

The Walls of Akros

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From set *Born of the Gods*
26. 02. 2014



Peregrination | Art by Jonas De Ro

Beneath the two stone monoliths known as the Horns, ten soldiers stood, sweat glistening on their skin. Heliod's light beat down on them, the shadows of the Horns falling ahead of and behind the line where they stood at attention. The shadow ahead of them had crawled tantalizingly closer as they waited, but it still stood a sword's length out of reach.

Leandros desperately wanted to settle into that shade and take a nap. Well, what he *wanted* was to go back to Akros for a bath and some pleasant company, but he'd gladly take the shadow—or a fight, if it came to that. Anything was better than waiting.

Captain Kyrillos stepped out of line. He was sweating just like the rest of them.

"That's long enough," said Kyrillos. He pointed to three of the men. "You three, with me. Bardas, Borias—climb the Horns and see what you can see. Everyone else, take a rest."

Bardas and Borias grinned and bolted toward the Horns, shucking their armor. The two men were not brothers, nor, as far as Leandros had ever determined, lovers. But they were undeniably a pair, and they liked nothing as much as competing with one another. Grunting, sweating, and exchanging colorful insults, they hauled themselves up the great standing stones.



Mountain | Art by Steven Belledin

Kyrrillos took young Haemon, handsome Nikasios, and steadfast Xanthos to secure a perimeter. Leandros gratefully settled down in the shadow of one of the stones, setting his sword within arm's reach and taking a long pull from his water skin. Mnesos sat, leaning against the stone, his well-worn copy of Perisophia's *Essays on Logic* already in hand. White-bearded Diocles took off his helmet and set it on a rock, running his hand through his thinning hair. And Pallas started doing stretches, the bastard. He was taller and more muscular than any of them save Nikasios, and he liked to show off.

"They're not coming," he said, bent double to touch his palms to the ground.

"Quiet," said Diocles. "Eumalos is a good captain. Not the type to miss a meet-up. If they don't arrive, it's because they're all dead. And you've no right to be so flippant about that."

Both their squad and Eumalos's were part of the Alamon, the wandering soldiers who were as vital to the defense of the polis of Akros as the city walls. The many small squads of the Alamon met up regularly to exchange information and supplies. Missing a rendezvous meant nothing good.

"Ha!" cried Bardas, or maybe Borias, having won their race.

"What do you think, O great scholar?" asked Pallas, now upright again but twisted almost all the way around to look at Mnesos.

"I think there are many possible solutions to the problem of universals, of which the theory of ideal forms is only one," said Mnesos, without looking up.

Pallas snorted.

“Cyclops!” shouted Borias, or Bardas. “Cyclops, from the northeast! Arm yourselves!”

Leandros regained his feet, sword in hand.

Bardas and Borias scrambled down the sides of the Horns as the others rearmed themselves. Mnesos’s book disappeared, replaced by a sling and stone. Diocles had his helmet back on within less than a second, and Pallas picked up his spear and wheeled to face the attacker.

The perimeter team made it back around the same time, and the ten soldiers fell into formation as the hulking form of a cyclops lumbered into view from the northeast.



Ill-Tempered Cyclops | Art by Peter Mohrbacher

The cyclops was already wounded, dragging one leg and leaving a trail of blood. It gave a cry that was more wail than roar and turned to lope around them.

Pallas reached it first, plunging his spear deep into the thigh of its good leg. It wailed again and back-handed him, sending him sprawling. Borias ran past it to catch its attention while Bardas lunged in to slice across its belly—a wound, although not a deep one. The cyclops lurched past them.

Beside Leandros, behind a wall of shields, Nikasios hefted his spear to throw. If the cyclops had been fighting back, he might have had a shot. But it was still trying to go around them. Taking down a cyclops, even a wounded one, without taking its eye would be a long, bloody business.

“Mnesos!” said Leandros. “Get its attention! Nikasios, be ready.”

Nikasios nodded.

The scholar backed off from the group, loaded his sling, and whirled a stone around his head.

There was a crack as Mnesos’s stone met the cyclops’s skull, and the creature roared. It whirled around to spot its attacker—and found the point of Nikasios’s spear instead. It screamed, clutching at the spear, blood streaming down its face, and the squad surged forward.



Coordinated Assault | Art by John Severin Brassell

Leandros rushed forward, ducked beneath flailing arms, and sliced the tendon on the cyclops's good leg as he passed. The cyclops dropped to its knees, and the squad surrounded it and finished it off. Leandros didn't see who landed the final blow, but the kill was Nikasios's if it was anyone's.

"Anyone wounded?" asked the captain.

"Bruised," said Pallas, wheezing. "Gave me a good swat."

"Don't be a hero," said Kyrillos. "Mnesos, take a look at him."

Pallas grumbled, but let Mnesos check him over for serious injury.

Nikasios and Xanthos trotted out around the perimeter while Haemon, the youngest of them, stared at the cyclops.

"Hungry?" asked Bardas, clapping Haemon on the back.

"You eat... cyclops?" asked Haemon.

"Gotta take what you can get out here," said Borias.

Haemon turned pale.

"You don't eat cyclops," said Diocles, scowling at Bardas and Borias. "Unless you're starving. And even then it might kill you. They're noxious things."

Xanthos returned from the perimeter.

"That's the only one," he said. "And nothing gave chase. Looks like this fellow came all the way from One-Eyed Pass."

"So what's it doing out here?" asked Leandros. "They're pretty territorial, aren't they?"

"Very," said Mnesos, nodding to Pallas. "And a wounded cyclops usually goes to ground."

“Who cares?” said Pallas, who stood and stretched. “It’s just a cyclops.”

“I don’t think these wounds were inflicted by Akroans,” said Nikasios. He was shifting the cyclops’s body with his spear to get a better look at it. “This other leg was mauled, not cut.”

“Another cyclops?” asked Leandros.

“No,” said Diocles. “Something smaller. Another cyclops would’ve just brained him with a boulder.”

“I’ve heard enough,” said Kyrillos. The rest of the squad fell silent. “Eumalos’s squad missed the rendezvous, and there’s something besides our soldiers in One-Eyed Pass that can drive off a cyclops. We’re going to check it out.”

Nikasios nodded. Pallas scowled. Diocles frowned. No one spoke.

“Mnesos, leave a sign,” said Kyrillos. “Then let’s get moving.”

The scholar pulled out a charcoal and wrote the time and date in his impeccable handwriting on the near side of one of the Horns, so the next squad of Alamon who passed this way would know they had been here.

The ten soldiers marched in formation, leaving the dead cyclops behind.

The squad camped restlessly for the night on a rocky outcropping. Above it, where glowing constellations had once acted out the stories of the gods, there were only stars.

Mnesos sat apart from the group, staring up at the sky. Leandros came and sat beside him, staying silent for a time.



“Why have the gods abandoned us?” asked Leandros.

“On that,” said Mnesos, “no one seems able to agree. For their own reasons, no doubt.”

“Will they return?”

“The historians tell us that this is not the first time the gods have retreated into Nyx,” said Mnesos. “I doubt it will be the last.”

Leandros nodded.

“Should I still pray?” he asked.

“Hard to say,” said Mnesos. He turned toward Leandros. “But I do.”

They followed the cyclops’s trail up into the hills, a winding path that took them into narrow gullies and winding canyons. The blood trail dried up, and with no footprints to follow on the windswept stone, they marched on toward One-Eyed Pass.



Mountain | Art by Adam Paquette

That afternoon, in the shadows of the sheer rock faces that marked the entrance to the pass itself, they found a scene of carnage. There were nine Akroans lying on the ground, their bodies already bloating in the heat. The smell of blood and putrescence was oppressive.

The bodies had been butchered, their battered armor scattered around the pass. The heads were all missing.

Mnesos covered his mouth and nose with a cloth. Haemon looked as though he might faint. Leandros felt sick with fury.

“That’s Eumalos,” said Diocles quietly, pointing to one of the bodies. “I recognize his sword.”

“Tracks,” said Xanthos, pointing past the bodies, where the blood had marked the assailants’ passage. “Minotaurs.”

The far edge of the mess was a tangle of bloody hoofprints the size of dinner plates.

“Keep moving,” said Kyrillos. “We need to get to the outpost.”

“But the bodies—” stammered Haemon.

“They’re not getting any deader,” said Kyrillos. “Come on.”

The squad formed up. Leandros muttered a prayer to Athreos, who ferried souls to the Underworld, and hoped that the River Guide was still listening.

“Better vengeance than remembrance,” said Mnesos. It sounded like he was quoting something, although Leandros didn’t know what.

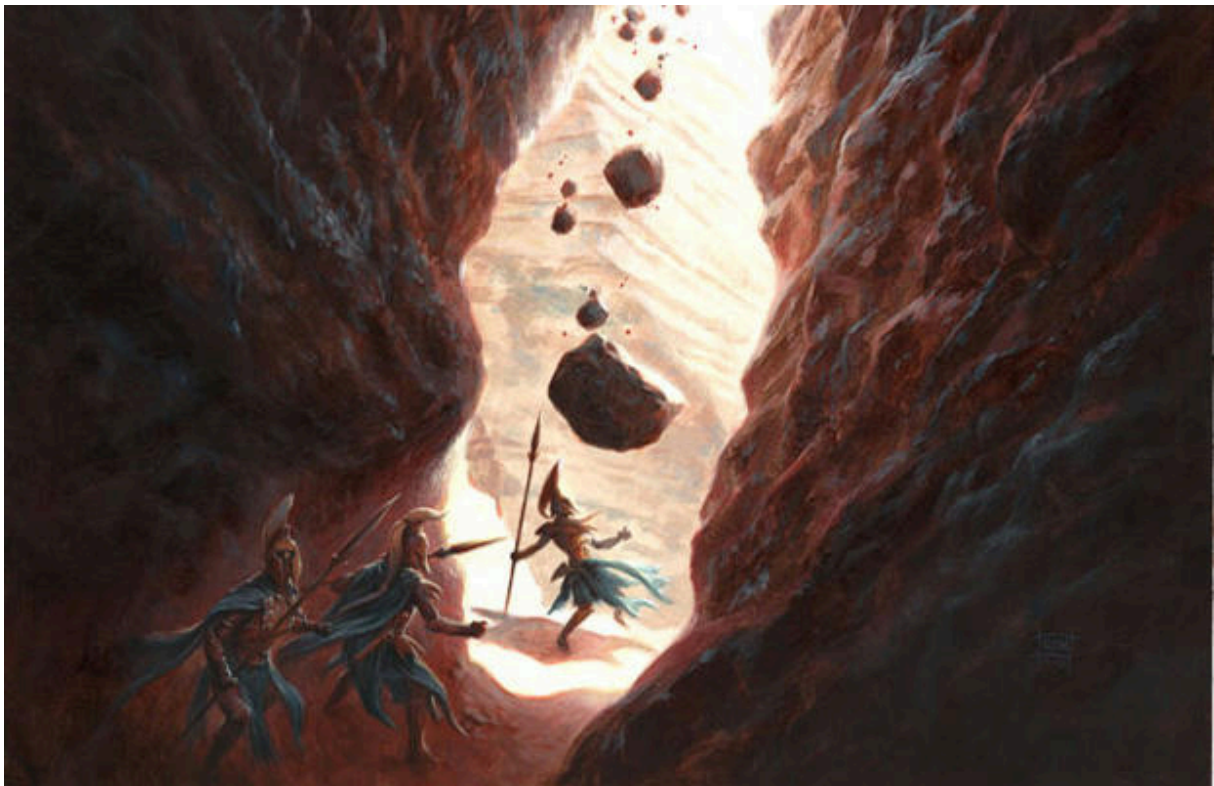
Haemon lingered by the body of Captain Eumalos. Nikasios put a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll come back for them,” he said.

Haemon nodded, and the ten living soldiers moved on.

In the pass itself, the scattered bodies of cyclopes and minotaurs made grim decoration. The minotaurs had been flattened by boulders or smashed against the stone walls, and a few looked like they’d been set upon by their fellows. The cyclopes had fared worse.

Behind them, rocks crashed. Leandros spun to see boulders tumbling into the canyon behind them, blocking their exit.



Boulderfall | Art by Ralph Horsley

From ahead of them came the sound of savage cries and thundering hooves, and then the first minotaurs rounded the corner.

At the head of the minotaur horde was a hulking brute carrying a sword. It bellowed insensibly, driving the others forward.

“Ready for charge!” yelled Kyrillos.

The squad was already forming up around him, shields up and spears out. The close quarters would buy them some time, but they were sorely outnumbered.

“They trapped us!” said Bardas.

“Minotaurs don’t set traps,” said Mnesos.

“Did you read that in a book?” snapped Pallas.



Akroan Phalanx | Art by Steve Prescott

Nikasios and Bardas skewered the first minotaurs to reach them. Another got past the spears, and Haemon got his sword up in time for the creature to impale itself. Then the horde was upon them, and tactics fell by the wayside.

A slaving minotaur that was already missing an arm lunged at Leandros, its remaining hand outstretched. Leandros bashed it in the face with his shield, then sliced one of its legs. It went down under the crush of hooves.

Kyrillos was barking orders from behind Leandros, fighting from the rear to keep a full view of the situation. Bardas and Borias fought back to back, shielding each other and hacking at the minotaurs around them. But they were being surrounded, cut off from the group.

Mnesos fought beside Leandros, muttering to himself about minotaurs, their tactics, and their supposed lack of intelligence. Pallas took risk after risk, throwing himself into the fray whenever he saw an opening and being fast enough, so far, to make it out again. Xanthos and Diocles flanked Haemon, covering any missteps. And Nikasios seemed to appear wherever he was needed, a quick spear thrust here and there buying crucial moments for his companions.

One of the minotaurs raised a stone sledge to batter Leandros, but Diocles got his shield up, and instead the axe came down on his shield-arm with a splintering sound. Diocles cried out but kept his feet, and Nikasios rammed his spear into the minotaur's chest.

Haemon stepped forward to finish the job, but another minotaur loomed, raising a massive axe. Then Xanthos was there, sword in hand. He lunged toward the minotaur, but he was too slow. The axe fell, and split him from shoulder to thigh.

Pallas roared and ran forward, batting aside the minotaur's clumsy backswing, and disemboweled it. Diocles dropped his sword and pulled Haemon back with his good hand. Leandros took a defensive stance, to cover their escape.

Another cry, to his left, and Mnesos was bent double around a minotaur's clawed hand. Leandros took the hand off, and the minotaur bellowed in pain. A quick, clumsy thrust from Nikasios was too wild to hit, but it got the thing to step back. Mnesos fell to the ground, moaning, blood seeping from his stomach.

From out of sight, Bardas or Borias cried out in rage.

They had killed dozens of minotaurs, but they were losing ground, backing toward the wall of fallen stone. Leandros tried to drag Mnesos with them, but every time he bent down, he had to straighten to block another blow. The scholar vanished behind a wall of matted fur and stomping hooves.

Haemon was back on his feet, weeping openly, taking chances. Nikasios's omnipresent defense was finally being overwhelmed. Kyrillos had stopped giving orders, focusing on the fight at hand. Pallas was panting, covered in blood, and his swings were getting slower.

Leandros's arms ached. He tried not to think about Mnesos.



The brute who had led the horde into the canyon finally stepped into the fight. It was easily ten feet tall, snarling defiance. It raised its blade and attacked.

Nikasios's spear skidded off its chest, taking only a strip of skin, and the blade came down at him. Nikasios lurched to one side, but the minotaur struck his leg, severing it. Nikasios cried out. Haemon ran forward, but the brute grabbed him by the head and threw him against the canyon wall with a sickening crack.

The minotaur swung at Pallas, who dodged. Now it was off balance, arms flung wide. Leandros and Pallas hacked at its sword arm, but its thick hide and makeshift armor deflected their blows. Diocles dragged Nikasios away from the stamping hooves.

Kyrillos had the opening, and he went for it. He stepped forward and rammed his sword up to the hilt in the minotaur's gut.

The minotaur howled and slammed Kyrillos to the ground with one huge fist, then brought one hoof down on his chest. It leered down at him, drooling.



Hero's Downfall | Art by Ryan Pancoast

Leandros cut the tendons in its leg, and it fell to its knees. Pallas's sword made a great arc and severed the minotaur's head. Its body slumped onto the fallen captain, spurting blood.

More minotaurs came, the last stragglers, but they had seen their leader fall, and they were scattering. Nikasios bound his own leg as Diocles, working with one arm, tried to push the massive minotaur's body off of the captain.

Pallas hacked at the fleeing minotaurs, shouting his rage, and Leandros tried to keep up. Soon they were alone, awash in blood, although the sound of growling voices and trampling hooves told them there were more minotaurs nearby.

Leandros found Mnesos's body, trampled and barely recognizable. He reached into the scholar's pack and pulled out *Essays on Logic*, hoping to save it. The book was soaked in blood, useless. He left it on Mnesos's body.

Pallas helped Diocles heave the minotaur leader's body off of the captain. Kyrillos was dead, his eyes glassy, helm askew, staring up into the sun.

Leandros found Borias next, slumped over next to the still form of Bardas. He'd been run through the shoulder with one of their own spears, and both of his legs were broken. Leandros bent down next to him.

"We had a b—" stammered Borias, staring down at Bardas's body. "A b-bet. Who'd live longer. There's a jar of, of money. In m-my quarters back home. We added to it every time we left. I guess... I guess I won."

He looked up at Leandros.

"You can have it," he mumbled. "The money. I don't think... I'll have... much use for it."

He shuddered, and his eyes went glassy. His ragged breathing slowed and stopped.

Leandros straightened.

There were four of them left. Nikasios was still conscious, leaning against a rock and gripping his spear with white knuckles. Diocles, his beard streaked with red, had gotten the battered shield off his left arm, which hung uselessly at his side. Pallas was still standing, but he couldn't seem to catch his breath. Leandros himself was untouched, through luck or fortune.

"Minotaurs don't act like this," said Diocles, sounding more weary than pained. "Something's wrong. They lured us, and they trapped us."

He looked down at the captain, and his eyes focused.

"We need to warn Akros," he said. "The minotaurs are hunting the Alamon, deliberately. If they can plan that, they can plan an attack on the city. Who can still run?"

Nikasios stared down at the stump of his leg.

"I can," said Leandros.

"Nope," said Pallas, his breath coming fast and shallow. "Not happening."

"What's wrong?" asked Leandros. "I didn't see you take a blow."

"Didn't," said Pallas. "Felt something pop, during the fight. Right where the cyclops got me yesterday. I wouldn't make it a mile."

He managed a grin.

"I can buy you some time, though," he said.

The sounds of rumbling voices and hooves scraping on stone grew louder.

"I can't just leave you here," said Leandros.

"Go," said Diocles. "Whoever stays, dies. But it might not be too late to warn Akros. Climb out of here, and run."

Nikasios hauled himself up onto a rock. He nodded to Leandros, spear at the ready.

"Get out of here," said Pallas.

He turned to face the far end of the canyon, then turned back.

"Tell them we went down fighting, will you?"

“I will,” said Leandros.

Then more minotaurs poured into the canyon, and Leandros turned to climb the tumbled boulders.



Art by Michael Komarck

Behind him, Nikasios banged his spear against his shield, and Pallas yelled insults at the minotaurs, until the sound of hooves on stone drowned them out.

Leandros reached the top, and ran, and did not look back.

He ran for a full day and more, dodging roving bands of minotaurs and fighting to keep his eyes open. Occasionally he came upon squads of fallen Alamon, and signs that large bands of minotaurs had passed this way.

By the time he caught sight of Akros, night had fallen for a second time. In the darkness, it took him a moment to realize that something was wrong. He slowed, then stopped, a vast blankness blotting out what should have been view of the city.

A wall. Someone—*minotaurs*—had built a wall around Akros, to keep the Alamon out while they besieged the city. It was a ramshackle thing, ugly and probably flimsy, but the Alamon were lightly armed and had no siege equipment. Even if any of them had survived the onslaught out in the wilds, they would have to besiege the siege camp themselves.

In the skies directly above Akros, stars flared to sudden, brilliant life, regaining color and motion for the first time in many weeks. Slowly, two figures took shape: brave Iroas and savage Mogis, the twin gods of warfare, respective patrons of the Akroans and the minotaurs. They grappled in the sky, fighting the latest battle in their long and brutal conflict.



But the gods had not returned to *Theros*. The twins were interested in each other, not mortals. There would be no help from that quarter.

Leandros fell to his knees.

He was too late. Even the gods could not stop this disaster.

The siege of Akros had begun.



Art by Peter Mohrbacher