

The Path or the Horizon

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Zosimos walked along the dirt path that meandered around the border of the ancient woods and welcomed the cool of the shade from the tall trees. The sun was bright against the blue sky as he breathed in the fresh air, thick with the smell of spring blossoms.

Then a thought crept into his awareness like a Nessian asp. It slithered around his mind and began to tighten its coils.

Glory and honor.

What if he never achieved anything? What if he died having never gained the favor of the gods? There were many heroes in the land, and all of them burned with the desire to please Iroas, Heliad, or Nylea. Some heroes had gained recognition, some were venerated in the temples. Their feats had been so amazing and inspiring that it made Zosimos sick just to think of it. Even if he had the chance, he felt like he would never be as great as those heroes, with their magical weapons and godly favor. Where would he find such gifts?

Zosimos couldn't tear his attention away from this dilemma. It ached in his heart like a thorn.

A bird sang as clear and as pure as a dryad. A golden lizard scurried across a stone, its skin glinting in the sun like a jewel, but Zosimos saw none of it, and heard only his own troubled mind. The bright world became dull, his steps heavier, as he continued his journey, weighted by his thoughts.

"You want to be a hero?" a voice said.

Zosimos almost jumped out of his clothes.

"Who said that?" Zosimos spun around and drew his sword. "Show yourself!"

A stout satyr hopped onto the path from a thick shrub and put his hands on his hairy haunches. He looked at Zosimos, squinted his eyes, and pursed his lips in study of him. "Yep. You want to be a hero. I've been watching you for a while, human. You have that worried look about you."



Satyr Rambler | Art by John Stanko

"I'm not worried," Zosimos said. "I'm thinking... about serious things. Probably something you wouldn't understand, you being a satyr and all."

"Fiddle faddle," the satyr said, then looked up and scratched his chin. "Although I can't say that I have worried a day in my life, truth be told. Actually, that's the first thing a hero needs to do."

"Worry or not worry?" Zosimos asked.

"It looks like you need some lessons. Sit down. Let me tell you a few things." The satyr sat in front of Zosimos.

Zosimos sheathed his sword and sat on a nearby rock. The satyr looked youthful and old at the same time, with a playful glint in his eye and a bouncy demeanor, but underneath it all Zosimos could sense something else he couldn't put his finger on.

"Your garden is full of weeds," the satyr said.

"What garden? I don't even have a garden," Zosimos said, confused.

"Your garden." The satyr poked Zosimos's head. "Full of weeds." The satyr sat back against the trunk of a small poplar tree. "And you're trying to grow a rare flower in there. Isn't going to work."

The satyr took out a slender pipe, packed and lit it. He looked at Zosimos from under his bushy eyebrows. "Smoke?"

"No. Thank you," Zosimos said.

"Worry is Phenax's creation, a great paralytic to rival Pharika's most virulent poison, except worry affects the mind, not the muscles." The satyr flexed his arm as he let out a long trail of smoke. "You want to know something? When you worry, you're actually worshipping Phenax. Worry gives him great pleasure, did you know that?"

Zosimos shook his head.

“Oh. I guess I may as well tell you.” The satyr leaned in and whispered. “When you worship Phenax, you spurn Iroas.”



Temple of Deceit | Art by Raymond Swanland

“By the gods,” Zosimos said. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Don’t get all caught up in it. Worry is the just the weed, but its root, ah, well, now that’s worth getting at.”

“The root?” Zosimos asked.

“Have you heard about the coinsmiths of the Underworld?” The satyr asked.

“Only what the books and philosophers say.”

“Books and philosophers,” the satyr said with a sigh. “They’ll keep you from finding anything out for yourself, but that’s beside the point. Deep in the Underworld, there exists a class of coinsmiths. But these are no ordinary coinsmiths. They mint coins for use in the Underworld. Now, because it is everywhere in the Underworld, gold is of little value. What the Underworld values are coins, *ostraka*, made of simple clay—but not just any clay, they are struck from the clay funerary masks of those who have died.”



Underworld Coinsmith | Art by Mark Winters

“Why are clay funerary masks so valuable?”

“They are valuable because a representation of who you were in life is carved into the mask, and Erebus, although he would never admit it, covets the world of the living above all else. He can never return to the land of the living, so, out of spite, he forbids anyone to return without paying a dire price.”

Zosimos remembered the many funerals he had seen over his life. The funeral masks flashed before his eyes, some simple, some extravagant, all of them attempting to encapsulate an entire life in a single expression.

The satyr continued. “Now, you would think that a great hero’s mask, or the mask of a king, would be more valuable than all the others. I mean, important people have such magnificent masks. But, at the shores of the River next to the coinsmiths, the masks of kings and heroes are mixed in with beggars, fools, and bandits. Erebus cares little for what you were in life. He only cares that you once existed.”

Zosimos imagined the mysterious coinsmiths, chiseling *ostraka* from the masks, stacking them in great piles for the denizens of the Underworld.

“Erebus is the great equalizer. He seals us within the Underworld, from which there is no return, unless we wish to forge a new identity and become one of the Returned. Any fool can see what a ghastly mistake that is.”

Zosimos had seen a Returned once, wandering, soulless, moaning. The memory of it still sent a chill down his spine.

The satyr could see the young man’s disquiet. “Before you make a judgment, Erebus is giving us a hint, a vital clue to the essence of truth.”

“What truth? Erebus is terrifying, merciless.”

“Erebos is making us find out what is truly valuable.” The satyr plucked and twirled a flower by its stem, making the blossom spin in his fingers. “No matter how much we strut and crow and adorn ourselves with rank, status, and titles, it all becomes a worthless clay mask in the end. We can’t take our pride or possessions with us to the Underworld. It’s all useless there. So what to do, what to do?”



Weight of the Underworld | Art by Wesley Burt

The satyr looked at Zosimos.

“I don’t know,” Zosimos said.

“That, my friend,” said the satyr, pointing the flower at Zosimos, “is an excellent place to start.”

“Consider that it’s not about what is carved into a mask or a statue,” the satyr said. “The living have little use for dead things. Perhaps it’s about what you leave behind. And what does a true hero leave behind? Stability, peace, a flourishing world, a place for everyone to grow. A hero is not concerned with a death mask or a fancy title or property, a hero is concerned with the flowering of goodness in all its forms.”

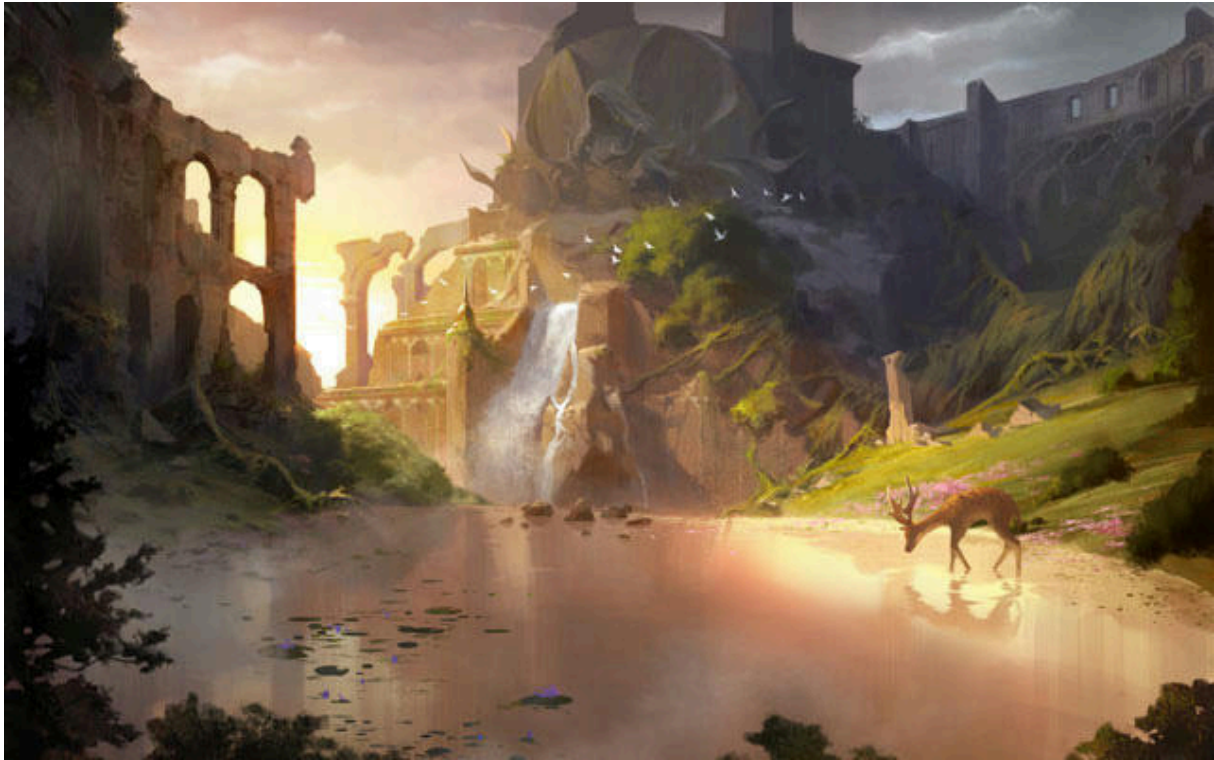
“The flowering of goodness,” Zosimos repeated.

The satyr gave a nearby vine a tug. An amber sap dripped from its stem.

“Put this on your tongue,” the satyr said.

Zosimos touched his tongue to the golden droplet. A taste unlike any other gently tingled in his mouth, a mellow sweetness expanded and filled his nose with berries, earth, and wine.

“That’s amazing,” Zosimos said.



Font of Fertility | Art by Jack Wang

“The world is good, my boy.” The satyr smiled. “That’s it. This whole creation is a garden and humans are caught up in ideas, concepts, ‘glory’—whatever that is—and they are missing everything: the spring breeze, singing, dancing, and the taste of nectarvine. A hero brings this awareness to the people and defends them from harm so that they can weed their own part of the garden.”

“I think I understand,” Zosimos said. The nectarvine still warmed his insides.

“That sword of yours is a good one, but you might need a knife as well.” The satyr handed Zosimos a dull, rusty knife that looked as if it had been used to cut stones from a quarry. “When a hero is awakened, all manner of things come from the darkness to snuff out the hero’s light. You can never be too vigilant.”

Zosimos took the blade out of politeness and stuck it in his belt.

The satyr got up, tapped out his pipe and brushed off his rump. “Farewell, hero. It’s a beautiful day.”

He skipped off into the woods like a deer.

Zosimos sat on the stone for a while and felt the breeze blow across his skin. The warmth of the sun heated the ground and he could smell the earth and the grass. There were monsters in the world, and terrible gods, but it all felt in balance somehow, and Zosimos knew what part he was going to play in the great dance of creation. He knew that goodness burned within the core of his being. He knew himself.

He stood up and walked down the path that extended out before him like a thread on the loom of fate. He was headed to Meletis, but after the encounter with the satyr, something in him had shifted. He had transformed. As he walked, he felt more and more drawn to the eastern horizon until he could bear it no further, and turned off the path.

The long grass brushed along his legs as he followed the feeling that pulled him to the mountains far in the distance. Zosimos had no idea what lay in those mountains. All he knew was the feeling in his

body, in his bones, that spoke to him without words. He had followed his troubled thoughts for too long, thoughts of fear and doubt, the seeds of Phenax. Now he followed his destiny.

As he crested the first of many rolling hills that lay before him, he felt a flash of heat at his hip followed by a blinding light. He looked down to see that the satyr's dagger had become a shining sword forged by the gods.