

Song of the Goddess

by

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This book is dedicated to my mother.

Thanks for all of your support.

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Chapter One

A raven soared passed a crescent moon hanging over one of many lush forests in the region of Austuria. Winged predators screeched, soaring through the shadowy green and brown treetops searching for a meal scurrying along the forest floor; stalking their prey and striking from darkness.

Ikari Sanada stood atop a thick branch and smiled, enjoying the warm breeze blowing over his youthful features and brown hair. He wore the traditional garb of the Sanyoshu: black clothing with red trim, light but sturdy arm and shin guards, and the crimson sigil of House Sanada on the back of his tunic. The only difference between himself and the rest of his cohorts was the short sword he carried on the back of his hip, rather than the long blade the others wielded.

The sound of horses trotting over dried leaves drew his attention to the road below. Two men sat on top of a dark-colored wagon, each armed with crossbows and peering around with a nervous look, while a third worked the reins. Ikari glanced over to the tree across from him and nodded at the young man kneeling on a thick branch. Saskai Tri'on returned his nod before making a chopping motion with his left hand.

Responding instantly, four hooded Sanyoshu, each with their sword in hand, leapt from their perch atop the trees and dropped down onto the wagon. Moving in sync, six more sprang from the brush and yanked the two armed men off of the wagon before they could react. Saskai followed them down, kicking the driver as he landed on the wagon.

The Sanyoshu lined up the driver and his compatriots behind the wagon while Saskai moved to inspect its cargo. Smiling again, Ikari let himself fall forward, flipping head over heels, to land softly on the leaf covered ground.

“Who’re you?” one of the men asked.

Ikari walked slow and purposefully, eyeing each of the men as he circled around them. “Tell me who you work for and I’ll let you live.”

“May Yun’Harrar feast on your soul for a thousand years.”

“You will be respectful or die.” Saskai picked up one of the fallen bows and struck the man on the back of his head.

“Who sent you?” Ikari repeated, adding a hint of menace to his voice. “Speak now, or even the gods won’t be able to save you.”

“I know only that we were given orders to deliver our cargo to House Borga,” the driver replied.

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“What’s the cargo?”

“Weapons,” Saskai answered. “Enough to furnish a small army and some ancient looking scrolls.”

Ikari grinned, then glanced back at the driver. “You’re going to deliver a message for me.”

“You expect us to accept orders from you?” one of the men spat.

“No.” Ikari shrugged, gesturing toward the third man. “I expect *him* to.” Before either of the men replied, Saskai shot them both in the neck. “You will tell your master that the Sanyoshu will kill all who trespass in our territory. You will also tell him that it’ll be House Sanada, not Borga, that will reign over this realm.” He stepped to the side and motioned for the driver to leave.

“Lord Ikari, do you really believe Danothir will make a grab for power?” Saskai followed Ikari over to the wagon as the man ran off.

Ikari nodded. “He’s been gathering weapons and soldiers for months now, but I can’t figure out why he’s been looking for ancient texts.” He climbed into the wagon, glancing at the crates for a long moment. “Whatever his intent is, if it doesn’t benefit the Sanada, I’ll crush it and him.”

* * *

An old Jeep Cherokee bounced its way up a winding dirt trail. Amy Price sat next to her sister Lucy in the back, staring at the dense jungle and mentally thanked the person who had invented air conditioning. True to form, Lucy had spent most of her time complaining about the humidity, the bugs, and anything else she could after they’d gotten off the plane from London. They had flown down to Belize to join their father on a dig where he found something he had described as *frightfully smashing*.

“So Diego, how long till we reach the camp site?” Lucy leaned closer to the driver, a tanned man in his late twenties.

“Not much longer.”

“What exactly has my father found?” Amy asked, remembering how excited he sounded during their last conversation when he convinced her to fly down to see for herself. She usually only joined him for brief trips in-between semesters, and only when he needed extra help with translating or was trying to convince her to follow in his footsteps.

“I saw for myself what he found, but it held no meaning for me.”

“But what was it?”

“I would tell you, but Dr. Price has sworn me to secrecy.”

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Giving up on coaxing the information out of him, Amy sat in silence and pulled her auburn hair back into a black elastic band while Lucy asked about Diego's interests.

Reaching the camp, Amy stepped out of the jeep and stretched, wearing a comfortable pair of brown hiking boots with light brown pants and a tan blouse. A few tents were set up in a loose circle around a fire pit and various pieces of digging equipment lay scattered about as people moved around carrying steaming bowls.

"Lucy!" Recognizing the voice, Amy turned just as their dad came rushing toward them with open arms. "I didn't know you were coming too."

"I wanted to surprise you." Lucy returned their father's embrace.

"I'm glad you came." Dressed in a dusty tan shirt and slacks, Dr. Price stepped over to Amy and put his arm around her shoulder. "How are things back home?"

"Good," Amy replied. "I'll be graduating a semester early."

"My little girl is getting her first degree. Don't suppose you've given any thought to joining me out on the field? Might as well put that college degree to use."

"I haven't decided what I'll do yet." Amy smiled, unsurprised by his latest attempt to recruit her. "So Dad, I'm dying to know what's got you so excited."

"First we eat and catch up, then I'll show you." His smile spread from cheek to cheek as he looked over to Amy. "You'll love this."

* * *

An hour later, they had finished dinner—which fortunately had tasted better than it looked—and headed into the jungle while listening to their father recount the last month of research.

"My team and I started finding some pottery and a few spear heads early on. A week later, Diego and I stumbled onto a sealed chamber and found half a dozen ivory caskets."

"Whoa..." Stepping into a large clearing behind her dad, Amy looked past him to stare at the stone temple in front of them. Standing about one hundred feet tall, the structure was almost completely covered by vegetation.

Making their way inside, her dad led them to a metal ladder and climbed down into the casket chamber. "Besides the bodies, we found quite a bit of jewelry and some rather fancy looking spears."

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Lucy walked into the center of the artificially lit room and looked around, adjusting the camera hanging around her neck. “I know I’m no expert on long dead things, but this looks a bit normal.”

“She’s right,” Amy confirmed, glancing over one of the caskets in the circular room. “The caskets are a bit unique, but it looks like a typical Mayan burial chamber.”

“The team and I thought the same thing, but when I started to examine that wall—” He pointed behind the sisters, directing Amy’s attention toward a section of the wall that had been broken through. “—I found the wall was hiding those stairs.”

“Where do they go?” Amy followed Lucy over to the hole and peered through, growing more intrigued by the second.

“Down aways.”

“You’re being annoyingly vague on purpose, aren’t you?” Amy turned to glare at her father.

“Playful teasing sweetheart, and I figured you could help a bit since you beat the team I have flying down from the Smithsonian.” Dr. Price led them down the narrow stairs. The walls were covered with a thick layer of cobwebs while cables ran along the ground providing power to the small lamps that lit their way down the long, zigzagging stairs.

They emerged in a large chamber where the air was warm and stale. Ancient writings covered the stone walls. Six columns, each evenly spaced on either side of the room with carvings of their own, held the cathedral ceiling above them. Five large archways were fixed into the wall ahead of them, with more writing covering the space between each.

Amy walked over to one of the walls and felt her eyes widen in surprise before rushing to another. Running her hand over the writing, she turned back toward her father only to find a wide grin staring back. “This is amazing, and impossible.”

“I knew you’d want to see this.” Dr. Price’s smile widened. “Linguistics was always your strong suit.”

“I don’t see what’s so special about some Mayan writing.” Lucy stared at one of the columns.

“It’s not all Mayan.” Amy turned and looked at her sister, eyes wide with excitement as she pointed to the wall next to her. “This is ancient Greek.” She walked over to another section of writing. “And this is Babylonian. Over there I saw Egyptian and Gaelic.”

“So?”

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“So?” Amy laughed, trying to decide which wall to look over next. “These are cultures separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years.”

“What’s it say?”

Amy walked along the wall, unable to believe what she was seeing. “Most of it seems to focus on mythology. There are references to Zeus, Cali, Loki, Ra, and others.”

“Can you translate this wall?” Her dad motioned toward the front wall.

Glancing at the archways on the wall while stepping over to a stone podium a few feet away, Amy tried to slow the questions racing through her mind. “I can try, but I’ve never seen writing like this before.”

Dr. Price shook his head. “No one else has either, that’s why I called in a team from Washington. Still, you’ve always had a talent for picking up languages. I was hoping you might be able help, and you’ll get the chance to work with some of the best archeologists in the field.”

Amy forced a smile, wishing her father would give up trying to get her to follow his career path. Turning back to the wall with the strange writing while Lucy and their dad began taking pictures, she started to ponder the significance of the archways.

“You know you don’t have to solve this tonight,” Dr. Price stated.

“I know.” Amy nodded, focusing on the podium. “There’s something about the writing though, it’s... almost like the translation is right on the tip of my tongue.”

Kneeling to get a closer view of the podium, she felt a soft breeze and began to notice a low voice. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Dr. Price replied.

As Amy glanced back at the writing, her vision blurred. Rubbing her eyes with a pained groan, she looked again and gasped, taken aback by what she saw.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy lowered her camera.

“I, I can read this,” Amy stammered, feeling light headed as she stood. “I was looking down and then, then I could read it.”

“What do you mean?” Her dad turned toward her.

“It says that these are passageways to other realms.” Amy read, unable to focus her thoughts. A stronger breeze swirled around her as the sound of a woman singing filled the chamber. “Who’s singing?”

“There’s no one singing.” Concern edged her father’s voice. “Are you alright, sweetheart?”

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“You can’t hear it?” Amy asked as the singing grew louder. “...And that breeze.”

“Honey, there’s no breeze. Look, it’s late and you had a long flight, you should get some rest.” Dr. Price put a hand on her shoulder.

Before Amy could protest, the stone within the forth archway ripped away, pulled into a howling indigo vortex of shimmering light.

“What is that?” Lucy jumped to her feet, mirroring the shock Amy felt.

The gusting winds continued to pick up, matching the increasing volume of the singing voice. Amy stared at the whirlpool—her mind numb and devoid of the fear that should have been racing through her—and started toward the swirling vortex.

“What are you doing?” Lucy shouted.

“It’s calling me.” Amy heard her own voice as if in a dream.

“No, it’s not.” Her father reached for her arm, but a blast of wind slammed into his chest, knocking him back.

A shimmering fog poured out of the light and wrapped around Amy, pulling her into the vortex. Feeling as if she was underwater, she heard her father and sister screaming her name as she stepped through the whirlpool. Then she heard nothing.

* * *

When Amy stepped through the vortex, she felt like she was in a trance. Whatever had compelled her to pass through the opening had her feeling calm and serene. Now, she was terrified.

Bright lights swirled around her as she sailed through a vast cobalt void. The Sound of swords clashing rang in her ears. She caught the scent of ocean water and looked down to find herself falling toward an immense green sea. Splashing into the water, she frantically tried to swim to the surface, but the more she struggled, the more she felt like she was being pulled down. She fought to hold her breath while the water began to swirl and bubble around her until it exploded in a bright flash.

Gasping for breath, Amy found herself standing on a floating slab of rock. All around her, she saw flashes of people dressed in old fashioned tunics or robes. Images of a man and woman dressed in black and red flashed in and out of view. Other images of a lean woman in a purple gown floated passed one of a man dressed like a knight. Voices shouting happily or angrily became drowned out by the woman’s harmonious singing.

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The cobalt void melted away to reveal a turquoise sky hanging over a grassy field covered in blood. People in strange, blood red armor slaughtered the men and women on the field while a black shadow poured over everything in sight, leaving her in darkness. Turning away from the dark, she found herself looking down at a small island with a round palace in its center. The palace erupted in flames, and a malicious laugh replaced the singing.

Amy screamed as the stone slab crumbled beneath her feet and sent her plummeting into the dancing flames. She closed her eyes, throwing her arms up to protect her head just as she was about to hit the charred ground, but after a long moment, she discovered that she was standing in a narrow, wooden box. Her heart about ready to burst from her chest, she pushed and scratched at the top of the box trying to free herself, pleading to be let out.

A moment later she heard a man's deep voice. "Open it."

Chapter Two

The sun shined high above the large market as villagers hurried about their business. Some carried baskets filled with exotic fruits while others held bags of rice or grain. Venders in wooden carts lined the sides of the road, selling cloth or inexpensive jewelry to young women who passed by. Others tried to sell blatantly fabricated scrolls that promised good fortune and health.

Unfazed by the venders competing to be heard, Hayate Thane made his way through the bustling crowd, heading toward the warehouses at the edge of the village. He glanced to his side and noticed a group of women staring at him. Nodding with a quick smile, he continued on his way, eager to complete his task. He had traveled to Nel'Oskow to speak with the head of House Borga—a man not known for his hospitality—but just as he arrived, he had learned that Lord Borga was *coincidentally* away. Hayate was told that he could find Borga's second in the warehouse district. He knew little about General D'Gust Svipdag except for tales of his ruthlessness and lack of compassion.

A man from behind a booth filled with weapons stepped out in front of Hayate. "Good sir knight, might I interest you in a shield?"

"Thank you but no."

"But you don't understand sir knight. This is the shield used by the legendary Primus himself."

"I doubt that." Hayate tried to step by, but the man blocked him.

"Perhaps I can sharpen your sword then?" The man gestured to Hayate's weapon hanging off his hip.

"Next time." Hayate pushed past the man and continued down the road. After a few minutes, he reached the warehouses and spotted Svipdag overseeing the unloading of large crates. He was a scruffy looking man with dark unkempt hair and a graying beard. His deep, raspy voice had the workers running frantically about. "Pardon the interruption, but..."

"Who in Ako'Reah's name are you?" Svipdag demanded, pulling out a knife before storming toward Hayate.

"I'm Hayate Thane of Ithor."

Svipdag crooked his head. "A bit far from Ithor aren't you, knight?"

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"I'm here to discuss the recent thefts of Ithorian shipments in this region." Hayate glanced around, noticing two soldiers approaching with crossbows. "I see that some of those crates have Ithorian markings."

"We get shipments from lots of places, so what?"

"A week ago an Ithorian freighter was attacked. The crew was found dead and the shipment is missing."

"That's too bad, but I could care less," Svipdag sneered. "Look kid, these crates—and whatever they hold in them—belong to Lord Borga."

A soldier in gray armor walked over to Svipdag and placed his left hand on his right shoulder in salute. "Sir, we've located the item."

"Show me." Svipdag turned and followed the soldier into the warehouse. "And get rid of the knight."

Hayate darted around the soldier, matching Svipdag's pace. "These crates belong to Ithor."

"Tell it to someone who cares."

Passing a large stack of boxes, Hayate followed the older man into a well-lit loading area and noticed a mahogany casket with the golden crest of Araia, the warrior goddess, affixed near the top.

Svipdag let out grunt, gesturing with his knife still in hand, toward the casket leaning against a smooth wall. "Open it."

"If this is..." Hayate started as the soldier pried the casket open, but let his voice trail off as a young woman with auburn hair burst from inside.

The woman—around the same age as Hayate—looked up, her face pale and eyes wide as they darted back and forth, and started stammering in a strange language, but in mid-sentence, she began to speak Terran. "...are you people? Where am I?"

"What is this?" Svipdag demanded, turning toward Hayate. "You! You knew. You knew about her so you came to get her."

Hayate shook his head, surprise still flooding his thoughts. "I don't know what's going on here but I'm putting a stop to it."

Hayate drew his sword and knocked the bow from the hand of the soldier to his left. He turned and ducked, avoiding an arrow from the right before rolling behind a stack of crates to avoid a second arrow. Another soldier came from around the other side and attacked with a large broadsword. Blocking the first strike, Hayate kicked the soldier in the chest then slashed him below his chest plate.

Climbing over the crates, Hayate leapt to the other side. Svipdag flung a knife at him as he landed, which he managed to deflect with his sword. Hayate lunged toward the General, but Svipdag drew his own

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sword and parried his attack. Raising his sword above his head, Svipdag swung it down, causing sparks to erupt as Hayate blocked and tried to push him back.

“Brave kid, but stupid.” Svipdag flashed a lopsided grin an instant before Hayate felt the butt of a bow crash into the back of his head. Hayate cried out as a jolt of pain flashed through him and struggled to remain standing until Svipdag struck him with the hilt of his sword, sending the woman, and everything else, fading into darkness.

* * *

The crossbows manufactured in the more affluent regions of Terra were usually made from the trunks of the amber caius tree’s, a sturdy and elegant looking wood that was growing more popular than oak bows. Startling back to consciousness, Hayate found himself lying on the floor of a well-furnished bedroom, grateful that the soldiers of Nel’Oskow were outfitted with the cheaper and softer oak version.

Staring up at a brilliant crystal chandelier, he rose to his feet and looked toward the wide balcony window to his left, finding the strange woman staring out. Stepping toward her, he reached out and lightly touched her shoulder. “Are you unharmed?”

Startled, she pulled away and looked him over while ringing her hands. “I’m fine.”

Looking over the railing, Hayate realized that they had been taken the Borga estate. He silently cursed himself for being reckless and forgetting about the other soldier. “We have to get out of here,” he stated as he went to the double doors and tried to open them. *Locked.* He moved back to the balcony and considered jumping but decided that it was too far of a drop.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Hayate Thane.”

“Amy, Amy Price.” She extended her arm.

Taking her hand with a reassuring smile, he brought it to his lips and kissed her fingers. “My honor to meet you. Tell me, why were you in the casket? Were you stowing away?”

“I, I don’t know how I got there.”

After listening to the improbable tale of how she ended up in the casket, Hayate found himself unable to hide his astonishment. Travel from one realm to another was common enough, but if you traveled through a Gateway from one realm, you would exit through another, and the Gateways to and from this realm were on Hapes Island.

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“Travel between realms is impossible without passing through the Gateway of the God’s.”

Amy shook her head. “I can’t explain what happened. I don’t even know where I am, and I certainly don’t know anything about different realms.”

“This is the realm of Terra.” Hayate smiled at her reassuringly. “Don’t worry, I’ll get us out of here, somehow, and I’ll help you find a way home.”

Still looking uneasy, Amy returned his smile. A moment later the doors burst opened and two soldiers marched in followed by Svipdag.

“Lord Borga wishes for you to join him.”

* * *

Following behind Hayate and the men escorting them through a series of well decorated corridors, Amy kept her arms tight to her chest as they passed paintings of some unknown countryside. A few large vases sat on polished mahogany tables placed between paintings while thin lace curtains were pulled open in front of the tinted windows.

Pausing as they reached a large door, Svipdag pushed it open and stepped into the spacious chamber before motioning for them to follow. “Your guests, my Lord.”

Amy stayed close to Hayate, desperate for some sense of where she was and what was going on as she stepped into the warm room. A plush rose-colored rug with gold trim lay on the hardwood floor while a wide mahogany desk with a pair of lanterns sat in front of a large window.

A middle aged man in a crisp, burgundy shirt turned away from the window. Light pouring from the lanterns reflected off of his graying hair and beard giving him an air of malice that sent chills throughout Amy’s stomach.

“Thank you, General. That’ll be all.” Waiting until Svipdag and the soldiers left, Lord Borga stepped around his desk, picking up Hayate’s sword and glancing over it. “So, Knight of Ithor, why have you come to my land?” His deep voice echoed off the walls as he glared at Hayate, adding to Amy’s apprehension.

“I am here with the full authority of the Consortium to...”

“Spare me. I know of your meeting with those fools and what you claimed you would come here for.” Danothir held the sword at eye level, anger shimmering in his eyes. “This is a beautiful sword, but do not think I would hesitate to use it to cleave your head from your shoulders.”

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Hayate held his gaze on the older man, unfazed by the threat. “I demand that you release us from this unjust imprisonment.”

“You are hardly in any position to demand anything, Knight.” Borga set the sword down and sat behind his desk. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to investigate recent thefts of Ithorian goods.”

“Lies. You are here to rescue that woman. You have come to take her to Ithor and save your dying kingdom.”

“She has nothing to do with Ithor, she’s just a stowaway.”

Borga laughed incredulously. “Come now, you know as well as I that her appearance in that casket means more than that.” He looked over to Amy. “Tell me, what is your name?”

“Amy.”

“Well Amy, tell me, why do you cower behind him?” Borga paused for a moment and smirked. “Is it because you are afraid? How can one such as you be afraid of a mere mortal? For you to fear me means that you have yet to discover your power.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Amy tried to keep the fear out of her voice. “I got sucked through some purple light and ended up here. I don’t know who any of you are, and I don’t care. I just want to get back home.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Danothir Borga, head of House Borga, and you needn’t fear me. You are the Protectorate Goddess. Cooperate and I shall not harm you.”

Amy stared at the gray haired man for a long moment. “Cooperate with what?”

“I have been searching for you, my dear, for a very long time now.” Borga leaned forward on his elbows with an unsettling smile. “You will lend me your power—all the power of the heavens—and with that power, I will destroy the ineffective and obsolete Consortium and usher in an era of amity in this chaotic realm.”

“That’s insane,” Hayate spat. “The Consortium has existed for nearly three hundred years. Even if you could defeat the Consortium, the other Houses would never allow it.”

“There is some truth in what you say. That is why Amy here is going to be of use. With her power, even the other Houses would bow before me. Think about it. One House ruling over the realm, there’d be no more squabbling, no more bickering over land or fighting over every petty thing. Under my unchallenged rule, this realm would prosper.”

“You are talking about subjugating an entire realm.”

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“Isn't a golden age under my rule preferable to the chaos that has been strangling our realm for centuries? If the realm is to grow, the old ways must be undone.” Danothir stood, picked up the sword, and called for his soldiers. Handing one of the three soldiers that entered Hayate's sword, he motioned for them to leave. “Take the knight and the girl upstairs and lock them in separate rooms.”

Pushed out the door along with Hayate, Amy silently wished that she was home with her father and sister, sitting in front of a warm fire telling each other about their days. Looking out one of the windows they passed, she noticed that the sun was beginning to set in the orange horizon and began to wonder if she would ever see another sunset when Hayate grabbed a vase and smashed it against the head of the soldier in front of them.

Amy jumped back, startled, while Hayate rushed the second soldier, pinning him against the wall and punched him. The remaining soldier quickly yanked him off the second and started to aim his crossbow, but Hayate tackled the soldier, trying to wrestle the weapon free. The second man shook his head, regaining his composure, and kicked Hayate in the ribs, knocking him off his compatriot. Slipping behind the man as he readied his weapon to strike, Amy grabbed a vase and smashed it over his head, knocking him unconscious.

The last soldier punched Hayate on the jaw before reaching for his sword, but Amy grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back. Snarling, he lashed out with the back of his fist, knocking her to the floor and sending a bolt of pain shooting through her cheek. Towering over her, he reached out to grab her when he let out a pain grunt before toppling over with an arrow sticking out of his back.

Looking up, she found Hayate holding a repeating crossbow as he hurried over and helped her to her feet. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Amy swallowed, all too aware of the pounding in her chest and the tremble of her hands, while he retrieved his sword from the downed soldier and put it in its sheath.

“We need to go before someone comes to investigate the noise.” Holding the bow close, Hayate took her hand and led her downstairs.

Hurrying down another well decorated hall while trying to stay ahead of their pursuers, Hayate pulled Amy into a dark room and closed the door moments before a group of soldiers rounded the corner and rushed passed.

“If we can get to the forest, we might stand a chance of getting out of here.” He went over to the window, kneeled, and peered out. “We'll wait here until the sun sets then make a brake for it.”

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“Is that a good idea?”

Hayate shrugged. “Better than making a run for it over open terrain while there’s still a bit left. We’ll just have to hope this place is big enough that it takes them a while to search.”

Amy nodded and crouched next to him, trying to stifle her terror and slow her racing thoughts. They waited in silence for almost twenty minutes before cautiously opening the window and climbing out.

Ducking behind a large hedge to see if it was clear to continue, they crept along the shadows, avoiding any soldiers and the occasional grounds keeper in the direction of the forest. Half way across the lawn, they spotted a pair of soldiers talking on horseback.

“Wait here,” Hayate instructed. He slowly advanced on the soldiers then fired two arrows, killing them both.

“Hey, over there,” someone yelled from the distance.

“Come on.” Hayate mounted one of the horses in a fluid motion and gestured toward the second. “Take the other one.”

“I’m not very good on a horse.” Amy ran over to him.

“Get on.” Hayate extended his hand and helped Amy climb up behind him. An instant later, the horse bolted toward the tree line. Fear rushing through her like the wind in her hair, she wrapped her arms around his waist, praying not to fall, as Hayate navigated through the sea of large trees.

Glancing over her shoulder, Amy managed to spot the outline of their pursuers in the darkness. Turning sharply, the horse galloped along a narrow path, sending a fresh gust of cool air washing over her face. Tightening her grip on Hayate, she shifted to her right to avoid a low branch, wishing she had taken riding lessons with her sister when she had the chance.

“Hold on,” Hayate shouted over his shoulder.

She opened her mouth to say that she didn’t need to be told that when three arrows whizzed past her head. A second later, the horse veered left and plunged into a denser portion of the forest. Amy looked back over her shoulder and noticed that they had gained some distance on the soldiers. Swerving to the right, they rode for another hundred yards before making an abrupt stop.

“Let’s go.” Hayate jumped off then helped Amy down.

“We’re not taking the horse?”

“They’ll track the horse.” Hayate slapped the steed and sent it running deeper into the forest. He threw the bow to the side then grabbed her hand, pulling her behind one of the larger trees. “It’ll be easier to avoid them on foot.”

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“But what about the crossbow?” Amy pointed to the discarded weapon. “Aren’t you going to, you know, shoot them.”

“It won’t do much good now, unless you happen to have extra arrows on you.”

Amy nodded in understanding just as the sound of hooves began to race toward them. Ducking low, they watched as two soldiers darted passed a few seconds ahead of four others. Waiting until it was clear; they emerged from behind the tree and took off on foot.

They ran for almost an hour before stopping in a small clearing. Collapsing beneath a large tree while trying to suck air back into her lungs, Amy glanced up and noticed for the first time the two pale moons that hung overhead as the stars shined brightly against the black backdrop of the night sky.

“Wow, two moon’s,” Amy gasped between breaths, amazed by the beauty of the shining orbs.

“There’s a third,” Hayate replied. “We call it the mystic moon because of its reddish color and that it can only be seen a few nights of the year.”

Amy looked back at the stars—admiring their beauty—and exhaled slowly, realizing just how far from home she really was. Her fear creeping back up, she began to question if she would ever find her way back or if it was even possible. Intellectually, she knew that if there was a way for her to get here, then logically, there must be one back.

Looking back over toward Hayate, she noticed a bruise on his handsome face. “Thanks, for taking me with you.”

“I, I won’t let him use you,” Hayate stammered. He stood in front of Amy and locked his gaze into her eyes.

She looked back into his pale gray eyes, unsure of what he meant. “Why does he want me?”

“There’s a legend,” Hayate peered up at the moons. “A girl not of this realm will traverse the stars and emerge from the casket of the warrior goddess. She will become the Protectorate Goddess, the guardian and protector of Terra and its people.” He looked down at her again. “You told me that you came from a place called London, and you were in Araia’s casket.”

“And you think I’m part of some legend?” Amy stared at him in disbelief. “I’m not a bloody god. I’m just me, a plain human being from London.”

“You came here without passing through the Gateway of the Gods. It’s said that only the gods can do that.”

Jason Argos

“I don’t care about gods, or Gateways, or whatever...” Amy pulled her legs to her chest and leaned back against the tree. “I just want to go home.”

“Whatever your destiny is I’ll help you.” Hayate knelt down in front of her. “I swear, I will protect and aid you. Whether you ascend to the heavens or return to your home, I will stay by your side.” He smiled warmly at her. Amy returned his smile, but turned away when she felt her face redden. He rose to his feet and offered his hand to help her up. “We should get moving. If we head north, we should come across one of the half dozen towns that are just outside the forest.”

“Okay.” Amy took his hand. She smiled at the warmth of his touch then rose to her feet. She couldn’t explain why, but she felt herself relax a little. However, she couldn’t shake the slight feeling of dread that crept up as she thought about what Borga had said. There was something disturbing about how he had laughed. Something familiar.

Song of the Goddess