THE ETERNAL ONES

SHE HOLDS THE POWER TO DEFEAT THE GODS.

BUT CAN SHE BECOME ONE?

Deka is a goddess-in-waiting with the potential to save her people from the brutal ancient goddesses who terrorize her kingdom of Otera. But first she must find the source of her divine power – and if the Gilded Ones find it before she does, they will drain her power and tear Otera apart.

Alongside her army of friends, Deka faces the hardest battle of her life – not just with the goddesses but with her own doubts. What if becoming a goddess makes her as evil as the Gilded Ones? And is she ready to leave her earthly life and loves behind?

"Namina Forna could be the Toni Morrison of YA Fantasy."
Refinery 29

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For Suma, Sinka, Satu, and Baby Shekou.
I write so the world is a better place for you.

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THE ETERNAL ONES

NAMINA FORNA

THE ETERNAL ONES *includes scenes of violence, including some graphic violence, which some readers may find distressing.*

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Golma
Harukana
Sembugard
Northern Provinces
Nagrabal
Eastern Provinces
Gar Melanis
Zhang-Do
Ebungard
Irfut
Xibal
Hemaira
Gar Suma
Gar Nasim
Gar Sinkarie
Southern Provinces
Western Provinces
Gar Shekou
Hualpa
Gar Satu
N
W
E
S
N'Oyo Mountains
Gar Monyanï
Nibari Desert
Gar Fatu
Unknown Lands
OTERA

THE STORY SO FAR....

(AS TOLD IN THE GILDED ONES AND THE MERCILESS ONES)

In the land of Otera, the Infinite Wisdoms – a series of holy books – control every aspect of life. Especially for naive Deka, a devout sixteen-year-old from a small Northern village. When Deka bleeds gold during the rite of passage known as the Ritual of Purity, she's told she's an alaki – a rare and monstrous descendant of the Gilded Ones, four female demons who once ravaged the empire. To atone for the sins of her blood, Deka must die. But each alaki has only one true death. And Deka's seems particularly elusive.

After nine unsuccessful attempts on her life, a mysterious woman known only as White Hands arrives with a reprieve: if Deka enrolls at the Warthu Bera, a school training warriors to kill deathshrieks – the mysterious and deadly creatures currently wreaking havoc across Otera – she will be pardoned. Deka chooses to go and, on the journey to the Warthu Bera, meets Britta, a cheerful, super-strong alaki who quickly becomes her best friend, as well as Ixa, a strange, shapeshifting creature that sometimes resembles a cat. She is also paired with Keita, a stern, golden-eyed jatu – an emperor's guard in training. Further friendships include traumatized and rebellious Belcalis, sweet and nervous Katya, and the twins, Adwapa and Asha, whose jokey exteriors hide unexpected depths.

Together, Deka's friends and their jatu partners battle the deathshrieks gathering near the capital, protecting the surrounding villages. But as they do so, Deka makes a startling discovery – deathshrieks are, in fact, resurrected alaki and not the mindless, soulless monsters she had been told they were. Furthermore, their mothers, the Gilded Ones, were not demons but ancient goddesses. When Otera's previous emperors, who wanted only men to rule the empire, imprisoned them in their own temple, the Gilded Ones cursed their alaki daughters to resurrect after their final deaths. This entire time, they've been building an army – preparing for the time that their one full-blooded daughter could rescue them.

That daughter is Deka.

Following this revelation, Deka fights to free the Gilded Ones, before carrying out a military campaign to extricate the land of Otera from the grasp of the emperor and his men. But all is not what it seems, because the Gilded Ones are not the only gods in Otera. There is another group – the Idugu – and they're all male. Even worse, they and the Gilded Ones are connected – the very same entities, in fact. Once, there were only four of them, four genderless and infinite gods. But they had trouble communicating with their human charges, so they split themselves into the male Idugu and the female Gilded Ones. This separation, however, corrupted their power and they began to need food. Sacrifices. Both pantheons of gods now feed on not only humans, but their children, the alaki and the jatu.

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Worse, they've been feeding on Deka…

For Deka isn't the daughter of the Gilded Ones like she's been told. She is the fifth god of Otera. Fallen to the empire for a single purpose – to kill the corrupted gods and prevent them from plunging the world into further chaos. But the Gilded Ones manipulated her and have been siphoning her power away using an arcane object disguised as a necklace.

In order to regain her divinity and destroy the gods, Deka must find her human mother, the only person who knows where her true power is hidden. And she must do so swiftly. The gods' unending quest for power has forced Otera to the brink. And if Deka doesn't destroy them all, the entire empire will perish.

And her with it.

ONE

The end of the world begins not with a scream but with a mist, spreading sinister tendrils on a dark, moonlit night.

Deep as I am inside Ixa's mind, I don't even notice. There's just too much to experience. I may be able to see only the faintest shades of colour through my blue-scaled, feline-like companion's eyes, but even then, everything I glimpse is breathtaking. Groves of soaring silver trees sprout from pink stone hills. Scrubby purple grasses cling to their roots, tiny iridescent lizards darting across them. Glass flitters. They, like the silver trees and the purple grass, are native only to Gar Nasim, the haunting, remote island that is my current location.

Finally, after three months of running and hiding, pursuers constantly at our backs, I'm here on the island that Anok, the only goddess who's still our ally, told us to seek. The island where, she told me, I would find my way to Mother and, through her, how to unlock my full power so I can defeat the gods.

Except there's no sign of Mother. Not even the faintest trace.

I sniff at a nearby tree, Ixa's nose flaring with irritation when

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it immediately puffs a noxious odour in our direction. Most trees and plants have defences invisible to the naked eye – after spending most of the last few weeks inside Ixa's mind, using his body like an extension of my own, I understand that now. And these silver trees, in particular, are quick to express their displeasure.

The tree sends another puff of odour our way, and Ixa wrinkles our nose, the motion sending a tickling sensation down the rest of our body. *Stinky,* he says.

He's in here too, the shadow just behind my consciousness. I don't know how it works precisely, the way we share one body, one mind. Only that it does. And that while I'm here, I don't have to be in my own body. In the wounded, golden ruin that's all that's left of me after my confrontation with the Gilded Ones, the false goddesses I once thought were my mothers, all those weeks ago.

Britta calls it possession, what I do to Ixa. She says it's as if I'm one of the demons written about in the Infinite Wisdoms, the false holy scrolls whose corrupt teachings I used to follow to the letter. But she doesn't understand. Ixa likes me here, welcomes me into his body. And I, for one, am grateful.

Whenever I'm in Ixa's body, I'm free. Free of pain. Free of the torment that plagues my every waking moment.

For the few moments or hours that I'm here, I can just be.

I lope to the next tree, nostrils already expanding to catch the scents in the air. Have to keep moving, have to keep going. This is the steepest hill in Gar Nasim, the site of the Old City. Around us rise the ruins of the long-abandoned city of rose-hued stone, whose fallen buildings and the golden skeletons

peeking underneath them tell a damning history. Of jatu, brothers to the immortal, gold-blooded alaki, slaughtering their sisters by the thousands in the very same city they once ruled. Of generations of deathshrieks, the monstrous-seeming creatures that are the resurrected forms of alaki, shrieking their songs of mourning to the wind.

No human would ever set foot here. No human would even dare.

Nonetheless, Mother must be hiding somewhere close. Perhaps not in these ruins, precisely, but somewhere on this island. Shadows, the one-time spies of the former emperor, Gezo, hide in abandoned places when they want to evade detection. That's what White Hands, my former mentor and now firmest ally, taught me.

I just have to keep—

"Deka?"

Heat sears my skin and I gasp back into my own body.

Now, Britta is crouched at eye level with me, her burly form blocking the door of the tiny house where my own body has been hidden all day, her offending hand still on my shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" I hiss, jerking away, but that just sends my back slamming against the wall. The gold-crusted sores on my back tear open and pain explodes across my senses. I have to grit my teeth to keep from screaming.

I should be used to this by now.

In the months since my confrontation with the goddesses, when the sores first erupted across my skin, more and more of them have spread. They do so every time I use any of my abilities or move too vigorously, a constant reminder that my time is

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limited. As White Hands has made clear to me, every moment that I don't reconnect with my kelai, which is the ancient name of the substance that gives gods their divinity, I'm closer to scattering into a thousand pieces, my body and consciousness lost for ever to the universe. And once I'm gone, there'll be no one to stop the Gilded Ones or the Idugu, their male counterparts, from bleeding Otera dry in their ravenous competition for power.

When blood begins seeping down my spine along familiar trails, Britta scuttles back, blue eyes wide with horror. "Sorry, Deka!" she says. "I didn't mean to touch you. I swear I didn't."

"Of course you didn't." I can't help the bitterness that creeps into my voice.

I was away. For almost a day – one glorious, blissful day, I was away from this body. From this pain. I was free.

And now I'm back here, with Britta, who's standing there guiltily in her whole, unbroken body. Her body that heals within moments of any injury. Her body that's free of sores and wounds and scars.

Free of pain.

The anger inside me rumbles louder. I hurriedly stuff it back down. It's always there now – the anger as well as the pain. Monstrous twin serpents, slithering in the back of my mind. My new constant companions.

Even Ixa has never been so faithful.

Almost as if I summoned him, my shapeshifting companion rushes into the crumbling square surrounding the house. He always hurries back to my physical body the moment I leave his mind. He's terrified of leaving me defenceless. *Ixa here,*

Ixa coming, he says, chest heaving, liquid black eyes wide with concern, as he threads over the broken stones and fallen statues.

I place my hand on his scaly brow, letting out a ragged sigh when I feel soothing relief flowing over me. Finally, I can breathe again.

I don't know why, but Ixa's presence is the only thing that ever makes the pain fade. When I touch him, it's as if I'm removed from my own body, even though I feel it there, dimly obeying my commands. The only thing better is when I'm in his mind, away from myself entirely. Only then am I completely free of pain, of the anger and accompanying emptiness that threatens to consume me.

I breathe again before looking down at him. *My thanks,* I say silently into his mind.

Deka welcome, Ixa replies, padding closer as I turn back to Britta.

I release another breath before I address her again. "What do you want? I was busy."

Hurt creeps into Britta's eyes, but she does her best to hide it as she announces, "White Hands has finally contacted us. She says we should search for any signals yer mother left us."

"And what do you think Ixa and I have been doing all day, running up and down the island?"

"Ye don't have to be rude, Deka." Disappointment, another expression I've seen often on Britta's face over the past few months, swiftly overtakes her hurt.

Guilt swiftly rises in me at the sight.

Hard to imagine, but once upon a time, she was always smiling, always pleasant. If anyone could see the more

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favourable side of a situation, it was Britta. But now, her forehead is always furrowed and her blonde hair hangs lankly around her face. It's as if the strain of running has sucked all the joy from her.

Or perhaps it's me and my anger, my continuous lashing out.

I force myself to unclench my tensed muscles. "I'm not being rude. I'm merely stating facts."

"Then here's another one for ye: White Hands wants to guide us, help us be more effective."

"If she wanted us to be effective, she'd be here in person instead of merely projecting herself," I scoff. "They all would."

Half our group left with White Hands about two months ago to travel to the Southern provinces in search of more allies for our cause. The twins Adwapa and Asha; Kweku, Adwapa's once slightly plump Southern uruni; Acalan, Belcalis's haughty and formerly pious uruni; our red-spiked deathshriek sister, Katya, and her betrothed, Rian; and even a few of the other deathshrieks still loyal to us went. Now that all of Otera's deities – both the Gilded Ones and the Idugu – have shown their true faces, the One Kingdom is in chaos, one section of the population intent on sacrificing as many people as they can to appease the gods' hunger, the other trying their best to just survive these treacherous times.

Which is why White Hands is building an army.

While I'm here searching for Mother, the key to finding my kelai, my former mentor is halfway across the world gathering survivors. Gathering soldiers. If she can assemble enough forces, she can stop the gods, imprison them again before they

consume enough sacrifices to regain their power. We can take back Otera without me needing my kelai.

And given my current state, White Hands needs to do it as quickly as possible.

Something is building in the One Kingdom, something devastating. I can feel it in the air – a sense of foreboding – and I know I'm not the only one.

A tingle shoots down my spine. I turn to watch as White Hands coalesces in the square, her small, dark body a shimmering spectral image amid the half-broken statues that ring the centre. She's using her gauntlets, the bone-white armoured gloves that are the origin of her name, to project herself here.

The sight of her irritates me further. "Why even bother using the gauntlets when she can't do anything from wherever she is," I mutter sulkily. Just because I know the reason White Hands isn't here doesn't mean I have to be happy with it.

Then again, I'm rarely happy about anything these days.

"All right, stop." Britta's tone is stern now, and when I look up, her expression is laden with disapproval. "That's enough self-pity, Deka."

"I'm not—"

"Yer in pain, I know this. We all know this," she snaps. "But that doesn't mean ye get to turn into a surly bear every time someone so much as looks at ye. We're here. All of us – even Keita, who ye can barely speak to."

She nods pointedly, and when I turn, my sweetheart's watching me from a nearby rooftop, that fire, as always, burning in his golden eyes. The moment he sees me looking, however,

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he turns away, a long, lean shadow in the darkness. He descends to the rest of the group, who are now swiftly making their way towards White Hands.

Britta's not the only person I've been growly at these past few weeks.

"We're all here with ye, even if ye'd much rather snarl at us than just talk."

I sputter, "I don't—"

"No, Deka, ye let me finish." Britta steps closer, mouth set in a grim, determined line. "I know what is at stake here – we all do. More to the point, I know that yer not really angry."

I look up at her, startled, and her expression gentles. She heaves a deep sigh. "Yer sad, Deka. Yer stallin'."

I huff out a laugh. "Why? Why would I do that?"

"Because once we find yer mother, we find the way to yer kelai, an' once we do that, ye become a god. Ye leave us."

And there it is, the fear that's been haunting me all this while: Once I'm a god, I'll lose all my friends, the family I've painstakingly created over the past two years.

I'll be whole and free of pain, but I'll be alone again.

Suddenly, I can't think; I can't breathe. I have to clasp my hands to still their nervous trembling. "How did you—"

"I'm yer dearest friend, Deka. I know ye. We all do." She nudges her chin towards my friends, who are all waiting with the projected spectre that is White Hands, the moon gleaming high above them.

Britta continues: "I know yer frightened, Deka, but we all are. Otera is fallin' to chaos around us – plagues, deluges, monstrosities at every turn. But that's why we have to keep

movin'. Because if we, the strongest an' the fastest, are terrified, imagine wha it's like for the rest of Otera. Imagine wha it's like for the children, the girls.

"We have to keep goin', Deka, no matter the cost."

"But it's always *my* cost." The bitter words spill out of me before I can stop them. "Always, always. It's always me making sacrifices. Even now." I glare down at my wounded hands, at the golden sores criss-crossing them like lightning bolts.

"An' wha about me?" When I glance up again, hurt is shining in Britta's eyes. "Don't ye think I suffer?"

"How?" I scoff. "You're not the one in pain. You're healthy. You're still—"

"Whole?" Britta steps closer, eyes wide with pain. "How can I be whole when every step ye take makes ye flinch? When every movement makes ye gasp in agony? Do ye think I am without conscience, Deka? Do ye think I am without empathy?

"I can scarcely breathe, watching ye. All the time, I can't breathe. Ye may be the one in agony, but I am the one who watches. Have ye ever considered that – wha it feels like to be the one who can't do anythin' but watch an' hold their breath? Hope that they're there in case ye— In case ye—"

Britta stops there, unable to speak further. Her breathing is heavy now, ragged with the weight of all the things she's too devastated to say.

"My apologies," I whisper. "I didn't know."

"Of course ye didn't know. Because instead of leanin' on us, ye've turned away, become this rageful…shell."

"Because I *hurt*, Britta." The words rip out of me, a deep and painful admission. "I hurt all the time. Every single moment of

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every single day, and I don't know what to do. When I was in the cellar back in Irfut, there were moments of oblivion, at least, but this – it's unending. It's like my body is a prison, and I can't break free no matter how hard I try."

By now, Britta's eyes are welling up, and she looks horrified. "I'm so sorry, Deka. I wish I could share yer pain. I wish I could take it into myself, or better yet, heal it. But I can't. All I can do is support ye. An' push ye, because…yer deterioratin'…fast. So we have to keep pushing forward. And swiftly."

Her words are like a tremendous weight pressing down on my chest, sucking all the air out of my lungs. It's almost unbearable, their heaviness. I have no choice but to do the only thing I can to break the tension: push out my bottom lip and pout in an admirable imitation of a six-year-old about to dissolve into a tantrum. "But I don't want to," I whine.

"An' yet, ye have to." A twinkle, the first I've seen in weeks, lights Britta's eyes. She moves even closer to me – near enough to touch, but not so near that her skin accidentally brushes mine.

It's the closest we've come to embracing in nearly a month. The closest I've gotten to touching anyone that's not Ixa.

"Come along, ye," Britta sniffs. "We have a kelai to find."

"And a mother to reunite with." I glance at her, uncertain. "Think she'll be surprised by how I look?"

I'm still as lean and muscled as I've been the past few years, but now golden sores carve across my skin like lightning bolts.

Between them and the glowing reeds I've taken to braiding into my curly black hair, I look very different from the quiet, timid girl Mother left in Irfut.

"Well?" I prompt Britta when she doesn't reply.

"More like horrified." When I give an outraged gasp, Britta snorts. "Have ye taken a look in the river lately? Ye look like one of those broken potteries they piece back together with gold."

"I always thought those were beautiful."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, an' from where I'm beholdin'…" Britta makes a rude snorting sound.

My reply is an outraged huff. "You're supposed to be my friend."

"Friends are supposed to be truthful." Then she smiles. "An' truth is, yer actually prettier than ever…in a tragic, wounded sort of way. No wonder Keita's been moonin' all these days."

When I glance again at my uruni, he's reached the others, but his eyes are still burning longingly across the distance. It's all I can do not to shiver. Keita's hands may no longer be able to reach me, but his gaze very much does.

Britta humphs when she sees it. "Must want to take care of ye an' such," she mutters under her breath. "Boys tend to get like that, ye know."

"Do they now?" I ask wryly.

Britta only humphs once more.

Perhaps it's the joy of bantering with her again. Or perhaps it's that all the constant pain has dulled my senses. Either way, I don't notice the strange heat stealing across the clearing. Don't notice the unnerving stillness in the air.

Until I do. By then, it's already too late.

Not just for me but for everyone.

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