

# The Walking Gods

## by K9Lupus

It was difficult to believe that our five-year search for the fabled ruins would be drawing to a close. The crashing walls of waves slamming at the sides of our humble craft did little to quell the fervor in the hearts of our ragtag family, their breathy wails kin to rallying cries towards our hard-fought victory through this desolate landscape. We were forward-sighted folk, cradling passion oriented by the sextants of our shared dream of discovery. In times like these, little else mattered. Indeed the very world itself could be engulfed at this very moment by the gushing ramparts surrounding us and we would be content, so long as the ruins still stood to welcome us.

Our travels had taken first me, and then Torvic and Honlaya a year and a half past my first departure through countless towns, some familiar, many not. We encountered all manner of folk speaking strange tongues and garbed from flowing, silken robes down to dusty, frayed scraps along our journey. All leads were given credence, every cryptic folktale analyzed with scrupulous care. Now as the distant set of looming stone columns and fixtures claimed by centuries of vines and wooded plants erupting from the shoreline came into view through the misty haze, I felt peace. The sacrifices had been worth it.

“Oiram, there's a break in the rocks that we can slip through.” Torvic said, pointing a long finger in the direction of the shoreline.

“Pull her in. Take little with you from the stores when we land. It won't be long travels for us anymore and we'll move swifter with lighter loads.” I answered.

A dry cackle dissolved within the ocean's fury boomed behind me as Honlaya etched a new mark into the port side railing of the ship, dragging the roughened pad of her thumb across dozens of its companions.

“What a shame. My blade's going to grow dull now isn't it?” Honlaya asked, the edges of her lips twisting up into an unmistakable grin.

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We descended down on crumbling stone steps into the dusty, claustrophobic depths of the secluded temple. Silent and alert, our blazing torches cast a warm glow to combat the relentless onslaught of shadows here. From the outside, any passerby would have thought the entrance nothing more than a shallow outcropping that bordered the leading edge of a large waterfall. It had been only after piecing together an array of tales across several lands did the significance of this sacred place reveal itself.

Walking Gods they had called them. Claiming dominion over the world in the time before man, it was said they abandoned us after coming to know our true nature. But this understanding was false. My journey here would prove so. I needed to believe that they had never left.

At the base of the stairs we found ourselves stranded within a large, central chamber. The air reeked with the dank odor of stagnant water untouched by time. A sprawling stone structure towered over the space, laced with traces of worn, golden vines wrapped all the way up beyond the range of my

torchlight. With a grunt, I dismissed Torvic and Honlaya to either side to spread out and search our surroundings for any clues. Upon closer inspection of the dark tower, I observed small glyphs in a foreign, ancient dialect embedded within the base of the tower cast in the same golden material as the ascending vines. Above and below them were rough depictions of creatures, but none like any of us had ever encountered in our travels. My eyes widened with realization that these images loosely matched those of the many stories we had been told about the Walking Gods.

I traced a knuckle over an image that particularly stood out to me, one with a set of massive wings that looked as if they could shield away the sun itself.

*Not all of the gods walked. Some flew.*

Below the depiction was a recess containing a small object within. Torvic and Honlaya had also each discovered an image calling to them as well. Us three, linked by fate and cursed by time, reached out to touch the bony fragments and seize our destiny.

A trio of shrieks echoed through the chamber as rippling waves of energy coursed through my body, threatening to eject my midday meal from my gut and causing me to drop my torch to the ground. As quickly as the overwhelming sensation had appeared, it was gone. The chamber began to shake, and a plume of acrid dust came barreling down from the direction we had come. The cloud settled into a blanket of dust at our feet and revealed an empty void beyond, the stone steps sunken back into the wall.

“What in all the great seas was that Oiram?” Honlaya shouted, her voice echoing around me and giving the sensation of being berated from all directions at once. The heel of her hand pressed hard against her forehead as if seized by an invisible vice.

“I have no idea.” Torvic interjected. “All I know is we found what we were looking for, and I'm not sure it was in our best interests. I don't want to stay here any longer than we need to.” he continued, clutching tightly at one of his legs.

“We've come this far. We can't back away now. Only one way out from here now.” I said, picking up my fallen torch and gritting my teeth to bare the near-constant spasms seizing my shoulders. I gestured it towards where a faint column of light reflected within the rock had appeared and made haste in its direction.

“He always does this.” Honlaya muttered under her breath.

“It always works out.” Torvic answered, willing his frozen leg forward to catch up ground to my fading torch light. Honlaya sighed, trailing behind at the rear.

“Men.”

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The new pathway that had opened was labyrinthine, each fork leading to even more winding excavations deeper into the temple. We moved hastily, motivated by the uncertainty of what was quickly developing for all of us. What at first was thought to be mild discomfort from the displaced dust soon became apparent that a force much stranger and much more profound was at play. Our bodies

were changing, transforming into new configurations unseen since times of old. Muscle and bone slid and shifted, cracked and grew, and sprouted into new, terrifying appendages and proportions. Influenced by the Walking Gods, we were coming to know humanity's inextricable connection to the past.

We followed the growing light at each fork until the labyrinth ended and opened up into a vast crater of a room with unfiltered light from a sloped chamber towards the surface shining down to cast the space in a blue-gray glow. The chamber was sculpted with polished granite that juxtaposed against the otherwise ancient stonework.

Looking to my two companions, I saw that our collective humanity lay in ruins around us, standing more kin to the Walking Gods than to our former selves. Like me, Honlaya's body had swelled with layers of primordial muscle beyond the constraints of her human clothes which lay clung to her in tattered strips and swaths. Along her back rose a mighty sail that would be the envy of any seafarer paired with a lengthening, paddle-like tail and an imposing set of overlapping pointed teeth. The mighty, membranous wings I had seen on the depiction at the central chamber were becoming my own, and a long, heavy beak had projected itself from my face. Torvic, however, had shrunk by a noticeable measure and was coated in a grand display of colored feathers with a set of scaled feet each baring a formidable sickle claw.

Across the space, an immense door stood wreathed in the same golden vines as the central chamber from earlier on in the temple. Instead of upward, these markings sprouted out in the direction of three pedestals: one at the center of the door, and two on adjacent platforms far out on either side, one framed by sloshing water, the other by a track of swirling sheets of sharp-edged metal. The center pathway lay riddled with indentations on the ground.

“One for each of us.” I managed to say awkwardly around my beak.

Torvic and Honlaya nodded, and we each stood at the beginning of the track our altered bodies had best adapted for. The two looked to me, and I gave a rallying cry that came out closer to a shrill squawk as I beat my arms hard to test my wings for the first time, keeping the pedestal ahead of me squarely center in my vision as Honlaya dove into the water and Torvic dashed forward on his swift, clawed feet.

I carefully navigated the spinning blades, trusting in the spark of rising instincts flourishing within me manifested in this new form. From the corner of my eyes, I spied Torvic leap from side to side to narrowly avoid projected spikes rising from the ground. Further beyond, a great surge of water spilled off the granite pool as Honlaya's face appeared, promptly chomping through a set of thick netting clinging at her head before continuing her progress. In our own ways, and through our own developed abilities, we made it to the pedestals. Our efforts had hastened our transformations further, but although we stood wheezing and out of breath, we were alive in spirit in a way none of us had experienced across our epic journey together.

We pressed down the spiraling indentations, and the same quaking we felt at the central chamber took place again, this time rocking Torvic off his feet closest to the shifting door sliding open. Honlaya and I rejoined Torvic and the three of us proceeded together into the newly opened space, huddled close together with nerves firing like cannons at the muffled rumble of our footsteps.

The light we had been chasing through the labyrinth was brightest here, and around the corners of this brilliantly decorated, gold-laced room were a set of reflective surfaces bouncing light towards a rising,

tri-pronged tower at its middle that joined with the ceiling above. Along the front face of the tower was a collection, undoubtedly complete, of depictions of the Walking Gods. Among the seemingly endless array, I noticed that three of the depictions glowed a warm amber corresponding to our new shapes that were quickly overwhelming the last vestiges of our remaining humanity.

I fixed my large, primordial eyes on the inscription at the shrine's center and found that I could now read the ancient text easily.

“Those who unite shall ease back the mind's bite. The role of Guardian you will keep from your courage's surge. To maintain One Strand until the final Merge.” I spoke out loud in a series of loose chirps and trills from my massive throat.

The panel housing the inscription sunk away, revealing a vast tunnel rippling with light and shapeless forms. I stood in awe of its glamour, its history, its potential. A large skull nudged at my back and I turned to see Honlaya there, breathing out a hearty chuff while Torvic's body crouched low between my folded wings, ready to pounce forward into the next adventure.

And so it was that we went; our bodies forever altered, our minds remained to give and pull from the One Strand, sailing forever within the Streams of Time. As we passed through, I felt peace again in my heart.

This sacrifice was worth it too.