

Praise for *Daughter of Darkness*

'I was lost to this exquisitely crafted world. *Daughter of Darkness* is **everything I want in a fantasy and more.**'

Mary Watson, author of *Blood to Poison*

'This is a **beautiful, breathtaking adventure** through the world of Ancient Greece and the Greek myths. *Daughter of Darkness* puts a twisty, surprising spin on the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, with plenty of heartache and betrayal, and a trickster heroine who had me rooting for her from the very first line.'

Holly Race, author of *Midnight's Twins*

'**Deliciously dark, dangerously exciting**, absolutely immersive fantasy from two goddesses of storytelling.'

Sinéad O'Hart, author of *The Eye of the North*

'**Rich with mythology**, this twisty adventure spins a new story from old – one that will leave you breathless, broken and desperate for more.'

Bex Hogan, author of the *Isles of Storm and Sorrow* trilogy

'Steeped in blood, betrayal and mysticism, this is a deliciously dark tale of legendary proportions – **a book of smart, savage beauty** that kept me reading long into the night.'

Josh Winning, author of *The Shadow Glass*

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DAUGHTER *of* DARKNESS

KATHARINE & ELIZABETH CORR

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To everyone who has ever stood up to a tyrant.



The Four Orders of Theodesmioi



Theodesmioi of the order of **ZEUS**
king of the gods, ruler of the heavens and the earth

Battle Wagers ~ fight with beyond-human powers of speed and endurance

Weather Workers ~ control the clouds and wind



Theodesmioi of the order of **POSEIDON**
god of the sea

Sea Singers ~ enhance the speed and strength of ships



Theodesmioi of the order of **HADES**
god of the underworld, ruler of the dead

Soul Severers ~ separate the soul from the body and send it on its journey



Theodesmioi of the order of **HEPHAESTUS**
smith-god and master of metals

Spell Casters ~ bind magic into metal

Note: Houses of the Orders of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon are found in most cities.
There are only two houses of the Order of Hephaestus, in Mycenae and Thebes.



Αἱ Μοῖραι προστάττουσι τοῖς πασιν θνητοῖς ἀποθνήσκειν
Οὕτως σε προσκαλέω τὸν ἀπαραιτήτους Θανατον.
Αἱ Μοῖραι προστάττουσι τοῖς πᾶσιν θνητοῖς πασχειν.
Οὕτως σε προσκαλέω τὸν ἀπαραιτήτους Θανατον.
ὅς, ὁ τῶν θεῶν μόνος, ἡμᾶς τῶν ἡμετέρων Μοιρῶν ἄν
ἐλευθεροῖ.

The Fates decree that all mortals should die.
Thus I call on you, pitiless Death.
The Fates decree that all mortals should suffer.
Thus I call on you, merciful Death,
Who alone of the gods
May free us from our fate.

Extract taken from 'A Song of Severing',
as recorded in the archives of the Order of Hades





Prologue

Sing, O muse . . .

That's how the old stories used to start. At least, that is how they used to start in Hellas, Greece – of all realms the most jealously guarded by its gods. A light-drenched land set in wine-dark waters, its craggy hillsides dense with pine, bright with acanthus, loud with the constant thrum of cicadas. Hillsides crowned with the cities of men: Mycenae, citadel of long-dead Agamemnon; warlike Sparta; rocky Aulis where Iphigeneia died at her father's hand. Pylos of the golden sands, on which the palace of wise Nestor once stood, looking out across the Ionian Sea. And mightiest of all, Thebes, from where Orpheus the Tyrant sends out his armies, cutting down kingdom after kingdom.

Sing, O muse, a song of Death . . .

There's the city of Iolkos, high on its hill above the gulf of Pagasae. One-time home of Jason, second-rate hero, third-rate husband and thief of the golden fleece. But the heroes – good and bad – dwindled and disappeared long ago. Now there are gods, and there are men, and there is Orpheus – a mortal who thinks he is a god. Iolkos is just a backwater, another place





caught within his net. And there, in a granite-walled complex beyond the boundaries of the city, in a small lamp-lit room with its windows open to admit moonlight and the scent of rosemary from the garden beyond, lies a girl who is dying.

Sing, O muse, a song of Death and the maiden . . .

Sickness stalks the broad streets of Iolkos, and Death follows in its wake. After all, he is everywhere, in all living things: their beginnings, their endings, and each moment of existence between. Built into every atom of the space they inhabit. He is only, and always, to be expected. Whether through disease or violence or the swift-footed passage of the years, all life eventually falls beneath the shadow of his wings.

A plague has left fresh scars on this girl's cheeks. Her eyes are mismatched – one dark brown, one grey-green – and half-veiled by fever-fluttered lids. And there's a symbol on her forehead. She's one of the Theodesmioi, the god-marked. Marked by Zeus, king of the heavens and the earth, or by Poseidon, lord of the seas, or by Hephaestus, hammer-wielding master of metals, or, in this girl's case, by Hades, ruler of the Underworld. Serving the city in Hades' name and drawing a fraction of the god's power in return. A very small fraction. Not enough to save herself.

Death tightens his grip on his sword. Swings back the blade, ready to sever her lifeline and unship her soul from its earthly vessel. The movement brings him closer to her face.

Her unseeing eyes open. For the first time in more centuries than he can remember, Death hesitates.

A ring of gold has burst into being around the pupil of the girl's dark brown eye like the sudden unfolding of a





sunflower. She gasps with pain and sinks back into oblivion. His sharp-edged blade is still ready. He knows he ought to use it.

And yet . . .

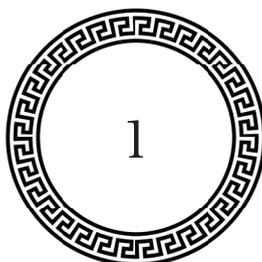
And yet, who's to say she can't survive? She's strong. A fighter. Perhaps there's something she wants very badly. A reason for her to try to stay alive. Death sheathes his sword, doing his best to ignore the voice he thought he'd long since silenced, the insidious whispering of hope.

What if she could be the one?

The girl's existence hangs by a fraying thread, fine as spider's silk, brittle as old bone, but not quite broken. Death lingers, warming himself at the flickering embers of her life. She can't see him. She can't hear him. Still, he murmurs two words into the darkness.

Fight harder.





Iolkos, two years later

Hope, Deina decided, was a terrible thing.

From where she was standing in the shady, stone-paved portico of the megaron – the labyrinthine palace that sat at the heart of Iolkos’s citadel – she couldn’t see the guilty man. He hadn’t yet been brought up from the cells. She could hear him well enough, though. Pleading with the guards. Begging, over and over. Bargaining. He’d been sentenced to what was generally held to be a fate worse than death. But apparently, despite all evidence to the contrary, he still hoped for mercy. Maybe even a miracle.

The gods alone knew why. In Deina’s experience, neither they nor the city’s rulers dealt in either. After all, the man had been condemned to undergo the Punishment Rite. The ritual stripped a soul from its human housing and trapped it forever in the Threshold – a space that functioned most of the time as a transition between life and death, a staging post





between the mortal world and the Underworld, but which was transformed by this particular rite into an eternal prison. Of all the functions carried out by the Soul Severers – the Theodesmioi of the Order of Hades – the Punishment Rite was the most terrible, inflicted only for the worst crimes. So terrible that years might elapse between performances. No wonder so many had come to watch.

The dead heat of midsummer wrapped the city like a shroud, and even the buzzing clouds of fat, black flies seemed drowsy. Still, people were crammed into the huge, colonnaded courtyard that extended outwards from the front of the megaron. More were huddled precariously on top of the massive ceremonial gateway that gave access to the palace complex. Some silent. Some gossiping. Some, enterprising, moving among the throng and trying to sell refreshments to anyone who could afford them. There weren't a lot of young men in the crowd, all told. So many had been conscripted into the Dominion's armies; so few had returned.

But there at the front of the crowd stood Aster, one of Deina's fellow Severers. Despite the press of people, there was a little space around him. Partly because of *what* he was, partly, Deina suspected, because no one wanted to accidentally jostle someone with such large and obvious muscles. As Aster frowned up at the portico, running a hand impatiently through his auburn curls, his lips were pursed like he'd eaten some particularly sour grapes. She'd heard him complaining – for days – that the rite should have been performed by him, or, at a push, Theron; they'd both been adepts for half a year longer than Deina, they were skilled, they were men. Deina



gave him a cheery wave. Too bad Theron wasn't also here to witness her victory.

Deina's gaze drifted to the proclamation pinned to one of the gilded columns making up the front and sides of the portico. She could read a little of it. A sentence with the condemned man's name – Dionys – and his crimes: murder, treason. And the word *eupatridae* – the well-born. Dionys was either a member of the nobility, the warrior class, or had killed one. But the rest of the text was still beyond her. She had a lesson later – unofficially, of course. Perhaps she could somehow take the proclamation with her . . .

Her mouth was parched. Heat radiated off the stone altar, ready and waiting on the top step. Various priests, all nobles, were huddled into the deeper shade on the other side of the portico, fanning themselves and wilting. Deina's mentor, Antei's, a red-robed elder of the Order of Hades, was standing nearby, eyes closed in meditation. Shouts from the crowd signalled the beginning of a fight. But the rite couldn't start without the presence of the archon, the highest rank in the city now that Iolkos was ruled from Thebes and had no king of its own. Perhaps the archon was still counting the gold for the quarterly tribute; the Theban collection ships were overdue. More likely, he was working out how much he could siphon off for himself, while his city grew more and more impoverished.

There were two other Theodesmioi flanking the doorway to the megaron. The thunderbolt sigils on their foreheads marked them as members of the Order of Zeus, the god who held sway over the heavens and the earth. Part of the palace guard, so most likely Battle Wagers – Theodesmioi gifted with



more-than-human reflexes and stamina, reflecting the earthly side of Zeus's remit. Only a few of their order had the much rarer gift of influencing the winds and rains with their minds. If the archon had a Weather Worker in his employment, he would have boasted about it for all the city to hear. Still, Deina hissed at the nearest of them.

'Hey, can't you summon up some clouds?'

The man scowled at her, but before he could answer, the archon – heavily perfumed, ruddy faced, robes flapping – hurried through the doorway.

'Bring up the condemned,' he ordered.

Struggling, still appealing for mercy, the man Dionys was dragged into the daylight. He was younger than Deina had expected. Naked, with bloody lacerations criss-crossing his skin from some earlier flogging. She'd seen bodies in a worse state. But the way he screamed, when the guards bound him to the hot surface of the stone altar, made her wince.

The archon cleared his throat. 'People of Iolkos, this man, Dionys of the clan Diminae, has been found guilty of patricide and of plotting treason against the city.' He dabbed the sweat from his forehead. 'In accordance with the wise commands of our master, Orpheus, sovereign ruler of the Theban Dominion, he is to be handed over to the Soul Severers of the Order of Hades for punishment.'

The archon wasn't telling the people anything they didn't know already. Still, the noise level in the courtyard rose.

Until one of the palace servants struck the huge bronze gong that stood nearby. The sound rippled through the air, leaving silence in its wake.





Deina came forward to stand next to the altar. The crowd stared at her, faces tilted upwards, squinting in the noon sun. Even the blank stone eyes of the leaping dolphins that formed the gateway's arch seemed to be fixed on her. For once, she was glad of the too-thick ceremonial robes and the veil that concealed her pockmarked face. Black linen for an adept, edged with scarlet – the sigil of Hades repeated in unending loops of woven flame.

But the people had the right to see the sign of her authority. Deina took a deep breath and folded back her veil to reveal the sigil on her forehead. The same symbol that scarred the forehead of Anteïs and that of every other Severer. Three stylised lines representing a sceptre, topped by the upswept wings of a bird.

'Why don't you just kill me? My father deserved the death I gave him!' The condemned man was writhing, trying to break free. He twisted his head towards the archon. 'You deserve it too! All of you, standing by while Orpheus takes our lands and birthright, forcing us to fight over what's left –' He raised his eyes to Deina, standing by his head. 'Please, I beg you . . .'

The bronze torc Deina had to wear was heavy against her collarbone. Ignoring the thumping of her heart, she deliberately turned away from Dionys as he was gagged. Doubt – of her choices, of her abilities – was a luxury she couldn't afford if she wanted any chance of being free. And what were the squabbles of the nobility to her? The well-born knew nothing of what the Theodesmioi suffered and they cared even less. In any case, if she'd turned down this opportunity, Theron would have taken it. Him, or Aster, or another Severer. Punish the criminal and earn a year's freedom – an entire twelve months



struck from the forty-year period of her indenture – or watch someone else do it. An easy enough choice.

As the archon and his retinue withdrew beyond the limits of the sacred circle, Deina tried to remember everything she'd been taught, everything she'd practised, all the advice that Anteïs had given her.

The first time is always difficult. It's hard enough to draw a soul from a body that's not ready to leave. Harder still to resist the pleading – and there is always pleading. Remember, they are condemned by the king and by the city, not by us. We don't have to judge. We just have to act . . .

That's why the older woman was here: to lend a hand. Not that Deina planned on needing any help.

Deina's tools were already laid out on the table next to her: a sharp-bladed knife carved from bone, a small bowl of white poplar wood, dried herbs and roots. And a vial of ashes, taken from the burnt remains of the man's victim. She murmured the opening lines of the Song for this rite, the words that gave shape and purpose to the power that dwelt within her. Gripped her knife tightly as she focused on sliding the blade across the man's wrist to open the vein. His skin split exactly like the ripe figs Deina had practised on, his blood flowing easily into the bowl. So far, so good. Ignoring his stifled screams, still chanting, she sprinkled the blood with a pinch of pungent mint, beloved of Hades, and one of rosemary, for memory. Added some shavings of dried asphodel root. Finally, she tipped in some of the ashes and mashed everything together with her knife.

Deina passed the bowl to Anteïs, keeping hold of the knife. Dipping her forefinger into the mixture she leaned forward and



spoke the final lines of this part of the rite as she pressed her fingertip against the man's breastbone, then against Anteïs's, then against her own, staining the skin.

'Heart to measure.'

The bright afternoon sunshine faded. Shadows began to gather and grow at the edges of the circle. Deina dipped her finger again.

'Touch to find.' Forcing Dionys's hands open, she smeared the mixture on his palms. Then on Anteïs's, then on her own. The hair on Deina's arms stood up as the air within the circle cooled.

'Tongue to summon.' His lips first, then Anteïs's, then hers. The noise of the crowd in the courtyard faded until Deina could hear nothing but the man's sobs, and the slowing beat of her own heart.

'Blood to bind.' She pressed her damp fingertips to Anteïs's brow and tipped what was left in the bowl onto the man's forehead. Placed her free hand gently on the side of his face as Anteïs gripped her shoulder tightly. Dionys had finally stopped struggling; no hope left now.

The sigil of Hades bound into Deina's skin was pulsing. Not pain exactly, but something so close to it that she had to grit her teeth and force herself to breathe evenly. She bent over until her forehead was just above Dionys's. Waited, until the light had almost gone, until she could feel frost forming on her skin, until she couldn't bear to resist a moment longer.

Finally, she let her head drop. The bloody mixture staining Dionys's forehead came into contact with her sigil. Darkness fell like an axe.



* * *

Sensation crept back. Deina became aware of the weight of Anteis's hand on her shoulder. The cool solidity of the knife-hilt in her palm. As the light returned, so did her sight.

She knew where she was: the Threshold. She'd been here before. A place constructed centuries ago by the first Soul Severers, drawing on the power of the Underworld, but separate from it, and accessible only to those bearing the sigil of Hades. The Threshold was both familiar and strange. Always the same, but always different. Reconstructed each time according to the type of rite and the power of the Severer who had summoned it. A few days ago, Deina had carried out a Severing Rite, releasing the soul of a child from her badly burnt body and setting her on the first step of her journey into and through the Underworld. An act of mercy that was the most common of the rites they were called on to conduct. The Threshold then had been welcoming – a small garden, bright with flowers. But this version of the Threshold was bleak and angular. A flat expanse of lifeless rock, dull grey sky above, surrounded by dense, unmoving cloud. It was almost like being marooned on the peak of a high mountain, with no visible means of descent. And looming over the space, conjured by Deina's will and the Punishment Rite, stood the Deathless Trees. Every detail from the Song, all exactly as she'd practised: blackened bark, gnarled trunk, branches drooping like so much lank hair. Bones for roots, poking up out of the ground. Menace leaked from their rotting hearts like sap.

The man, Dionys, was standing nearby. His lifeline encircled his body – a faint silvery thread that also looped around



Deina's waist and around Anteïs's. It would fade soon, but until then, the lifeline tethered them all to the mortal world. But Dionys didn't seem to see it. Instead, he was staring at the unblemished skin on his wrist.

Deina cleared her throat, drawing his attention. His eyes widened in recognition and he took off, sprinting full pelt towards the wall of mist surrounding the space, lifeline unspooling behind him, glancing over his shoulder at Deina – until he slammed into the mist and flew backwards. With one finger, Deina carefully prodded the fluffy edges of a nearby cloud – as solid and as sharp as glass.

Dionys still wasn't giving up. Back on his feet, he began running back and forth around the boundary, testing it, hurling himself against it in growing desperation.

Deina looked away and thought about the sketch of a ship pinned to the wall of her room. The kind of ship she hoped might one day take her somewhere. Anywhere, as long as it was far, far away from Iolkos.

'Deina.' Anteïs nodded towards the man, one eyebrow raised. 'Get on with it.'

'Right.' Deina ran her tongue over her dry lips, recalling the next part of the rite: the fettering. She took a deep breath and held up her arms.

'Deep-rooted guardians of the Threshold, I call on thee. Deathless, lifeless, keep this accursed villain in your tender embrace, and subject his soul to everlasting chastisement.'

The roots and the branches of the two trees began to quiver, growing and slithering towards their prey, seeking blindly. When Dionys realised what was happening, he flung his hands



up, mouth open in a silent scream. But there was no escape. With a mesmerising inevitability the trees embraced him, weaving themselves around him – arms, legs, body, head – until he was caught fast. The last tendrils latched on to his eyelids and forced them open.

Next, the summoning. Dionys bore the imprint of Deina's sigil on his forehead. At her words, something like smoke spilled from the mark, billowing and shifting until it became a full-sized image: a living, moving memory, built out of the smoke itself. There was Dionys, a cup in his hand, approaching an old man who was lying propped up in a bed. Holding the cup to his father's lips and making him drain the contents. Standing there and watching as the other began to thrash about. The air within the Threshold grew rank with the stink of death and excrement, strong enough to make Deina gag. She could hear everything too: the horrible gurgling of the old man choking, trying to breathe through the blood gushing from his mouth and nose. Until Dionys stood over his father's corpse, spattered with blood, an expression of triumph on his face.

As soon as it finished, the scene replayed from the beginning. Over and over. That was the point: for the murderer to experience the horror of what he had done. For eternity.

Anteïs was leaning heavily on Deina now, her eyes closed, her face drained of colour, her breathing fast and shallow.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes . . .' Anteïs sniffed and straightened up. 'Hurry. The severing.'

Deina nodded, tightened her grip on the knife and picked her way across the floor of the Threshold – Anteïs following



closely, still gripping her shoulder – to where Dionys hung, immobile. Reaching the trees, Deina chanted the final prayer to Hades to end the rite as she drove her knife into a crack in one of the black branches and widened it. She gathered up the glimmering thread of Dionys’s life and looped it tightly around the branch, making sure the lifeline was stuck fast into the crack, trapping him there, inside the Threshold. Shifted her hold on the knife to cut the other end of the cord, to send her and Anteïs back before it was too late.

Paused.

He was there . . .

Long hair, dark as jet, framing a young man’s face. What looked to be old scars spiralling up and around the bare flesh of his arms. He wore a black tunic with a silver sword belt and seemed wrapped in a cloak of darkness, though his eyes glittered all the more brightly for that, like sapphires held up to the sun.

Deina lowered the knife as her grip on the hilt slackened.

Two years had passed since she’d first noticed him; every time one of the Severers’ rites had led her beyond the boundaries of the mortal world into the Threshold, there he had been, watching her at a distance, as motionless as a beautifully crafted statue. Silent too; he’d never spoken. Only his gaze had suggested he had some interest in her.

Questions crowded her mind: who was he? What was he? Some Underworld creature that had breached the other side of the Threshold, even though all Deina had been taught told her that shouldn’t be possible? A tremor of fear – of the creature, of what his appearance might mean – unsettled her breath.



He – it – moved. Cocked his head to one side, locked eyes with her, smiled and began sauntering towards her.

A bolt of pain shot from Deina's left temple into her eye. She gasped. The creature drew closer and the pain intensified until she was gritting her teeth. What was he doing to her?

'Deina, the knife!' Anteïs's voice jerked Deina back to the rite. To Dionys's lifeline, rapidly fading from existence. Before Deina could do more than swear at the danger her loss of concentration had placed them in, the elder snatched the blade and sliced through their end of the lifeline. Just in time. The Threshold spun away from them and they were dragged back into the mortal world with a suddenness that took Deina's breath away.

They were standing on the top step of the portico. Dionys's body, now no more than an empty shell, was still bound to the altar.

Deina caught Anteïs as the older woman slumped. A servant hurried forward, and together they began to lead her back into the megaron.

'Fire . . .' Anteïs barely breathed the word, her eyelids fluttering.

Deina glanced over her shoulder at the archon, still loitering outside the circle. 'It's done. You can burn what's left.' No long rest for Dionys within the silent enclosure of the city's tombs. By the time she got Anteïs inside and the doors were shut behind them, kindling had been spread on top of his body, and the flames were already eating into his flesh.

The servant led them to one of the small rooms that made up the bulk of the megaron, helped Deina settle Anteïs on a



couch and made his escape. Olives, bread, a jug of water and another of vinegary wine had been left there in readiness; Deina poured herself a drink, picked at the refreshments and watched her mentor's face. Anteïs was undergoing the Toll, the side effects that almost inevitably followed performance of any of the rites. The exercise of power exacted a varying price, depending on the strength of the Severer and the difficulty of the rite: headaches; vomiting; bleeding from nose, ears or pores; temporary blindness; stomach cramps; seizures. Death, if you were inadequately prepared, weak or unlucky.

Deina fretted a piece of bread into crumbs. She had carried out the whole rite, apart from cutting the lifeline at the end. Would it be enough? Would she receive the reward for the rite, or would Anteïs? Deina didn't feel tired or unwell, but then she very rarely did; for whatever reason, the Toll was mostly something that happened to other people. She lifted the neck of her tunic and gazed at her torso. Like that of all Soul Severers, her skin bore a record of her deeds. Rite-seals, they were called: every severing, every laying, every hallowing – every time she'd wielded Hades' power in the service of the city – was imprinted on her flesh. A different symbol for each rite. Like one half of a balance sheet, they showed how much time she had earned from her work, to set against the term of her indenture. The rite-seals began above one's heart; Deina's first, curving around her left breast, had already begun to fade to a paler scar. There was no sign yet of any new imprint, though sometimes they took a while to appear . . .

Anteïs opened her eyes, groaning.





'Hades, I'm getting too old for this.' Her gaze focused on Deina. 'What happened?'

'Don't you remember?'

'Oh, I remember. I remember having to take your knife and free us before the lifeline faded. Damn.' Anteïs wiped away a trickle of blood from her nose. 'So I'm going to ask you again: what happened?'

Deina hesitated. Going into details about the dark-haired boy would raise all sorts of questions. And she didn't have any answers. 'I lost my nerve. That's all.'

Anteïs pushed herself up on her elbows, eyebrows raised. 'You lost your nerve.'

The words, generously salted with disbelief, hung in the air. Deina would have to offer an edited version of events.

'I thought . . . I thought I saw something. Something in the Threshold that didn't belong there, that I hadn't called into being. I was mistaken, obviously. But it made me lose my concentration and I got a headache.' She touched her temple. 'The Toll, I suppose.' Thinking about it, perhaps she *had* created the dark-haired boy, unintentionally. Those Severers who survived the physical demands of the rites often ended up losing their minds instead. Deina tipped back her head and drained the wine in her goblet.

'The Toll, before the completion of the rite? Hmm.' Anteïs lay back on the couch. 'Well, it's unfortunate.' The elder pushed the fabric of her tunic up above her elbow, revealing a fresh abrasion on her bicep. 'You lost your nerve, and I completed the rite, so I benefit from what should have been yours.' She gave Deina's hand a quick pat. 'I'm sorry, child.'



Deina stared at the puckered red skin around the new rite-seal. A year off the term of her indenture. That's what she would have earned, if that mark had currently been burning its way into *her* skin. An entire year. There were no symbols yet on her own arms: they hadn't reached that far. She'd been earning rite-seals for four years, but of the forty years of service due under her indenture, she'd only worked off three.

Hot rage pounded through Deina's skull – but she couldn't give in to it. Not here. She wanted to slam the silver goblet she held over and over against the archon's elaborately painted walls. Instead, she gripped it until her fingers ached. Forced herself to breathe slowly until the fury ebbed. All she could do was keep playing the game, and play it even better.

A cart took them from the megaron back to the House. Anteïs slept while Deina brooded, listening to the bustle of the city and the gossip passing between their servant and the cart driver. The men discussed the weather, the price of bread, the latest war Orpheus was waging to push the boundaries of the Theban Dominion even further. There'd been fresh news in the marketplaces that morning: a battle won in the west, twenty thousand of the enemy dead, more captured. Some of Orpheus's own soldiers, a cohort from Athens, slaughtered for objecting to the scale of the bloodshed. The walls of the defeated city pulled down and its fields ploughed with salt because it had dared to resist. Rome, the driver called it. As the cart passed through Iolkos's main gates, into the short stretch of countryside that lay between the city and the House of Hades, Deina rolled the strange name around her mouth, almost like a prayer. Orpheus never lost. The people of that city had never stood a chance.



The heavy bronze gates of the House rumbled closed behind them. Even blindfolded, she would have known where she was. High stone walls sealed them in and shut out the rest of the world. Here, all was order. Bells, used to start and end the constant competition bouts in the training grounds – running, wrestling, archery and blade work – formed a counterpoint to the chanting of the apprentices and novices as they learned the Severers' ancient Songs and rites. There *were* children here. Every winter solstice more arrived, those on whose foreheads the sigil had appeared that year, rounded up and taken from their parents. Most had seen no more than five summers, some were even younger, but their childhood ended as they entered the House; there was no sound of play.

Deina couldn't properly remember her life before the House, or how old she'd been when she'd come here. She'd long since stopped trying. She didn't even recall her real name; the House gave you a new one. In theory, it was to protect you against ghosts and sorcery – it was harder to work evil magic against someone without knowing their true name. In reality, it helped the Order suppress any sense of identity that didn't relate to being a Severer. The House named you, fed you, clothed you, and you owed it everything.

Singing and chimes and the clash of weapons and the scent of the rosemary that edged every path – this had become home to her.

And she couldn't wait to escape.