

The Last Goddess

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CHAPTER ONE

Haven's grand bazaar smelled like wet gorillas. Nathan Rook had thought as much from the first moment he stepped into the city four years ago. It didn't matter that he'd only seen a gorilla once, or that the hulking beast had been as dry as an Ebaran summer at the time. Rook just knew that the eclectic mix of imported animals, fabrics, and spices filling the bazaar always reminded him of damp primates, and he wouldn't describe it any other way.

"Uh oh," Van muttered, squinting off towards a moving caravan to their left.

"Trouble?" Rook asked as he pretended to inspect a ring from a jewelry stand.

"Maybe. I think those merchants are Sunoan."

Rook frowned. "Damn. That probably means they have dresses."

"And shoes," Van added. "Don't forget shoes."

Rook did his best to keep a straight face while risking a furtive glance over at Rynne. To her credit, she hadn't even dignified their taunts with an annoyed glare. She remained perfectly in character encased in her battered armor, the Vakari-style war paint around her cheeks and eyes glistening in the afternoon sun. Still, he knew they would hear about it later.

"No sign of Marek," Van said after another minute. "You sure he's—"

"He'll be here," Rook soothed, placing the ring back on the rack and eliciting a disappointed sigh from the shopkeeper. "Let's go check out those Kimberperan weapons."

They made their way across the bustling street, his two bodyguards doing their best to intimidate people without actually touching them. At six and a half feet tall and bristling with muscle, Van didn't need much help with that. Rynne, standing barely over five, required assistance from some impressively padded boots, but most of the people here understood the danger of messing with a Vakari mercenary—even a short one—and gave her a wide berth.

Rook nodded politely to the weapon merchant and glanced idly over the stock. As usual, Kimberperan innovation didn't disappoint, but he wasn't really paying much attention to the new flintlock pistols or extended-cartridge crossbows. Instead he peered past them towards an unassuming blonde man descending the bazaar's south ramp.

"That's our guy," Van murmured. "Same meeting spot?"

"No reason to change it," Rook said.

He waited a full minute before stepping away from the merchant stand and angling off towards an open cantina on the west side. Marek and the two burly men flanking him arrived at about the same time, and the two groups wordlessly found a table.

"Mr. Rook," Marek said with a half nod as he sat down. "Glad you could make it."

"I told you I'd be here," Rook replied coolly. "I just hope you have something worth my time."

Van loomed just off to his left, crossing his burly arms over his chest and glaring down the opposing bodyguards. Rynne slid next to Rook's right shoulder and not-so-subtly fingered the crossbow hanging on her hip.

Marek didn't even flinch. "Oh, I do. Honestly, I'm more worried about you having the drakes to pay for it."

Rook cocked an eyebrow despite himself. Confidence, feigned or otherwise, wasn't typically the hallmark of a petty scavenger like Marek. He drifted meagerly from job to job,

selling whatever he could find to collectors or other merchants. Rook had done business with him a handful of times and had never seen anything worth more than a hundred drakes. But this time...

Everything about Marek seemed different today. His posture, his glimmering eyes, his cocky grin...he looked exactly like a man who had struck it big and believed himself invulnerable. Of course, that painted him as even more of an amateur given the fact he didn't have the resources to protect anything so important. Regardless, Rook had to admit his interest was piqued.

He grunted as derisively as he could manage. "Spit it out, Marek."

The scavenger leaned back and smiled widely. "I take it an educated Ebaran businessman like you knows all about the legend of Septuria."

"I hope that's a joke," Rook growled. "You'd only be about the thousandth kreel in Haven to try and peddle off 'legitimate Septurian relics.'"

"It's no joke. All these religious fanatics going on about restoring Septuria, and I found a real piece of it not ten miles outside the city."

"So you are wasting my time," Rook said, standing. "Don't contact—"

"I'm telling you the truth," Marek insisted, glancing nervously at the nearby tables to make sure no one was looking. "Just let me explain."

Rook glared down at the man for a full thirty seconds before letting out an exaggerated sigh and dropping back into his chair. It was so much easier to fake annoyance when most of it was genuine. "You have one minute. Don't waste it."

Marek's smile returned and he nodded. "I already told you Prince Kastrius paid us to start digging a few weeks ago. Given how much the Empress wants to distance herself from her son these days, it made enough sense to hire us instead of using his own people."

"It keeps his hands clean whether you find something or not," Rook reasoned.

"Right. I don't know where he got the tip, but we could tell within hours that this wasn't another futile gorm hunt. This was a *real* Septurian building—a mortuary, at that. It took a week to dig it open, but it was worth it. All the symbols you see the fanatics waving around these days? They were all there—this is the real deal."

Rook casually folded his hands in front of him. Marek certainly believed what he was saying whether it was actually true or not. That was a step up from his normal routine, at least, but it was still important not to seem too interested. "Go on."

"There's more to the legend than just the city falling from the sky," Marek said. "I'm sure you're familiar with the story of the Kirshal."

"A trite messiah fantasy concocted by bored priests," Rook replied dismissively, a warning tingle working its way down his spine. He knew a lot more than that about the Kirshal, naturally, and he also knew how many charlatans had claimed to unearth her remains over the years. But something in Marek's eyes...

"They say that before the Sundering, Edeh placed a fraction of her soul into one of her priestesses," the man went on. "The idea was that this woman would survive Septuria's destruction, and then one day she would awaken and bring about this great restoration. Some even claim she would have the power to free the gods from the Fane."

It was a succinct but accurate summation of the ancient legend, and Rook's warning tingle abruptly transformed into a full-blown chill. He would have expected a man like Marek to rely on outright lies or tack on some thick hyperbole, especially given how many over-the-top

Kirshal myths were out there. The fact he was telling the truth was somehow even more disturbing.

“As I said, a fantasy for kreel who should know better,” Rook replied, though he could hear the rising tension in his own voice. “My patience has limits, Marek. Get to the point.”

“The point is,” Marek said, his lips twisting into a crooked smile, “I found her.”

“You found the Kirshal?” Rook asked skeptically. “How exactly do you identify the Messiah from a pile of bones?”

Marek shook his head. “Not bones. You don’t understand. I found—”

“Trouble,” Rynne warned in her best Vakari accent. “Over by the ramp about fifty yards.”

Rook tried to ignore the knot forming in his stomach and craned his neck to get a better look. There, coming down one of the ramps with a full detail of Faceless bodyguards, was Cadrien Naen, a prominent member of the Assembly of the Six Gods. It wasn’t unusual for politicians to visit the bazaar, of course, and patrols of Faceless were a common sight anywhere in the city. But then, that wasn’t what she was worried about.

“Naen always puts on a show whenever he goes anywhere,” Marek said. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried about him,” Rook murmured.

“There by the silk vendor, you see?” Rynne asked.

“Yes.”

Marek, flustered, shook his head and tried to follow their gaze. “What are you talking about?”

“The pack of Balorites waiting for him,” Rook explained, hopping to his feet. The only weapons he had brought with him were a single shot Kimberlan pistol concealed under his jacket and a slender dagger stuffed in his left boot. Hardly worth mentioning if this turned out like he suspected it was going to...

“It’s a Darenthi city—there are Balorites and Edehans everywhere,” Marek pointed out. “I don’t see the probl—”

“They’re not just any Balorites,” Rook interrupted. “These fanatics have been hounding Naen for weeks, ever since he declared his support for the Empress’s peace treaty.”

“I think they’re magi,” Rynne added. “Shakissa’s mercy...”

Marek shook his head desperately. “Magi? How can you tell?”

“There they go,” Van warned, unsheathing his sword and terrifying the other cantina customers in the process. Rynne leapt over next to him, drawing her crossbow—

And then, in a single moment of fire and screams, it all went straight to the Void.

One of the Balorite cultists, tactically separated from his peers by a dozen yards, abruptly tilted his palm upwards, and a second later a brilliant ball of orange-white flame flashed in his hand. With a flick of his wrist the sphere streaked across the market and detonated on the ramp right in front of Assemblyman Naen. The explosion instantly reduced a pair of adjacent merchant stands to ash, but mercifully none of the nearby shoppers had been hit. They shrieked and sprinted off in all directions before the lingering flames could engulf them.

Naen was not so lucky. The assemblyman screamed in agony as he flailed about, desperately trying to extinguish the fire dancing across his clothing. Two of his Faceless bodyguards immediately charged forward, their swords and shields already drawn. Their jet black armor wasn’t even singed, but that shouldn’t have surprised anyone—any mage, even the most fanatical cultist, would understand that Faceless were impervious to magic.

Which meant that somewhere in the crowd, more Balorites were lying in wait.

“Zandrast’s blood!” Marek swore. He’d already managed to stuff himself under the nearest table, and his “bodyguards” had done the same.

“Just stay down,” Rook told him, scanning the chaos-strewn bazaar for inspiration. The Faceless thoughtlessly shoved past civilians to get at the Balorite mage, while the Assemblyman, badly burned, screamed in agony as his two remaining guardians hauled him away.

“They’re flushing him up the ramp,” Rynne said.

“Yeah,” Van agreed. “Look—that first group is baiting the Faceless away.”

Rook grimaced and glanced down to Marek. “Do you have any weapons?”

“What?” the man stammered. “You’re not serious?”

“I take that as a ‘no.’” Rook looked up again. “We might be able to cut them off up there.”

Van blinked, and even Rynne cocked her eyebrow at him.

Rook smiled. “I like having politicians indebted to me. Come on.”

He lunged over the cantina’s meager railing and drew his one-shot pistol mid-leap. Sections of the ramp were still alight with flaming debris, but the path was wide enough to easily maneuver around the rubble. Rook took the lead, knowing the others would follow him even if they thought he was crazy—which they almost assuredly did. And to be fair, they were probably right.

He reached the top of the ramp just as another explosion rocked the area, this time just off to his left. Naen shrieked as the blast narrowly missed him, and his two remaining Faceless guardians lunged forward in a vain effort to reach a small group of Balorite attackers up on the rooftops.

“Death to the Empress!” they shrieked in unison. “Glory to Abalor!”

Rook dove for cover behind a statue, then swiveled his weapon up at the cultists. For all its other benefits, this pistol had pathetic range, but perhaps he could at least spook them enough that they’d fall off...

A sharp *thump* sounded next to his ear as Rynne fired a shot from her crossbow. It pelted one of the cultists in the shoulder, and the man dropped his weapon and toppled from his perch. Before he even hit the ground she’d already fired a second shot, this one ripping through a second cultist’s leg and dropping him flat. The third and final cultist shifted his aim to face them, and Rook finally squeezed his trigger.

It was, in any measurable sense, far less impressive—but it got the job done. The bullet blew apart a shingle near the man’s foot, and it startled him so much he lost his balance and tumbled over with his companions. Almost immediately, the two remaining Faceless lunged forward and mercilessly hacked the wounded men to pieces.

“See,” Rook said, standing. “I told you we’d—”

The hand of the statue above him shattered, and Rook dropped back into a crouch. He caught a glimpse of three more attackers charging from the other direction, bellowing a mix of insane chants as they fired their crossbows.

“You really don’t pay me enough for this,” Van muttered as he rolled out, shield leveled in front of him. He grimaced and charged, and Rook couldn’t help but wince at each *thud* as Van’s shield caught bolt after bolt. A second later the three new attackers drew steel to meet the big man head-on, and Rynne slid a fresh cartridge into her weapon before firing another volley of her own.

Rook rolled to his right and pulled the dagger from his boot, suddenly regretting not buying one of those new flintlocks earlier. He popped into a half crouch, waiting for the opportunity to at least throw the screlling thing once Van was clear...

And then yet another barrage of shots whistled over his head from behind. He turned to see Marek and his two henchmen firing away with their hand-held, easily concealable crossbows.

In a matter of seconds, it was all over. The last Balorite group lay crumpled in a bloody pile in the street, Van standing triumphantly over them. And most importantly, it didn't look like anyone had suffered more than a scratch.

"No one travels in Haven without a weapon," Marek commented dryly. "And I kind of like the idea of an Assemblyman being indebted to me, too."

Rook grinned and put his dagger away. Naen was still cowering behind a stone column with his two guards and would probably stay there until some healers arrived.

"You know, I'm not even sure he's worth it," Rook murmured, his smile fading. Farther down the ramp, what seemed like a whole platoon of Darenthi soldiers had arrived on the scene, both Faceless and the still-human variety. It was a nearly-averted massacre and yet another chapter in the endless Holy War between the Balorites and Edehans.

"They're getting bold," Rynne said gravely. "Attacking the Empress's people in broad daylight."

Rook nodded. "They've been fighting for a thousand years. I don't think anyone expected this recent truce to last forever."

Marek grunted. "Haven—the great 'City of Unity.' I wonder if anyone ever actually believed that."

Rook pursed his lips. "You said you found something."

"Yes, I did," the man replied quietly, his eyes thoughtful. "Though it belatedly occurs to me that it might just make things even worse around here."

"The corpse of the Edehan Messiah?"

"Not the corpse," he corrected. "The Kirshal in the flesh—and alive."

Rook eyed the other man carefully. Again, the scavenger didn't appear to be lying. "You're serious."

"It's something you're going to have to see yourself to believe. Once you do, we can negotiate payment." Marek glanced down to the soldiers attending to the wounded and the Assemblyman still crying out in pain. "I don't want anything to do with this mess."

Rook nodded and sighed. Change draws blood, the old saying went, and here in Haven it was just as true as ever. A dozen different nations vied for power over Esharia, and within each of them, even one as heavy-handed as the Darenthi Republic, were hundreds of smaller factions with their own beliefs and agendas. Haven wasn't the city of unity, but it might have been the city of the future—or at the very least a harrowing glimpse at what was to come.

"I think you're right," he said softly. Even if Marek was lying, Rook didn't really want to stick around here much longer anyway. Political favors or not, he'd rather not face the scrutiny of a Faceless inquisition. "I think it's time you showed me what you found."

Marek smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

Rook had been in the business long enough to expect hyperbole and spot out-right lies. What he was far less accustomed to dealing with was the truth, and that made everything Marek showed him that much more impressive.

“I tried to tell you,” the man said, gesturing towards the storeroom now packed full of open crates containing everything from sculptures to jewelry, “but I guess I can’t blame you for being skeptical. This is the real deal.”

“So it would seem,” Rook commented idly. Rynne had already given him the confirming nod that most of this stuff was indeed genuine, at least as far as she could tell at a glance. Actual Septurian artifacts...outside of temple vaults or wealthy independent collectors, they were almost unheard of.

“You’re welcome to buy whatever else you want, but this is what you came for,” Marek said, leading them over to an open stone coffin. “This is what a lot of people in Haven would kill to see.”

Rook looked down into the coffin, and the knot that had been slowly forming in his stomach twisted like he’d just been stabbed.

Van peered over his shoulder. “You found her in that?”

“Sealed shut,” Marek confirmed.

Rook glanced to Rynne; her face had gone completely white—which meant she had come to the same conclusion he had. Namely, that this was bad. Very, very bad.

The woman inside was tall and statuesque with long red-blond hair, and she was wrapped in a sari-style dress and halter combination he had only seen in paintings. An intricate pattern of tattoos decorated her bare stomach from beneath her belly up to the folds of cloth covering her breasts, and a striking emerald crystal pierced her navel. It was shaped like a small leaf—the holy symbol of Edeh.

“She’s not breathing,” Van pointed out. “How do you know she’s alive?”

Marek leaned down and placed a hand against the woman’s face. “She’s still warm. There’s some type of magic keeping her asleep. That’s about all I could get from my people—none of them are actual magi.”

Rynne leaned down over the coffin. “Shakissa’s mercy...”

“I’ve heard the Vakari don’t believe in the Kirshal,” Marek said. “I think this just might prove you wrong.”

“There are other explanations,” Rook whispered.

“Really? So I take it I should offer this to someone else?”

Rook bit his lip. “I’ll buy it all.”

The scavenger smiled. “I thought you might. Now, let’s talk price...”

“Fifty thousand,” Rook said. “And your word that you leave the city and don’t tell anyone else about this.”

Marek raised an eyebrow. “Fifty? I think you can do better than—”

“More than fifty and my people take it from you—right before they drive you out of town,” Rook warned coldly. “It’s the best offer you’re going to get. I suggest you take it.”

Marek could have protested. Many men would have in his position, even if they didn’t have the resources to defend their prize. He certainly couldn’t ask the city guard for help—the moment anyone outside this room got wind of this, he would lose it all. And of course, if Prince Kastrius ever found out he had sold all these relics...

“Fifty it is,” Marek said. “And don’t worry: I don’t think any of us plans on sticking around much longer.”

“Start packing it up. I’ll have my people come over shortly.”

Marek nodded. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Rook.”

He stepped away to give his people orders, and Rook knelt down next to Rynne. “You recognize the markings?”

“Of course I do,” she whispered. “She’s real. It’s all real.”

Van grunted. “You can’t know that for certain.”

“No, but it’s all there,” Rook said gravely. “The coffin, the tattoos, the dress, the—”

“The legend,” Rynne breathed, shaking her head. “The Kirshal, the Restoration, Septuria...”

Van sighed. “So you’re telling me this woman has been stuffed in a coffin for a thousand years and somehow survived? I’m sorry, but that’s a load of drek.”

Rynne glanced up to him. “Of course she survived. She’s carrying the soul of a goddess!”

Van wrinkled his nose and turned to Rook. “You don’t believe that, do you, Nate?”

“I don’t know,” Rook replied softly. “But we’re going to find out.”