

Gods Old and Dark

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One

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Siren, Wisconsin

Heyr Thorrson, pounding roofing nails into shingles on the hottest August afternoon Wisconsin had seen in ten years, suddenly smelled spring in the air. He slid his hammer into his tool belt, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply.

The scent that he caught this time wasn't spring, but it had the same feel to it. Newness, and life, and goodness – but fragile. Fragile.

“Hmmm,” he said. And, “Well. By damn.”

He yelled to his fellow roofer, “Hey, Lars, I'm on break.” Lars, sweating and shirtless and looking like he'd been run through a wringer, just grunted. Heyr took the time to go down the ladder, though it would have been easier just to jump. He kept breathing deep, making sure all the time that this wasn't just his imagination, just wishful thinking, because jobs were hard enough to come by anymore and he didn't want to do anything stupid.

The smell was still in his nose when he went to the foreman, who gave him a little smile when he walked up and said, “You could have the decency to pretend to be as exhausted as the rest of us. Doesn't this heat bother you?”

Heyr shrugged. Extremes of weather had never bothered him. "Just lucky," he said. And then, one more quick breath. Still there. "I hate to do this to you in the middle of a job, Colly, but I've got someplace I need to be."

Colly shrugged. "Don't worry about it. You never miss a day, never ask for time off. You need to go someplace this afternoon, go ahead."

"I don't mean this afternoon. I mean I have to leave now. I quit."

Colly, whose real name was something so dreadful that Heyr had never heard him or anyone else use it, held his hands out wide and stared at the development springing out of dirt. "We got this house and fifteen more just like it. You know you got a job until this is done, and for anything else I get when this project is finished. You're my best guy. You quit, I'm going to have to hire three other people to replace you. You can't just walk out on me like this, man. In the middle of the day. In the middle of a roof ... Jesus wept, your nail box is still up there, and half a flat of shingles."

"Told you when I signed on I'd stay as long as I could. Well - this is as long as I could."

Colly looked at him, exasperated. "You said that six years ago. I figured by now you'd made up your mind."

"Doesn't have anything to do with me," Heyr said. "I like you, liked working with you. You treated me right, and the rest of your men, too, and I appreciate it. I just got my call. Have to go now. Right now." He turned and left.

Colly was yelling after him, but Heyr walked across the site, climbed into his white pickup truck, and pulled out. He had a cell phone in the truck. Soon as he was out on the street, he picked it up and hit "1" on the quick dial.

He heard two rings. Then a voice one degree too sexy for professional use said, "First National Savings and Loan, Nancy Soderlund speaking. How may I help you?"

Heyr had his window rolled down. He took another deep breath. Yep, it was still there. "Have to go, Nancy," he said.

There was a moment's silence, in which Heyr had time to wish he'd stuck to his guns about keeping his relationships uncomplicated.

"Go? Where?"

"I'm not sure. I just have to go."

Another silence. "Well ... for how long?"

Make it clean, he told himself. Make it quick.

"This is what I told you about when we moved in together, Nancy – that one day I was going to have to leave."

A very, very long silence followed this announcement, while she tried to figure out what he was talking about. Then, into the silence, she screamed in his ear, "*That was FOUR YEARS ago!*"

"I know." He was going to have to let her get this out of her system. Have to let her yell at him. If things were different, he'd go home one last time and let her scream at him in person and punch him and maybe break things and throw them at him, but he didn't have the time. What he smelled was pure live magic, too fragile and too tentative to be left untended. He needed to track it down fast, before someone else got to it first and destroyed the source. "I'm sorry."

"SORRY?! You're *SORRY*?! I have put four years of my life into us, into taking care of you and loving you and ... We don't even *fight* much, you son of a bitch, and now you're

telling me that you're *leaving* me, and I get no warning? What, am I supposed to just go away now, and pretend you never existed? Find someplace new to live, and someone else to love, and act like the last four years never happened?"

"You don't have to go anywhere," he said. He stopped the truck at an intersection, closed his eyes, and sniffed. Trying to get a sense of the direction of the smell's origin. East, he thought. East, and maybe south too, though at the moment east was strongest.

"I don't? How do you figure that? I'm living in your house, unless you forgot."

"It's your house," he said. "I bought it for you. It's all in your name, and paid for. I didn't want you to not have anything when I had to go."

Suddenly she was crying. "What happened? Did you kill somebody? Have you been in hiding? Have the police or something tracked you down?"

"Nancy, I just have to go. I didn't do anything wrong, but I knew eventually I was going to find what I was looking for, and when I found it, I was going to have to leave."

Weeping on the other end of the phone. He could just imagine the looks Nancy was getting from the patrons in First National. She had one of those pitiful glass-walled offices that let everyone look in; he thought her job would have to be like working in a fishbowl, or being on display at a zoo. He wouldn't have been a banker for any amount of money, but banking was regular work, and the bank was warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and that mattered a lot to Nancy.

"Who is she?" Nancy whispered. "What's her name?"

He was going to war, and her mind was jumping to other women. Well, of course she'd think that. What did she know of war?

Heyr, following the road, heading east, smelled the scent of new life, of fresh beginnings, of rebirth, and the thought occurred to him that maybe it would be easier for Nancy if he was leaving her for another woman – if she could tell her friends what a dog he'd been, and how sneaky having a long-distance affair under her nose, and if she could hate him and badmouth him and feel justified.

“Her name's ... Hope,” Heyr said. “You don't know her. She lives out east.”

More sobbing, some words Heyr didn't even know that Nancy knew, and then she seemed to pull herself together. “We have four good years behind us, and I thought we had a lot of good years ahead of us. I'm leaving work now, and I'll see you when you get home, and we're going to talk about this. You and I – we're worth fighting for.”

He sighed. “I'm not coming home. I ... won't see you again. I'm sorry. You can throw out all my things if you want. Or sell them. Or keep them.” He'd reached the edge of town, and wild Wisconsin spread before him, hills and fields and forest. The road curled eastward, black and smooth and narrow, rolling up at the horizon into a copse of trees. “I have to go now, Nancy. You'll find the deed to the house and some money I left for you and some other things in the red box under my side of the bed. The key for the box is in our safety deposit box, taped to the back. It's labeled Spare House Key.” He took a deep breath, and gave her the lie, because lies were sometimes better than the truth. “I loved you more than I ever loved anyone, but I don't love you anymore. I'm sorry, Nancy. I really am. I wish you well, and hope that you'll someday find someone who's good enough for you.”

She was yelling, but he cut her off.

Then, because he didn't want her to be able to call him again,

he threw the cell phone out the window. He'd gotten the phone for her, so she could call him when she needed him, and now there was no more her.

Keep it clean. Let her hate him. Give her a reason to say, "Good riddance," and move on with her life.

Heyr studied those trees at the top of the rise. Probably not, he decided after a moment. He was still too close to town. He drove past them, rolled onward. Fine countryside surrounded him – a land dotted with glacier lakes, scoured by an ancient ice age, grown back tough and fierce. He'd spent a long time in Wisconsin, and he'd grown comfortable there. The place fit him; fit him as well as any place he'd ever lived.

He sighed. Sooner or later, it had always been time to move on. This time, it had been sooner.

He let the road hum beneath his tires for a while, until he found a good spot to pull off the pavement. He drove the truck down a two-rut road, listening to the hiss of tall grasses slapping against the truck sides, smelling the green of late-summer so rich in his nose it was almost a feeling, sensing the weight of the heat, liking the taste of dust billowing up from the track. This newest smell – this spring-blown thread of life – curled his toes, arched his back, made him hungry and sharp and tight as a new bowstring. Took some of the edge off of pain so overwhelming he'd stopped fighting it; pain so old that he'd forgotten until just now that pain sometimes lessened, instead of always getting worse.

Good stand of trees up ahead, fronted by some low understory growth that formed a natural arch over the road. Yes. He was far enough; this place would do. He pulled up close, left the truck running, and from his glove compartment, pulled out a length of twine. He measured out four arm-lengths, frowned thoughtfully and added another two arm-lengths, and snapped the twine in two with one sharp movement. He hopped out of

the truck and jogged to the two closest saplings that could be formed into an arch – two pliable young white oaks that grew directly across the road from each other, with single trunks and few side branches.

Heyr pulled them together and bound the trunks with a knot that would untie with one hard tug of the string. He eased the arch he'd formed out of his hands and watched it for a moment. It held, though the trees strained against the twine.

Then he studied the long tail of string now dragging on the ground, and realized he'd still left it a bit too short, so he pulled the truck up until its front bumper rested only a couple of feet from the arch. He tied the string to the back bumper. Patted the hood of the truck as he walked by and said, "Going on a little trip, boys."

And then he stood before the tree arch. He stared into it, letting his eyes unfocus, so that the shadowed greens and browns of the woods beyond seemed to form a flat, mottled canvas for the arch. He let the image of a surface grow in his mind, and did not stare directly at the little green lights that began to zip and streak across that surface. They began to connect, and then, like spilled ink spreading out across a blank page, radiant green fire filled in the arch, making a doorway big enough for Heyr and the truck. Heyr stared into that sheet of light that hummed with life and promise and energy. In it, he sought the source of the tender, sweet scent that had first caught his attention – and when he located the scent, he found a deceptive web, one that wandered from world to world, universe to universe, that popped up in unexpected places from seemingly random connections in other universes. He found, in short, an intentionally tangled, confusing mess. That was good. But the mess had a center, a strong core to which every single thread could eventually be traced. And that was bad, because if he could find that center, others could, too.

That core was a single house in a small southern town. He marked the house with a tiny magical tracer, and set his vision roaming. A sign outside the town, with badges for the Lions, the Rotarians, the Masons, and the Jaycees, said, "Welcome to Cat Creek, North Carolina, Home of the Fighting Tigers."

He directed his vision out of town, keeping careful watch on the road. He hated being lost, or wandering around looking for things. Just comfortably distant from the town he found a good patch of woods that bordered on fields white with cotton, with a dirt road running straight out to the road that would carry him back to town. That would do.

He turned to the truck. "Let's go."

The door opened for him as he approached, and the motor growled.

He jumped in and put his hands on the steering wheel, but it was shifting beneath his fingers, becoming hard leather reins. The truck changed as it slid into the green light, and for one brief, wondrous span that was no time and all time as he slid into one of Yggdrasil's branches, he could feel his old friends Tanngrísniir and Tanngnjóstr leaping forward, while at his hip Mjöllniir sang, wearing its true seeming. He roared his pleasure, and the green fire enveloped him, and in his ears the Valkyries sang songs of heroes and feasting and mighty battles, and the world tree spun him forward, embracing him, welcoming him, and as quickly and as slowly as that, it spat him out, taking thunder and lightning, sheeting rain and towering black clouds with him.

Heyr sat in the truck, window still down, while the rain pounded the windshield and sluiced away the dust and grime, while lightning crashed all around him and thunder roared like a choir of giants in his ears, and he threw back his head and laughed. He bellowed into the storm, "*I'm here now, you*

slinking cowards, serpents, you hidiers in darkness and weak-kneed back-biters. I'm here, and I brought my hammer. Come play with me ... if you DARE!"

#

Night Watch Control Hub, Barâd Island, Oria

Rekkathav, personal servant of Aril, keth dark god and Master of the Night Watch, trotted along beside the Master of the Night Watch as the Master glided through the corridors of the ancient Barâd palace, heading for the control hub hidden at its core. Aril's was typical of the keth; he was twice as tall as Rekkathav – tall enough to look a rrôn in the eye – and slender as cattail reeds, with huge, black almond eyes, a tiny rosebud mouth and almost no nose, and an androgynous beauty that added a taste of awe and lust to the terror that he inspired. His silk robes, light as air, floated around him, and the thousands of braids of his pale gold hair swirled as if alive. The aura of power that poured from him terrified Rekkathav, even though he had survived more than two years already as Aril's closest assistant. This longevity was something of a record.

In the Hub, the true center of all the universes, where the dark gods watched and controlled and commanded the fates of worlds, mere assistants were as disposable as mayflies, and warranted as much interest. Rekkathav had spent the last two years balanced on the sharp edge of a knife, with fear his constant companion. The Night Watch was almost ready to harvest Earth and drink its death, and Rekkathav, if he survived to that point, would partake of the feast and get his first taste of the dark power created from the slaughter of a world and all its inhabitants. And he would move up in rank; Rekkathav would become a dark god, and no longer just a pretender. Surviving long enough to feast, though, was his great challenge.

The hyatvit, dozen legs scrambling and twin hearts racing, kept up with the Master. "You've returned in such a state, Master. Your inspection did not go well?" He instantly regretted that question – clearly things had not gone well. The question was whether they had gone badly in a way that could be blamed on Rekkathav. "What may I do to assist you?" he asked.

Aril stared down at him. *Summon the off-duty fieldmasters. Bring them to the Hub.*

The hyatvit – his mind touched by the coldness of Aril's thoughts and the depth of Aril's anger – nodded, terror-stricken, and fled.

Rekkathav sent messages to each of the fieldmasters via the emergency communication gates, then raced back to Aril's side to await his next orders. No new orders were forthcoming, however; instead, the Master of the Night Watch beckoned him to follow, and floated at terrible speed to the enormous main doors of the Hub, the central nervous system of the Night Watch's reality-spanning organization.

The Master approached the doors of the Hub, stared at them for just an instant, then blew them open with the force of his thoughts. They exploded off their hinges and buried themselves in the marble floor, the metal twisted and ribboned like fruit peels. Everyone within the Hub dove for cover.

Not me, Rekkathav whispered. He wore a resurrection ring driven through the skin fold behind his right front powerleg, but he had not yet passed through his first death. He clung to life, an old god but not yet a dark god, not yet fed by the power of death, and every time he was faced with the possibility of his own first death he had second thoughts.

To command the powers of the universe, to hold eternity in his hand – he wanted this for himself. He wanted some day to become what Aril was: the Master of the Night watch, the true

owner of worlds.

But to rise through the ranks to the Mastery, first he had to survive. He did not have to avoid death, of course. A Master had died a hundred times or more by the time he reached the pinnacle of dark godhood. But Rekkathav had to keep resurrecting, when the moments between death and rebirth were when a dark god was most vulnerable. And Aril knew of his ambition, and though at the moment the Master of the Night Watch was amused by it – that Rekkathav dared dream so high who had not yet tasted a single death, even his own – Aril's amusement had a nasty way of vanishing like smoke in the first stiff breeze.

Aril glided to the center of the Hub, with Rekkathav hurrying behind him.

Heads began popping up from behind the tall consoles that powered the Hub's observation and intervention gates. The head fieldmaster, Vanak, who was in charge of tracking activity on the worlds in which the Night Watch worked, was on duty at the time. When the Master beckoned, he came cringing up to Aril like a whipped cur. Rekkathav watched the Master, ever silent, point a finger at Vanak.

It seemed nothing but a gesture. No lightning crackled, no thunder rolled. Yet the fieldmaster's spine arched and his fingers clenched into fists and his arms went rigid at his sides, and for a moment he made a strangling noise in the back of his throat. He stared at the Master, his mouth opening and closing as if he were a fish torn from the water and tossed into the tall grass to die.

Then Vanak's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the floor, twitching. He pissed himself, flopped and spasmed, vomited, lost control of his bowels. Watching this display, Rekkathav felt terror clawing inside his gut as if it were full of fighting reptiles, cold and clawed and sharp of tooth

and spine.

Fieldmasters' live log, Aril whispered into Rekkathav's skull, and Rekkathav leapt as if stabbed and raced for the log, skittering back to place it with trembling fingers in the Master's outstretched hand.

Aril did not look at the log, though. He simply stood, waiting, sniffing the air as if he smelled the fear that rose in the room like heat off of stones after a blazing summer day.

Nine gates in the staff gatewall at the far rim of the Hub shimmered to life, and nine fieldmasters – dark gods of the Night Watch all, with positions of tremendous power and privilege – stepped through almost simultaneously. Their eyes first found Aril, and then Vanak at his feet, still flopping, no shred of awareness or dignity left to him.

The fieldmasters had endured thousands of their own deaths between them. Any aspects of their living selves had long ago been stripped away, leaving them creatures of keen intelligence, ravenous dark appetites, and little else. But they were still capable of fear. Not an emotion, fear – it was a simple survival instinct. Creatures with no capacity for fear could not recognize danger to their existence and avoid it; most creatures so made didn't last long in a universe well endowed with teeth. The dark gods of the Night Watch were survivors. They stared at the grotesque remains of their still-living-but-destroyed colleague, and they recoiled.

Come, Aril told them in a thought-voice that everyone within the Hub could hear, and the fieldmasters stepped toward him, their horror clear in every reluctant step.

In the whole of the Hub, the only sound Rekkathav heard was ragged breathing.

When the fieldmasters stood before him, Aril held the log book

out. Find an example of your signature, one at a time, and show it to me. This, too, he broadcast into the minds of everyone present.

He handed the log to the first fieldmaster to his left, and Rekkathav watched the fieldmaster flip to a page, point to his initials, and pass the book to the next. The log went down the line, each fieldmaster finding an example of his or her initials and pointing them out and the last fieldmaster demonstrating the presence of his own signature and returning the log to Aril.

Thank you, Aril said. In the whisper in Rekkathav's mind, no trace of gratitude echoed.

For a moment the Master did nothing else. Then he turned to walk away and Rekkathav, watching the fieldmasters, saw each of them relax.

Around the room, Rekkathav saw echoing relief on the faces of the lesser staffers. Whatever had happened was over – it had been Vanak's sin alone. And they had survived it.

What happened next, Rekkathav would never be able to expunge from his memory.

Aril made a tiny gesture with his left hand. All nine fieldmasters, plus the twitching hulk that had been Vanak exploded in green fire and crumbled to dust.

One of them had been so close to him that Rekkathav could feel the backwash of magic curling against his skin; could smell dust that was all that remained of flesh and bone and blood. Rekkathav heard screams of shock and dread throughout the Hub. He did not scream, though; he could not even breathe. His throat locked shut, his many knees gave way, and he dropped to the floor in a shivering, chattering pile.

The Master seemed uninterested in Rekkathav or rest of the

room's survivors. His attention fixed on the senior field assistant like the rays of the sun focused through a lens. Rekkathav would have felt pity for the senior assistant had he not been so relieved not to be him.

Gather their rings, Aril told the assistant. Place them in the terminal box.

The fear in the room grew deeper, sharper – until that moment, the punishment of the fieldmasters had seemed simply that – a punishment, something that they would return from once their resurrection rings recreated them. Until that instant, Rekkathav had believed the Master of the Night Watch had been making a dramatic gesture of his displeasure.

Instead, clearly, Aril intended to overturn the universe as Rekkathav had known it.

The terminal box changed everything. The terminal box was designed to destroy resurrection rings – to grind the gold to powder, to strip away the magic that powered them, and to wash the resultant slurry into the sea, from whence not even the Master himself would be able to gather all the bits back up again.

The Master was choosing to exercise his right to pass capital sentence on immortals. Rekkathav knew of the terminal box being used through the history of the Night Watch, though its use had always been rare. He was certain it had never been used to dispose of every chief officer in the most important branch of service in the Night Watch.

The senior assistant looked like he was about to be sick. He dropped the resurrection rings into the terminal box, one after the other. Two trips, twenty-seven rings ranging from small finger-rings to heavy bracelets to thick, massive chains. Each fieldmaster had clearly been hedging his bets, augmenting his main resurrection ring with back-up rings.

When the last of the rings dropped into the ancient, bejeweled box, the senior assistant looked to the Master, waiting for a sign that he should remove the rings – that the object lesson for all those present was done.

Close the lid, the master said so that all could hear.

Not just a display, then; Aril intended the destruction of the entire field command of the Night Watch in an instant.

The senior assistant closed the lid, and tortured screams of metal against metal and magic against magic filled the Hub. Everyone stood frozen, knowing they were witnessing something unprecedented, something both huge and terrible, none of them daring to move in case whatever had happened was not over, and moving might bring them to the attention of the Master.

The moments in which the terminal box destroyed all twenty-seven resurrection rings were the longest Rekkathav had ever experienced. When the box finished its work, the Master of the Night Watch pointed to the assistant. *You are the new head fieldmaster. Choose nine associates today. Your mutual survival depends on your mutual competence, so choose carefully.*

Aril then told them something so ludicrous that, had Rekkathav not seen the destruction of the fieldmasters, he would have thought the Master of the Night Watch lied.

New, live magic has reappeared on Earth. The planet has, under the watch of those now destroyed, begun to heal itself in spite of our working against it. The new fieldmasters' primary duties will be to determine how this has been accomplished, and to eliminate whomever and whatever is responsible. The new fieldmasters will have limited time to reverse the damage done and set the world back upon our chosen course to its destruction.

You have seen the price for failure or carelessness. Make

sure you succeed.

WORLD GATES EXTRAS

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