

Tragedy

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From set *Theros*



Triad of Fates | Art by Daarken

Chorus of the Triad: Hark now to the tale of bitter Penthikos, marked by the gods and bound by fate.

Theros. A land of heroes. Heroes like me. May you never share this glory.

I was once among the favored of Iroas. Serving in the phalanxes of Akros, I stood by my companions on Pharagax Bridge in defense of the polis and marched with them against the marauders of Deathbellow Canyon. We slew many foes. But serving honorably as part of a group was not enough. My heart cried out for the blessing of the God of Victory, and I was determined to prove my bravery to him.

One day, I and my fellow Stratians descended the Titan's Stairs to strike into the Phoberos badlands. Scarcely had we relieved the previous defenders when a mob of beasts swarmed into view: firebreathing hounds, bloodthirsty minotaurs, feral satyrs, and other creatures less easily described. The unruly creatures attacked with no strategy, and I met them in the same spirit—breaking formation and running ahead, eager to wet my blade.



Ordeal of Heliod | Art by Lucas Graciano

Oh, it was glorious! I struck down enemies as fast as they came at me, and challenged more to face my sword. Amid the roars of dying monsters and my own battle cries, I did not at first hear the screams from behind me. I finally became aware of the sound during a pause in my slaughter.

I looked back on a horrible sight. Phalanxes of grim, gold-masked soldiers were closing in on each side of the companions I had left behind. My hasty charge had left the Akroan ranks in disorder, and as they struggled to fill the gap I had left, they drowned under the advancing tide of the Returned. I hurried toward the battle, but even before I entered spear's reach I knew the fight was hopeless. I heard my shieldmates curse me as they died.

All I could do was try to find another way to the polis and warn of the danger. I fought my way through the canyon and scaled the Kolophon's sheer cliffs, until finally I staggered through the gates of Akros. I fell before the Oromai, bleeding, and gasped out what had befallen my fellows in arms.

They took me before the king. He heard my tale. He gave his orders. He pronounced my sentence.

"As you desire not to belong, you shall be set apart forever."



Chained to the Rocks | Art by Aaron Miller

I had sought the smile of Iroas, but now I was bared to the angry eye of Heliod. My stony bed grew hot as Purphoros's anvil. In my agony I hurled a prayer to the skies, hard and true as a javelin. "Let me expiate my hubris, O gods! I offer myself, to undertake any ordeal you decree."

No answer came for long hours, or so it seemed. But then the rock shook beneath me, and a great voice filled the air.

"So be it."



Swamp | Art by Adam Paquette

I stood, free of my shackles, at the mouth of a grim and silent cave. The stink of brimstone issued forth. Although I heard no more words, I knew I must enter.

The passage twisted downward like the coils of a whip. The suffocating miasma grew ever thicker. All around me echoed roars, cackles, hisses, although I could not make out shapes. My steps grew heavier, slower. My thoughts grew dim. All became darker, although I knew not whether my torch was burning out or my eyes were losing sight.

I felt a chill touch my sweating skin. Something swept past, insubstantial but malevolent. I lashed out in the dark, and as my blade cleft the shape my soul was likewise rent. I heard again the screams and curses of my companions. Black tears started at my eyes.



Tormented Hero | Art by Winona Nelson

Again and again the shadows struck at me, clawing at my flesh and chilling my blood. Only cutting them down could end the pain, although the death of each ripped my heart. With every blow, more of the foul ichor poured down my face.

At length the shrieking shades left off. I could only continue on the dread road, although injuries both physical and psychic had left me crawling. Just as I thought I could go no further, I fell forward into a vast chamber. The poisonous airs cleared and sight returned, although oppressive fog hid most of the space from view. Utter silence reigned, broken only by my tortured breathing.

Ahead stretched a dreadful shore, a strand of teeth and crumbled bones, black water thick as tar. The hulks of rotted ships curved overhead like skeletal ribs. In the distance glowed a dull aura, recalling the sun through a cast of rain. I stood and began to walk, slowly, toward the hopeless light.

From the gloom arose a dismal heap of life's remembrances: funeral urns, torn banners, cleft helms, rusted blades. The wan illumination seemed only to increase the dreariness of the place. Beyond stretched a dank and slimy wharf that vanished into the mists, and I knew what bark was moored to it.



Temple of Silence | Art by Karl Kopinski

This, then, my end. My penance to the gods was no different from the doom that awaits all mortals, save that I had come to the Rivers' edge while yet alive. What further anguish would my soul endure when my flesh crossed over that horrid flow?

If torment and death be my lot, I would show both Iroas and Erebos how a hero faces them. I took one step toward the dock, then another.

"So eager to see the Underworld, when life has not yet left your limbs?"

The voice, although soft, shattered the silence like a thunderbolt. I turned, startled, to see a robed figure leaning on a shivered beam. Her eyes reflected the gleam of a coin she tossed slowly as she watched me.



Scholar of Athreos | Art by Cynthia Sheppard

“You bring no face for the boatman. How will you cross?”

My hands moved to my lips, my cheeks. They weren't there. The pitchy tears had encased my visage in a featureless surface, leaving only my eyes uncovered. Without a funerary mask, Athreos the River Guide would not know my name. Would I linger here, unmourned and unforgiven, for all eternity?

“Thrice asked, and done. Do you seek oblivion?”

I bent before her piercing gaze. A sob heaved in my lungs, but I gritted my teeth and swallowed it down. I would not show weakness, even now.

“I seek absolution. I seek erasure. I seek peace.”

“What you seek I cannot give. That is for the gods alone. I can only listen, and perhaps advise.”

“A god sent me here. He did not say more.”

“And what did you pray for?”

“I had offended against my polis and the gods. I asked only for the chance to set things right. Was my crime as monstrous as the punishment meted? Have I not suffered enough?”

“Erebos *is* suffering. Only through the pain of others can he find peace, and only thus can mortals find their fate.”

“Then I was a fool to take his bargain. And I defy fate.”

“Fate cannot be avoided. It can only be realized.”

“I make my own fate.” I felt the matter on my face shift and sculpt itself into a grimacing death-mask as I shouted.

“Come, master of the passage! This pathetic soul seeks the dark shores of the Underworld.”

The ancient barge silently slid forth from the fog. Its ragged guide stood expectantly, hand ready to receive my face of crystallized pain. The price paid, we drifted across to that bleak land.



Returned Phalanx | Art by Seb McKinnon

But I will not give the god of death his satisfaction. I will not abide in darkness among the dull shades. Even now, the final strokes fall on my new golden face. I will follow the Path of the Returned and seek my place in the ranks of the dead.

Chorus of the Triad: And so what was fated has come to pass.