

Dance of the Flitterstep

Jennifer Clarke Wilkes

From set *Born of the Gods*

"More children taken. This is an evil we will track without mercy."

—Anthousa

My child, where have you left your children so young? Have you no pity for the orphans, that you should go and leave them? You have left your children on the streets, my child!

—Ancient Cretan lamentation

The still, dark shrine was hung once more with cloth strips. Each was twisted about some trinket—a tiny bracelet, a carved horse—that silently cried with forsaken parents' grief. The offerings clattered gently in gusts that wound through the streets.

Nowhere were seen public demonstrations of death and loss, with processions of mourners following the bier. No ritually washed corpse in solemn gray robes, crowned with a diadem of gold or sacred leaf. No marble stele, offerings of wine and blood, or smoking altar. These innocent tokens marked a gaping emptiness. Even the sad certainty of death had no home here, just a plaintive hope slowly fading into the dusk.

"Another one gone," said the patrolling soldier to her companion, as the two paced the agora of Meletis.

"That makes three so far this month." The other shook his head. "A bad business. And still no word on what has happened?"

"None. It is as though they vanished into Nyx itself."

"I cannot imagine what their families are suffering. Gods protect us all from such a fate."

"Perhaps the seers will be able to discern the truth in the Observatory. May Kruphix lift the veil from our eyes."

The two passed from view. A whisper of delighted laughter drifted in their wake.



Art by James Ryman

The shoulders of the bearded youth slumped as he contemplated the marble slab. Its surface bore a *bas-relief* of a modestly robed woman, her arms stretched toward two carved children. The man's lips moved silently, his hand gently resting on the waist-high marker. Then he lifted a painted *lekythos*, a narrow urn, and poured out a ruby stream at the stele's foot. With a final look he straightened, then turned and slowly paced from the grave.

The phalanx leader saluted briskly as he ascended the steps of the Dekatia. The sentry at the academy's golden doors returned the salute and nodded toward the entrance. "Enter with honor, Reverent One."

Although carved from stone and overlaid with gold, the weighty doors swung open smoothly on bronze pivots to admit the soldier. He removed his plumed helm as he entered, taking care to cross the threshold with the right foot first. Inclining his head, he waited to be acknowledged by the august gathering within.

The finest minds of the polis were conversing quietly but intently. The citizenry, the surrounding fields, the harbor, and the nearby Dakra Isles all required careful observation, discussion, and administration. Having reached some sort of agreement, the respected philosophers inclined their heads to the captain. A gray-haired woman, wearing a simple *peplos* with a thin blue border, rose and stepped forward.

"Greetings, Reverent Captain. We thank you for your service. What news do you bring from the field?"

The phalanx leader raised a hand to his breastplate. "Honored Speaker Perisophia, I pray you will forgive this intrusion."

The woman smiled, shaking her head slightly. "The welfare of the polis is always of the highest importance. You more than any know what threatens us. Please, speak your mind."

"I thank you, Speaker. I bring grim news from the borders of our lands. Patrols near the coastal marshes reported new activity from the accursed dwellers of Asphodel. I went to see it for myself."

“An attack?”

“No, Speaker. A raid would not be unusual for the Returned, and we have driven back many such. But this...” The man gazed into the distance, a grimace wrenching his lips for an instant. Perisophia waited quietly.

He continued in a hoarse tone. “We have again seen the Weeping Woman. And... she is no longer alone.”

A soft gasp echoed around the council chamber. Then the Speaker gently spoke. “She has found them?”

“I do not know. If they are hers, they do not know it. I pray those unfortunates are at peace now.

“Three children trail her, two clinging to her hands. A girl and two boys, probably. We could not see their faces. Some... were masked.”



Forlorn Pseudamma | Art by Winona Nelson

A man cried out. “Abomination!”

Perisophia took a step forward and laid her hand on the man’s shaking shoulder. “And what then?” she asked in a low voice.

“I know we should have ended that mockery of life on the spot. But we could not. The little ones...” the captain swallowed a sob. “No one could raise a blade against them. We just watched as they turned back into the mist.

“I am sorry, Speaker. I was weak. I accept the penalty for my actions.” He bowed his head.

The Speaker did not lift her hand. “No, honored servant of our people. Never that. Tenderness, not weakness, stayed your hand. Could any of us so harden our wills as to strike down innocents?

“And yet, such kind impulses lead to greater cruelty.” Perisophia faced the assembly. “For many months we have heard the stories of the Lachrymosa. We pitied her tragic existence, but we left her to wander

Asphodel with the others who rejected the Underworld. We told ourselves that they suffered enough with the choice they had made.

“But our forbearance has brought new evil. We have all heard of children disappearing recently within the polis. Now we know the reason. In her endless search for her dead, the Weeping Woman has lured away the living.

“They are trapped like her in an endless half-life. Such a hideous fate is far worse than death. We cannot allow this desecration to continue.”

She folded her arms across her chest and closed her eyes. “Let the children sleep.”



Art by Dave Kendall

The blood-dark porphyry of the temple walls seemed to drink what little cheer the torchlight carried. In the guttering light a small circle of robed and hooded figures knelt around a bowl-like altar. One at a time, each lifted an arm and drew a knife across the left palm, then tipped the hand to let a plain black *lekythos* catch the crimson fluid.

Salt and decay rode the chill evening air. The speaker of the Twelve looked out over the salt marsh. On her left side stood the phalanx leader. He held his shield high and gripped the hilt of his sword. On her right was a bearded youth in a dark cloak, his face still marked with recent mourning. He held a black *lekythos*.

Facing the group, his eyes hidden under a heavy cowl, stood a solemn priest. Three others flanked him, similarly garbed. Small golden whips at their belts silently proclaimed the dour god they served.

The head priest began to intone a dirge. As the notes settled into the doleful murk, he and the other priests turned to face the bog. The assembled group chanted in antistrophe. Again and again he spoke prescribed words, and the others responded. Then the priest gestured, and the young widower paced

forward to his side. He knelt in the sour, muddy earth and whispered a prayer. Finally, he raised the *lekythos* and poured its contents into the dark water.

The group waited. The light bled away. The plaintive cries of the shore birds stilled.

Then, out of the mists, she came. In deathly silence the gold-masked woman trod her path. She clutched the hands of two children, who did not share her stillness. A constant, keening wail rose from the distended mouths of the masks they bore. A third, older-looking girl paced behind them, softly whimpering through golden lips.

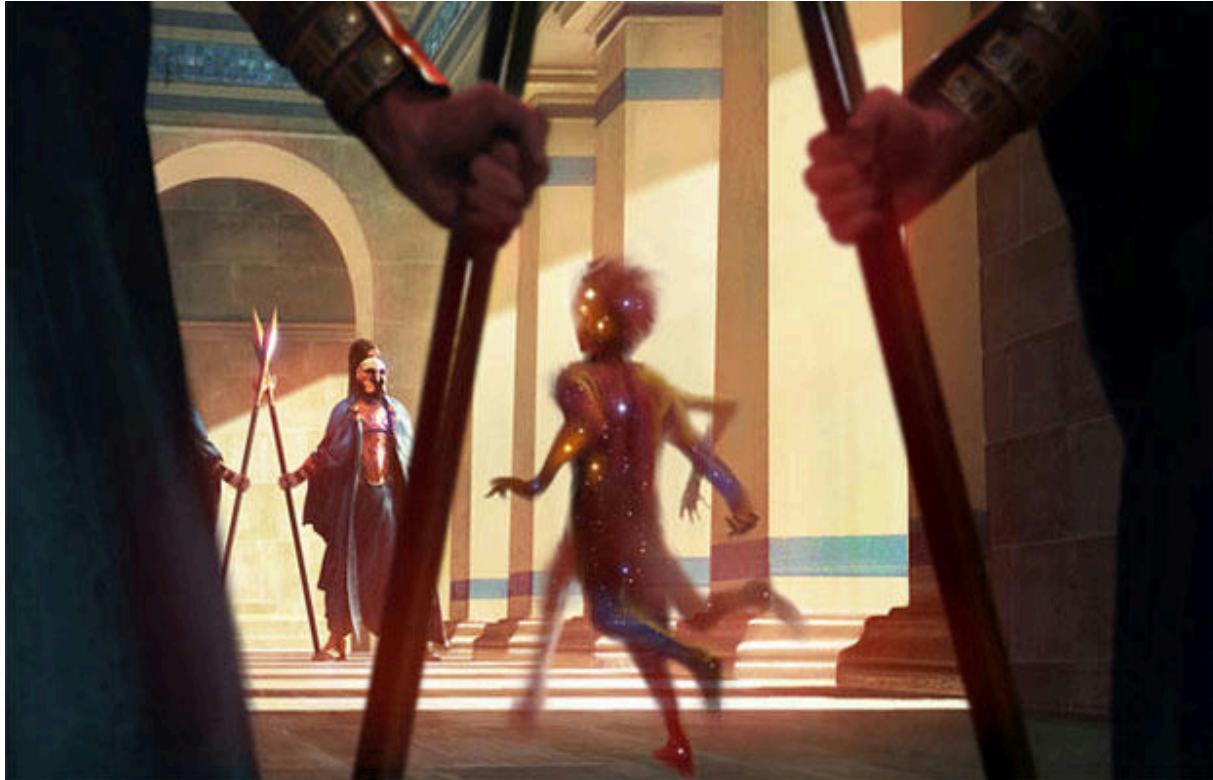


Zombie token | Art by Winona Nelson

The young man wailed and tore at his hair. Gasps from the others punctuated his grief.

The priests stretched forth their hands. The leader began to chant gently, a single phrase repeated in a monotone. One by one, the others joined in lilting harmony and swayed in time with the music. The thready wails grew fainter and finally ceased. The four masked figures stood as though listening.

Still singing softly, the priests unbound the blood-stained wrappings on their left hands. In unison, they strode into the fen. As one, they gently laid dripping palms on golden brows. And with a sigh, four masked figures slipped below the surface. Not a ripple remained.



Flitterstep Eidolon | Art by Chase Stone

As dawn lightened the sky, the solemn group entered the agora, heads bowed. None spoke. The young man's shoulders drooped, and his footsteps stumbled on the paving stones. Perisophia and the reverent captain supported him.

The silence was broken suddenly by the tinkling of innocent voices. From a nearby wall emerged an indistinct form, child-sized and misty. Dim stars glimmered through its space as it frolicked across the adults' path. Eyes and faces rose to follow its romping play.

The sparkling form danced through a patrolling guard, who turned with amazement at its passage. Trailing a whisper of laughter, it skipped across the plaza into a marble monument, reemerging a moment later on the other side. The giggling intensified as other shining figures chased it through the streets, winding among the assembled adults. One by one they vanished into the walls that lined the plaza.

The playful voices faded away. A wondering murmur escaped the watchers' lips. Perisophia looked to the sky, where the glow of Nyx was fading into the sunrise. Then she turned to the others. "The children are at rest. Let the light of their dreams awaken hope in the polis."