would relish it. Atropos wanted only to restore order.

"I am aware of every gift I have ever given a mortal."

"What's your point, Hermes?"

The winged Messenger of the Gods stared boldly—too boldly—at her in open defiance. Had she and her sisters pushed Hermes too far? Allowing Zeus to cast Hermes from Olympus had left the messenger god with nothing to lose. She felt some of that cold determination in Kratos. What more could be done to him that the

Sisters of Fate had not already decreed? His fate was sealed as surely as if they had affixed a blob of wax to him and used their signet rings to display an imprint on his forehead.

“I gave the ram to Phrixus and Helle, who flew—”

“Yes, yes, we decided that Helle would tumble to her death.” Atropos chuckled at the memory. None of the Sisters had foreseen that the mortals would name the narrow channel where Helle died after her.

“Phrixus appreciated my gift. The ram had both reason and speech—and possessed the Golden Fleece. It was one of my finer gifts.”

“I know this, Hermes. You waste my time. Now leave.” Atropos found the thread she had been spinning with such care.

“Every gift I have ever given,” Hermes said more forcefully, “is forever linked to me.”

“Hermes,” Atropos said, tiring of his reminiscences. “Your charities are of no interest to me.”

His face hardened. “There is always more to my deeds. Do I not learn secrets and then divulge them? I knew when Jason killed the dragon and stole the fleece.”

Atropos glared at him. Then she felt a coldness build within that was both unexpected and unusual. She controlled the fate of others, but now her own destiny slipped and slid in directions not of her choosing. She knew that Hermes spoke the truth.

“Jason embarked on another quest, this time to offer the Golden Fleece to you as tribute so you would change his fate.”

Hermes pressed on with what Atropos did not want to hear.

“Jason is dead and Kratos possesses the Golden Fleece.”

“He can enter the Temple of Euryale,” Atropos said, shocked.

“Kratos has powerful allies.”

Gaia! sprang instantly to Atropos’ mind.

“Iris,” Hermes said. “The Goddess of the Rainbow aids him. I am sure of it.”

“Iris?” Atropos was brought back from her speculations about the Titans plotting once more to gain ascendancy over the gods. She knew Gaia’s interest in Kratos, but had Iris somehow escaped her

destiny? Atropos felt true fear. She had meddled and might have brought ruin down on herself through lack of skill. How she wished she had Lahkesis' talents for such disregard of destinies they had all agreed upon. This had to be made right, and when it was, she would go back to her work of measuring and leave Lahkesis to her tiny diversions.

A new, colder thought came to her. What if Lahkesis had countered her minor tweaks of Kratos' fate, changing the warp and woof of his thread for her own purposes? Those purposes might not have Atropos' best interests at heart. After all, she had become excited at the idea of meddling so that *she* determined destiny rather than all three Sisters of Fate.

What if Lahkesis had decided *two* sisters might be better? Atropos never argued with Clotho, and she had never known Lahkesis to, either. But she and Lahkesis? They had moments of bitter dispute, although not lately. Had this lull in their contention been a clever plan of Lahkesis' to lull her into—

Atropos swelled to four times her normal size. The projection dwarfed Hermes now as she tried to conceal her agitation.

"Who else can provide such accurate information but another Messenger of the Gods? She has designs on Zeus."

"His throne? She will never be accepted as Queen of the Gods, sitting on Zeus' throne."

"Oh, no, not that. Iris is subtler. She thinks to supplant Hera as Zeus' wife. From his side she would manipulate and direct to gain the power she seeks. Zeus is a god of immense loves and hates and does nothing by half measure, often responding with emotion rather than reason. Iris has his counsel in the guise of bringing him news from across the mortal world. She brings him lies!" Hermes was flushed now. His wings beat frantically now, lifting him many feet above the tiled floor as his passion grew.

"We have not decreed that," Atropos said. She dropped the complex weave and the distant Nile overflowed its banks, sweeping away thousands, all requiring her expert measurement. Forgotten for the moment, she left those threads of fate and sought the ones for Zeus, Hera, and Iris. No reworking revealed itself, but Lahkesis

was always changing her work once she became bored. And Clotho was the subtlest of the Sisters. She could have worked in a strand that Atropos might never find without shredding the entire thread.

The Sisters of Fate had not decreed such an upheaval in Olympus. But had *one* of the Sisters? Atropos stared at Hermes and wondered. Had Lahkesis become tired of her role as only one of the three Sisters of Fate? Did she have ambitions to become the *Sister* of Fate?



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KRATOS STOOD BEFORE the Gorgon Gate, its eyes emitting the deadly green beams that would permanently turn him to stone. His return through the ruins had been quick because a burning need rose within him. If Jason had sought the Sisters of Fate, other heroes might also come to beg them for a different destiny. His need lay paramount. He had killed Ares, the God of War. Now he intended to kill the very King of the Gods.

Kratos touched the spot on his chest where the sword had penetrated and left his entrails dangling. He looked at the Gorgon Gate and sneered. He touched the Golden Fleece adorning his shoulders, magical tingles passing into him. Before it had been only a cape. Now glowing plates adhered to his armor.

The Gorgon's eyes fixed on him. The heat and stark power staggered him, but the golden armor bolstered his ability to fend off even the most severe blow. He advanced, the Barbarian King's war hammer in his right hand.

Torrents of energy poured around him, as if he were a seaside rock and a mighty storm's waves crashed against him. Like that rock, he did not bend or yield. Grunting, he swung the hammer as hard as he could against the face of the stone Gorgon. It exploded into a million pieces. Kratos let out a bellow of triumph, then rushed into the Temple of Euryale.

He began to explore, finding only desultory guards to block his way. He heard scraping sounds. Drawing his swords, he rounded a thick pillar to see a wizened soldier yanking hard at a handle on a winch. The soldier looked up and grinned, revealing gaps between teeth so blackened with rot as to be useless. The flesh was pulled drum-tight on his face, and his eyes burned with fanatic fire. He yanked hard and pulled the wooden handle out of the winch, staggering back.

“You’ll never reach the Sisters of Fate, Ghost of Sparta. It is *my* fate.” On spindly legs more bone than muscle he ran away to vanish around a pillar, cackling maniacally the entire distance.

Kratos studied the winch and saw it controlled an elevator that would have lowered him into the bowels of the temple. Lacking the handle, he had two choices. He could track down the emaciated soldier and take the handle from him, or he could find another way down, for such had to be the direction he needed to travel. Why else would the old soldier in his battered, blood-encrusted armor try to keep him from the lower levels unless that way truly led to the Sisters of Fate?

Stalking about finally revealed a small hole in the ancient stone flooring that Kratos enlarged with several swift blows from Alrik’s war hammer. Debris fell to the floor far below. He shoved his head down into the hole to look about and saw a strange iron cage spanning the length of one wall—but stranger yet were the spinning blades with serrated edges that rolled back and forth along channels mounted in the ceiling. The drop was too far to the floor, even for Kratos, but if he could reach a wall and climb down, he could continue his search.

To do that, he had to cross the ceiling laden with spinning wheels of death. Any of the rotating, laterally moving wheels would sever an arm or legs—or head—if he made even an incautious move.

Without hesitating, Kratos swung down, using the Blades of Athena to grapple into the stone ceiling. He fell into a rhythm that allowed him to swing forward, pull free his sword, and then reach for a new, secure anchor in the ceiling, but this almost caused his death. His path crossed that of whirling saw blades that came racing

from the walls, following tracks on the ceiling. Kratos was forced to time his progress across to match the accelerating speeds of multiple saw blades.

When he had almost reached the far wall, he was forced to use his sword to block a saw blade spinning directly at him. The impact wrenched his hand free. He dangled by one arm as the blade whipped past. It took several seconds for him to recover his senses; then he saw the blade had reached the end of its channel and was coming back at even greater speed. Wrenching himself about, he thrust his sword into the ceiling, got a firm anchor, and swung out of the way at the last possible instant. Kicking hard, he swung to and fro, then shot outward in an arc that caused him to smash into the wall. Quick reflexes brought his swords about and into the stone. From here it was the work of a moment to lower himself to the floor.

“It’s a trap. A trap,” came the weak moan from inside the iron cage along the wall to his left. Kratos examined the mechanism and frowned.

The decrepit soldier who had stolen the handle had been impaled on spikes mounted on a vertical wall that traversed the interior of the long iron cage.

“A lever,” the skewered man whispered hoarsely. “Be quick or be dead ... like me.”

The soldier shook spasmodically, then fell lax. Kratos wondered for a brief moment how much of his life the soldier had wasted in attempting to change what the Fates had meted out for him, but before he could wallow any deeper in that pool of thought, Kratos forced his mind back to the task at hand. Carefully he examined the structure that lay before him. The warning given seemed accurate. He bent his back to pull the external lever, which drew back the piston mounted with the spikes and the impaled body enough to enter the cage. He released the lever and watched how the mechanism worked.

A second lever along the rails worried Kratos. He walked farther, peered around, and saw a stone grate. He moved the lever twice more, watching and counting. On the third pull, he stepped in front;

the piston began moving behind him. Stride long, Kratos went to the second lever in a nook beside the cage. He judged distances, counted duration for how long he had before the piston rammed the spikes into him, then drew back this lever. A heavy door opened beyond the end of the grating at the far end of the cage. By now the piston was speeding up as it came down the interior of the cage.

Kratos gripped the edge of the grating, which was at the end of a steel tunnel, and heaved. The grating moved ponderously. He applied every ounce of his immense strength and lifted it in time to avoid being impaled as the soldier had been, but he saw the doorway ahead closing. He dived forward through the door at the last possible instant.

He hit the floor fifteen feet below, rolled, and came to his feet, alert. All around the immense chamber rose stone pillars. Sea-green marble floors stretched about, but what drew him was a solitary pedestal in the center of the chamber. On it, open, lay a book. Rubble surrounded the pedestal. When he kicked at the debris to get closer, dust rose and shards scattered. Kratos stared at a petrified hand amid the debris. A single stone finger pointed up at him. His foot came down and ground the hand into dust.

He saw words on the book's open page. They had been written in blood.

I AM ALL THAT REMAINS ... I KNOW NOW THAT I WILL NEVER REACH THE SISTERS ...

Kratos had reached out to turn the page when he heard the awesome sound of breaking stone. He looked up as a pillar collapsed toward him. Flying behind it came a huge Gorgon, snakes on its head a-wiggle and its reptilian tail whipping about like a monstrous flail. Stubby arms reached for him as pendulous teats bobbed about. Amid the destruction of the column Kratos was forced to jump straight up or be crushed as that deadly tail turned the pedestal and book into dust with a single powerful smash.

He stumbled away, reaching for the war hammer. By the time he regained his balance, he faced the towering monster, which hissed at him.

Euryale, queen of serpents.

“Kratosss. Murderer of my children. You are surprised I know you? Yes, I am aware of the misery you have brought my brood.”

Her attack was blindingly quick for such a huge creature. She swept her tail around, forcing Kratos to jump over it, then tried to freeze him with her gaze. He landed on one knee and lifted the Golden Fleece, deflecting the deadly stare.

“You will die, Kratos. Ruthlessly cutting down my line, your hands still wear their blood. Praise to the Sisters, for on this day, Kratos, you will meet your end!”

Kratos had no time to bandy words. He swung the war hammer and smashed Euryale in the chest, knocking the monster back. He swung the hammer around in time to block the swish of the tail. The sting in his hands told him that if the blow from the powerful tail had connected, he would have been broken into small pieces. He drove the heavy hammer into her flesh but failed to elicit so much as a twitch of pain. Euryale was driven by fury and beyond sensation.

Except, perhaps, the sensation of pleasure she would take at Kratos’ death.

As she flopped on her stomach, she swung the tail about, then brought it high for an overhead blow.

Kratos saw how the Gorgon queen fought and abandoned the war hammer in favor of his razor-edged swords. This almost cost his life. The deadly beams from her eyes caressed his left arm. He screamed in pain before it began turning numb. With an involuntary twist, he got his arm free, only to have his leg caught in the petrifying gaze. Instinct took over. He somersaulted twice and came up behind a pillar that afforded a momentary barrier to the Gorgon’s weapon.

Rubbing his arm furiously produced needles of sensation. He flexed his hand and found he had restored its use, but he had no time to treat his leg similarly. The Gorgon slithered around, seeking him out. Rather than continue to run, as Euryale undoubtedly expected him to do with his injuries, he drew his swords and once more somersaulted—straight at her. He rolled under her twin death beams and came to his feet, ready to strike.

His leg betrayed him and he lost his balance. The Gorgon hissed in victory, but Kratos never surrendered. His left leg scraping across the floor, stone on stone, he came to a kneeling position at arm's length. As he slashed at Euryale's flesh, for the first time he drew blood, inflicted true pain, brought about a reaction that lifted his lip in a sneer. He had seen it before in battle when an overly confident foe first engaged him in combat.

First came the overweening belief that Kratos would prove an easy foe, that his reputation was the stuff of legends and not reality. If the enemy survived long enough, that hubris turned to uncertainty. He read that in Euryale now. For now the thought of her own death flickered behind her eyes.

Kratos blocked another stone-creating gaze with the fleece, then pressed forward with his slashing swords. Euryale backed away and curled her sinuous body around one of the thick stone columns.

Casting out his swords like harpoons, he embedded them in Euryale's shoulder and back. The Gorgon jerked in an attempt to free herself, but Kratos was implacable. Heaving, he yanked as hard as he could. Euryale refused to release her grip. Kratos increased the power of his yank. Something had to give—and it did.

The stone column collapsed and fell atop Euryale. Kratos did not give her an instant to recover. Weapons driving into flesh, he hacked out huge gobbets and produced another shriek, this time of pain and utter fear. Spartan training had always told Kratos that it was not enough to defeat an opponent physically. True victory came in breaking the foe's will to fight.

Kratos recognized that Euryale had one final attack locked in her. As she unleashed her gaze, he used the fleece to deflect the Gorgon's attack, leaving her helpless on the floor.

But only for a moment was she writhing. Kratos leaped high in the air and came down on her back, using his stone leg as a pile driver, away from the feeble light dancing in her eyes now. The weight snapped her spine. Kratos jerked off her head, held it up, then sent it sailing across the chamber. It hit the floor and bounced, then rolled and stopped, faceup, once deadly eyes now fogging over as Hades claimed his due.

He dropped to the floor, leg outstretched and tingling. Making the effort to rub circulation back into his flesh soon brought back full use of the leg. He stood, tested it, and found it once more sturdy under him.

Kratos felt no triumph that Euryale had died. She was only an impediment to locating the Sisters of Fate and forcing them to return him to the moment that Zeus had so treacherously slain him.

As he stood, part of the wall began to shimmer and shake, then disappear. Kratos did not need to be told that Euryale had guarded this passageway and her death opened it to him. He entered a passage that soon opened out into a wide boggy area, which he ignored. His gaze fixed on a spire in the distance that might have been the twin of the Temple of Euryale—but he saw the difference immediately. The tower glistened with life.

With fate.

He imagined he saw threads running from the top of the tower, radiating outward in all directions, though this might have been a trick of light. Having killed Euryale, he had to press on. The sky-ripping spire was the obvious destination. As he started forward, he slowed, then stopped to look into the sky.

The heavy overcast hid the sun, and a sulfur stench filled the air. Kratos sniffed, turning until he located the direction of the strongest odor.

A boulder whistled through the air and crashed into a wall to his right. For a moment he could not make out what attacked him; then he saw the pile of rocks ahead move, rise, and hurl another rock the size of a man's head at him. Kratos sneered. For every obstacle he overcame, the Sisters fated him to contend with another. His war cry announced that he was more determined to prevail than they were to stop him.

The rock Minotaur's belly glowed with the light of flaming magma as it drew itself up to a height five times that of Kratos. Lumpy, rocky appendages groped for him, hands that were more boulder than finger. From its joints glowed molten rock, and immense horns on its head jerked back and forth as the monster tossed its head, as if unable to see its victim. Then it fell heavily,

causing the ground to shake so hard Kratos was thrown down. The rock Minotaur pounded its massive arms repeatedly on the ground. Every blow produced a new quake impossible to stand against. Bounced up and down, Kratos knew the creature had to either attack him directly or tire from this ground-shaking attack.

The rock Minotaur foolishly chose to attack. As it reared up, thinking to fall forward and crush him under its ponderous weight, Kratos got his feet under him and jumped straight up into the air. The Blades of Athena bounced off rocky limbs, but he had no easy target on the arms or legs. As he soared high, he whipped the swords about and came down just in front of the stony head with red, glowing rock-melt eyes. Both blades drove deep into the rock Minotaur's head.

It roared in pain and began to spin about. Its abnormally long arms, covered with sharp shards of stone, were the spokes of a wheel rotating around its axis. Kratos jumped again, leaping over first one and then the other deadly arm. As long as the rock Minotaur spun in this crazy, dizzying attack, he could not attack directly. If he backed off, the pounding would create earthquakes that would knock him from his feet.

Kratos kept jumping, waiting, biding his time. The horned head thrust in his direction with every rotation, but the arms presented the most danger.

When he got the rhythm, Kratos landed on one arm, then launched himself upward to again attack with his swords. One sank deep into flesh beneath the rocky hide. The other rebounded off a stone horn atop the Minotaur's head.

The combination of deep wound with stunning blow interrupted the rock Minotaur's attack for a brief instant. Kratos sprang. His swords raked across the rock Minotaur's throat and caused it to rear back, further exposing its belly.

Swift cuts opened wounds on the monster's underside. Rather than bleeding, it leaked molten rock. The bright rivers pouring from the Minotaur's innards glowed red-hot and then trickled in orange rivers as lava leaked out and cooled. Kratos landed hard only feet from the rock Minotaur's belly, the heat searing his flesh and

causing rivers of sweat to blind him. When new gobbets of molten rock sprayed outward, sizzling and hissing past Kratos, he drove forward as hard and fast as he could to stab with both swords. The Minotaur reared up, more lava oozing from the new cuts in its body. With two powerful slashes, Kratos bored through the belly and meted out still more punishment.

As the Minotaur bellowed in pain, its guts leaking out in gouts of magma, Kratos jumped, landed on the heaving shoulders, and used his swords to hack and slash until he found the most vulnerable point. He shoved both blades deep. The rock Minotaur shuddered, began glowing between the armor plates covering its back, then crashed facedown.

Kratos stood panting from the exertion, but he did not look at the fallen creature. He looked past it to the spire rising in the misty distance. He was near his goal. He felt it. The Sisters of Fate would have to grant his request so he could kill Zeus.

If they didn't, he would kill them and *then* slay the King of the Gods.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“THE THRONE SITS empty. That is not a good thing,” Poseidon said, his voice rumbling until it filled Zeus’ private quarters. “We must replace the God of War soon.”

“It pains me to agree but I must with my watery brother,” Hades said, “You make a grave mistake if you do not replace Ares.”

“You mean that I should replace Kratos,” Zeus said. He pulled a thunderbolt down and ran it up and down his fingers, then caught the lightning between thumb and forefinger as he looked up to his brothers. Both drew back, fearing Zeus would unleash his thunderbolt against them.

This flash of fear pleased Zeus. There had been too much dissension between the gods and goddesses he could not turn to his own machinations. Such rebellion could get out of hand.

“I will not allow disobedience. That is why I killed Kratos. He defied me.” Zeus billowed up and expanded, forcing both his brothers back to make room. “I will not permit that.”

“You allow too much,” grumbled Hades. “Hermes. Look at how he defied you.”

“I banished him.”

“You should send him to my kingdom,” Hades said, a smile pulling back his lips in what looked more like a rictus. “I know how to handle such disobedience.”

“Your edict, Zeus, your foolish edict prevents one god from killing another. You had to trick Kratos into draining his godly powers before you killed him.”

“Kratos was too powerful, otherwise,” Hades said.

“*He was not!*” Zeus leaped to his feet from the couch where he reclined and towered above Hades, who fought to hide his unease. “I could have slain the God of War at any time. I am the King of Olympus, not that upstart. I made him a god and he defied me.”

“I meant that your edict of one god killing another *forced* you to turn him mortal again,” Hades said.

“Do not patronize me, brother.”

“Be quiet, both of you. There is trouble in Olympus. Look around and you can see it at every turn,” Poseidon said.

“I will order all to get along,” Zeus said.

“That will certainly work,” Hades said. “It will work as well as elevating Kratos to Ares’ throne.”

“You dare mock me, Hades?” Zeus’ beard flashed with constant lightning now, and he held a thunderbolt in both hands.

“Are you so blind you cannot see what our brother Poseidon is saying?” Hades shot back. “Olympus is only an insult away from open war. A civil war among the gods. I return to the Underworld to find peace!”

“You are too close to the problem, Zeus,” Poseidon said.

“A new God of War,” Zeus said more thoughtfully, dropping again to his couch. “That would be a good thing. But who?” He pursed his lips as he considered potential warriors.

“Athena would never agree,” Hades said.

“She is a cunning bitch. Tricky.” Poseidon glared.

“Someone must be brought to the throne, as you did Kratos. But you must choose more wisely,” Hades said. “Someone from the Elysian Fields seems a poor choice. Who, being content in the afterlife, would desire constant strife?”

“Someone from Tartarus?” mused Zeus. “Why not a mortal hero? Would not my son Hercules be worthy of ascending?”

The trio began an argument that grew increasingly heated as each suggestion was met with dual disapproval.

Watching from behind a tapestry, Hermes saw that they would never agree. The three brothers had fought over too many other matters in the past, but if someone else suggested a logical, reasonable mortal to elevate to the throne of God of War, Hades, Poseidon, and even Zeus would greet this suggestion with approval.

And a reprieve from banishment.

Hermes slipped away, clutching a magic helmet. He knew exactly which hero to champion to be Kratos' successor to the God of War's throne.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“LET THE RAGE of the Titans fuel your blades, Kratos,” came Gaia’s warning.

Kratos did not need such advice. He had faced wraiths before, and the ones guarding the entrance to the Great Hall of Atropos were no true barrier to one of his fighting prowess. They floated atop a black fog rather than walking on mortal legs, slender bodies elongating as they surged to attack with arms like whips. Sparks exploded from the tips of those deadly, seeking arms, but he quickly parried as if they were metal swords. With several quick cuts, he brought the keening wraiths upright, where they were easily defeated with devastating cuts from his swords. But he realized Gaia’s suggestion had merit when several wraiths closed in on him. Singly, they were quickly vanquished, but as a phalanx they proved mightier opponents.

The Rage of the Titans blasted forth. Kratos laughed without humor as he cut down one wraith after another, dispatching the final one with little sense of satisfaction at a job well done. He was a warrior; they were his enemy. He had defeated them and that was as it should be.

He turned toward the Great Hall when he heard a distant cry.

“Who’s there? Help me. I’m trapped.”

At the sound of the voice, Kratos touched the Golden Fleece. This potent defense against spells had been gained following an earlier plea for aid. Jason had been a small impediment to reaching the Sisters of Fate, but he had given up the fleece and thereby aided Kratos. Another seeking the Sisters, another failing to reach them, might provide yet another useful trinket that would guarantee Kratos' success.

He entered the temple and looked around the high, vaulted area. Empty at first, it now held two bearded men dressed in thigh-length togas. In one hand they each held a knife and in the other a scroll.

"I seek the Sisters of Fate," Kratos said.

"You are not wanted," the nearer man said. "We are the High Priests of the Sisters." He lowered the knife in his right hand and brought forward the scroll, now glowing with a faint greenish light. Kratos did not hesitate. Such a gesture could only be the precursor to an attack.

His sword swung in a high arc that ended on the High Priest's knife. The sun-bright flare dazzled his eyes, but Kratos fought by feel, by sound and smell and a sense honed in battle that transcended mere physical hints. He pressed forward and felt the High Priest give way. Behind him the second priest closed for an attack with his short dagger.

Kratos bent the man before him back off balance, then moved swiftly to kick out one leg and drive him down to the floor. The High Priest looked at him swiftly without expression. Then a nimbus of energy boiled from the priest's hands and sent Kratos staggering. The High Priest stood and prepared another that Kratos knew he could not endure. He reached down within himself and felt the white burning star of the Cronos Rage building. Focusing it, Kratos released the blast at the same instant the priest launched his attack.

The clouds of magic collided, roiled about, turning black and ugly and ... disappeared.

The High Priest looked at his hands in disbelief, and Kratos knew why. He was drained of all energy, and the priest had to share this enervation. Four quick steps forward brought Kratos face-to-face with the priest. Before he could even draw the ceremonial dagger

sheathed at his wide leather belt holding his robes together, the High Priest died. Kratos punched hard and caught the priest in the throat. He dropped to his knees, then fell to his side.

Kratos had no time to recover his strength. Another priest storming forth from his rear proved more difficult for Kratos to fight. Instead of using his weapons, he drew forth the Golden Fleece in time to deflect a shock wave of green energy. He swung about, still holding high the fleece. Step by step, he forced back the High Priest. Once the man tried to cut him with the knife, but the short weapon depended more on magical power, now robbed by the Golden Fleece, than length. Grunting to coordinate his power in both leg and arm, Kratos exploded forward and knocked the High Priest down.

The knife flew from the priest's hand, and the scroll was half pinned under his body. A fist to the face stunned the High Priest. A second ended his life. He might as well have been hit by a steel-plated maul. Kratos went to pick up the scroll, but it turned to greasy ash with the High Priest's death. Stepping away, he knew he had alerted Atropos, if not all three of the Sisters of Fate, with these two deaths. The Sisters had to rely heavily on their priests for defense and to keep away petitioners begging for alteration of their fate.

Kratos sneered. Men like him.

He crossed the Great Hall and scaled a ladder mounted in the wall. The Sisters had to realize he had penetrated this far into their domain. From his encounter with Lahkesis' statue, he knew he was not going to be a guest welcomed by any of the Sisters of Fate, and killing two of their High Priests would set them to redoing his fate in an even less agreeable fashion.

Reaching an open area, he paused to study a stone bridge stretching across a courtyard far below. A stone head with eyes emitting what had to be deadly beams guarded the way across.

"Up here. Help!"

Kratos craned his neck around to see the temple walls soaring even higher from this point. Whoever begged for his aid was up there. He saw an arched doorway to his left and entered, emerging

onto a large terrace looking down onto the rumps of the Steeds of Time. Seeing no way to advance, Kratos walked the length of the terrace, found a ramp leading downward, and carefully trod it. The stones were loose and slippery from seawater. He came to an immense door a dozen times his height and almost as wide. From beyond he heard cursing, probably from the man who had begged for his aid. Planting his feet firmly, Kratos grabbed a handle fastened along the base of the door and lifted with all his might. Even this was almost not enough to budge the ponderous weight, but it began to yield slowly, then with a sudden surge shot upward to stand fully open. An army could have marched through, but Kratos saw only a shallow bath, tiled in sea-greens and bright blues.

He stepped forward. He looked over his shoulder at the grating noise. The door plummeted from above to once more close.

“No!” came the cry of a warrior splashing through the pool. He pushed past Kratos, armor clanking. A shield slung on his back hid his identity as he bent forward, pounding his fists on the closed door. “That door was my only escape!”

The warrior leaned against the door, his shield gleaming and a golden helmet held in one hand.

“I have faced test after test in search of the Sisters, and now you have dashed it all away! You certainly do not live up to your reputation, Ghost of Sparta.”

“Nor do you live up to yours, Perseus. A great hero trapped in a tiled natatorium filled with perfumed water?” Kratos laughed harshly. “Trapped so completely you cry out to any who enters Atropos’ realm for help?”

Perseus pressed his hand against the door, ran it along the cool metal, and then turned to face Kratos. Their eyes locked. Kratos saw resolve harden in the hero who had fought the Graeae, a trio of powerful witches. Perseus had fought Gorgons and killed the monster that King Cepheus had tried to appease with human sacrifice. For all his deeds he looked ordinary to Kratos, but then the Ghost of Sparta was used to those soldiers of his own army. Spartans were a breed apart.

Perseus walked down the steps to the edge of the pool, studying Kratos closely. He lithely jumped into the pool and sent ripples running from where he stood calf-deep in the limpid water.

“But perhaps this is a test,” Perseus said thoughtfully. He threw his head back as if petitioning the gods of Olympus. “Are you watching me, sisters? Give me a sign! Am I, the great Perseus, to kill this fallen god to receive an audience with you? Will that allow me to bring back my love from the grasp of Hades himself?”

“You fool yourself if you think the Sisters of Fate will grant you a boon for such a suicidal act.”

“I have dared much and will dare more to win back Andromeda! She will again share my bed. She and I have a love that powers the music of the spheres!” Perseus reached to his belt and drew out a sling. He spun it in lazy circles, the faint whispering noise it made almost masked by the sloshing water in the pool. “But you know nothing of love, do you, Ghost of Sparta?”

Kratos tensed at the taunt. In single combat angering your foe so that he no longer thought as he battled was a time-honored tactic, but this barb stung. Perseus must know how Kratos had killed his own beloved Lysandra and his daughter at Ares’ behest.

Kratos drew the Blades of Athena.

“Your weapons will not serve you this time, Kratos.” Perseus lifted the helmet. “Hermes has given me this helmet.”

“Hermes? He dares come to the lair of the Sisters of Fate?”

“He has aided me in the past. Unlike other *false* gods of Olympus, he knows his loyal worshippers.”

“Hermes is a fool with pretensions to greatness.” Kratos seethed at this.

“If I cannot gain an audience with the Sisters, at least I can bathe in the glory of being the one who brought down the mighty Kratos, the slayer of gods.”

Perseus settled the helmet given him by Hermes on his head. Kratos sneered as the hero vanished, his visage now entrusted to godly enshrouding magicks.

“Although I hardly think a Harpy’s fool such as yourself deserves such praise.” Perseus laughed with real joy at the possibility that the

Sisters would receive his sacrifice and grant him an audience.

The hero's disappearance under the helmet did nothing to slow Kratos' reaction as a rock suddenly appeared, flying directly at his head. He twisted aside violently, the sharp stone whizzing past his face to crash into the door behind him. The stone had been hurled with such force that it remained embedded in the bronze door.

Kratos waded out farther into the pool, looking for any sign of Perseus. Through pure instinct, Kratos brought up both swords to deflect another missile. He spun and slashed—at nothing.

“Wrong!” Perseus cried. “I am over here!”

Kratos attacked where the voice had come from, farther toward the center of the pool. Again his blades found thin air. He stood stock-still and let his ears rather than his eyes tell him where Perseus was. The sighing of the leather sling warned him of another stone coming toward him. Kratos bent, let the missile pass him harmlessly, and looked for the ripples in the pool where Perseus stood. He might be invisible but he left tracks, even if they were liquid and evanescent.

A mighty slash with his blades brought the result Kratos sought. He felt one edge dig into flesh and heard Perseus cry out in pain. Blood billowed in the crystal-clear water. Using both instinct and cold logic, Kratos followed where Perseus' retreat must lie and attacked there. Again his blade chopped at a struggling human.

Perseus tried to use the sling again, but Kratos savagely thrust and cut one leather cord. The end flopped away from the invisible warrior and floated for a moment on the water, then sank.

This victory in robbing Perseus of his sling also took away Kratos' advantage of hearing the sling's whine as Perseus swung it. Now the hero depended entirely on silent shield and blade.

Kratos saw the dual ripples moving in a V toward him, then ducked and thrust as if he could see Perseus' shield. The impact of his blade rattled all the way up to his shoulder as he miscalculated and drove his sword directly into that shield. But Kratos recovered quickly with a wide slashing arc that produced more blood in the water. He watched as the trickle of blood moved away. In his mind Kratos pictured Perseus retreating, his back exposed.

Reaching Perseus would be difficult; Kratos reached down inside himself and coaxed the white point of energy that launched the Cronos Rage into a smolder. But try as he might, he could not generate more than a tiny speck from it. He had exhausted himself using it against the High Priest.

That did not prevent Kratos from releasing the Cronos Rage, feeble though it was. The shock wave radiated outward, and Kratos was instantly thankful he had not unleashed the full power of the Rage. Knee-deep in the water, he felt a sudden tingling shock that spread throughout the pool, momentarily stunning him. But if it unsettled him, it caught Perseus entirely unawares.

The hero screamed and thrashed about in the pool, causing a commotion impossible to miss.

With a mighty leap, Kratos shot from the water and brought both swords down in a double-handed thrust. If he had misjudged the hero, he would die.

Both swords found fleshy berth in Perseus' shoulders. The hero vented a huge scream of pain. Kratos drew back and saw that the impact had knocked the helmet from Perseus' head. His opponent was no longer invisible.

That did not mean Perseus was helpless. He swung his shield about like a discus and forced Kratos to retreat. Moving in the water slowed both their steps, but Kratos was not as severely wounded. No matter that the shield resisted his every sword thrust, Kratos had other weapons.

Kratos was momentarily dazzled when Perseus swung the shield about and reflected light into his eyes. Something magnified the brilliance until it was as if he stared into Helios' chariot pulling the sun behind it. Kratos squinted and then blinked furiously in time to recover.

As Perseus pressed an attack, trying to use the edge of his shield to slip under Kratos' neck and decapitate him, Kratos unlimbered his war hammer from its magical satchel at his back. The mighty killing tool rose high and crashed down on Perseus. The shield might protect against the Blades of Athena, but such a crushing attack could never be turned aside. The hammer blow drove Perseus to his

knees in the water. As Perseus fell, momentarily exposed, Kratos reached out and grabbed the son of Zeus and Danaë by the throat.

A swift twist and he shoved the hero's head underwater. At first, noisy bubbles rose. They slowed. Then Kratos yanked his foe out of the water, swung him about, and ripped the shield from his weakened grasp. Perseus sputtered and tried feebly to fight.

Kratos growled deep in his throat, lifted, and heaved Perseus with all his strength out the far end of the pool area. Perseus screamed in agony as his spine was snared by a massive hook dangling from a chain. He twitched, then sagged. His weight caused the hook to rattle and clank lower out of sight.

Kratos went to the edge of the pool, climbed up on a tiled lip, and jumped. His fingers closed on the chain, and then he let himself down to the terrace below where he had looked out over the Steeds of Time. Kratos kicked away from the chain and stared for a moment at Perseus, limp and lifeless on the hook.

"You will be with your lover now," Kratos said. "Both of you will be under Hades' watchful gaze for eternity."

He turned and walked away without a glance backward. He had to find the Sisters of Fate. If Perseus was the best they could do to prevent him from demanding an audience, Zeus was as good as dead.



“YOU WERE FOOLISH, Atropos. Foolish!” Lahkesis stormed about the Chamber of the Loom, then came to a halt and stared at her sister in disbelief. “We should tell Clotho.”

“No! No, don’t tell her. This is not as serious as you make it seem.” Atropos’ long, black boneless fingers played over the skein of fates she held. Dozens of the threads ran in all directions, some colored, others plain gray and white and black. There were so many ways of determining a mortal’s destiny that she had codified them long since. Black resulted in utter despair and eventual death, usually through suicide. White provided the optimistic mortal a chance to laugh at the fate meted out, but the end was seldom different from that of the gray thread. The grays were those with lackluster lives, daily toil leading to little fulfillment or enjoyment of life and even less once they crossed the River Styx and were adjudged by Hades’ three assessors, Aeacus, Minos, and Rhadamanthys. The more brightly colored threads she left to Lahkesis and Clotho. Their fates were unusual and often annoyed her with their complexity.

“You planned this?” Lahkesis sounded skeptical.

“Cut here,” Atropos said, her long talon marking a spot on a thick skein. After Lahkesis had done so, Atropos said, “See how easily

removed problems are? You are the one who claims to enjoy a diversion. What do you fear from Kratos?"

"Nothing. I fear no mortal, no god! Why should I? We are the Sisters of Fate. I end their miserable lives." Lahkesis brought her scythe down on another skein of threads. They snapped about, then evaporated.

"An entire country, Lahkesis. We have just eliminated the population of an entire country. There is no reason to fear a single mortal, even if he had been a god." Atropos sounded more confident than she was, but they were in control of all fate.

"You are not giving up on your little pet, are you?" Atropos pressed. "The Spear of Destiny? You told the Warrior to stop Kratos."

Lahkesis glared, then said, "This is why we must end his life now."

"The Warrior handled the spear too gingerly. He was afraid of the weapon. I read it in his thread."

"You know more than I thought, sister," Lahkesis said.

"I am not without talent or intelligence," Atropos said haughtily. "And neither are you. Come, sister, let us deal with Kratos together and enjoy his struggle before we end his worthless life."

"How do we control him? His thread has become increasingly slack. Look. Tug on Kratos' thread and you do not pull him this way or that to influence his quietus."

"He will eventually come to the end of his thread, the conclusion to his fate. It will be as we have decided."

"Until then, we cannot control him. Gaia laughs!"

"Determine her fate anew," Atropos said.

"I have followed Kratos," Lahkesis said, "through the bowels of your temple. He sent Perseus to the Underworld. If such a mighty warrior had no chance against Kratos, who will? Especially if he possesses the Spear of Destiny?"

"He doesn't," Atropos insisted. "He can't or he would have already made good on his threat to kill Zeus."

Lahkesis turned thoughtful as she considered all her unimaginative sister said. Nodding slowly, she said, "Even if Kratos

has the Spear of Destiny, he cannot know how to use it. But it must be retrieved. It cannot remain in his possession. It cannot!”

“It won’t,” Atropos promised.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

KRATOS HAD GOTTEN a fair look at the islands now pulled together by the Steeds of Time and saw that the way inward would take him toward the immense spire. He did not doubt that this was the lair of the Sisters of Fate since it commanded both sky and earth from its lofty pinnacle. He made his way through the maze of rooms and finally came out on a path leading inward. The stench of decay hung heavily in the air, convincing him this was the proper path.

Jason and Perseus had both perished trying to find their way to the Sisters. Kratos felt no triumph that he had bested them and now had the goal in sight. At a trot he set off through the swampy region, slowly climbing and finally reaching an open area where Harpies fed off one another in a gory buffet. He stopped and saw what had drawn them to this spot in the first place. A huge griffin had smashed into the ground and spread its guts in all directions. But this was not just any griffin. Blazing with actinic light was the spear that the aerial rider had tried to use against Kratos. Its power drew him.

He whipped his war hammer about as the creatures moved from considering one another a meal to choosing him. He crushed first one and then another as he made his way to the dead griffin. The crystalline spear glistened as if it had been dipped in liquid light.

Kratos reached out and gripped the spear's thick shaft, then yanked it free of the griffin's body.

The coruscating light forced him to look away. The spear burned at his hand, but he did not release it. Lifting it high over his head gave him a chance to examine it. In places he could see through the transparent crystal, but other points in the interior were milky with light. Still other sections, more like splinters, blazed with the purplish blue light that had drawn him to the weapon. He spun it about. Lightweight, quickly pointed, easily used to stab or defend, the spear held his attention—and he knew that it was a potent weapon if he could find how best to use it.

Kratos whirled it about and stashed it away as he made his way deeper into the swampy land, but he quickly came out on the brink of a precipice falling hundreds of feet down into the sea. The way across seemed obvious, but Kratos had learned this meant danger. A broken roadway stretched over the deep chasm, the sections of stone paving separated by gaps.

He walked to the edge of the roadway, stepped out—and almost perished. The road tilted swiftly under his weight. He lost his balance and slid downward and would have plunged to his death if it had not been for his quick reflexes. The swords lashed out as grappling hooks and affixed themselves into the side of the cliff. The roadway dropped all the way from under him but he swung back, hit the cliff face, and then hastily scaled it. By the time he reached the top of the escarpment once more, the roadway had returned.

It tilted but did not fall.

If one segment tilted in such a fashion, he saw no reason to doubt that all would. To cross to the far side required more than speed and balance. Kratos concentrated and called forth the magic of the Amulet of the Fates. The world boiled around him in a thick green stew as time slowed. He stepped onto the tilting road and then tried to sprint for the far side. His legs gave way beneath him, forcing him to reach down to keep from falling. Use of the amulet sucked his power quickly. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to stand. The greenish fog about him began to thin. His gut tightened as he forced himself to send more energy into the amulet. Then he took a step.

And another. Determination kept the Ghost of Sparta moving. He would conquer!

Just as he came within a dozen feet of the other side, the spell controlled by the Amulet of the Fates wavered and began to abate. Roadway tilting beneath his feet, Kratos abandoned use of the amulet, jumped, and barely caught the edge of the cliff as the roadway skewed away from his feet. He dangled above a chasm that would kill him should he fall.

A grunt, a heave, and he stood on the proper side of the segmented road. The trail led forward. His distance-devouring stride began gobbling the terrain as he ran, fast and sure he headed in the right direction to the Sisters of Fate.

The jungle vegetation arched above him, forming a close tunnel. At times he had to duck and push through small openings, but he persisted and came to the far side of the island. In the distance he saw what had to be his destination on the Island of Fate. Again he was faced with a road across a chasm so vast he could not see the bottom. The Steeds of Time might have pulled the islands together, but the sections were a poor fit.

This road, however, lacked only a segment here and there. From the way the arches supported the road from below, he saw no possibility for a trap to be engineered into the bridge-work. He strode out onto the broad, uneven paving and had gone only a quarter of the way across when he heard the wings flapping furiously.

Kratos turned in a full circle, looking to the sky for any sign of Harpies. He hated the flying hags and would not mind working off some of the rage that had built within his breast by pulling off a few wings and then casting the flightless, still-living bodies into the great chasm to their deaths.

There was nothing in the sky, but he heard distinct flapping of wings followed by a feeble scraping as if talons tore at the bridge's stone base. Kratos reached for his war hammer as an emaciated, ancient man crawled over the edge, but he held back a killing blow when he saw long, elegant wings seared onto the man's back. Kratos held out his own forearms and looked where Ares had welded the

chains from the Blades of Chaos into his living flesh. Had something similar been done to this poor wight?

“Go back. Go back, warrior. There is no passage here.”

Kratos looked at the man.

“I can reach that distant spire on this path.”

“Never! It isn’t possible. You will never make it across. You think you can, but you cannot.”

Kratos brushed past the man.

“I know you cannot make it,” the man insisted.

Kratos looked from the distant spire where the Sisters of Fate must have their lair to the man. The burns on his hands and face were now obvious. The wings had melted in places but were still functional. With a single backhand swat, Kratos knocked the annoying pest away.

“Do you not know who I am?”

“Why should I care?”

The man looked incredulous. “Have you not heard of Icarus? Of my father, Daedalus, and the marvelous creation he made so that I might escape from Crete?” The man turned and spread his wings, flapping them hard enough to create a small turbulent gust of air intended to blind Kratos.

Kratos pushed him away as he tried to crowd close once more. He saw that the wings had been magically fused to Icarus’ shoulder blades in such a way that scar tissue surrounded the base. The wings fluttered about, once more trying to disconcert Kratos. Despite their lack of spread, the wings were powerful.

“It is my *fate* to make it across. None other!”

Kratos studied the stone roadway. He could make it, no matter what Icarus said. He started to cross.

“This is *my* test. The Sisters will grant *me* an audience, not you! You will die, White Warrior. You will die!”

Icarus grabbed Kratos to hold him back.

“I will reach the Sisters of Fate, and I will use your wings to do so,” Kratos said, glaring at Icarus.

“The Sisters will not allow you to bathe in their pure light!”

Icarus let out a gurgling sound as Kratos seized him by the throat. With startling agility, Icarus broke the grip, ducked under arms trying to encircle him, and jumped onto the Spartan's broad back.

"It is my fate only that I cross this chasm." With a tremendous flap of his wings, Icarus unbalanced Kratos and pulled him back onto his heels.

Kratos reached behind to swat the annoying man, but another surge of those long wings lifted both off the bridge and sent them falling, falling, falling into the bottomless chasm.

"You will fail. You have already failed!" gloated Icarus. His cries turned to pain as Kratos pulled him around so that he fell belly-up, unable to use the wings to soar.

Kratos looked down into the man's face. The skin was drawn as taut as a drumhead over the bones. His eyes were sunken, and thin sandy hair floated about in wild disarray as they fell. Kratos drove his fist into that face and felt bones break. He began hammering Icarus in earnest when the man refused to yield.

"Wait," gasped out Icarus. "Perhaps the Sisters have sent you to help me. I realize that now!"

Kratos drove forward, the head butt breaking Icarus' nose and sending up a blinding spray of the man's thin blood.

"If I give you my wings, together we will succeed. Take my wings and help me across."

Even as he spoke, Icarus tried to wrench free. Kratos pummeled him mercilessly as they fell faster through a billowing reddish cloud that rose from the edge of creation itself.

"We can work together, White Warrior." Icarus grunted as Kratos landed another powerful blow to his face. "Please. Have pity on an old man. Help me change my destiny and see my father one last time before I die."

Kratos flipped Icarus over, reached down, and wrenched with all his strength. The wings tore free, leaving behind bloody, glowing stubs on Icarus' back. He screamed as he fell faster into the red mist. Kratos pulled the feebly beating wings about and placed them on his own back. He screamed in agony as the wings magically bonded to his shoulders. Tendrils of sensation worked their way down into his

back, through his chest, and all over his shoulders, no longer giving pain but a curious itching sensation. Clapping his hands together in front of him brought the wings forward. Spreading his arms opened the wings. In seconds he learned how to use the wings and employed his powerful shoulder muscles to slow his fall, then to glide away.

“You have your wish, old man. Hades will see to another reunion this day,” Kratos said, but he spoke to emptiness filled with surging clouds of choking red gas. Using the wings proved easier than he had anticipated, but still he could not swoop and then soar back up through the thick crimson fog. He banked and spilled air from under the wings, slowing his descent. But try as he might, he could not power the wings downward with enough energy to climb.

Kratos spiraled about a chain with links thicker than his body, broke through a lingering cloud of red mist, and saw then that his fight with Icarus over the wings had been more dire than he had believed possible.

“The Temple of the Fates is far above you, Kratos. You must get back to the surface,” boomed Gaia’s voice.

Banking sharply, Kratos flew closer to what he saw now was an immense face, crusted over as with corrosion, and landed on the lower eyelid.

Kratos got his feet under him and stared into the right eye of the Titan he had banished from the world and doomed to forever hold the weight of the earth on his shoulders.

Atlas blinked and his enormous eye focused on Kratos.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“WHO ADDS TO my torment? You are far too small, even for an Olympian, to be a god, yet you have found me.”

Kratos looked over his shoulder and saw nothing but the Titan’s huge body stretching down into the mist below. He had already fallen a huge distance from the world above, but to dive off the eyelid now meant even more distance had to be traversed. Kratos staggered as Atlas blinked and the blazing red eye focused on him.

“Kratos!” The name came out as a roar and reverberated like a rung bell. Atlas had identified him; now his rage would become unbridled.

“You dare show your face to me after what you have done?”

Atlas shook his head. The gigantic chains binding his four arms clanked with even this simple motion. Atlas was securely bound just as Kratos had left him, burdened with supporting the weight of the world on one shoulder and the Pillar of the World on the other. This had been a gigantic battle, between Atlas and Kratos, when he had served as Champion of Olympus.

For her own reasons, Persephone had released Atlas from his torment in Tartarus to destroy the pillar and end all life in the world. Kratos doubted Hades had put her up to it, but the Underworld would have been crowded with enormous numbers of dead mortals. Kratos had no qualms about trying to kill the dark

goddess, nor of gaining Hades' eternal ire, but Atlas' fate had always been a sore point with him.

Atlas should never have tried to destroy the pillar, but release from his eternal torture was a potent reward for the deed. Kratos had to admit the Titan had contrived a devious scheme to accomplish his destruction. Dragging Helios from the sky and plunging the world into darkness had been but the first part. Eliciting the cooperation of Morpheus to put the gods into a deep sleep had given the Titan time to use the sun to begin his razing of the Pillar of the World.

The Ghost of Sparta knew his own fighting prowess. He also knew that luck had aided him in chaining Atlas.

"I will make you suffer, Kratos."

"Atlas! You must trust me. Much has passed since last we met."

Kratos groaned as Atlas reached up with a hand large enough and strong enough to balance the world itself to crush him. He was caught between thumb and forefinger.

"Why would I ever trust a servant of Zeus?"

"Because I seek to destroy Zeus." Kratos grated out the words. His breath gusted from his lungs under the tremendous pressure of Atlas' fingers closing. It took all his own effort to force his hands into the thumb and finger to keep apart that deadly vise. Despite his own superhuman strength, he was as weak as a mewling baby in the Titan's grip.

Atlas laughed harshly and shook his head in mock sorrow.

"Kratos, Kratos, still the arrogant and foolish warrior. You have not changed."

Blackness stalked Kratos' senses; tiny tendrils of deadly darkness crept up on him from all sides. The effort of holding apart the Titan's digits sapped his strength. If he flagged for even an instant, he would be crushed like a bug, then discarded with no further thought. His arms began to lose feeling from the pressure as his strength faded. Aware that Atlas lifted him back to eye level and peered more closely at him, Kratos fought away ultimate blackness.

"And how do you plan to defeat the King of the Gods?" The question lacked the mockery of Atlas' earlier words and showed that

Kratos had intrigued him—enough not to smash him like an insect in his stark grip. Yet.

The fingers trying to squash him relaxed enough for Kratos to suck in a deep breath.

“By taking the Blade of Olympus back and driving it into Zeus’ heart. It holds the power I once wielded as the God of War.”

“The Blade of Olympus? I have not heard that name in many years. Since ... since the end of the Great War.”

Atlas relaxed his pressure entirely and held Kratos in the palm of his hand. Lightning flashed all around as Atlas got a far-off look in his eye. Kratos stiffened as he saw reflected in that Titan’s orb the last days of the Titanomachy, the Great War.

“I saw Zeus floating through the thunderclouds, lightning dancing from his fingertips,” Atlas said. “I had never seen the young King of the Gods look angrier. Conjured thunderbolts exploded from Zeus’ grasp, carrying not only power but a reddish tinge as well. It was as if the god’s own blood mingled with his magicks.

“Even I recoiled as the lightning crashed downward and began to spin, slowly at first and then faster until a mighty tornadic column climbed into the heavens from the earth.”

Kratos stayed his tongue. Atlas relived the days of the Great War and convinced himself of Kratos’ plea.

“Anything material was caught up in that vortex and sent skyward. Buildings, crops, people, it mattered not at all as the spinning cloud grew and crossed the land.

“Bloodlust and power raged within Zeus,” Atlas said. “His desire to rule over mortals was intolerable to us.”

“It has not changed,” Kratos said. “If anything, Zeus becomes more insistent of the might of his rule and suspicious of everyone else.”

“Cronos was brought to his knees. Zeus hated Cronos, his father, above all others and was determined to drive one thunderbolt after another into his trembling flesh so that Hades could swing chains about and shackle Cronos’ soul. But I began my fight, tearing off boulders from the side of a mountain and then flinging them at

Hades. If any had struck the God of the Underworld, it would have seriously injured him.

“The God of the Underworld dodged my stony missiles, yet he managed to keep the chains binding Cronos’ soul taut to prevent it from reentering the Titan’s physical body.”

Atlas shuddered. Kratos had to throw himself flat to keep from being tossed off the Titan’s outstretched palm.

“Cronos’ body stood, unmoving, while his valiant soul shimmered like a blue haze as Hades fought to gain full control over it. I could not allow Hades to take our leader, the one behind whom we rallied. I slammed my fist down to the ground once, twice, a third time.”

Kratos avoided Atlas’ fingers clenching into a fist as he remembered the battle so long ago.

“The earthquake from my blows caused Hades to stumble and allow one chain to slacken. Cronos jerked free of Hades, and his soul merged once again with his body. I thought our cause was won in that moment!

“But Cronos staggered as lightning bolt after bolt from Zeus’ hands blasted into his back. Zeus slowed his father enough for Poseidon to arrive and add his own power. Cronos sagged under the onslaught of the two gods. Hades regained his feet but, seeing how his brothers boxed in Cronos, he turned to me and cast out his chains. The hooks sank deep into my breast, and with a powerful pull on the white-hot chains, Hades drew out my soul. It whirled about as if caught in the tornado ravaging the land, rose, and then filtered down to Hades, who captured it.”

Kratos pushed his way past the clenched fingers and stood atop the fist to stare at Atlas. The Titan was entirely lost in the memory of how he had been defeated and consigned to Tartarus as punishment for standing with Cronos and the other Titans.

“I crashed forward, the impact causing new earthquakes. The war between the Titans and the Olympians forged the landscape of the mortal world,” Atlas said. His booming voice had turned to little more than the whisper of wind through the treetops.

“The gods continued to assault me, but I rose with the last of my strength.” Atlas’ eyes widened in the remembered pain of Hades sucking the last of his soul.

Kratos stared at the Titan. Atlas’ face showed a blank expression and lifeless eyes.

“It was a war that we knew the Titans must win.” Atlas’ voice came stronger now as memory of the defeat faded and anger returned. “If we lost, it would mean an end to the Golden Age of Titan rule. Peace and prosperity for mankind would be no more.

“Zeus came across the battlefield and stood near the top of a funnel cloud that whipped about him. The tornado grew around him until he was completely enshrouded. Zeus pointed. The funnel drove downward, crashed into the battlefield, and blasted out a deep crater.

“The cyclone winds died down,” Atlas said in a hoarse whisper. “Zeus stepped from the crater and faced those of us still battling in the distance. From the sleeve of his robe Zeus drew forth a blade of eye-searing light.

“The Blade of Olympus.”

Kratos sucked in his breath and held it. He looked down to his belly and the scar there left by that blade. He began to share Atlas’ desolation at the Titans’ loss—and renew the anger he felt toward Zeus.

“The battle continued,” Atlas said, “despite my capture. Then Zeus stabbed out with the glowing blade and cried, ‘I banish you to the darkest pits of Tartarus!’ ”

Kratos experienced the Titan’s anger and fear at Zeus’ mighty weapon, forged from the heavens and the earth.

“I awoke in the torment of the Underworld,” Atlas said, an edge to his voice now. He spoke louder, faster. “I was banished to the darkest pits of Hades. I would have destroyed Zeus if you had not put me here, slave of the gods!”

“I no longer do the bidding of the gods,” Kratos said. “I have stomached their betrayal for the last time. Show me the way to the Sisters, and I will kill Zeus once and for all!”

“How can I trust you?”

“Know this, mighty Atlas. I am a warrior of Sparta and pledge my word that Zeus will die by my hand. To violate that oath is worse than any torture Hades might deliver to me.”

Atlas growled, a sound like mountains grinding together, then said, “What Gaia says is true, Ghost of Sparta. You are an honorable warrior and a worthy ally of the Titans.”

Kratos thrust out his chest and lifted his chin. With his other hand Atlas reached out above Kratos and extended a finger. A tremendous surge of energy exploded within Kratos.

“You now control the power of Atlas. The world will quake as you command.”

Unlike the fiery white point of star-stuff that was the Rage of Cronos, the new magical power caused Kratos to shake all over.

“You have given me the falling sickness!” he accused. “My arms and legs shake uncontrollably.”

“Not beyond your control. Focus.”

Kratos closed his eyes and fought to gain control of the power. He saw how it differed from the magic given him by the other Titan, how it suffused his limbs with a palsy and then how it rushed out from hands and feet. He appreciated this. Atlas, with four limbs, directed his power from each hand. A bipedal mortal had to improvise. Hands and feet would be the conduit, and he would be the stronger for possessing the magical spell.

“Tell me how to find the temple of the Sisters of Fate.”

Atlas shook his head, but the twin red beacons that were his eyes never left Kratos.

“None, not even a Titan, knows the way to the Sisters’ temple. But it is said he who finds it will wield great power. I have given you the last of my power, Spartan.”

Kratos looked skyward through the parting red mist and saw what might have been the roof of a cavern. Then he recoiled as Atlas’ fingers closed above him. The sudden upward acceleration almost drove him to his knees. Atlas shoved his fist ever higher, into the bottom of the earth, beyond. All around Kratos raced dirt and rock and then he once more caught the scent of the swamps on the Island of Creation.

Still Atlas' hand elevated him and finally he came to the edge of the roadway where he had fought Icarus. Kratos stepped forward as Atlas' hand sank back into the world.

"May fate grant you passage, Kratos, for many rely on your success."

Then Atlas was gone, leaving Kratos to stare across the chasm spanned by the stone roadway at the elaborate stone building on the far side.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“ZEUS MUST KNOW,” Hermes said, fluttering about nervously, “but I cannot be the one to tell him.”

“Not after your ill-advised attempt to aid Perseus,” Athena said. “Kratos has become stronger because of that fight.”

“I can tell Zeus how Kratos stole the shield from Perseus,” Hermes said. “He doesn’t need to know any of the details.”

Athena shook her head. Things in Olympus had become even direr. God openly fought god, and Zeus did nothing to end the battles. She looked past a nervous Hermes into the long corridor that ran the length of the mountaintop. Alcoves along the immense corridor opened into gardens and the palaces of the gods and goddesses. But she paid scant attention to the personal abodes of the gods. The gardens were overrun with black vines sprouting foot-long thorns dripping with venom. Those once pacific terraria now spawned creatures so vile even Hades turned from them.

As if the thought of her uncle brought him to sight, Hades tromped down the marble corridor, fiery chains snapping like whips in each hand. He wore his war helmet so that only his eyes were visible, those red-coal eyes that promised eternal torment for any who offended him. In place of ordinary armor his flesh sprouted spikes of black iron, and he left a trail of sooty footprints.

More than his dark visage, Athena felt a different presence in her uncle that had not been common in Olympus prior to Kratos ascending the throne of the God of War. There was a blackness to the very air that corrupted anything it touched. Where once Olympus had been a place of great joy and beauty, now it held only anger, fear, and a growing darkness.

“Don’t let him see me,” Hermes said, voice quavering. “I should never have tried sneaking back to Olympus. Hades will surely turn me over to Zeus for violating his ban. I’m not supposed to be in Olympus for another hundred years.”

“Longer,” Athena said absently. Her thoughts refused to grapple with the true problems facing the gods. Concentration on what was best for Olympus usually required no effort. Athena rubbed her temples, then looked up sharply.

“Hide. Behind the tapestry. Now!” Athena shoved the Messenger of the Gods in the right direction, then turned and smiled in what she hoped was a sincere fashion as Iris rushed in without bothering to announce herself.

The Goddess of the Rainbow saw through her fake amiability and openly sneered at her.

“Zeus would speak with you. There is a disturbance among the mortals. *Your* worshippers,” she said with some delectation.

Athena saw the rainbow trailing Iris shimmer and begin to fade. She blinked at the sight of a black band amid the other colors. Athena worried she saw disaster behind every door and in every heart. With that thought, she forced herself not to glance over her shoulder in the direction of the floor-to-ceiling tapestry where Hermes had taken refuge.

“What word have you of Kratos?” Athena asked.

Iris feigned surprise as she answered, “Why, none. He is of no interest to Zeus or any of us now that he is a mortal.” A wicked smile curled the goddess’ lips as she added, “Can it be that Kratos is among the mortals causing the disturbance?”

“I suspect that to be true, wherever he is,” Athena said. “As God of War he never felt content to simply sit and think of what might be. He was always prone to action.”

“To fighting, to brutal killing and bloodshed that soaked entire countries,” Iris said.

“You disapprove? I would think a messenger for Zeus would delight in carrying such news.”

“There will be changes soon on Mount Olympus, and you should not oppose me.”

“How is Hera?” Athena asked, the nastiness that Iris showed her now being returned. “I’ve heard that she is not sharing Zeus’ bed. Can it be that she’s ... elsewhere?”

A flare of anger died in Iris’ eyes. Her mocking smile came more readily to her full red lips now.

“One would almost think that a former gossipmonger of a god filled your ear with lies, but then that cannot be so. Zeus has banished him to the mortal’s world.” Iris whirled about, her long, flowing dress shedding rainbow colors as she moved. Athena frowned as tiny flecks of blackness remained. It was as if Iris had lain with Hades rather than Zeus and dirtied herself with soot.

That thought gave birth to other speculation. Iris might play one brother against another, but Athena doubted she would do anything as foolish as attempting to place Hades on the throne as King of the Gods. Zeus had appetites that could never be sated but which Iris might feed—a little. Hades loved only Persephone and would never lie with another. This forced Iris to find another lever to bend him to her will, and the Goddess of the Rainbow was not the sort to risk all without complete assurance of her power.

“Zeus demands your presence. Now,” Iris said, flouncing away.

Athena settled onto a couch and waited a decent time before calling for Hermes to stop trembling behind the tapestry. It looked as if the stag had developed the falling sickness from the way Hermes quivered in fright behind.

“She would have brought down the wrath of Zeus on my head,” Hermes said. “Thank you for hiding me.”

“I did not do this out of friendship,” Athena said sternly. “I want something from you.”

Hermes turned wary.

“I would speak to Kratos. Arrange this for me.”

“But he is on the island! The Sisters of Fate control all there!”

Athena looked down the corridor.

“I can bring Iris back.” Athena beckoned, and the remnant of the rainbow swirled about and formed a perfect ring in midair.

“I ... I will do as you request, Athena. Are you certain Zeus is not on Olympus?”

“He prowls the world of the mortals. That is why I deemed it safer for you to come here than for us to meet below.” She frowned. More than this, her departure from Olympus would alert Iris. The less the new Messenger of the Gods knew, the better. Besides, Hermes was crafty making his way to Olympus and through the palace undetected, having spent so many eons in assignations with so many of the goddesses. She would never have dared suggest this to Hermes had Zeus been present, but affairs occupied him elsewhere.

“You have always been my best friend, Athena.”

She laughed at this. Hermes had tried to seduce her for centuries. The challenge grew after each failure. As gods went, he was harmless enough in his pursuits. Athena pushed aside his not-too-subtle flirting since it was less about coupling than it was about position and power on Olympus. This caused her thoughts to soar with plans and importuning for the Ghost of Sparta. He was the axle about whom the troubles in Olympus rotated, and only he could put things right again. Her friendship and support for him had to sway his anger away from Zeus and toward more ... innocuous pursuits.

“I will return as quickly as I can.” Hermes settled his toga about his trim young body as if marching to meet his executioner. “If the Sisters allow me to return at all.”

With that his winged sandals carried him out a tall, arched window and downward to the earth, leaving Athena to worry about Zeus. And Kratos. Always Kratos.



KRATOS BEGAN WALKING along the stone roadway and reached the spot where Icarus had confronted him. He looked over the brink and into the red swirling mist that hid the edge of creation. Below, far below, Atlas stood in his chains, balancing the world on his broad shoulders and waiting for his chance to again live in the upper world. Zeus and Hades had been brutal, but Kratos understood that. Kindness and charity had no place on the battlefield or when dealing with enemies.

He held out his hands and looked at them, feeling the gift Atlas had bestowed upon him. Gaia guided him, Cronos had given him his rage, and now the Atlas Quake quivered within Kratos' grasp as he tightened his fingers into a fist. He assembled the might of the Titans, and all he had to do was reach the far side of the road and persuade the Sisters of Fate to change his destiny to put those powers to their full use. Gaia had aided his escape from the Underworld so he could kill Zeus. No matter that she and the other Titans wanted Zeus dead for their past humiliation and Kratos wanted it for his own reasons. Betrayal was only part of his need to see Zeus impaled on the Blade of Olympus.

Barely a dozen paces toward the far side of the chasm caused the stone beneath his sandals to crack. Another stride and a large

section tumbled away and threatened to take him with it. Spreading his arms caused the wings of Icarus to billow and cut through the air. He flexed his shoulders as the wings began to beat steadily. He found the knack of leaning forward as the wings took downward strokes to accelerate his journey until the wind whipped past his face and threatened to rip the air from his lungs. Before that could happen, he shoved his feet downward, spilled air from the wings, and set down lightly on a stone-paved terrace leading into the temple.

Although he did not know for certain, his instincts told him he had found the Palace of the Fates.

He entered and slowly turned in a full circle to appraise the palace. One possible doorway led deeper into the building but when Kratos stepped toward it, spikes shot up from the floor. He danced away. Any one of those spikes would have driven through more than his sandal and foot. Each was waist-high.

As he watched, the spikes sank back into the floor. He thought to go around this section but discovered more spikes popping up to block his path. Only by retreating to the center of the room could he avoid those deadly nails shooting upward with such vicious force.

A soft sighing brought him around. Dark Nymphs floated into the room and tried to cast webs over him. Dual sets of translucent wings began to hum so loud that he could barely think. This was part of their attack. Bodies only a few feet long and slender, they posed little threat otherwise—except for their sticky nets spat from between vicious mandibles. He caught one strand on his arm and jerked, bringing the Nymph to him. He grabbed at the wings, swung it around in a high arc, and slammed it down onto spikes rising from the flooring next to him.

More spikes thrust upward, forcing Kratos to use Icarus' wings to flutter above them, but this made him a better target for the Dark Nymphs. Their sticky webs sailed through the air to entangle him and bring him to the flooring where the spikes would end his life. Kratos hit the floor, jumped, and grasped one Nymph's wings. He tore them off and discarded the shrieking creature.

He looked and saw that the exit from the room was now blocked. The same circular locking pattern that had prevented easy entry into this room now prevented easy access. The walls moved steadily, giving him hope that the openings would align again soon, but until then he had the Nymphs to fight.

A pair of them was crushed together as Kratos grabbed one in each hand and drove them into each other.

He kept moving, anticipating the upward thrusts of the spikes, until he saw his opportunity and took it. The circular walls slid around and once more opened a hallway to him. Diving over a new segment of rising spikes, he hit the floor beyond, rolled, and came to his feet. Kratos looked back as the walls continued to spin, blocking the Dark Nymphs from pursuing him.

He brushed off gore and the sticky webbing cast by the Dark Nymphs as he explored deeper into the palace. The corridors wound around in a circular pattern, and several times Kratos heard walls grinding along tracks. Occasionally he saw rooms open to his left or right, but nothing in them caught his attention or seemed important until he reached an open-air atrium looking out over the sea. The stone pedestal in the center drew Kratos. Open on its inclined holder lay a book.

He stared at the words on the page, but they meant nothing to him. He could not even decide what language the book had been written in. Placing his hand on one page warmed his palm and sent tiny tremors up into his shoulder. There was power locked within these pages, if only he could decipher them.

Looking to his right he saw a long open walkway, but the scent of burning candles mingled with the salty sea air. He went down the walkway to find a small turret. Inside knelt a robed man before an altar to one of the Sisters of Fate. Kratos had seen Lahkesis' phantasm briefly, so he decided this might be one of the other two. The man sat on his heels, bowing repeatedly as he uttered invocations to the Sisters.

"You," Kratos said. "Can you read the book?"

The robed man looked up, startled.

“I am the Translator but—” He let out a yelp of surprise as Kratos scooped him up and carried him over his shoulder. The Translator struggled but to no avail against Kratos’ strength and determination.

Halfway back along the walkway to the atrium Kratos slowed, then stopped. Ahead, blocking entry to the atrium and its book, two tall soldiers with war axes moved to fight.

“Stop them!” cried one soldier.

“Stop them?” scoffed the other. “Kill them both! You know our orders.”

“No one can speak to the Translator,” agreed the first soldier.

“No, you can’t let them kill me. You must protect me!” The Translator clutched fearfully at Kratos’ arm.

Kratos cast the Translator aside. The man hit the edge of a railing and sat heavily. His eyes were round with fear and his mouth moved, but no words came out now.

The two soldiers attacked in unison. As one axe rose to lop off Kratos’ head, his comrade’s axe drove for Kratos’ legs. Only an agile twist and leap into the air saved the Spartan from losing either a leg or his head. As he came down the pair launched a new attack. Both swung their axes for his head, forcing him to block using the Blades of Athena. Sparks erupted from the contact, and Kratos was pressed back.

“They’ll kill me. You can’t let them!” cried the Translator.

The soldier on Kratos’ right was momentarily distracted by the Translator’s plea for mercy. Swinging his swords in a furious arc, Kratos cut off first a hand and then a leg. The soldier staggered, then fell over the railing. If the dismemberment did not kill him, the fall past the edge of creation would.

His comrade’s death caused an instant of hesitation in the other fighter. Against the Ghost of Sparta this meant only one thing: death. He judged his chances and saw no hope. Instead of engaging Kratos, he rolled and tried to reach the Translator to slay him. Kratos swung his war hammer high and dropped it squarely on the soldier’s helmet before he could make a fatal thrust through the Translator’s breast. Blood exploded out the eyeholes as his head was turned to pulp within the bronze confines.

“You ... you’re going to kill me. I know it. You can’t. Please! I have forgotten the words.”

Kratos grabbed the Translator by the scruff of his neck and lifted him so his toes dragged along the bloodstained stone. They returned to the atrium, and Kratos shoved the man forward onto his knees in front of the opened volume.

As the Translator tried to shy away, Kratos laid his open palm on the back of the man’s head and slammed his face forward.

“Read the words,” Kratos commanded.

“Hear me, Sisters who control the thread ...”

“Keep going.”

“Another searches for what only the Sisters may give. He is worthy—” the Translator began. Then he writhed in Kratos’ grip and turned a frightened, bloodless face to the Spartan. “No, don’t make me read the words. I’m not ready.”

Kratos slammed him into the volume again, this time causing blood to spurt from a deep cut on his forehead. The blood dribbled across the book and onto the floor, where it collected in blood gutters radiating outward from the stone pedestal.

The Translator pushed away, his blood dripping onto the book, before running off to the grooves in the floor.

“I know this is what you have asked of me, my exalted sisters, but is there no other way?”

“Read,” Kratos said. He gripped the back of the man’s neck hard, found nerves, and pinched down. The Translator danced about, unable to control his own legs or arms.

“G-great Sisters of Fate ...”

“Keep going.”

“I come before you to humbly request an audience.” He swallowed hard before he continued. “To prove my resolve is true ... no, please, no! I can’t do it!”

“Read it!”

“I ... I offer this sacrifice of ... m-my blood.”

Kratos rammed the man’s head so hard into the book that his neck snapped. Blood gushed from his nose, mouth, and ears. Kratos stepped away and let the Translator fall to the floor.

He watched in fascination as the blood flowed in the grooves in the flooring. He had not seen the pattern before but with blood flowing freely, it became apparent. For a moment, his attention lifted from the atrium floor to the mountain some distance away directly in line with the pedestal and book. Like a chrysalis opening, it seemed to spread immense wings.

“Wings,” Kratos said. He drew in his breath. The pattern now limned in blood on the floor was that of the Phoenix. But there was more. A red-hued apparition of a lovely woman floated a few inches above the floor. She wore a winged helmet and sported a long robe that dragged along the floor. Her toga hung open to expose her left breast; in her right hand she clutched a scepter. She wore a girdle that hung in front, leaving her legs bare.

“Well done, warrior. With this sacrifice you have proven your resolve to seek out the Sisters of Fate. However, this is but a small step in your quest to gain an audience with us.”

A gateway opened behind the ghostly figure, who turned and pointed with the scepter. Then the apparition faded into nothingness, leaving Kratos to seek out the other trials necessary to win if he wanted the audience with the Sisters of Fate.

Without hesitation he went through the door and plunged deeper into the Palace of the Fates.



“I HAVE NO TIME for you,” Zeus said. He scowled and looked away from the goddess who had once been his favorite daughter.

Athena would have none of it. She took a step up toward the raised throne, drawing his immediate reaction.

“I did not grant permission for you to climb the dais!”

“I did not ask,” Athena said, forcing her voice to remain calm. “When does a daughter need sufferance to speak with her father? Her *loving* father?”

“You—” Zeus cut off his accusation, but Athena read it in his face. There was nothing but growing hatred, and it was directed toward her.

“You wound me with your belief that I seek anything but your welfare and that of Olympus.” Athena took another step. She turned slightly and saw movement from the corner of her eye. Iris spied on this audience. So be it. Let the snoop spread what was to be said.

“You’re like the rest. You plot against me. Even my wife seeks to —” Again Zeus cut off his accusation.

“Hera values you above all others. If you think otherwise, Sky Father, you deceive yourself.” Athena considered shifting the blame to Iris, then decided not to. In his current state, Zeus would never believe his new Messenger of the Gods worked against him at every turn. Athena had to believe Iris’ hold over Zeus extended to more

than supplying false or biased news. Her father had never been one to consider abstinence a virtue, and for that Aphrodite had always hailed Zeus as a great ruler.

Athena had heard even Artemis had been ignoring her forest and animals, turning reclusive, never venturing into her beloved wilderness. Things in Olympus were increasingly awry.

“Father,” she said, “your worshippers are slipping away.”

“Impossible. I am Zeus, King of the Gods! What mortal would deny me in their supplication?”

“More every day leave to secret shrines to the Titans,” she said.

“How do you know this? Iris said more give sacrifices to me every day than the day before.” Zeus stroked his beard, once white and cloudy but now filled with roiling lead-gray storm clouds.

Athena dared not tell him that Hermes flew constantly across the face of the world as he hunted for the news that would restore his place in Olympus. She wished that Hermes had found something worth presenting now, because she felt her welcome at the throne of Zeus slipping away. If he banished her as he had Hermes, her influence would disappear—and that of Iris would be transcendent.

“I see how my worshippers pray in Athens,” she said, cloaking the truth with a half lie. “Those who once sacrificed to both of us do so less often.” She hesitated, then blurted, “They once again pray to the Titans.”

As the words escaped her sepia-tattooed lips, she knew she had committed an error from which there could be no return.

“The Titans!” Zeus exploded to his feet and kept growing until his head pressed into the high dome of the audience chamber. His shoulders rippled with muscle and his eyes frosted over, then turned to burning white pools without definition. Athena had never seen her father so wroth.

Zeus clapped his hands together, and thunderbolts exploded. Athena threw up her arm to shield herself from the assault. If it had been directed solely at her, she would have died.

“He is responsible for this. If he had shown the good sense to remain in the Underworld and not allow Gaia to bring him back to this world, the Titans would still be where I put them. In Tartarus!

In the deepest realms enduring Hades' tortures! Must I return him to Hades' grasp myself? Again? I am king but none will serve me by removing Kratos!"

"Kratos is an annoyance, but you cannot hold him entirely responsible."

"The Titans use him. He thought Ares was a liar and knave. Kratos has no idea how the Titans can lie and deceive and manipulate! Cronos thought to kill all his children. His own children!"

"Gaia raised you," Athena said, again damning herself for letting her true thoughts reach Zeus. "Your fight was with Cronos, not the other Titans."

"They all deserved to be destroyed, but I chose to allow them to live."

Athena fought to keep her words bottled up, but the pressure became too great.

"You made Kratos an enemy, Father. If you had not duped him into draining his godly powers into the Blade of Olympus, he—"

"He still opposes me. A mortal! After I put him on the throne of the God of War! How dare he?" Zeus grew even larger and caused the ceiling and walls to tumble. Lightning flashed about, mirroring Zeus' wrath.

"Father, please ..." Athena looked up and saw that Zeus paid her no heed. His fury consumed all reason.

"He will suffer in ways he has never considered possible. I will destroy everything he holds dear!"

Athena turned as Zeus vanished in a flash of light so intense that it would have blinded her had she watched. She didn't need Hermes—or Iris—to tell her what would happen now that Zeus was willing to unleash his fury into the world.

Tears formed in Athena's eyes for what was happening to the Olympians.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

COLD FURY DROVE Kratos. Lahkesis had told him he had taken a small step toward an audience with her and the other Sisters of Fate to plead his case. Being denied was a slap in the face when he had Zeus to kill. He would do whatever it took to drive the Blade of Olympus through Zeus and make the King of the Gods suffer the way he already had.

Kratos entered a curving corridor, paused when the door slid shut behind him. The only way to go was onward—but that was where he intended to go. He ran around the circular path, stepping over rails mounted in the middle. The stench of burning metal reached him an instant before grinding gears sounded and a metal wall ahead creaked on the rails and then accelerated toward him.

“We will never allow you to reach us in our secret temple, Kratos. We have tired of you as a diversion,” said Lahkesis.

As if to accentuate the warning, a flurry of temple guards armed with their curved axes ran into the room. So many faced him that Kratos unleashed the Cronos Rage. The energy building within lacked the potency of earlier releases. The white-hot speck seemed cooler, more diffuse because of his earlier usage. Some time must be necessary to regenerate, but Kratos did not have the luxury of this. He cast forth the Rage. For a brief instant the powerful spell flowed

through those attacking him, their limbs numbed. A full-scale casting would have blown them away.

One temple guard fell to his knees, then fought to stand. The Rage had barely affected him. He looked at Kratos and sneered. “You must kill us all—and more!”

Kratos saw the Rage shock wearing off the other guards. But what did the one mean, “and more”?

“Delay him, delay him!” the guard called to his recovering comrades, and this told Kratos what had been meant. The wall would yield to his passage for only a short while. If the temple guards prevented him from reaching it during the moments of vulnerability, he would have to find another way forward. Time pressed down on him, knowing the Sisters of Fate might take note of him at any instant and prevent his appeal.

With grim perseverance, Kratos cut and slashed his way through. He saw that the metal wall, still sparking and grinding forward, slowed with every death. This spurred him to fight harder. They had no chance against his skill, his strength, his determination and rage, and they died to the last guard. But had he killed them in time?

The wall reversed direction and clanked away amid showers of sparks, then grated to a halt. Kratos acted without thinking, rushing to an exposed door in the outer wall. Just as he slid through the portal, the wall shot back like the descending blade of a Spartan soldier. Kratos had almost lost his arm, if not his life, to the trap. He dropped to one knee, got his breath back, then continued to explore until he came to a room suitable for worship of the Olympian gods. Statues of the gods stood in small niches. Most had been destroyed, but one remained intact. Kratos walked forward and stood before the statue of Athena.

He was not surprised when the statue spoke.

“Kratos, you know not what you do. There are things far more important than your revenge.”

She had once guided him and had been there when he ascended to the throne of the God of War, but like the other gods and goddesses, she had shunned him. Only when he had urged the

warriors of Sparta to conquer the other city-states had she taken notice of him, and then it was to sternly order him to cease.

He had killed Ares. *He* had become God of War! And Athena had sided with Zeus and the others demanding that he not allow his worshippers to go to war.

“You, of all the gods, cannot deny me! Yet you ally with Zeus against me.”

“I will do what I must to protect Olympus,” she said.

“Zeus is not Olympus. He must pay for what he has done. I do not seek to destroy Olympus, only the one who betrayed me, who gave me this reminder of his treachery.” Kratos ran his hand over the scar crossing his belly where the Blade of Olympus had skewered him. The simple touch renewed his determination to kill Zeus.

“Kratos, please ...”

Kratos swung out with the war hammer to crush a statue of Poseidon to dust. Not satisfied, he worked around the room. Finding one of Hermes, Kratos took grim satisfaction in reducing it to gravel.

“I beseech you, Kratos. Cease this quest for revenge. Zeus is far too powerful. You are destined to fail. You do not want to risk his wrath—or what he might do if he is goaded.”

Kratos stopped in his destruction of the statues depicting those who had once been fellow gods and goddesses and stared at Athena’s stony visage. They all told him he would fail. Athena, Zeus, Hermes, the Sisters of Fate. He would not fail. He was the Ghost of Sparta.

“Kratos, please. I am your friend. But your actions make it impossible for me to defend you to Olympus.”

He swung the hammer and sent pieces of Athena’s statue flying throughout the room. Athena’s marble head rolled away, still speaking.

“You must stop!”

Kratos gripped the shaft of the hammer in both hands, lifted and brought it down with every ounce of his strength on the statue’s head. Athena’s head and voice disappeared in a haze of detritus.

Anger still burning, Kratos spun and continued his search through the maze of corridors. Occasional creatures tried to bar his way but

such was his wrath that he dispatched them and hardly noticed the blood on his hands, how he waded through ankle-deep gore on the floors or found his way to a room where a wizened man looked up in surprise.

Kratos saw that this room was the duplicate of the other where he had found the book that required deciphering. For a moment he thought he had gone back in time, but this robed man was different, as were details of the room. This atrium looked out toward the mountain where it seemed that the chrysalis had opened slightly but still nothing of its interior had been revealed. What caused Kratos to hesitate was a large mirror on one wall. The glass was both solid and fluid, rippling like the waves upon the sea.

The old man drew Kratos' attention when he ran to the low wall surrounding the atrium and cried, "I will not let you reach the Sisters."

Kratos needed the Translator if he were to proceed. As the man dashed away, Kratos grabbed. His fingers closed on the man's robe, but to no avail. The fabric ripped. The Translator looked back, eyes wide with fear. He climbed atop the wall and then plunged to his death, past the edge of creation, before Kratos could reach him.

Kratos looked over the precipice. The man had died as a coward—but he had denied Kratos what he required most. Stride quick, he walked back to the pedestal and examined the book. Undecipherable without the skills the now dead Translator possessed. Why else would the man kill himself other than to prevent Kratos from learning what was in this volume? Kratos found himself transfixed by the mirror, which was unlike any he had ever seen. Polished bronze served women well, but this was glass—and yet it wasn't.

Kratos walked to it and stared at his reflection. He reached out slowly, but his fingertips paused, never touching the surface. The curious ripples in his reflection told him this was not a perfect mirror—but it showed him. Turning his head to one side, he saw a shimmer deep within the mirror. A quick turn to look over his shoulder convinced him the mirror showed more than what was in the chamber.

On impulse Kratos reached out to touch the mirror's surface, but he found no resistance. This was definitely not an ordinary looking glass. With a deep breath Kratos plunged into the mirror.

Where shards ought to have cut his flesh he found himself in a peculiar green sea, moving at normal speed while all else slowed. It was as if he had used the Amulet of the Fates, but he felt his guts twisting about and knew entering the mirror was different. He whirled about and stepped back through the mirror to find the green fog gone but the Translator only now looking up from the book.

Kratos had gone back in time. Just a handful of seconds. The Translator tried to kill himself again, but Kratos circled his waist with a strong arm and lifted him bodily to drop him in front of the book.

"Ghost of Sparta?" the Translator rasped out in a frightened voice. "It was foretold that you would come, but I will not let you reach the Sisters."

Kratos bent one arm behind the man in a hammerlock and grasped the back of his head with the other so he could not look away from the book.

"Read the words."

"You must not reach the Sisters. All will be destroyed. Do you understand this?" The Translator groaned as Kratos applied pressure to the hammerlock to emphasize his command.

"Read!" When the man tried to shake his head, Kratos slammed him face-forward into the book. Blood flowed. "This is your purpose. Die with honor."

"Divine Sisters of Fate, hear these words. I have proven my resolve. I seek your divine wisdom and power ..."

The Translator attempted to get away. Kratos slammed him down into the book again, then gripped his hair to pull his face up so he could continue deciphering the peculiar runes.

"Show me the path to your great temple." He cried out in pain and fright. "No, Kratos! This will be the end of us all. Stop!"

"Read!"

Sobbing, the Translator read, "... and I will lay my life before you."

Kratos made sure he did. Life fluids from the man's broken body ran into the shallow blood gutters on the floor, again outlining a Phoenix with widespread wings. Kratos looked out from the atrium and saw what he had mistaken as a huge insect chrysalis on a pillar of ash opening more, spreading wings that could span the distance from Athens to Sparta. The Phoenix's eyes glowed, but the bird did not stir otherwise.

Above, clouds moved away so that the sun shone brightly on the bird. As sunlight moved across its chest and lit its head, it slowly opened its mouth. Cradled within the cavernous mouth gleamed a building of ivory and gold.

The Temple of the Fates.

Kratos went to the low railing and tried to find the base of that ashen spire now capped with a Phoenix but could not. The sides were too sheer to climb. And the distance to the Temple of the Fates was incalculable. Still, he had to risk using the wings of Icarus to fly. That was the most direct path. Before he could step to the railing, he felt a presence in the room.

The reddish apparition of Lahkesis again spoke to him.

"You are impudent, mortal who once was a god. No one petitions the Sisters of Fate without our permission. I do not grant you that boon."

Kratos stared at the Sister. The staff in her hand drew his attention. The wickedly curved blade at the end was more than a formidable weapon. He suspected that with this razored edge she severed threads of fate.

But she had not cut his. She toyed with him.

"What would be necessary for you to give me such an audience?" Kratos saw surprise cross her face. A small smile curled the corner of her mouth, but the amusement died as quickly as it came. This told him she was unlikely to cut his thread of destiny without something more.

What more could it be? His mind raced.

"You have proven an annoyance far too long."

“To you? Or to your sisters?” Kratos saw the shock again on the Sister’s face and knew how to proceed. “You control the fate of the world, but it must become tiresome.”

“I eliminate continents, mortals by the thousands, gods,” Lahkesis said proudly.

“The job wears on your imagination. That is why you have allowed me to come this far.”

“Atropos—” Lahkesis began. She cut off the sentence. “I do not have time for your impudence.” She lifted the scythe, but Kratos saw no thread running to him. Perhaps a mortal or even a god or Titan could not see what the Sisters of Fate did, but he was in their inner sanctum. Hiding the threads would serve no purpose if no one entered. He hoped that the threads being spun were not visible only to the Sisters of Fate.

“So your sister has been my guide thus far,” he said. “She is the one who tires of the sameness of her job.”

“Atropos is a poseur.”

“Your skill is greater?” he asked. Kratos put enough doubt into the question to infuriate the sister.

“It is! Far greater! Atropos mimics me, nothing more, and she does it poorly.” Lahkesis floated upward, clutched her staff in both hands as if ready to lash out, then stared down at him. Kratos saw the subtle change in her visage.

“Perhaps we should grant an audience, but you must prove yourself worthy.”

Kratos knew that anything he said at this moment would change the sister’s sudden resolve to show up Atropos, to continue to enjoy the challenges she placed in front of him. He was under no illusion that Lahkesis would not end his existence in an instant, should she tire of him. Whatever she commanded of him now would almost certainly result in his return to the Underworld.

“Kratos, like the fiery Phoenix who is resurrected from his ashes, you, too, search for a second chance at life. Find these ashes and free the Phoenix. Only then will you find the path to the Temple of the Fates.”

The ghost of the Sister faded from sight. Faint laughter followed her. He stepped away from the railing and glanced toward the mirror. How could he turn its time-changing property to his own advantage? Perhaps he did not need the Sisters of Fate to reverse his destiny but could use this mirror.

It would not be that easy. It could not. He had gone back only seconds in time, not the long weeks necessary to return to Rhodes and slay Zeus.

Kratos left the atrium and went down a curving corridor that led to a capstan with steam leaking around it. He looked up, then began turning the crank to lower the plug. Steam billowed all around him so he could stretch out his wings and soar upward on the thermal air current. Spiraling about, he deftly landed on a platform above. Folding his wings, he ran deeper into the palace, alert for traps and guards.

There was no need for either. He came to a vast cavern filled with glowing magma from the heart of the world. The heat tore at his face and chest, but Kratos saw in it another chance to use the wings of Icarus. He stepped off the floor, extended the pinions, and banked quickly, making his way across the fiery floor, avoiding occasional bubbling geysers of molten rock to finally land on a platform at the far side.

Ahead of him billowed even more intense heat radiating from the magma over which he had flown. To enter this chamber unprotected would mean instant death. Looking around, he saw a tall stone statue. Putting his back to it, he scooted the statue out and used it as a shield to get closer to the flames shooting from the far wall. Barely had he begun his journey across the room than Hades Legionnaires surged forward to engage him. Kratos found himself at a disadvantage, having to remain behind the statue. The creatures from hell had no such problem. If anything, they relished the intense heat and flame that licked at their hindquarters as they brandished their scythes and curved war axes.

Kratos swung his war hammer and caught one Hades Legionnaire with the spiked surface. A second blow knocked the monster to its knees. A third crushed it. But while he fought one, the second came

at him from the rear with an attack that almost took him by surprise. Rather than a sword, this legionnaire simply shoved him forward.

The flames bathed him and burned at his flesh. Kratos spun and grappled with the creature of Hades. His fingers crushed one arm and distracted the legionnaire long enough for Kratos to gather his strength, bend low, and then heave. He swung the creature high, then smashed it to the floor. Kratos whirled around, still holding its arm, and banged it into the rear of the statue. Another hard slam to the floor ended its life.

Kratos pressed into the blisters that dotted his massive chest and sneered. They were badges of honor to him. He lowered his head, pushed hard against the statue, and moved it closer to the flame wall until he could see a point high on the ceiling above to grapple, catch, and swing past. He landed hard beyond the wall, rolled, and came to his feet.

Ahead stretched another chamber filled with molten rock, but this time Kratos dared to hope that he had reached the Phoenix Chamber. In the middle of the ocean of liquid rock stood a ring of columns, the magma bubbling and boiling between them. The sulfur scent made his nose wrinkle, but he also smelled the hint of victory that hung in the air. Standing in an alcove was an intricately decorated urn.

He tried pushing the urn toward the ring of columns, but it proved too heavy for even his immense strength. Kratos stepped back and looked above, seeing a track. He walked back toward the boiling lake of lava and found a lever behind the head of a Phoenix statue. Pulling hard on the lever caused the grappling mechanism to activate. A platform above rolled over the urn and lowered a chain outfitted with a metal collar. Kratos fastened the collar around the lip of the urn, then returned to the lever and pushed it back. Chains rattled, and the winch on the rolling platform above began whirring. The urn lifted from the floor so the platform could roll toward the columns in the molten lake.

The urn stopped directly over the center of the columns before the collar released and sent it hurtling downward. The heat consumed

the urn, but dancing sparks rose above the magma, swirling about and settling down on the boiling surface in the pattern of the Phoenix.

Kratos stepped back and reached for his swords when a head appeared in the molten rock. The columns constrained the creature as the magma beneath it rose slowly. More and more of the Phoenix's writhing body was revealed. Wings formed. The beak snapped as the head took on more definition. Then the Phoenix arched its back and became whole atop the rising pillar of lava.

The Phoenix exploded upward, bursting through the ceiling and leaving behind a hole that showed azure sky beyond.

Kratos explored and found an elevator to a higher level that overlooked the sea. The Phoenix struggled atop the pillar of molten rock, unable to escape. Its wings flapped futilely trying to get free. It spun about, but no amount of fury released it from its invisible bonds.

A long horn at the edge of the terrace drew Kratos. He placed his lips against the horn, remembering how he had summoned Cronos in the Desert of Lost Souls, pursed his lips, and loosed a powerful call. The resonant note built and radiated outward, encompassing the Phoenix and the column of magma holding it. The Phoenix shivered as if cold, then shot upward, free of its molten bondage.

Kratos watched as the bird with flaming feathers circled and then settled on a perch halfway between him and the prodigious Phoenix statue with the ivory-and-gold palace in its mouth.

He had freed the Phoenix and had won the right to an audience with the Sisters of Fate.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“LORD POSEIDON,” Iris said, bowing slightly. “I had thought to find King Zeus.”

“In my chambers?”

“He is often here since he trusts you above all others,” Iris said. She half turned to hide her disdain, sending bits of rainbow from her gown flying around the drab quarters. Poseidon lived like a fish. Her nose wrinkled slightly as the thought crossed her mind that he smelled like one, also.

“Zeus said that? He trusts me more than he does Hades?”

“Certainly,” Iris lied. “He would never take any of the other Olympians into his confidence.”

“I did best Oceanus,” Poseidon said thoughtfully. “That was an epic battle and saved Zeus from having to deal with a Titan controlling the waters that girdled the earth.”

Iris looked at him askance.

“Yes, this must be why Zeus said such a thing about me,” Poseidon went on, puffing himself up. “Oceanus was not easily vanquished. He had three thousand offspring! I had to bring every river and lake under my domination to defeat the Titans. Still,” he said, running fingers through his seaweed beard, “I find it odd that Zeus would trust me so when there are others ...”

She sniffed and looked pained. “Certainly not Athena.”

“Athena? She is his favorite.” Poseidon chuckled. “I can see why. She has the gift of persuasion.”

“A thief with her words,” Iris said.

“How’s that?”

“Oh, just something I heard Zeus say. But I must find him. I have an urgent message. Do you know where he is?”

“He rushed off to do whatever his anger dictated,” Poseidon said. “His wrath has grown of late.”

“Kratos,” she said, nodding as if she agreed with him. “Kratos provokes him at every turn. It’s a shame none of the Olympians cares enough for Zeus to do anything about that annoying mortal. It seems that Kratos allies himself with Gaia, and you know what rabble-rousers those Titans can be.”

“What are you saying?” Poseidon bent over and looked at her closely. Iris tried not to flinch as seaweed from his beard flopped across her face. Worse than this saltwater assault, the stench of fish almost made her gag. Zeus always had a strangely pungent odor about him, something like garlic, especially after he had lashed out with his thunderbolt. That was bearable, but Poseidon!

“What everyone knows,” she said carefully. “The rumors run rampant that he holds back on dealing with Kratos again because of Athena’s importuning.”

“She is his favorite,” Poseidon repeated.

“But he would certainly favor anyone who relieved him of Kratos and his meddling ways. Zeus is far too hard on himself.”

“What do you mean?”

Iris looked hard at Poseidon and saw he was soaking up her every word like a sponge from his underwater kingdom. Trying not to laugh at his gullibility proved more difficult than the lies she told so glibly.

“He blames himself for elevating Kratos to the throne, although it was entirely Athena’s doing. She hated Ares and used Kratos to kill him, then thought she could control the new God of War. Kratos proved too obstinate for that. Once a mortal, always a mortal.”

“He would show great favor to anyone killing Kratos?”

“I am sure Zeus is on a pilgrimage now to think about this matter away from the Olympian hubbub.”

“He’s not going to kill Kratos himself?”

“I hardly think so. Not even Zeus dares oppose the Sisters of Fate,” Iris said. “But I do need to find him. I have important messages.” She hesitated because Poseidon pursed his lips but did not come to the conclusion she had hoped he might. “You don’t know where he is? Perhaps finding a way to deal with Kratos that would not anger Athena?”

“A way of killing Kratos.” The God of the Oceans smiled cruelly. “Now, what could kill a crafty warrior like the Ghost of Sparta?”

“I don’t know, Lord Poseidon, but a god of sufficient daring and power would,” Iris said. She silently added, *But I am sure I will find out soon. All of Olympus will find out!*



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE PHOENIX SAT on its perch with the Palace of the Fates some distance beyond it. Kratos compared the newly resurrected firebird with the spire of ash and the opened wing replica with the palace in its mouth. There had to be a connection between the actual Phoenix and the location of the Fates' palace, but he could not see what it was. Blowing again on the horn would solve nothing, but a different perspective on both Phoenix and palace might. He began edging along a narrow walkway to find the true path to the Sisters.

The walkway ended in a room opening on the sea, the Phoenix, and the palace but otherwise in utter darkness. But Kratos sensed another being near even before he heard, "I have come too far to fail!"

Kratos drew the Blades of Athena and swung around in time to meet a sword thrust with a quick parry. His opponent, cloaked in darkness, peppered blows with a fist along with his sword attack. Kratos ignored the pummeling, blocked a lunge with the flat of one blade, then swung about and brought its razored edge down on the attacker's head. Only a last-instant twitch saved the man from having his head split open.

This turned the tide of combat. His opponent weakened rapidly from the blow, which had severed an ear and cut deeply into his shoulder. Kratos pressed his advantage. He batted the sword from

the man's hand, grabbed him around the waist, and lifted. Grunting, Kratos slammed the man into a wall and felt even more fight drain away.

But his foe proved not to be as easy a kill as it first seemed. Kratos punched hard, but the man jerked to one side. Kratos' fist slammed into the wall, and he loosened his grip on the hidden man. Kratos landed two more hard punches.

As quickly as the fight began, it ended. The man grappled with Kratos and wrenched him about. Kratos drew his sword and lunged; locked together, they plunged through an interior window, fell two stories, and landed hard in the center of a large porch overlooking the ocean, surrounded by shards of glass from above.

Kratos started to twist the sword he had buried in the man's gut, then saw his opponent clearly for the first time.

"You?" Kratos slid his sword from the soldier's torso.

The soldier looked up, clutching Kratos' sword, which had run through his chest. "My lord. In the darkness, I didn't recognize you! I sought the Sisters to ..."

Kratos grabbed him by the cuirass as he had once before back in Rhodes.

"I told you to return to Sparta. Why do you leave Sparta unprotected?"

"Sparta," the young soldier gasped out, visibly weakening, "is no more." He looked away, unable to meet Kratos' accusing gaze.

"What treachery is this?" Kratos shook him hard to focus his attention on reporting rather than dwelling on the sword wound that would soon end his life.

"Zeus," the young soldier said, coughing up blood. "He came under the cloak of darkness. I was standing guard with two others when a thunderbolt destroyed the wall and sent us flying through the air. They were killed. I was trapped under a large stone, unable to move—but I saw. Oh, my lord, I saw every moment of the destruction!"

Kratos stared in disbelief, trying to understand what he was being told. Sparta laid to waste? Impossible!

“The people ran about in confusion, begging for their god to save them. I saw Zeus striding through the city, a hundred feet tall. More! He reached down and destroyed the tallest structures by plucking them like a thorn from flesh. He crushed smaller buildings underfoot, then ground what he had already crushed into powder finer than flour. Fires raged, fires Zeus caused by plucking lightning bolts from the sky and hurling them into the city. Women and children were burned to death before my eyes.” The soldier sagged back. Kratos shook him again until his eyelids fluttered and the soldier forced himself to speak.

“They ran past me, on fire, and I could do nothing. My legs were pinned under a stone from a temple—your temple, God of War.”

“Yet you are here,” Kratos said.

“I forced the stone from my legs and stood weaponless to face a god, but Lord Zeus had already gone to destroy more distant sections of Sparta. I was left with no choice. I had to seek out the Sisters to change the fate of our beloved Sparta.”

“How did you penetrate this far into their temple?” Kratos asked.

The soldier looked up, his lips moving but no sound coming out. He shuddered and blood trickled from his lips before he spoke.

“I was brought here. A giant eagle caught me in its claws, then dropped me.”

Kratos caught his breath. Could the soldier have been brought by Zeus? The Sisters of Fate had to have allowed it. This made Kratos suspicious. Lahkesis had chosen to present him with a new challenge before giving him an audience. The dying soldier might be part of that barrier to his quest. Was his hatred for Zeus greater than his loyalty to his Spartans? A wrong decision now might doom him in Lahkesis’ eyes.

Kratos held the soldier upright. No strength remained in him, but he fought to finish his tale.

The soldier coughed and turned, croaking out, “For I am all that’s left.” He fell back and stared up, a tiny smile curling his lips. “Now you are all that’s left. I have faith that our brothers of Sparta will live on to see the true God of War.” He choked on his own blood, and died.

Kratos released his grip and stood, staring at his fallen comrade. The soldier's death had taken away one possible course. There was no reason for him to abandon Gaia's quest now and return to Sparta to save that city. He threw back his arms and looked skyward, bellowing, "Zeus! Is this how you face me? Coward! I am through doing the bidding of the gods. Come down here and face me now, Zeus!"

A fetid gust of wind pressed into Kratos' back. He heard a squishing sound followed by the sharp *clack* of what might have been steel against steel. Slowly turning, he stared into a gaping mouth filled with viciously curved fangs. Eyes the size of a warrior's shield fixed him with utter hatred, and curved pincers pressed into the stone flooring as the Kraken drew itself up from the sea.

"Zeus won't even fight his own battle," Kratos said, sneering. "He has Poseidon send his minion!"

The Kraken roared and spat at him.

"Come down here and face me now!" Kratos roared, not at the Kraken but at Olympus. "I grow tired of the lies of the gods."

Kratos swung his war hammer in an arc before him. The Kraken reared higher and pulled more tentacles from the sea. It roared and lashed out with preternatural speed, a tentacle whipping around Kratos and circling him entirely. Arms pinned to his side, Kratos struggled in the slimy grasp—to no avail. The Kraken lifted him high and drew him closer to its maw. It would feast this day.

Kratos made a mighty heave in an attempt to break free but the tentacle slithered up around his neck. And squeezed. And squeezed and squeezed.

He blacked out for a moment and then thrashed about, startled to find himself on a hillside. The clouds in the overcast sky reflected light from the fires burning in the city below. Kratos took a step forward when he saw the woman making her way toward him. Silently she stopped a few feet away.

"I am so sorry, my love." The furious hatred for Zeus faded as Lysandra stepped even closer. "Can you ever forgive me?" His voice was hardly a whisper, but earnest and spoken from the heart that he had forsaken for vengeance.

“All is not lost, Kratos.”

His eyes widened. The voice was not that of his beloved wife but of Gaia. He tried to speak but words refused to form. The gods had used him for their own whims, and he had rebelled. Gaia used him, too, speaking through Lysandra to manipulate him. Kratos found he did not care. Seeing his wife again, come across the Elysian Fields, even with the backdrop of a burning, destroyed Sparta, filled him with joy and longing.

“You must go on,” she said. “There is much at stake here.”

Kratos held up his hands, palms toward his wife, and shook his head in sorrow.

“I cannot defeat the gods.”

“Victory favors you, Kratos. But you must grab hold of your destiny and command it. There is a war on the horizon, and we need you to lead us into battle.”

Kratos looked past his wife—past Gaia—to destroyed Sparta. Fires burned like the campfires of some vast army, but none lived amid the ruins. Zeus had been too thorough in his rampage.

“To what end?” He was pleading for an answer.

“The death of Zeus! If you relent, Zeus will torment you still. He will not rest knowing you live. And when you die his brother Hades will see that your shade is tortured for all eternity. You will have no rest until you destroy him.”

His wife lifted her hands and placed them on his shoulders. Her touch was magic, electric—fire. Flames rose to consume her, to blend with those of the distant destruction in Sparta. Thunder rolled across the sky, and the flames consumed them both where she touched his shoulders.

“Take within you this fire that burned your beloved Sparta. Let it fuel your rage and hasten your steps toward destiny.”

From head to foot Kratos filled with molten fire. It raced through his veins and caused his heart to hammer so hard in his chest, he thought it might explode. She removed her hands but remained close.

“The time to act is upon us, Kratos. This battle is just the beginning of a great war that is to come.”

He reached for her and found his arms pinioned at his sides by slippery flesh. Kratos shook all over and twisted about in the Kraken's tentacled grasp. It opened its mouth and roared. Kratos stared down its gullet and saw not flesh and blood but the eternal torture Gaia had promised at Hades' hand should he fail.

Kratos summoned the Rage of the Titans and forced open the tentacle wide enough to slip to the stone flooring. The Kraken wrapped more tentacles around two pillars on either side to better pull itself up to the attack.

Kratos swung his spiked war hammer with all his strength. He tore away a goblet of the Kraken's tentacle but did not seem to affect it. The mighty sea monster roared, a green cloud expanding outward and searing all that it touched. Seeing how close it came to the fallen Spartan soldier, Kratos rushed over and heaved the young man's body over his shoulder. The Kraken roared again and lashed out with its tentacles. Every attack Kratos made on the left side produced movement.

He dropped the soldier's body onto a pressure plate near the left tentacle and immediately felt a rising column of hot air directly in front of the Kraken. Extending the wings of Icarus allowed Kratos to soar upward on the thermal so he could circle just above the sea monster's head. With the Blades of Athena aflame, he stabbed downward into the ribbed forehead, cutting off part of a dorsal fin and further enraging the creature. A lashing tentacle knocked him from the sky, sending him rolling across the stone floor.

As the Kraken brought down a tentacle to crush him, Kratos lashed out with both blades and began sawing away at the slimy appendage. The Kraken fought to get free but only succeeded in aiding Kratos as he chopped off the tentacle's end.

The Kraken recoiled, giving Kratos a chance to again become airborne and stab repeatedly at its head and upturned ugly face. Try as he might to blind it, the heavy bony ridges over the Kraken's eyes protected its sight. A chance blow sent Kratos tumbling from the sky once more. He came to his feet in time to avoid a tentacle crashing down on him.

As before, he slashed at the end, worrying his blades about and digging deeply whenever the opportunity presented itself. The end of this tentacle soon lay on the floor, severed by Kratos' slashing blades.

The Kraken recoiled at this new pain, giving Kratos the chance to unleash the Rage of the Titans once more. Electric sparks erupted, enveloping the Kraken, dancing from its eyes to the fangs in its mouth and finally burning at its tentacles. As the spell worked to humble Poseidon's monster, Kratos launched himself upward on flapping wings and renewed his attacks against the monster's head and eyes. He drove it downward. Seeing victory within his grasp, Kratos landed on the edge of the terrace.

The Kraken's massive body had hidden a lever. Kratos drew it back. A bridge shot outward, decapitating the Kraken. Kratos nodded solemnly as he saw the bridge extended to the pedestal where the Phoenix perched, as if waiting for this moment. Kratos ran out onto the bridge, vaulted over the pieces of Kraken staining the roadway, and landed only a few feet from where the firebird perched on a roost atop a fiery brazier.

Kratos walked around the brazier, staring up at the thirty-foot-tall Phoenix. He glanced from its nervous movement on the perch to the distant spire of ash and the stone Phoenix that had opened its beak to reveal the Temple of the Fates.

Stopping directly in front of the Phoenix, Kratos cast out his blades, using them as grapples that caught on either side of the bird, just in front of its wings. The Phoenix went berserk, flapping and thrashing, burning hotter and trying to escape the punishment. With a powerful tug, Kratos dragged the Phoenix from its perch and knocked it flat on its breast in front of him. Ignoring the fiercely burning feathers, Kratos jumped onto the firebird's back. It surged upward, dropped one wing, did everything possible to dislodge him.

Kratos held on firmly to the grapples and reined them in to gain better control. The Phoenix took to wing, rolling over and banking suddenly in further attempts to unseat him.

It would take more than this to deter Kratos now. He bent forward and guided his fiery transport toward the open mouth of

the stone Phoenix far out to sea. The Phoenix understood that it would be free if it obeyed his commands.

On powerful wings blazing, the Phoenix carried Kratos toward his goal: the Temple of the Fates.



“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” cried Athena.

“Keep a civil tone,” Zeus said, glowering at her. “I did what was necessary. Kratos had destroyed the other cities. I destroyed Sparta.”

“That won’t keep him from killing you—from trying to kill you,” she hastily amended, shocked at the slip of her tongue. More and more she said what she thought rather than what was wisest. Dealing with the Olympians had always required a large amount of diplomacy, to soothe bruised vanity, to gloss over slights, to guide the others in the direction she desired. Not for nothing had Zeus valued her counsel above all others. She had remained calm and tactful when others grew wroth or sulked.

“Kratos has always been your pet mortal. No longer. I declare him nothing more than a stag to hunt, game to bring down. I want him dead! For good! I want my brother Hades to imprison him in the deepest hellhole in the Underworld for the rest of eternity.”

“Destroying Sparta only stiffened his resolve,” she said.

“How do you know this, daughter? Where is he?”

“I know Kratos. Wherever he is—”

“I know where he is,” came a clear, lilting voice that rang out as clear as a bell.

“Hermes!” The name slipped from her lips before she realized it. She raised her hand to motion him away, but the god paid her no

heed and flew forward to the bottom step leading to Zeus' throne.

"I banished you! You defy me!" Zeus jumped to his feet and drew down the power of lightning to slay Hermes.

"I venerate you, Sky Father," Hermes said, bowing deeply. "I bring you news of Kratos that will allow you to destroy him."

"You were banned from Mount Olympus," Zeus said, but his tone moderated.

Athena stepped to one side, marveling at Hermes' foolhardiness. Or was it bravery? She looked at him with new appreciation.

"I serve you, no matter where I go. And always I seek the truth that you have been denied."

"What are you saying?" Zeus tossed a glowing sphere of lightning from one hand to the other.

"Ask Lord Poseidon why he sent the Kraken to kill Kratos."

"He did what?"

"My brother!" Poseidon roared into the audience chamber. "I know nothing of what this fool is saying."

"Lord Poseidon loves and honors you above all and wanted only to stop Kratos," Hermes said in his clarion voice. "He did not know he had been deceived."

"Deceived?" Poseidon shook his trident in Hermes' face. "What are you saying?"

"You did what you had been told was proper, sending your Kraken against Kratos. You did not know the Sisters of Fate had decreed that the Kraken would fail."

"Fail?" Poseidon looked uneasy.

"Why did you send the Kraken, brother?" Zeus continued to toss the glowing sphere back and forth but now squeezed it, compressing it, intensifying the power within.

"To aid you, Zeus," Hermes answered for the Lord of the Oceans. "He did not know the Sisters of Fate had forbidden the Kraken's success. Iris led him astray and put him in conflict with the Sisters."

"Iris? What do you mean, Hermes?"

Athena started to intervene, then forced herself to silence. Hermes was proving more diplomatic—more cunning—than she could ever

be. His banishment had forced him to mature and become more circumspect.

“She has lied to you, my king, to disgrace Poseidon in your eyes. In this way she would gain more influence among the Olympians.”

“That’s so, Zeus,” bellowed Poseidon.

“Is it?” Zeus frowned.

“It is, Sky Father,” Athena said. “My uncle speaks the truth. He was misled by Iris.”

“Iris thought to anger the Sisters of Fate and turn them against you,” Hermes went on. “She seeks your throne, Zeus. By pitting the Sisters against the gods, Iris thought to emerge the victor.”

Zeus looked from Hermes to Poseidon and then to Athena. He had no trouble interpreting whom Hermes meant by “the gods.” Athena kept her face solemn, although she wanted to cry out in triumph. Hermes might embellish Iris’ plans, but the kernel of truth was obvious, even to Zeus.

“I once more greet you as Messenger of the Gods, Hermes,” Zeus said. “Your first mission as courier is to tell Iris she is banished. Never again will she be allowed to walk the earth save at sunrise or sunset and then only when it is raining.”

“I hear and obey, great lord,” Hermes said, bowing deeply.

“You are to return and tell me more. Kratos destroyed my brother’s Kraken? This can only be possible with the acquiescence of the Sisters of Fate. Gifts must be sent to them in the name of all gods and goddesses.” Zeus turned to Athena. “Since Poseidon sent his Kraken, you are less likely to stir their ire. Send what tribute is appropriate.”

“They were our allies during the Great War,” Athena said. “We must never lose their cooperation.”

“No, we must not,” Zeus said. His dour expression returned. He sat heavily and crushed the lightning ball in his hand, sending sparks exploding outward. “But I will not allow them to protect Kratos. He will die. I will see Kratos dead!” As his wrath cooled, a look of determination settled on his craggy face. “Iris told me Kratos was dead, when she lied to use him against me.” Zeus’ right hand closed, leaking a lambency that increasingly turned to rainbow

colors. "She will rue the day she sought to deceive me." His hand opened and rainbow colors exploded in all directions until nothing but a dull gray fog remained.

Athena had nothing to say to this. Not now. Hermes had returned to his wonted position and Iris had been relegated to a minor role again, stripped of her spectrum. There would be time to plead Kratos' case to Zeus. Soon. But not now.

She bowed to her father, then left. Perhaps Aphrodite or Artemis would accompany her to an audience with the Sisters. For the first time since Ares had been killed, she felt that serenity for all Olympus was within her grasp.



“WE MUST CONSULT CLOTHO,” Atropos said. Her voice almost broke with strain.

Lahkesis nodded slowly, thinking about all that had happened.

“You are right, sister. Your meddling has—”

“Mine! What of your silly dallying with Kratos? He is yours, and you have allowed him to come this far!”

“We must share some of the blame for that, sister,” Lahkesis said. “We have worked at cross purposes. The Warrior of Destiny was too hesitant with the use of the Spear of Destiny and allowed Kratos to recover it.”

“Cut his thread now. I will measure it, you cut it,” Atropos said, her voice shrill. “Kratos is aided by Gaia.”

“Gaia,” Lahkesis said, waving her hand in dismissal. “The Titans dream of bygone days. They will never be a threat. What worries me more is the Kraken. Did you weave the monster’s attack into Poseidon’s thread? No, of course not. Neither did I.”

“That’s not possible. You must have. You were teasing Kratos and had Poseidon send his monster,” Atropos said. She fell silent when she saw the answer on her sister’s face.

“We who are mistresses of the fate of the world are not supposed to be surprised by such things, especially when the attack occurs on our doorstep.”

“If you didn’t weave the Kraken’s attack into a thread and I didn’t, could Clotho have done so?”

“Come with me to the Loom Chamber,” Lahkesis said, “and we will settle this matter. We must decide on a destiny for Kratos immediately.”

“We had done so,” Atropos said. “He defies the fate that we set for him.”

“Impossible,” Lahkesis said, though she had an uneasy feeling that her sister might skirt the truth. She shook it off. The Sisters of Fate were supreme. This problem with Kratos had occurred only because Atropos had dabbled in what she thought would be an adventure, just as she had. Their work on Kratos’ thread had proven to run at cross-purposes, creating the current situation with him prowling about the Island of Creation.

“Clotho!” Atropos called the instant they reached the Loom Chamber. Their immense sister hunkered on her pedestal, working to spin countless fates. A huge eye turned toward them.

“Sister,” Lahkesis said, keeping her own tone level. “We must discuss Kratos.”

“Have you cut his thread too soon? That is all right, though, there is still tension,” Clotho said, reaching out to pluck at a black thread. She rested her hand on the thread, then slowly stroked it before turning to her sisters. “What have you done? This is outrageous! Cut the thread now, Lahkesis. Now!”

“Note how his thread intertwines with so many of the Titans,” Lahkesis said. “Gaia mentors him and has allowed him to come as far as he has.”

“You and Atropos are responsible, meddling individually. Cut the thread now!” Clotho plucked it again, but the vibrations died out quickly. Too quickly. Such a tweak should have crippled Kratos. It didn’t.

“I should face him,” Lahkesis said. “There is more to Kratos than we know.”

“No!” Both Atropos and Clotho cried out in unison at such a heretical thought.

“The Ghost of Sparta is Gaia’s pawn, but there is more to him. He is developing a will not controlled by our determination of his fate.”

“This cannot be,” Clotho said. “We are sole arbiters of destiny.” She looked at her sisters and said in a cold voice, “If he has somehow escaped our rule, others might, also. Can it be an effect of Pandora’s Box?”

“The gods are becoming agitated,” Atropos said, “but doing nothing to contradict our destinies for them.”

“Yet,” Lahkesis said, “the evidence is mounting that we must more tightly monitor our work. The Kraken, Gaia and the other Titans, the gods’ behavior after Ares was killed ... and at the center of it all is Kratos.”

“Very well, sister,” Clotho said. “Put the worst possible obstacles in his path. If those do not stop him, then confront him. Find out if he has somehow escaped from his thread of destiny, though I feel it is only your and Atropos’ poor judgment and poorer execution that is responsible.”

Lahkesis bowed slightly, then left the Loom Chamber with Atropos trailing. Kratos would return to the Underworld soon. The Phoenix would be his bane. And if he somehow survived, she would face him to see what made the Ghost of Sparta able to evade his fate.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

THE PHOENIX TRIED to bank away from the opened mouth of the stone Phoenix, but Kratos forced it back onto course. As they flew nearer, he saw a pool of water in the gaping mouth. The Phoenix flared all over and sent fiery sparks everywhere as it fought to avoid entry. Kratos gathered his strength, put his feet against the firebird's side, and then launched himself into space, diving into the pool. By the time he surfaced and looked out the mouth, the true firebird was winging its way out of sight.

He swam strongly to a platform and pulled himself up. The large bell in the center of the mouth, where a uvula might have been expected, could be rung with a swinging pendulum clapper. Kratos placed his hand on the huge bronze rod that could be sent crashing into the side of the bell. To announce visitors? Why would the Sisters of Fate not know who came to their palace when Lahkesis had twice visited him in the form of a red-hued ghost as he fought his way to this point? Some other secret lay hidden in the bell and its clapper.

Kratos examined the structure and saw how the clapper could be rotated using a capstan. He began turning the crank, repositioning the huge bronze rod until it hung at a right angle to the bell. Only then did Kratos hop up and draw it back to the full extent of the arc permitted by its chains. He released it to smash into a wall. The

masonry collapsed in a pile and created dust clouds. Kratos stepped away and peered through, hunting for traps or foes. After the dust settled and he saw nothing to impede his advance, Kratos rushed through.

On the far side of the wall he found an impeccably maintained corridor that led to a chamber so huge, he could hardly see to the far side. In the center some hundreds of feet below was a round platform, as if for supplicants. Kratos spread Icarus' wings and glided down, barely touching before he heard a commotion above. Looking aloft he saw Lahkesis step off a platform, then slowly float lower until her feet were only a few inches above the platform where Kratos stood. The intent was obvious. She was superior and he was a mere mortal.

"We've been expecting you." The upper part of her face was hidden by a black mask, and her voluptuous body was more beguiling than any houri Kratos had ever seen. Sleek, bare legs extended down, but her feet did not touch the floor. She floated inches above the tiled flooring, as if she disdained sharing the act of walking with a mere mortal.

Kratos reached out an arm to grab the Sister.

Lahkesis smiled and brushed off his hand.

"Your resolve is admirable, even if it is misguided. I truly thought you would have given up by now." Lahkesis rose a few more inches and orbited about Kratos, as if seeing him for the first time. The amused smile grew.

"None can change their destiny, Kratos," she went on, coming to a halt in front of him. "We sisters determine the fate of all. It was I who deemed that the Titans lose the Great War and I who have allowed you to come this far, because it pleased me." The smile disappeared. "It is not your destiny to kill Zeus."

She floated around him and reached out to touch his shoulder, but he drew back.

"You no longer control my destiny."

"Gaia has filled you with her lies—"

Kratos grabbed Lahkesis by the throat and squeezed hard so she could not finish the sentence.

“Give me what I want. I would go back in time and kill Zeus.”

Lahkesis made a small gesture, knocking Kratos’ hand away with the contempt born of total power.

“You have always amused us, Kratos. But know this, mortal, there is no power greater than the Sisters of Fate.”

She held up her staff with the shepherd’s crook edged with a knife blade, but no shepherd’s staff ever produced such eye-searing light. It exploded outward toward Kratos. Barely was he able to raise the Golden Fleece to deflect the magicks. Many battles had been won through aggression. Kratos attacked rather than waiting to see how Lahkesis would further employ the staff, now completely bathed in green light. He rushed forward, the Blades of Athena slashing furiously.

Lahkesis gasped as the edges cut into her coppery flesh. She tried to flutter higher, but Kratos prevented it with a high strike that arced above his head and came down on the Sister’s shoulder. The blow knocked her to the floor. Kratos pressed his advantage with a flurry of thrusts and cuts. Somehow Lahkesis once more gained the air and floated high, the hem of her long, intricately woven robe barely brushing the platform.

Kratos unleashed the Rage of the Titans and again knocked Lahkesis to the floor, but this time she used the long staff as a sweep and caught his leg. A quick yank sent him sprawling onto his back.

She soared above him, her glowing staff aimed at him. Kratos caught the new bolt of energy on his crossed swords but felt the shock all the way up his arms and across his shoulders. It was as if he had been hit with the Barbarian King’s maul.

A second bolt narrowly missed him. He rolled to the left and scrambled to get his feet under him. He faced away from Lahkesis and she swooped in for the kill. War hammer in hand, he spun about. The full power of the rotation and his incredible muscular strength powered the spiked head directly into the Sister’s body. Lahkesis turned a flip in midair and crashed to the floor, lying on her face and moaning in pain. Kratos walked over, the hammer raised for a killing blow.

Lahkesis looked up at him.

“You do not deny fate, Kratos.” She slammed her staff onto the floor. At first Kratos wanted to laugh at the ineffectual gesture. It was nothing more than spite and not a real attack or attempt at defense.

“We have woven the events of your life ...”

The crook grew brighter yet and cast a shadow against the far wall. Lahkesis tapped her staff against the floor and caused an inky mist to expand slowly, roiling and taking form in front of a tall mirror.

“Atropos,” he growled, recognizing the sister flowing from the mirror. In place of legs she rode on the ebon mist, floating toward him.

Both Sisters of Fate intoned, “... and now that life is at an end.”

Kratos backed away to confront the two Sisters.

Atropos screeched as she swooped down, her long, talon-like fingers clawing at Kratos. He caught her up and threw her to the floor, but holding her was difficult. She proved stronger and more agile than her fragile appearance suggested as she writhed away from him.

Atropos screeched again and grabbed him, carrying him through the mirror.

It was Kratos’ turn to scream. It felt as if every muscle in his body was strained to the breaking point. Bones cracked and nerves sang with pain. And the brightly lit throne room of the Fates had turned to inky night. He took a step and sank to hands and knees, fighting the dizziness. His gorge rose, but he forced it back, despite the burning bile in his mouth.

He looked up, got to his feet, and stared into the distance, where he saw himself as a giant battling with an equally outsized Ares. A curse came to his lips when he saw that distant self wielding the Blades of Chaos, their chains still welded to the bones of his forearms showing he was a minion of Ares.

“We control your destiny, foolish mortal,” cackled Atropos. “With a whim, we can end your life ... or allow you to live.”

Kratos looked at the ground and realized he stood on a broad strip of steel. Then his attention was drawn once more to the distant

fight. Ares fired a massive fireball that whirled and spun and formed a vortex so powerful, it sucked up everything around it. Kratos cried out, but his other self was sucked into the tornado. Ares threw back his head and laughed, then vanished in a sheet of lambent light.

Kratos swung his sword as Atropos swooped past. Her impossibly long talons lightly raked his cheek, and then she soared away, hovering high above him, her feet hidden by the blackness.

“Search your memory, Kratos. The sword on which you stand delivered your victory against Ares. Without it, you will be the one who dies this day, *not* Ares. We can change your past and set your future. This is the power of the Fates!”

Kratos spun and saw that the Sister spoke truly. He stood on a long bridge made from a sword—a sword he knew all too well.

The steel blade cracked under his feet, causing him to fight to retain his balance. He fell to one knee and saw Atropos preparing to release a glowing sphere of pure energy at him. Drawing Typhon’s Bane, he released one icy arrow after another. One caught Atropos and sent her spinning back.

Atropos launched one of her fireballs. Never hesitating, Kratos deflected it with the Golden Fleece, but it did not soar back at Atropos. Rather it looped out in a wide arc and came back toward him.

He ran. The sphere chased him, gaining swiftly. The white burning star of energy that formed before releasing the Cronos Rage failed to grow. He had to rejuvenate, and only time would accomplish that. Instead, he felt the chill suffuse his entire body from the gift Atlas had given him. Kratos stumbled, fell onto his back, and lifted arms and legs. From hands and feet roared the Atlas Quake. The power of the magic met, meshed, and canceled out Atropos’ sphere of death.

Getting to his feet, Kratos unleashed a new attack on Atropos using Typhon’s Bane. The bowstring hummed as he loosed one gelid wind gust after another. Several more airy missiles struck Atropos, causing her to sink until she hovered only a few feet above the sword bridge.

Kratos lashed out with his swords and caught the Sister of Fate on each shoulder with the grapples. He jerked her downward to the bridge, kicked her in the head, then drew his sword and drove the point through her forehead. Orange fire enveloped Atropos' body as he stepped away. Bit by bit the blackness that had encircled her lower extremities worked its way upward, as if devouring her.

The smoky blackness circled and enveloped Kratos, then he was spun about and exploded in size to match that of the advancing Ares. Kratos looked from the God of War to the immense sword bridging the great chasm. He reached down and ripped it free from its stone anchors to use against Ares.

As the blade pulled free, what remained of Atropos tumbled over and over into the chasm. Her screams faded into the distance. Kratos ignored her and turned to face Ares. A surge of knowing blasted through him. He had faced Ares like this before. He had fought Ares with his sword and won. The battle had been ...

Kratos stood staring at the mirror in the Temple of the Fates, Atropos pounding against the far side. She had been trapped, and Kratos no longer held the blade that had spanned the chasm. Atropos clawed and smashed repeatedly against the other side of the mirror but could not get through.

Kratos half turned to Lahkesis, who said, "I am through playing games with you, Kratos. This power was never meant for a mortal like you."

Lahkesis raised her staff. It had been eye searing before. Now it seared Kratos' very soul.

He squared off to face Lahkesis.

Green lightning raced from Lahkesis' staff to each of three mirrors in the room. Kratos rushed forward, swords swinging. He drove Lahkesis back and circled—and beyond her he saw Atropos halfway through a mirror. Her talons clawed the air, seeking his flesh. The upper portion of her body writhed as if she were in excruciating pain because of the half entry back into this world, this time.

Kratos pulled out his war hammer and rushed to the mirror where Atropos struggled. Mighty blows of that heavy maul cracked the looking glass and drove Atropos back to the far side. Barely had he

succeeded in smashing this mirror when Lahkesis renewed her attacks. Kratos used his hammer on her, stunning her, but saw that Atropos tried to creep through another of the remaining mirrors.

Kratos used the Amulet of the Fates to slow time. He ran to the second mirror, where Atropos seemed stuck halfway through, and swung his hammer, smashing the glass to shards. Atropos vanished once more, leaving only one mirror passage.

Seeing the second mirror destroyed, Lahkesis redoubled her efforts to kill him. Her staff flared constantly now, forming marching columns of death that sought to encircle Kratos. He avoided them, backing toward the untouched mirror, thinking to smash it, too. Lahkesis rushed forward, oblivious to the way she left herself open to attack. Kratos wrested the staff from her, swung it around, and knocked the Sister of Fate skidding across the floor. He reared back to impale her with her own weapon.

When he focused on Lahkesis, Atropos came through the remaining mirror and grabbed him from behind, lifting him off the floor and shaking him like a hunting dog would its kill. He lost his grip on Lahkesis' staff. It went spinning away from him, to be caught up by the Sister.

"I measure fate with these, and your fate is at an end!"

Kratos grunted in pain as Atropos' talons cut into his body and left bloody tracks on his bone-white skin, across the red tattoos, deep to the muscles beneath. He twisted and jerked about in a vain attempt to break her grip. She was too powerful.

From across the room Lahkesis let out a cry of glee. She lowered her staff and shot through the air straight for Kratos. Held by Atropos, he could not avoid Lahkesis' staff—and death.

At the last possible instant he used the Amulet of the Fates, drawing power from resolve and hatred deep within, froze time for a heartbeat, levered himself free of Atropos' steely fingers, and released the spell. Lahkesis plunged onward, aiming her deadly staff for the spot where Kratos had been.

She skewered her own sister. Atropos let out a heartrending cry and fell backward into the mirror. In the instant that Lahkesis stood stunned at what she had done, Kratos struck. He grabbed her by the

throat, then stabbed her in the forehead with his sword. She slumped in his grip as he shoved her through the mirror to join her sister.

When both of the Sisters of Fate flailed about on the far side of the plane of the mirror, he took his war hammer and began smashing the glass. Blow after mighty blow landed on the final mirror. Both Sisters rushed forward, but the mirror had cracked and they could not get through. Kratos continued to pummel the mirror until it shattered, revealing a corridor behind.

Panting with exertion, he lowered the war hammer to the floor and stared. Resolve hardened within his breast. He was close.

He climbed through the open frame, glass crunching under his sandals as he went to find the remaining Sister of Fate.



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“YOU MUST NOT come to my loom, Kratos. You will destroy everything.”

The words rumbled in his head. Kratos roared in defiance, swung his hammer against a part of the stone wall in front of him, and smashed it with a single blow. He knew with complete certainty that this way led to Clotho, the final Sister of Fate.

The ramp spiraled down, empty of all impediment to passage, but Kratos advanced warily. He spun when he heard a hissing sound behind him. A curtain of energy sizzled and then a Gorgon’s head took form and sailed outward. He drew his swords, ready to fight, but the Gorgon’s head stretched to within a few feet and then returned to the plane of the energy curtain. He knew that, had the Gorgon touched him, he would have died.

“Retreat, Kratos, and I will let you live out your pathetic life.” Clotho’s words rumbled and roared in his ears.

“You know what I seek, Sister,” Kratos said. “There must be a change in the course of fate. I will kill Zeus!”

“Your way, then, will be forever blocked by all the others who think to change their own destiny. Fallen heroes, risen blackguards, all will bar your path, Kratos. Their reward for your death will be a reworking of their own fates!”

Kratos returned to his course and immediately found his way blocked by Cursed Legionnaires with their curved blades waving

menacingly. He recognized them by their insignia and knew of their betrayal to Zeus, pledging their allegiance to the Persians' false gods in return for their lives after defeat at the isle of Propontis. Those legionnaires who had bent a knee to the Persian god Zahhak had been defeated in a subsequent battle with the Greeks and had discovered that Zeus' rage knew no bounds. The Cursed Legionnaires marched endlessly, fighting, dying, being resurrected to continue their eternal battle—and their eternal defeats.

He ignored Clotho's threat and delivered his attack. Four quick slices brought down the legionnaire before him, and an adept thrust skewered another. The third legionnaire backed away, but it wasn't from fear. Kratos saw the Juggernaut advancing in support of the Cursed Legionnaire. The creature towered three times Kratos' own height and was heavily armored, its head encased in a black metal helm. A huge, hairy hand gripped the shaft of a morning star, the spiked ball at the end of the chain ablaze. One touch of that formidable burning sphere would crush Kratos like a bug, then scorch his corpse to cinders.

He rushed the lumbering monster and used his war hammer to smash a leg. The Juggernaut canted to one side, off balance. As it shifted, it swung the spiked ball. The chain whistled, and Kratos barely avoided the touch of a spike dripping fire. Somersaulting away, Kratos regained his fighting stance, but so had the Juggernaut. The giant let out a bull-throated war cry and charged—too slow, too clumsy in a fight with the Ghost of Sparta. Kratos finished it with a second blow from the maul.

This gave the legionnaire the opening to attack. Kratos winced as the tip of the curved blade scored his belly. In return he beheaded the legionnaire.

As the head hit the ramp and rolled downward, the Gorgon's head leaped out in a vain attempt to devour Kratos in its seething maw. He ignored it. Retreat was not possible.

A short distance ahead he heard the beguiling notes of a Siren singing. His legs turned weak as he advanced. The sinuous beast blocked his way. Seeing him, she sang louder, with even more promise. He need only stop and remain here with her forever. They

would be happy together. More! Bliss such as he had never known would be his as they shared—
—death.

Kratos tapped into the hatred he felt for Zeus to momentarily thwart the effects of the Siren's song. He dashed forward, caught the Siren in a powerful grip around her waist, and squeezed as hard as he could. Mingled with the rising pitch of the song came the snapping of a backbone. He jerked a little harder even after the Siren ceased her hypnotic song, then cast her aside.

The downward spiral grew steeper and took him to a Satyr and a Minotaur. The hoofed creatures looked at each other and laughed. The Satyr died instantly. The Minotaur's reactions were a bit quicker. It lowered its head and tried to hook Kratos on a horn.

The Blades of Athena cut off that horn. The Minotaur bellowed at the loss, stumbled back, and grabbed a flaming spear with a haft as thick as Kratos' body. It stabbed out with it, but Kratos felt the pressure of time weighing him down. The cuts he had received on his belly trickled small rivers of blood, but the true pain came in knowing he was so close to finding the path back in time to kill Zeus. He would not be denied.

Blades spinning a curtain of fire and steel in front of him, Kratos advanced on the one-horned Minotaur. The creature fell back, its flaming spear set in the middle of the ramp. Kratos saw his opportunity and took it instantly. Both blades flashed away and grappled on the Minotaur's shoulders. Grunting, Kratos pulled the Minotaur toward him—and onto the creature's own fiery spear. Impaled, the Minotaur struggled.

Kratos shoved the Minotaur back, jumped onto its chest, and used a double-handed stab to dispatch it to the lowest level of Hades' domain.

Pushing ahead through cobwebs and enduring a musty smell that turned to a sickly sweet stench reminding him of decaying flesh, Kratos slowed and finally faced a huge door inset with a metallic leering face and claws reaching down to hold shut a locking bar. Kratos swung his hammer twice. Each blow knocked open the claw latches. He grabbed the locking bar and jerked hard, sliding it

away so he could grip the bottom of the door and fling it up and open. The fetid odor hit him like a physical blow.

He stopped when he heard Gaia's voice in his ear.

"I am the earth, but Clotho is creation. She is the Loom of Life. To defeat her is to defeat the genesis of all."

Kratos advanced slowly, coming to a bridge guarded by two swiftly swinging pendula with razor-sharp edges. He judged the speed of each pendulum, the length of the arc, and then walked without stopping, the blades cutting close to both chest and back. He stepped past the second pendulum.

"To disrupt the Loom of Life," Gaia continued, "is to endow mankind with the ultimate freedom. No longer will humanity be bound by the chains of destiny."

He rounded a large central column. Kratos' eyes widened when he saw this column was flesh. He looked upward and saw flaccid teats and scrawny arms with skeletal fingers drooping down.

"First you must gain control of the loom and find your thread," Gaia said. "Find your thread, Kratos, and determine your fate."

He stepped back as a bony hand flopped down in front of him. Looking upward into the lofty chamber, he thought the cobwebs had taken over. Then he saw the different-colored strands, the way they quivered, the size growing or shrinking, and he knew he witnessed the fates of countless humans and gods.

And Titans.

Somewhere in the midst of all those threads stretched his own destiny. Finding it might be difficult, but taking control of it might be impossible. Kratos had no idea how to change his own destiny.

He hurried around the side of the immense mountain of putrid flesh and found a dangling chain. Hand over hand, Kratos made his way up to a higher level. He passed a level where more teats grotesquely flopped onto a walkway around her. Kratos jumped off at the highest level and ducked under the threads that spun from the very body of the Sister of Fate.

Faint, distant, he heard humming followed by the words, "Cut and mend. Cut and mend. Cut and mend. You live because we allow it."

A bright green thread above Kratos' head was severed, then spliced with a double strand extruded from Clotho's flabby, gray-fleshed body, the strand swimming forth like a spider's web from a spinneret. Kratos dropped from the chain and walked around the circular platform that served as a scaffolding for Clotho. One of the spindly arms flailed about and the long, bony fingers slapped down in front of him. Revolted, Kratos swung his war hammer and smashed two fingers.

"I am the Loom of Life. Eternal."

Kratos sneered. He would see about that. He smashed the other fingers on the hand, forcing the arm to lift the damaged hand away. Clotho took no notice of this minor damage, so Kratos knew he would have to do better.

But he had to find his thread among the thousands of others crisscrossing the chamber above. Each strand traced back to a spinneret on Clotho's body.

Kratos moved an apparatus on the edge of the circular platform and was rewarded with more furious beating from Clotho's other arms.

"The thread of life runs until its end. You cannot change what the Fates have deemed."

"I will find it!" Kratos shouted. "I have already changed what the Fates have deemed. *I will find it!*"

Clotho stirred, bringing her arms about. Kratos saw past the bulging body for the first time. Clotho's head was tiny and pointed, set amid the folds of fat of her grotesquely sloping shoulders. Her piglike eyes fixed on Kratos. She turned in the confines of the scaffolding and swatted at him as if he were nothing more than a bug. He smashed at her fingers with his hammer, but inflicted no serious damage.

Which of the threads and cables and ropes and lines stretched across the chamber was his fate?

"Do you sense it?" Clotho taunted. "Do you sense your thread coming to an end?"

Kratos moved more of the equipment around the outer ring, not sure what it did other than irritate Clotho. Chains led upward into

the distance, woven between the threads of fate, but serving no discernible purpose he could determine.

“If you disrupt the loom, the world will spin into chaos, and so the wisdom of the ages has made me impervious to any who dare try.” After Kratos had hammered a few more times, Clotho said, “You cannot change your fate; your skills as a warrior are useless here.”

Kratos smashed a groping hand. The arm flopped over, revealing proto-suckers along the underarm as if Clotho were partly a squid or octopus. Revolted at the sight of the mottled gray flesh, Kratos swung his hammer again, but the damage he did was minimal.

He scaled another chain, this time taking him above Clotho so he could see what the equipment did. He recognized it immediately as the pivot mechanism that suspended the pendula he had avoided entering the Loom Chamber. The huge piece of steel at the end of the chain gleamed like a razor, its edge exactly the weapon Kratos sought. Kratos jumped back down to the platform in front of Clotho, who lashed out at him.

Using the Amulet of the Fates, Kratos slowed time. Clotho was not entirely frozen, but Kratos still moved faster as the spell turned the chamber into a green sea filled with viscous fluid, the fluid of time itself. He grabbed the windlass and cranked the pendulum up until it swung just above the platform in front of Clotho. Clotho cried out, “Your attempts are preposterous. From me all life flows.”

He shifted the steel pendulum about, positioned and drew it back, then aimed it directly for a spot between Clotho’s naked, drooping breasts.

“You must stop, Kratos. Creation itself is in the balance!”

He used the Amulet of the Fates once more to precisely position the deadly pendulum. As the green flow winked back to normal, Kratos let the steel weight swing free. Clotho’s spindly arm reached out and easily stopped the pendulum from striking her.

Kratos attacked. His swords flashed and left bloody trails in the gross gray flesh, but Clotho paid no heed to her wounds. Seeing this, Kratos tried a different tack. Seeing that he could not draw the pendulum back far enough where he was, he jumped and stood

behind Clotho's pin-sized head. He used his blades as grapples on the pendulum and drew it toward him—and Clotho—as hard as he could.

“No, no, you know not what you do!”

The muscles on his shoulders bunched as he yanked. Clotho caught the pendulum and held it away, but she was unable to move from the scaffolding supporting her ponderous bulk. As she weakened, Kratos' purpose grew stronger. When the Sister of Fate could no longer hold the heavy pendulum away, Kratos used the last of his strength to pull even more. The sharpened steel edge drove into Clotho's face. Blood spurted as the Sister of Fate collapsed forward.

“I will find the proper thread, Clotho.” He released the Blades of Athena from the pendulum, which remained embedded in Clotho's head. “The reign of the Sisters is over.” Kratos kicked at the Sister's tiny head. “Feel *your* thread coming to an end!”

Taking no time to reflect on the fact that he had done the impossible and killed the Sisters of Fate, beings so powerful that even the Titans and gods of Olympus were subject to them, he jumped down and looked at the huge spools all wound with threads of fate that circled the platform. Thousands—millions!—of threads were wound. Which was his?

Stepping away, he looked above Clotho and saw a large platform where another of the huge mirrors flickered with promise. He had destroyed both Lahkesis and Atropos by imprisoning them on the other side of such a mirror, then destroying it. Kratos found an elevator to the platform and stood before a mirror ten times his height. Threads of fate ran in all directions, forcing him to step over them.

“The power of the Fates resides within these great mirrors,” Gaia said. “Find your thread and you will be able to control the mirror. Use it as a gateway to return to the time when Zeus betrayed you.”

Kratos examined one thread after another. The tangled skein proved too complex for him to identify any single strand of fate as his own.

Furious, Kratos drew his swords and began hacking away. Even the slenderest of threads proved impervious to the Blades of Athena. The Rage of the Titans powered his next cut. Nothing happened but a tiny vibration along one minuscule thread. He started to use brute force to continue what might be an exhausting attempt, then stopped.

He remembered how the Warrior of Destiny had fallen and how he, Kratos, had retrieved the Warrior's weapon. The Warrior had been sent by the Fates. His weapon had to belong to their arsenal.

Kratos drew forth the Spear of Destiny and held it high over his head. Before it had shone with an inner blue-white light. No longer. Every color and hue he had ever imagined flared within the crystalline spear now. Gripping its shaft, he swung it around and drew its spearhead against an arm-thick cable of woven fates.

The threads severed cleanly, easily. The ends whipped about like things alive. Kratos heard cries that rose, filled the entire Loom Chamber. He could not tell if they were of joy or fear, sorrow or release. No longer were these souls bound to a destiny the Sisters of Fate had decreed.

He began cutting the threads, using the Spear of Destiny. With every thread he cut, the crystal spear glowed brighter and more colorful.

Wantonly slashing now, every thread he found was cut. The sounds from those attached to the far end of the threads rose in his ears, like a wave breaking against a gentle shore. The faster he chopped, the louder the sound, until a full-blown storm might be smashing against an unseen rocky point.

When he cut one bundle of threads, he felt suddenly weak and a sound like those he heard escaped his lips. Kratos grabbed at one thread of the purest ebony and held it. His heart threatened to explode.

This was his destiny. He held it in his own hands.

With a snap as if he lashed out with a whip, he sent the black thread that was his now severed fate into the mirror.

Kratos cried out as it felt as if he were being ripped apart, every muscle, every bone, every nerve destroyed.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

“EVEN NOW, AS YOU DRAW your last breath, you continue to defy me? No matter.”

Kratos took a stumbling step forward, sucked in a deep breath, and forgot the sharp pain that still permeated his body. Not ten paces away Zeus leaned on the hilt of the Blade of Olympus—stuck through Kratos’ body and pinning him to the stone paving. Kratos reached down and touched his chest and mentally corrected what he saw. Zeus had skewered Kratos’ earlier self but now he had returned.

He had defeated the Sisters of Fate, and now he could kill Zeus.

Running fast, he lowered his shoulder, dipped down, and then lifted when he got between Zeus and his own fallen body. Zeus went flying back, staggered by the impact, and fell to the uneven paving stones of the Rhodesian terrace. Kratos grabbed the Blade of Olympus and pulled it from his chest—from the earlier Kratos’ chest. He had never dwelled on what it would be like to die in combat, but this lay even further beyond his imagination. Seeing himself dead on the inlaid stone floor fueled his anger at Zeus.

He spun on the King of the Gods, the potent sword leveled, point aimed at Zeus’ belly.

“What? How can this be?” Zeus got to his feet, his long white hair caught by the winds generated by the burning city.

Kratos shuddered as power surged through him. He had drained his godly powers into this blade and once again could tap into its reservoir of energy. He experienced the return of the powers of his godhead, if not the godhead itself. He remained a mortal but one with prodigious might.

“The Sisters are dead,” Kratos said, advancing on Zeus.

“Dead? Impossible! They control destiny. They—” Zeus rocked back, face skyward as he vented his ire with a roar that shook the foundations of the world. “They favored us Olympians over the Titans and allowed me to punish Cronos for his transgressions.” Storms danced in the mighty god’s beard, dark clouds swirling about turbulently. He turned to the Ghost of Sparta, searching for evidence of a lie. Then he smiled at Kratos with a touch of appreciation. The smile turned into a sneer.

“I underestimated you.” Zeus held out his hands, palms up. His thunderbolts began forming in each hand. “A mistake I do not intend to repeat.”

Before Kratos could swing the Blade of Olympus, Zeus rushed him. The lightning bolts seared at his body, and then Zeus’ arms encircled his waist. The thunderbolts exploded and carried both Zeus and Kratos high in the air.

Kratos fought in the god’s arms, attempting to bring up the sword to deliver to Zeus what he had already given the fallen Kratos. They shot farther into the sky, through storm clouds. Lightning surrounded them as they fought in midair; rain pelted them. Zeus tried to pull the Blade of Olympus from Kratos’ grip, but the Ghost of Sparta had endured too much to release it so quickly, so easily. It was his weapon of choice to kill Zeus.

Arching his back and bringing up his feet to kick at Zeus’ chest, Kratos separated himself and tumbled backward, through the clouds, through the rain, and toward an abandoned shrine atop a mountain. Kratos spun and got his feet under him in time to land heavily. He went to one knee, then stood slowly, the Blade of Olympus firmly in his grip.

Kratos had never been here before but recognized it from Gaia’s tale of Rhea giving up baby Zeus. The stone altar had weathered

over the centuries, but he could picture the disconsolate mother handing over her infant to an eagle to carry away for Gaia to raise while surrendering a rock dressed in swaddling for Cronos to swallow.

He turned to see Zeus peering over the edge of the mountainside. He had grown to immense size. For an instant Kratos was taken back to when he had faced the god-sized Ares before opening Pandora's Box and growing in size to fight on more equal terms. Kratos lifted the Blade of Olympus and knew Zeus' size did not matter. The blade was so intensely powerful, he could kill a god with it.

And he would.

"I will show you the true power of the gods!" Zeus cried. Golden nimbuses of lightning enveloped Zeus' hands, then he slammed his fists down on the rocky mountaintop. The curtain of energy raced across to sweep Kratos backward.

With the Blade of Olympus held aloft, he deflected the worst of the energy storm. Then he advanced on the King of the Gods. Zeus might be a hundred times his size, but the Blade of Olympus evened the odds. Zeus leaned forward on both hands.

Kratos unleashed the Atlas Quake and sent Zeus staggering back. He quickly followed with the Rage of the Titans to add extra power to his sword thrust.

"Even with the power of the Titans, you cannot beat me. I am the ruler of the gods!"

"You are weak, Zeus. Submit and I will let you serve me!" Kratos intended to infuriate Zeus so that he would make a mistake. It worked.

Zeus let out a battle cry.

"Kratos, you are no god! You are not worthy of a throne on Olympus."

Zeus threw a thunderbolt and was rocked back when Kratos used the Golden Fleece to turn it back on its user. But Kratos found that the Cronos Rage had little effect. He rushed forward and stabbed out with the blade, pinking Zeus' hand. The blade barely penetrated the back of a hand that had delivered a potent blow to the mountaintop,

but Kratos felt the blade begin to quiver as it sucked up Zeus' energy.

The King of the Gods began to shrink visibly and soon was hardly taller than Kratos himself. But if the change in size made Zeus less intimidating, his energy had been condensed into a smaller body. A golden aura suffused him as he attacked. Blows capable of killing a bull were exchanged, and Kratos found himself hard-pressed to maintain the fight. Zeus was all-powerful, a god, and possessed of an anger matching Kratos' own.

But the Blade of Olympus fed Kratos and kept him in the fight, thrusting, finding Zeus' arms and legs. When he pointed the tip at Zeus, blue fire leaped forth and diminished the King of the Gods. More than once, judicious use of the wings of Icarus kept Kratos from being incinerated by the thunderbolts Zeus hurled.

Kratos drove forward, only to find Zeus' fingers around his neck, squeezing the life from him. The Blade of Olympus dropped from his grip, and Zeus cast him away like some piece of offal.

"If you will not serve, then you will die!" Zeus stalked to where Kratos lay stunned. Zeus held the Blade of Olympus in his grip and was ready to again kill Kratos with it. "Your powers are no match for mine!"

Before Zeus could lunge, Kratos wrapped his arms around a massive stone column, wrenched hard, and broke it free from its foundations. He let it fall on Zeus.

Lying stunned under the weight of the toppled column, Zeus tried to stand. Grabbing the fallen Blade of Olympus once more fed Kratos' power. He drove the sword into a stillstanding stone pillar, worked his way to the top of the ruined temple, bent low, and thrust his fingers under the edge of a lintel. He heaved and sent the lintel and two columns toppling onto Zeus.

The god cried as the massive weight crushed him.

"I told you I'd make you pay for what you did," Kratos said.

Kratos jumped down, ready to dispatch Zeus to the deepest recess of the Underworld, but the King of the Gods gave a massive heave, climbed from under the pile of stone, and began to grow in size once more.

“I am through playing with you, Kratos.”

Kratos stood, glaring up at the imposing figure. He lifted the Blade of Olympus, then lowered it. His shoulders sagged. He drove the blade into the ground and turned away from Zeus.

“I lay down my arms, Zeus.”

He dropped to his knees and held out his arms from his shoulders.

“Release me from this torment. That is all I have ever asked—and it is the one thing that you have denied me.”

Zeus shrank in size and floated down to stand behind Kratos. He gripped the hilt of the Blade of Olympus and drew it, then approached Kratos.

“I will release you from your life, my son, but your torment is just beginning!” He lifted the blade to make a killing stroke across the back of Kratos’ neck.

As Zeus drew back for the blow, Kratos ducked down, got his feet under him, and drove backward, the Blades of Athena stabbing out. The tip of one caught Zeus in the midriff. Blood exploded from the wound, and Zeus slumped back, sorely injured. All the rage Kratos had built for years blazed forth now. He turned and repeatedly drove his sword into Zeus with his right hand as his left circled Zeus’ wrist to keep the Blade of Olympus at bay. A savage twist forced Zeus to drop the weapon.

Kratos continued his attack, kicking Zeus to the ground. As the King of the Gods attempted to pick up the fallen blade, Kratos grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and smashed his head repeatedly into the stone altar where Zeus was to have been sacrificed to Cronos. The shower of blood mingled with the falling rain.

Reaching down, Kratos picked up the Blade of Olympus. There was no hesitation in his strike as he lunged forward. Zeus grabbed the blade to keep it from skewering him in the chest. Kratos leaned on the hilt, refusing to yield as Zeus slowly weakened. The thrust finally drove home. But this was not enough for Kratos. He yanked it free of its godly sheath and stabbed Zeus again.

Before he could end Zeus’ life, the slap of sandals against wet stone came from his left.

Athena shoved him away and cried, "You cannot do this, Kratos!" She interposed her body between god and mortal.

"You dare stand against me, Athena?"

"I do not wish to fight you, Kratos." She grappled with him, pushing against the blade and trying to force him away from where Zeus clutched at his bleeding chest. "But I *will* defend Olympus!"

Kratos looked past her to where Zeus painfully climbed to his feet. His wounds healed of their own accord, but there was a slowness to his movement that betrayed how badly Kratos had injured him.

"Know this, my son. You have started a war you cannot win. The Sisters of Fate have already deemed me victorious!"

Kratos growled and shoved Athena to the side to finish the killing he had begun. Zeus would die!

Kratos lunged, but Zeus had already begun his retreat, his feet leaving the ground and his body soaring high into the clouds. But Kratos' blade did not lack a target. The Blade of Olympus ran Athena through.

"Athena, no!" The blade began draining her of her godly power. "Why do you sacrifice yourself?"

"To save Olympus."

"I do not think to destroy Olympus. Only Zeus!"

She reached up, her hand gentle as she rested it on his shoulder, then his cheek.

"Zeus *is* Olympus." She coughed up blood and sagged. Kratos cradled her as he guided her gently to the ground.

"He brought this to himself."

"He did it because of fear, Kratos, a fear felt by his father, Cronos. A fear that brought the Great War, a fear that drove Zeus to kill you ... his own son."

Her fingers slipped across Kratos' cheek and then away, limp as death approached.

"His son?"

"Just as Zeus was compelled to destroy his father, Cronos, you are compelled to do the same. No son should destroy his own father."

Kratos pulled away and sneered. "No, I have no father."

“God after god will deny you, Kratos. They will protect Zeus. Zeus must live so Olympus will prevail.” She collapsed fully to the ground. Her gray eyes were on Kratos as the light faded and the life fled.

“If all on Olympus will deny me my vengeance, then all on Olympus will die.” Kratos stood and watched as her body evaporated.

“I have lived in the shadow of the gods for long enough. The time of the gods has come to an end!”

Athena’s body flared and a green fountain of the motes erupted skyward, swallowed by the clouds. Kratos lowered his head as the shock wave of her passing radiated across the lonely mountaintop. When he looked up, Athena was gone.

Through the building storm, Gaia spoke to him.

“Remember, Kratos, you have the power to control time itself.”

He knew what had to be done.



KRATOS STOOD BEFORE the huge mirror above Clotho's Loom Chamber. Reels of thick threads were arrayed behind him. On each reel were wound threads of fate as large as his brawny forearm. He had brought the reels to this place and saw how the quivering cables ran away from the mirror. He drew the Spear of Destiny and watched intently as it responded when he touched its spear tip against the largest of the cables, a brown one highlighted with tiny stripes the green of forests.

Resolve hardened. Kratos swung the Spear of Destiny and cut through one huge thread after another until all the reels held only the ends of the threads. He stepped forward into the mirror and felt the gut-tearing transition as he returned in time, this trip taking him back innumerable centuries. Prepared for the shift this time, he found himself in the middle of a devastated plain, buildings burning in every direction he looked.

The ground rumbled. Kratos looked up and saw that what he had mistaken to be a large hill covered with grass and a small forest was a Titan. He had never seen Gaia before—not in her actual guise—but this had to be the Titan of the earth.

She towered more than a thousand feet high, her body nothing but dirt and vegetation. Pendulous breasts the size of large war galleons drooped down, attesting to her status as a mother to all.

She blinked a dirt-brown eye and bent low. A hand that might have been dipped in mud and then dried reached out to him. Kratos did not flinch.

“Gaia!”

“We have been expecting you, Ghost of Sparta. The gods are much too powerful for us to defeat now.”

“All on Olympus tremble at my name! Zeus is weak, Ares and Athena are dead. And I wield the blade! We can win the Great War, but not in this time.” In the distance rose twisting columns of stark blue energy, the weapons of the gods driving back the Titans in their last futile assault on Olympus. “I have killed the Sisters of Fate and severed the threads of destiny they weaved for you in my time. Together we will kill the petty gods and see Olympus tremble before us.”

Kratos was bathed in coruscating energy. He turned and felt the pull of the time mirror behind him.

“Come with me, Gaia. Return to my time. Victory awaits.”

Storms built all around, blinding him with dirt and rain.

Zeus sat on his throne, hands gripping the arms so hard the stone cracked. Arrayed before his throne were the gods and goddesses of Olympus, all apprehensive at being summoned to the foot of the throne of the King of the Gods.

“We have faced far worse than this one fallen mortal,” Zeus said in a booming, confident voice. “We are the gods! We, whom the mortals worship, we who rule over this land, we will not be swept aside by this petulant fool!”

Zeus saw the uneasiness among the gods. Even his brothers Poseidon and Hades looked apprehensive.

“Brothers, put aside the petty grievances that have splintered us for so long. We will unite, we will stand together, and I will wipe out this plague! Olympus will prevail!”

Zeus shot to his feet and stumbled. An earthquake shook the home of the gods. Statues cracked and parts fell with thunderous crashing. He brushed aside part of the dome of his audience

chamber that fell too close to his throne. The gods rushed to the terrace and looked down. Zeus followed, stepping over marble columns that had collapsed in the quake.

He blinked in surprise. The mortal world burned. Everywhere cities were on fire. Devastation far greater than anything he had ever seen stretched to the horizon.

Kratos looked up the sheer pinnacle that held Olympus. From his vantage on Gaia's shoulder it did not look that tall.

He grabbed a linden tree for support as Gaia began climbing. To either side other Titans began the long climb as the assault on Olympus began.

Kratos held the Blade of Olympus and shook it in Zeus' direction, for he knew the King of the Gods watched. It would be impossible not to know that the battle would soon be joined.

Scores of Titans lumbered over the battle-scarred landscape and followed Gaia and the others already beginning their assault when Atlas gave the command, his hand smashing down on the ground to cause another earthquake, his four arms wrapped in broken chains.

"Zeus," Kratos shouted at the top of his lungs, "your son has returned! I bring the destruction of Olympus!"

The End begins ...

This one is for the visionary Mike Stackpole, always at the forefront of writing and publishing.

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