

RLAKERS

LEVIATHAN

AN EXCERPT FROM
ATLANTIS
TWILIGHT OF MANKIND



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THE AUTHOR HAS RATED THIS NARRATIVE

RL-18+

INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 18

For descriptive scenes of violence against both animals and humans, frightening portrayals of malevolent supernatural beings, depictions of societal debauchery and human sacrifice, and references to depraved sexual practices and denigration of women.

No part of this story is appropriate for children.



THE PANTHOLON

THE FOUR

S'MAEL	<i>the Stag</i>	god of the forests and all verdant life
R'ZUUS	<i>the Ram</i>	god of the skies and the mountain reaches
M'LAACK	<i>the Bull</i>	god of fulfillment
E'RIIS	<i>the Goat</i>	god of war

THE SIX

H'PHAEST'M	<i>the Chimera</i>	creator god
A'BAAD'N	<i>the Locust</i>	destroyer god
H'KETH'A	<i>the Mandrake</i>	god of procreation
X'NUUB'S	<i>the Hound</i>	god of the dead
B'KSEID'N	<i>the Crocodile</i>	god of the inland sea
R'HAAB'A	<i>the Kraken</i>	god of the greater sea

THE THIRTEEN

G'DEER'L	god of the morning
M'LATH'Z	god of the evening
B'STEM'S	god of the hunt and wild animals
D'NYYS'S	god of crop and vine
S'TARO'T	god of beauty
E'PHEN'X	god of music and poetry
G'BAAL'M	god of storms
D'GAAN'U	god of fertility
Y'NCUUB'S	god of seduction
I'THIN'I	god of knowledge
V'LAAB'C	god of riddles
M'THEM'T	god of order
L'TEET'M	god of chaos

THE CALENDAR

SEASON OF COLOR

First Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bitter Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Dream Moon	<i>30 days</i>

SEASON OF TWILIGHT

Kestrel Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Wet Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bull Moon	<i>29 days</i>

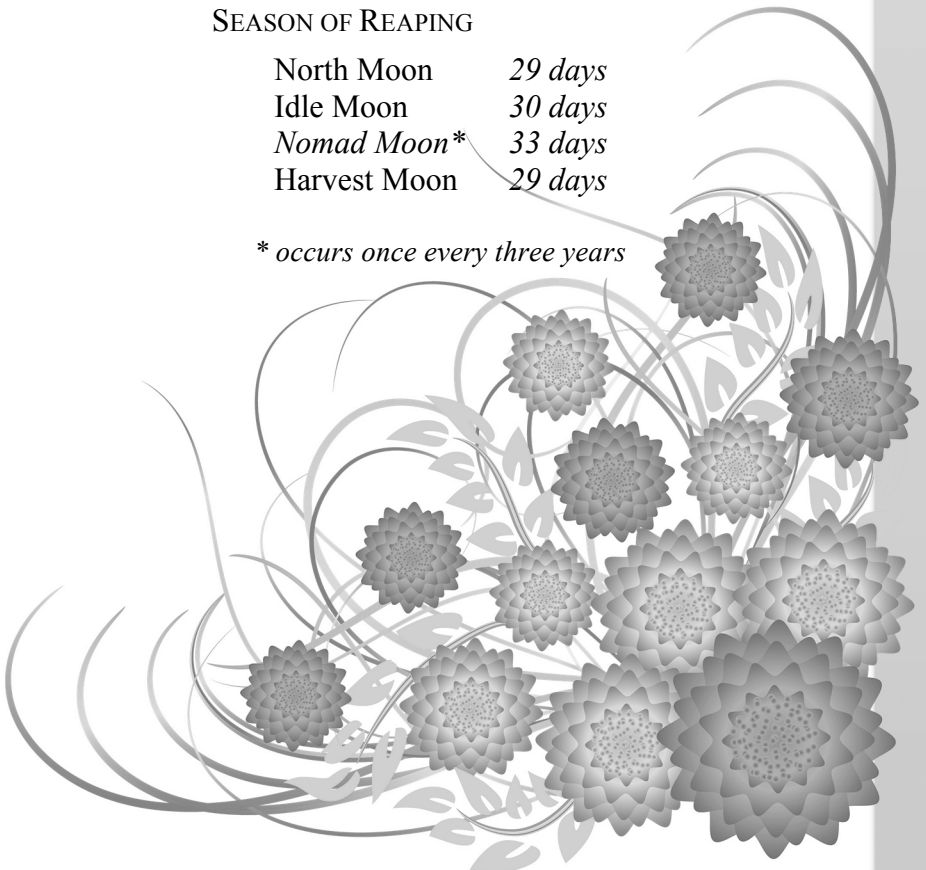
SEASON OF SOWING

Spring Moon	<i>30 days</i>
Bright Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Blade Moon	<i>30 days</i>

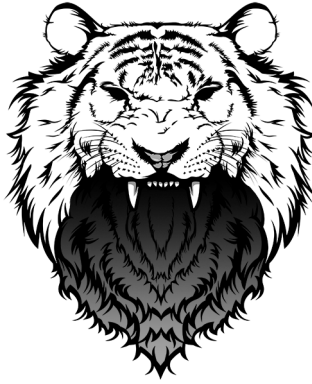
SEASON OF REAPING

North Moon	<i>29 days</i>
Idle Moon	<i>30 days</i>
<i>Nomad Moon*</i>	<i>33 days</i>
Harvest Moon	<i>29 days</i>

** occurs once every three years*



CHAPTER EIGHT



second day of the
NOMAD MOON, 1652

D'Akaio's first task took him to a farming community northwest of the City. It seemed the villagers there had been plagued for some time by a great lizard of particular ferocity; at intervals no man could predict, the beast would emerge from Lake Qual to swoop down upon men and oxen in the field, slaughtering the men and making off with the choicest oxen clamped in its huge jaws.

The moment R'ZUUS had told him of this 'dragon'—for that was what the locals called it—D'Akaio had felt the excitement of a great challenge burn through him; no doubt a beast of this sort would make for an exceptional foe, and there was great glory to be won in defeating it. Yet his father had insisted he wait a few weeks. The local god, one of the Thirteen, had finally been roused to send his son against the beast; R'ZUUS felt that D'Akaio's glory would only be the greater if he defeated the monster *after* the local demigod had himself failed to do so.

And so D'Akaio had waited in the City proper, doing his best to hide his impatience from his friends, from Adana, but failing miserably. Finally, he'd received word: the farming god's son had succeeded in cornering the dragon, only to have

their roles reversed, he himself becoming the prey and the dragon the predator; the beast had made a special exception that day, dragging the Eidolon back to its lair instead of its normal meal of cattle.

D'Akaio had set forth first thing in the morning, taking with him an expert tracker and four of the Hyderra Guard.

It was a mere three-hour trek from R'ZUUS's sector of the City, beneath the Falcon of Atalas and across the western bridge, then north through one of R'ZUUS's vassal territories to the independent farming community. In truth, the adventurers could have made the journey in half the time by barge, simply cutting straight across the River Ghon; but D'Akaio's stallion was skittish of water, and they had a fair number of provisions to take along.

Despite the proximity of the farms to the City—the farmers actually considered their village a part of the City, albeit on its outskirts—it was like entering a different world. The people dressed in muted colors, their clothing rough-spun, not nearly so fine as the silks and velvets that were the norm on the isle. The buildings were timber-framed and wattle-sided, exclusively single-story, with muddy dirt tracks running between them. And over everything hung an eerie, humid mist, courtesy of the marshy lake that irrigated the surrounding fields.

Following directions from one of the farmers, D'Akaio's troop found the site of the beast's latest kill, then tracked it from there. Soon enough, the sixsome stood at the edge of Lake Qual, looking out across its reed-punctuated expanse, the fog obscuring its far shore.

Holding back the bulrushes, the tracker showed D'Akaio a large, three-toed footprint. "I've scouted up and down this side of the lake, found tracks leading both in and out. I don't know if the beast makes its lair in the lake itself or elsewhere, but this is clearly part of its game trail."

D'Akaio nodded slowly. "I don't fancy swimming, so we'll let it come to us." He turned to the Hyderra. "Make camp. And find us some bait."



D'Akaio stood among the bulrushes, gazing out at the opposite shore of Lake Qual. It was early afternoon, and the mist had burned off for a few hours, but he knew the low-lying fog would soon return. After three days of camping here, D'Akaio and his men had grown well accustomed to the weather patterns.

The smell, unfortunately, was another matter. No length of time would make that aroma of marshy putrefaction any more palatable, and that would have been true even without D'Akaio's own addition to the bouquet. When he'd first ordered the confiscation of an ox, then had it slaughtered on Qual's shore as bait, he'd never imagined they would still be standing here when the carcass began to decompose. They'd pulled up stakes and moved some distance 'upwind' to escape the smell, but in a region with so little airflow, that hadn't helped much.

D'Akaio gritted his teeth and leveled a glare at the tracker, who averted his eyes submissively. It wasn't the tracker's fault, but that was little protection against the ire of an Eidolon.

"It'll come out eventually," Xelal said softly from D'Akaio's side, his eyes steady on the surface of the lake, alert even now for telltale signs of underwater movement. "It had only just eaten when we arrived."

The demigod grunted, heeding Xelal's words and resuming his own vigil. Laxelalal was Captain of the Hyderra, a skilled warrior and great leader of men. As commoners went, he was the closest D'Akaio had to a friend; it was hard not to respect a man who could stand at ease before an Eidolon,

speaking his mind without showing either challenge or fear. He was loyal to R'ZUUS and D'Akaio, a good man to have at one's side.

"Has your lord father spoken to you of increasing recruitment?" Xelal asked conversationally, just loud enough to be heard over the background drone of the crickets who made their home in the rushes. Like all three of his men, the guard captain had left his distinctive cerulean tunic at home in favor of woodland garb.

D'Akaio turned. "Recruitment?"

"For the Hyderra. Great R'ZUUS wishes to build the troop into a larger fighting force, a full regiment."

The demigod lifted a brow. "A hundred men is not sufficient to protect a god who cannot be harmed?"

The guard captain remained silent, unwilling to step into the minefield that comment had created.

D'Akaio sighed. "No, *Dad* didn't say anything about this to me. Do you know why he wants to do this?"

Xelal cringed slightly at the overly familiar reference to R'ZUUS. "The ways of the gods are mysterious, and beyond my understanding."

D'Akaio snorted. He had spoken true when he said this was the first he'd heard of it, but he could certainly guess his father's reasoning. R'ZUUS had plans for the City, plans that involved elevating himself over the other great gods; D'Akaio's tasks figured prominently into those plans, his every conquest serving to undermine the prestige and worship the commoners offered to those gods. But D'Akaio's efforts were only the start; even if all went according to plan, S'MAEL and the others would eventually strike back directly... and that meant war, of a sort not fought since the days before the gods took control of the city.

And wars required armies. R'ZUUS was wise to start building his now, before the other great gods began to suspect the designs he had on their territory.

D'Akaio placed a hand on the guard captain's shoulder. "Do you have a *concern* about this? This new recruitment push?"

"Well... the Hyderra is an elite unit. We maintain rigorous standards, and with only a hundred men, we can afford to." Xelal chewed his lower lip. "Expanding our membership tenfold, and as quickly as your father is hoping... I don't know how we could manage that without diluting our training regimen. *And* it would require most of our existing force to serve as a new officer corps, which would take them from their own training."

"So what do you propose?"

Xelal responded instantly. "An entirely new outfit. Leave the composition of the Hyderra unchanged." He shrugged. "Maybe train the officers of the new outfit with the Hyderra to start, even allow some of the Hyderra to transfer to the new outfit if they wish, but ultimately separate this new regiment entirely."

D'Akaio felt a smile tugging at his lip. "This isn't just about structure and training. You fear that the reputation of the Hyderra will suffer, don't you?"

"Certainly," the captain said. "Shouldn't I? We defend the honor of the Great R'ZUUS, master of the skies and the mountain reaches. We live to bring him glory, and most of us have trained our entire adult lives to do so. No army recruited and trained in a hurry could hope to achieve that level of excellence, and their mediocrity will be evident to all." He shook his head. "Yes, I'm concerned about the reputation of the Hyderra, for that will reflect on the honor of R'ZUUS himself."

Xelal glanced his way, saw that the demigod was grinning openly now, and smiled sheepishly in return. "Sorry," he muttered. "The Hyderra... it's my life..."

D'Akaio clasped the man's shoulder. "I will discuss it with my father. But I think your suggestion has merit."

The guard captain inclined his head. “Thank you, my lord,” he said formally, though D’Akaio could hear genuine appreciation in the man’s voice. It really was unfortunate R’ZUUS wasn’t more open to feedback from his followers, at least those like Xelal, who were in trusted positions of authority. His people remained utterly loyal, but it was loyalty born of fear, a fear which tended to squash creative thinking. D’Akaio couldn’t help but feel pride that Xelal was willing to share with D’Akaio the concerns he was afraid to bring before R’ZUUS.

The afternoon sunlight faded into early evening, and the mist slowly crept back into existence. Xelal traded watch with one of his men, but D’Akaio remained at his post.

“Lord Eidolon,” the tracker said at length.

D’Akaio turned to eye him.

“I think mayhaps some fresh bait would be a good idea.”

The demigod frowned. “Why? Surely the beast can smell *that*”—he gestured at the carcass—“from a league away.”

The tracker hesitated. “True, but... *You* wouldn’t wish to eat something that smelled that way, would you?” He quailed beneath the flash of D’Akaio’s eyes. “I’m just saying, maybe we should bury that ox, get another—and leave it alive this time,” he hurried to add. “The beast is accustomed to live prey, after all.”

D’Akaio skewered the man with his gaze a moment longer, then withdrew it. “Very well.”



The demigod opened his eyes and stared up into the swirling mist. It flowed through the air in slow motion, now and then eddying to form a temporary vortex, every wisp lined silver by the light of the Nomad Moon. The moon itself was

barely visible, a pale blue orb whose edges were hazy; the night sky, its stars normally glittering brightly this far from the City lights, was hidden entirely.

D'Akaio registered all of this, then slowly re-lidded his eyes, listening intently. Something had awakened him... He did not immediately rise from his oversized bedroll, did not in fact make any movement to suggest he was now alert. He simply lay there, listening, allowing his chest to continue rising and falling in the pattern of deep sleep.

And he heard... nothing.

He frowned. Were his instincts steering him wrong? There was nothing to—

D'Akaio blinked as his mind came the rest of the way awake and realized the import of that silence. At this time of night, he should be hearing the chirping of crickets, untold millions of them filling the night air with their song. Or the sound of the oxen moving about, their halters and chains clinking softly; there were two of them this time, commandeered from a nearby farm and purposefully left alive. But none of those sounds met his ears now, and the hair rose on the back of D'Akaio's neck.

He allowed his head to loll slowly to one side, straining to see in the monochrome light. He could dimly make out Xelal's sleeping form nearby, but there was no sign of the guard who should have been on watch in that general direction. D'Akaio rolled his head slowly, scanning behind him, then over to his left, in the direction where the oxen had been chained. There was something there, a dark shape of roughly the right size, though motionless. Perhaps whatever had silenced the crickets had frozen the cattle in fear as well. D'Akaio continued his scan, sweeping the area past his feet, but no other shapes emerged from the mists. That meant there were *two* guards unaccounted for.

D'Akaio rose carefully, staying low in his bedroll, but getting his feet beneath him so he was ready to spring.

Something shifted to his left, and he turned toward the oxen. They were moving again, if barely, and D'Akaio breathed a little easier to hear the clink of their halters. A light flickered in their midst, but the flame was obscured. D'Akaio strained his eyes until he realized what he must be seeing.

"Hey," he hissed. "Put out that light, you fool." It was obviously one of the guards, his silhouette merging with that of the cattle. Undoubtedly the guard was lighting one of those little rolls of tobacco, the ones the men sometimes enjoyed as a way of passing time while on watch.

The light continued to flicker.

"Hey, simpleton," D'Akaio said a bit louder. His words must have awakened Xelal, because he heard the guard captain's breathing change behind him. But there was no response from the guard with the light. D'Akaio swore under his breath and stood. There was something out there in the night, something scaring the normal wildlife into submission, and his men needed their night vision intact if they were to be ready to fight the beast. A member of the Hyderra should have known better, should have extinguished any light as soon as he heard the shift in the sounds of the nightlife...

The thought slowly ground to a halt as D'Akaio took a shuddering breath. Yes, a Hyderra *would* have known better.

Before the demigod, the flickering light seemed to flare and then grow. D'Akaio stared, his eyes drawn to the flame like a moth to its destruction. The light appeared to be coming from within a cave, illuminating stalactites and stalagmites in the foreground, fading into the distance down a long, winding passage.

"What the hells?" Xelal whispered beside him.

D'Akaio shook his head in confusion. There had been no caves there when he laid down his head to sleep. The land was flat for leagues around.

The light grew, and a new shape came into view at the mouth of the cavern—two shapes. The carcasses of two oxen, slumped on the ground.

Abruptly, the sight of those two mounds cast everything into the proper scale. D'Akaio was not seeing a cavern off in the distance, he was staring into a maw at close proximity. The light flared again—

“Move!” he shouted, knocking Xelal down as he dove to the side. He raised his head once more, and what he saw froze him in his tracks. Barely visible, backlit by that growing orange light, a massive frame crouched in the mists. It was shaped much like the effigy to his father, R'ZUUS Recumbent, except that the head sat low to the ground, hovering over its outstretched forelegs; a devilish mouth cracked wide, flames now flickering wickedly over the foot-long teeth that D'Akaio had initially taken for cave formations—

A ball of yellow-orange flame exploded from the creature's maw.

With a startled yelp, D'Akaio threw himself farther to the side, feeling the flames lick his body. He allowed himself two extra rolls through the cool mud to put out any fire that may have caught on his clothing, then jumped to his feet.

He immediately stumbled, disoriented. His eyesight was shot, his night vision destroyed. He drew his sword, raising it in a defensive posture as he turned this way and that. “Xelal?”

“Here,” a voice called to his left.

“Do you see it?”

“No.” Pause. “I don't see much of anything.”

D'Akaio grimaced. As the men spoke, each followed the sound of the other's voice and fell into a mutually defensive stance, back to back with one another. Another of the Hyderra joined them moments later, their formation expanding to include him.

It seemed an eternity before their eyes adjusted, but in the end, D'Akaio was forced to conclude that the creature was long gone. It had left behind the bodies of two oxen... and the other two Hyderra, the men who had been on watch.

The significance of that was not lost on anyone. Not only had the beast stalked and killed two highly trained armsmen without making a commotion, it had abandoned all four of the carcasses uneaten. Its kills had not been motivated by hunger.

The dragon was playing with them.



"It breathes fire," Xelal said.

"Apparently," D'Akaio responded.

"That would have been nice to know."

The demigod paused in his work, then he and the guard captain turned as one to look at the tracker. The little man wilted before them. "I've heard tell of it, but I—I thought that was just an exaggeration!" There was a long streak down the inside of the man's left trouser leg, still damp, where he had wet himself at the dragon's appearance. That was a mere hour past, and dawn had since arrived. The four survivors had remained mostly silent until now, their ears alert for any sign of the beast's return.

D'Akaio returned to cinching the straps on one of the pack horses, then turned to his stallion. Fortunately, their mounts had been hobbled some distance inland, and the dragon had not bothered with them. Out of the corner of his eye, D'Akaio could see several of the farmers standing in a huddle, talking amongst themselves, and shooting foul looks in his direction. They were far out of earshot, but he could well imagine what they were saying.

"We're out here doing something about their problem," D'Akaio said. "You'd expect them to be grateful."

“Well,” Xelal offered tentatively, “we *have* now commandeered three of their oxen without recompense.”

The demigod sighed. “Point taken.” He finished tightening his saddle, then paused and looked in the farmers’ direction. They stopped talking as soon as they noticed his attention, and after a moment, the group broke up and returned to their work. D’Akaio could only hope they were merely upset about the oxen; more likely, however, they’d been gossiping about D’Akaio’s failure to do better than the previous Eidolon. He gritted his teeth, trying to keep the flush of shame from his face.

Swinging up into his saddle, he grimaced anew. He was not a particular fan of trousers, of the way the material constricted his movements, but there was really no other option when riding. And his stallion was a spirited one, a regal beast of immense proportions from a line specifically bred for the Eidolon. D’Akaio patted the creature’s neck and looked to the tracker.

“You’ve found its trail?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then let us pursue.” The Eidolon paused. “We must run the creature to ground today, before nightfall. Darkness is its ally, so we cannot afford to camp another night, and my pride will not stand for retreating, even if it is to return in greater numbers.” He took a moment to lock gazes with each of the three men remaining in his party. “Do you understand?” There were nods. “Very well.” He gestured to the tracker, who began leading them around the rim of the lake toward the north, eyes locked on the ground.

At first, after the lizard had disappeared, D’Akaio could think of nothing but defending their position, worrying that the beast might return at any moment. When first light had finally arrived and he could see farther than a stone’s throw, he’d begun to think more analytically, and he’d realized something. In the moments following that blaze of light, he had indeed

been blinded, but there had been nothing wrong with his hearing—and he'd heard no splash to suggest the creature had retreated into the lake. He'd immediately set the tracker on the problem, and sure enough, the little man had soon discovered a new trail leading around the lake. No doubt the creature moved much faster over land than in water.

The four hunters traveled slowly, the tracker mostly remaining on his own feet rather than riding, so as to read the signs more carefully. He kept close to the lake's edge, stopping frequently, while the riders maintained their distance lest they obscure the dragon's prints, which often overlapped older tracks. Occasionally the tracker followed the trail away from the lake, into a nearby bog or copse of trees, but he inevitably backtracked from those side trips. It seemed the creature's most recent trail led unerringly around the rim of the lake.

The mists had begun to burn off at midday when the foursome reached the mouth of a waterway feeding into the lake. D'Akaio consulted his map and the sun, realized they had circled all the way to the north of the lake, where it was fed from an offshoot of the Ghon. The passage of water was wide but relatively slow-moving; and yet, for such a sedate waterway, it was surprisingly hazy, the water almost opaque.

D'Akaio eyed the tracker expectantly.

"I see no indication the beast slowed, my lord. It plunged right in." The man shrugged uncertainly. "Mayhaps we can pick up the trail again on the other side."

D'Akaio sighed, then dismounted and stepped tentatively into the water, uncertain how quickly the passage deepened. Within three steps, he was up to his waist in dirty water, mud sucking at his feet. Within three more, he was up to his chest. Disgusted, the Eidolon snapped his fingers at the stallion to follow, which it did with even more hesitation than the demigod.

The three men trailed after them, the Hyderra remaining mounted, allowing the horses to swim the passage; perched on their backs, the guards maintained a calm grip on their weapons, eyes alert for danger. It seemed unlikely danger was near, however, for the cricket song was as cacophonous here as anywhere.

With a splash, D'Akaio fell the rest of the way into the water, losing his footing suddenly as the bottom fell away beneath him. Surfacing, he shook his head, long hair whipping. "It grows deeper here," he said unnecessarily, with as much dignity as possible. Anything to mitigate the shame of losing his balance.

He kicked off toward the other side of the passage and soon found his footing again, the bottom resuming its pull at his boots as he climbed laboriously from the water. The four men soon stood once more, though it would have been a stretch to say they did so on dry land. The ground here was muck, its grip on their feet nearly as tenacious as the streambed's had been.

And everywhere they looked, immense three-toed footprints stood out in high relief.

Raising a finger to his lips, D'Akaio gestured, and the Hyderra spread out to either side of him. The tracker swept his eyes over the jumbled tracks in dismay, then gave the Eidolon an apologetic shrug. D'Akaio didn't mind. He recalled what the map showed of this area; much as the Isle of Atalas existed at the center of a temporary fork in the River Ghon, so too was this spit of land a sort of island at the center of a fork. Surrounded on all sides by water, covered over with ankle-deep muck, this place seemed like a great lizard's dream come true. If this was not the dragon's lair, it was at least a vacation home.

The demigod waved a hand forward, and the troop set out as quietly as possible, the mud sucking noisily at their boots.

The flora of the dragon's isle seemed constrained to bulrushes and small stands of shrubs, nothing large enough to

hide the beast on its own—not if it was as large as he suspected. Reports indicated the creature always carried its prey in its jaws, *not* dragging it along the ground. Any lizard capable of carrying an Eidolon, much less an ox, must be sizable indeed. And truly, even crouched as it had been last night, that dark shape D’Akaio had glimpsed came as high as his shoulder; standing fully, it no doubt towered over even a demigod.

Yet, even if the flora could not hide the beast, the ground of the little isle was uneven, hilly, providing plenty of nooks and dips within which the beast might lower itself to escape sight. The men moved quietly and cautiously, swords at the ready as they crested each rise. They found more than a few carcasses, mostly oxen, little more than skeletons stripped of flesh. One of the bodies was recognizably human, however, and too tall to be fully mortal.

“D’Styphyl,” the tracker breathed.

“Who?” D’Akaio asked dismissively, though of course he knew. This was the local demigod slain by the dragon. Crouching down, D’Akaio worked at the corpse’s torq, bending the soft ring of burnished gold enough to remove it from the demigod’s throat. “The boy’s father may wish to have this.”

The tracker blinked, giving D’Akaio a look of surprise, but Xelal smirked. *He* knew better than to think D’Akaio was truly being noble. The Eidolon slid the torq onto his own upper arm and squeezed it into shape, so it would stay.

The men soon completed their search of the small spit of land, but there was no sign of the dragon. They returned to where they’d started.

“It’s not here,” Xelal said in frustration, sheathing his weapon.

“Hmm,” D’Akaio said distractedly, his eye drawn to a slight movement in the passage they had swum earlier. As the

lesser men fell to arguing their next move, the demigod stared, trying to figure what had caught his eye.

There. Something out in the middle of the passage where the water was moving fastest; a tree branch, perhaps, just a bit of its tip poking from the muddy surface, floating smoothly downstream. D'Akaio frowned... but no, there it was again... the stick paused in its passage and then began floating *upstream.*

"Xelal," he said softly. "Look."

The guard captain turned. "Where?"

D'Akaio crouched to his level and pointed. "There, maybe forty paces past that rock. You see it? The stick moving against the current?"

Xelal remained silent a moment. "I... don't recall there being a rock there when we came in."

The demigod blinked, a prickling sensation crawling up his back—the sense that he'd been here, in this situation, before. But not actually *here*... this moment reminded him of last night, when he'd realized the maw he was staring into wasn't a cave.

The leviathan rose majestically from the muddy water, abandoning its hiding place now that D'Akaio was pointing straight at it. For what seemed an eternity, it stood there, water sluicing off its body. It was not, in fact, much taller than D'Akaio, but it was *long*, four or five times an Eidolon's height from its gruesome head—the top of which D'Akaio had taken to be a rock—to the tip of the tail he had seen sweeping back and forth in the water. The beast stood balanced on two thick legs, its powerful tail swaying behind it to maintain balance. It flexed its stunted forelegs and leaned towards them, mouth cracking open to reveal wicked teeth... and to emit a low, cackling growl.

D'Akaio nearly wet his own trousers at the sight of it.

The beast moved then, taking a long step forward and pivoting. Its thick tail swung around, sweeping toward them.

“Spread out!” Xelal shouted, but it was too late. Returning here after their fruitless search, the men had naturally clumped together—exactly the state of affairs D’Akaio had taken pains to avoid when they’d begun their exploration of the isle.

Crouching, D’Akaio leapt just as the tail connected with the tracker, audibly crushing the man’s rib cage. The Eidolon mostly cleared the sweep, though the muscular appendage struck him a glancing blow, knocking him off balance as he came back down again. Scrambling to his feet, he drew his sword and charged down the slope into the water.

He slipped almost immediately, cursing himself for a fool. The dragon knew what it was about. It was because of that treacherous footing that the beast had not charged them to start. Tumbling down the muddy slope, D’Akaio splashed into the water, spluttering, gaining his knees and searching for his sword. A clawed foreleg swiped at him, and he dodged easily; the dragon’s size and strength were formidable, but it had none of the speed of the lion D’Akaio had recently fought. The demigod retrieved his sword in the next moment and turned back to face the beast, whipping his long wet hair out of his eyes.

The dragon crouched, eyeing him balefully, the digits of its forelegs twitching in anticipation. It tilted its reptilian head to the right, no doubt keeping its other eye on the other members of D’Akaio’s party. The beast seemed to cough, and a flicker of light appeared within its gaping maw, moments before it turned its focus fully on D’Akaio. The dragon swept its forelegs to either side, jutting its chest out as it leaned forward into a bellow. Eyes wide, D’Akaio threw himself into deeper water just as another burst of flame erupted in his direction. In the instant before he submerged, he could *feel* his hair dry and then crackle.

He surfaced some distance away. The dragon was now facing the other direction, scrambling maladroitly up the slippery slope. Its attention was clearly focused on the tracker,

who was in bad shape, crawling as fast as his arms could carry him, spitting up blood as he wheezed badly. The beast finally found its footing and lunged forward, snatching the man up in its mouth. The tracker had time for one agonized scream before the lizard whipped its head savagely from left to right; the man trapped in its jaws fell abruptly silent, sagging lifelessly.

At its rear, the surviving guardsman swung his sword at the dragon's tail, but the beast's armor was too thick, turning the blade easily. The attack nonetheless drew the creature's attention, for it immediately dropped its kill and bent its front around double to snap at the man. The guard leapt back even as Xelal stabbed from the other side, mimicking his subordinate's attack with only marginally improved results; his blade bit, pushing past scales to enter the tender flesh of the dragon's powerful left leg, but it didn't sink far. The beast swept its tail back around to swing its body away again, pulling itself off the sword tip before it could cut deeper. It leaned low and bellowed in rage, flame spurting from its mouth to rake over the men.

Both Hyderra dropped and rolled, putting out the flames and gaining their feet once more, only stumbling slightly in the clinging mud. The dragon lunged toward Xelal, hoping to make a quick end of him before he could reset himself, but then D'Akaio was there, swinging his sword in a powerful, two-handed grip to sever the beast's heel cord. The lizard stumbled as that leg gave out, collapsing with face and chest in the mud. Xelal dashed nimbly away to safety.

Enraged, the dragon shook its head, tried to rise, collapsed once more. Head turning to track the other Hyderra, it slithered forward on its belly—far faster than D'Akaio would have dreamed—aided by its scrabbling forelegs, propelled by the powerful rear leg that remained unharmed. The armsman yelped and ran, and that meant he was facing the wrong direction when the next burst of flame shot from the dragon's maw; he didn't see it coming, and so he didn't dodge or roll,

and the fireball burnt him to a crisp. The dragon snapped up the blackened husk before it could even collapse to the ground, whipped it just once from left to right, then cast it aside.

Standing as he was, and *where* he was, D'Akaio had seen directly into the dragon's mouth when it loosed that last spurt of flame. "You were wrong!" he shouted.

"What?" Xelal shot back. He was circling the dragon on its far side.

The beast rolled onto its back in the mud, working its damaged body spasmodically to reposition itself between the two hunters.

"It doesn't breathe fire!" D'Akaio explained.

"I beg to differ!" the guard captain retorted.

D'Akaio grinned. "The flame doesn't come from down its throat!" He was circling also, the same direction as Xelal, forcing the beast to scramble to keep both of them in view. "It has these... I don't know, glands? Like sacs, inside its mouth."

"And these sacs..." Xelal sounded skeptical, "it spits fire out of them?"

"It shoots streams of liquid, poison or gas, I don't know. But where the streams meet, they turn to fire. And when the beast screams, it blows the flame out toward us..."

The dragon seemed to be edging in Xelal's direction, though it kept its head turned toward D'Akaio.

"I'm sure your sister will be fascinated to hear all the scientific reasons behind how a dragon breathes fire," the guard captain said impatiently. "But how does that help *us*?"

Something else caught D'Akaio's attention momentarily, and he turned to look out over the lake. It was early afternoon now, and the mists had still not returned, meaning a man could see clear across the body of water. And sure enough, a crowd of farmers had gathered along the far shore.

"Perfect," he said. He thrust his arms high overhead, swinging his sword in circles to reflect pulses of sunlight like a

beacon. If there was one thing D'Akaio knew how to do, it was play to an audience.

He turned back toward Xelal and the dragon, only to find the dragon's attention now focused on him. He waved his sword overhead once more, for effect, then threw it far away.

"Distract it!" he yelled.

The dragon was still staring at him, head cocked, its body language almost... quizzical. Xelal dashed forward and swiped it across the nose before leaping away again.

"Alright, it's distracted!" the guard captain reported. "Now what?" Unlike the Hyderra who had just fallen, Xelal was too wise to turn his back on the beast; it spat another fusillade of flame at him, but he dropped to the ground and rolled, rising only slightly singed. "You're right, by the way. I see the sacs."

"Just keep distracting it!"

The beast was scrambling forward again, moving rapidly in the mud as Xelal backed away in a zigzag pattern. D'Akaio ran after it, pumping his legs furiously to reach his best speed in the mud, coming alongside the dragon and then diving forward onto his belly. He slid easily, squirming over onto his back and yelling to attract the dragon's attention as he drew even with its head.

Taken by surprise, the lizard reacted on instinct, turning to snap up this prey that had so foolishly delivered itself within reach of the dragon's powerful jaws. D'Akaio's dagger was already in his hands. As the maw gaped wide and closed down upon him, he threw himself *forward* into the creature's mouth. Demonstrating the speed and reflexes that only an Eidolon possessed, he stabbed down into one sac, dragging the dagger blade viciously through the second. *Then* he shoved himself backward.

The beast screamed, throwing back its head in agony, jaws flying wide in a rictus of pain. Its teeth tore long furrows in D'Akaio's side as the demigod stumbled back, dropping

painfully to the ground. He landed hard, bones popping, but began rolling immediately.

The dragon was whipping its head back and forth, and it had even managed to rear up on its good leg, balanced tenuously on the leg D'Akaio had slashed. Good. All the better for the spectators to see. From the demigod's vantage, fluid was clearly streaming from between those long teeth—and then he heard the distinct sound of a gurgle, as if the beast were choking. The dragon coughed viciously, trying to clear its airway, and there came a sound like a rushing windstorm.

The great lizard's head exploded.

D'Akaio had just managed to regain his feet and sprint some distance away, but the shockwave knocked him down once more. The flames leapt out twenty paces in every direction, instantly raising blisters over every stretch of exposed skin and curling what hair remained on the left side of his head.

There was a mighty *thud* and then all fell silent.

Levering himself onto his elbows, D'Akaio took in the sight of the dragon, now lying motionless in the mud. This side of its long head lay open, a gaping hole with wisps of smoke slowly fading into nothingness above.

D'Akaio pushed himself the rest of the way to his feet, staggering slightly. "Xelal?"

"I live," a voice called, its owner hidden by the dragon's bulk. The Captain of the Hyderra started to say something more, then subsided into a fit of coughing that soon transitioned to laughter.

The hilarity was infectious. D'Akaio was laughing too as he turned to face the distant crowd, raising his arms in the sign of victory.



The people preceded D'Akaio as he entered the village square, every man, woman, and child cheering triumphantly, the atmosphere festive.

The demigod himself sat astride his stallion, bare-chested and at ease despite his many burns and cuts, which were openly bleeding. He'd had very little time before the crowd descended upon him; rather than tend to his injuries, it had been more important that he cut away the ruined mess of his hair. For the drama that was about to unfold, he needed to look the part of an Eidolon of the Four, the Favorite of Great R'ZUUS. His lionskin cape helped immensely—it had been packed in his saddlebags for this exact purpose—and he couldn't help but smirk at the feel of the great cat's skull resting atop his, its fangs hanging down on either side of his forehead.

He reined in his mount before the palace of D'NYYS'S, god of crop and vine, and lord of the surrounding farms. As palaces went, the structure was a bit sad; though far grander than the surrounding timber-and-wattle houses, it was less impressive even than D'Akaio's estate.

Turning, D'Akaio verified that his cargo remained intact. Nestled carefully in the rear of an ox-drawn wagon, what remained of the dragon's gruesome head was on display for all to see, dripping mud and gore. Sadly, it was too big to wear in the same manner he wore the lion skull—standing on end, the lizard's head was nearly as tall as a common man!—but D'Akaio would still find a use for it. Perhaps mount it over the entrance to his estate? He traded smiles with Xelal, who sat atop his own steed, pacing the wagon and ensuring no one disturbed the trophy.

There was a commotion from the 'palace,' and D'Akaio looked back just in time to see D'NYYS'S stumble out onto his wraparound porch. His face and form were those of a normal man, albeit of larger proportion; unlike the muscular frames most of the gods preferred to wear, his was portly, his skin ruddy. It took D'Akaio a moment to realize that the god was... *drunk*.

[[WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?]] the other slurred.

D'Akaio stared, then remembered himself. "I am D'Akaio, Favorite of the great god R'ZUUS, master of—"

[[I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, MONGREL.]]

The Eidolon cut off in the midst of his carefully-prepared speech.

[[YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE.]]

The air of festivity died rapidly. No one openly retreated before the angry god, but a circle did open up around D'Akaio as the people put some distance between themselves and the object of the god's anger. Suddenly the god did not seem nearly so inebriated.

D'Akaio forced a smile, raising one arm in victory. "I am the Favorite of R'ZUUS. I am welcome *everywhere*."

The god's eyes smoldered. [[YOU GO TOO FAR,]] he rumbled dangerously.

"No." The demigod braced himself. "It is you who did not go far enough." Shaking his head, D'Akaio smiled sadly, playing to the crowd. "Standing about idly as your people were slaughtered, their livelihood laid to waste by a mere beast of the field." The crowd began to stir at this. "You should be ashamed."

Rather than be ashamed, the god was instantly enraged. D'Akaio swallowed hard at the look of black hatred that came across the god's face. Certainly D'NYYS's could slaughter him where he stood, with barely a gesture... except that he *couldn't*. D'NYYS's was one of the Thirteen, under the dominion of the Four. No matter what internecine scheming might occur amongst the Four, no matter how R'ZUUS's three rivals might wish for and even plot D'Akaio's death themselves, they would never stand for the death of another of the Four's Eidolon at the hands of such a low-ranking god. Besides, it was considered extremely poor taste for a god to slaughter another god's scion directly; it evidenced poor self-control.

D'Akaio breathed easier as he saw the god clench his fist in impotent rage.

[[WHAT IS IT TO ME IF A FEW PEASANTS DIE?]]

The crowd tittered at this. The Eidolon allowed himself to look saddened, but inwardly, he was beaming. Was D'NYYS's really so foolish that he couldn't see where this was leading? Or *was* he, in fact, drunk? Not that any of the gods cared a wit for the welfare of their devotees, for they certainly did not. But in a very real sense, a god's power derived from the number of followers who claimed him, and by the strength of their devotion. To so openly spurn them...

No, D'NYYS's was not entirely a fool; he was just slow on the uptake. D'Akaio could see recognition dawning in those glittering black eyes. [[BUT I AM GENEROUS,]] he added suddenly, trying to mitigate his earlier words. [[I SENT MY OWN SON TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM, DID I NOT?]] The god turned, his physical form swelling larger in the sunlight. [[DID I NOT?]] he demanded of the crowd.

D'Akaio let the question hang for a long moment, the silence growing awkward. Then he spurred the stallion forward a few steps. "You did," he said magnanimously. And without any other comment, he unfastened D'Styphyl's distinctive gold torq from his arm and tossed it casually to the god.

D'NYYS's caught it out of habit, took one look at it, then cast it aside in frustration. His eyes were black daggers.

D'Akaio turned his stallion around, contemptuously putting his back to the lesser god. "You have been granted a boon by R'ZUUS," he thundered. "He looked down upon you in your distress, and he sent me to rescue you. From this day forth, you may till your fields without fear, knowing you are under the protection of one of the Four." He cut his eyes back over his shoulder. "No matter who it is you worship."

And without another word, the Eidolon spurred his horse and left the square. The people were not quite so enthusiastic

in their cheering as they'd been before, but cheer him still they did, and many chased after him. And the farther they drew from the palace of D'NYYS'S, the more excitedly their ovations built towards their previous fever pitch. Many of the farmers followed him all the way into the City, and despite the distasteful looks they drew from the inhabitants of the isle, they nevertheless showered attention and glory upon D'Akaio.

And that night, more than three thousand were added to the number of worshipers at the Temple of R'ZUUS.

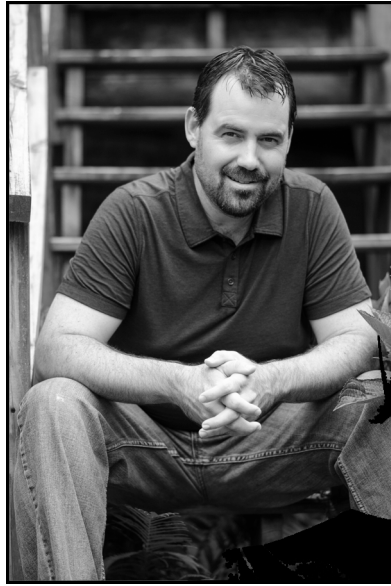
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R.L. Akers loves stories. He loves hearing them, loves telling them, loves embellishing them, and loves forging them from raw materials. He is convinced that every person who ever lived has an interesting story, and he's only met one person in his life who came close to proving otherwise.

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