

# AVATAR

**Lois Tilton**

The king of Rhylios stood at the altar to invoke the aid of War. He was arrayed in bronze corselet and greaves, but helmetless, a wreath of bay leaves around his forehead.

Smoke rose from the altar. The sacrifice was a black horse, a flawless young stallion. It is rare in these times to lay a maiden on the altar or a captive taken in battle, yet these also are proper sacrifice to War, whether worshipped as Ares or by some other name.

But now Rhylios summoned its wargods, and we answered: I, dread Enyo the sacker of cities, and my brother-consort, warlike Enyalios. Our panoply was gold—gold corselet and greaves, gleaming helmets with tall black crests—as it had been two generations past, when the Achaians brought war to the walls of Troy.

The knife fell from the king's hand as he covered his eyes, dazzled by the godlight. The palace courtyard fell silent, except for the hissing of flames on the altar.

Then our voices rang out like war trumpets, echoing off the stones: "Take up your spears, Rhylians! Harness your chariots! The enemy's ships are in sight. Meet them on the beaches and spill their blood onto the sand! Make their shades in Hades' realm curse the day they sailed to Rhylios!"

The Rhylian warriors heard the voice of War and responded with their battlecries, striking their shields with spearshafts.

I glanced at the altar where the king, Alektryon, stood with his captains, his face flushed with battle fever. He was young, I noticed—his beard was still soft.

Then he stepped up into his waiting chariot and raised his hands for silence. "The wargods are with us!" he shouted. "Victory to Rhylios!"

"Victory!" the warriors echoed, as the king took up his bronze helmet, red crest nodding, and lowered it onto his head. Battle fever was heating their blood, driving out the doubts and fears of mortals about to come face to face with death.

Then the trumpets sounded, and the captains ordered the warriors to form up in battle order. There was the clatter of hooves and wheels on the flagstones as chariot drivers whipped their teams forward into position. Bronze-armored heroes settled their shields into place, gripped their weapons. The foot soldiers swung their spearshafts up to their shoulders, bronze blades in ranks like a bright palisade.

The city gates swung open, and the Rhylians rode out to the sound of trumpets, foot soldiers marching behind the chariots. It was a stirring sight. Women and children stood in the streets and on the walls, cheering their heroes as they went to meet the invading enemy.

I glanced back toward the whitewashed city, grapevines shading the courtyards of its houses. Ahead, in the dark green water of the harbor, merchant ships were lying, wide-beamed vessels incapable of engaging the enemy's lean warships. War had been long absent from Rhylios. Did these merchants remember that, generations past, their ancestors had breached other walls on this site and conquered the people who had built them? Did they remember the sacrifices they had made then, to War and Strife, sackers of cities? Now the walls were their own.

I spoke to Enyalios, who drove his gold chariot alongside my own. "This time they defend."

"Their weapons are still sharp," he replied. "Their captains seem to know what they're doing. And it always helps to stiffen a warrior's backbone when he's fighting to save his own home."

He was my brother, my consort, my other self. Wargod and goddess, we were two, as War was invoked at the sacrificial altars of Rhylios.

"And the walls are strong," I agreed. "But far better to stop them here on the beach, to drive them back to their ships. Look!" I cried, pointing toward the horizon.

Battle-eager, we fixed our eyes on the ocean. The serpent-prowed ships of the enemy were visible in the distance, oars churning the white foam. They were lean, fast, sea-raiders' ships, carrying war to the shores of Rhylios. And their god was leading them.

This god was a serpent, its three heads on long-coiled necks, blue-scaled, poison-fanged, hissing. I could see the red godlight flash from one of its eyes, promising bloodshed and cruel death. It was War in a form I had never yet seen, dire and monstrous. I shuddered to face such a thing, and around me I could feel courage leach from the Rhylian warriors as they watched their enemies approach.

I recovered myself and shook off the pall of dread. There was need to strike, now. I lifted up my bow, ivory and horn, banded in gold, beyond the strength of mortals to bend. To the bowstring I fitted a gold-tipped arrow and drew it back. High over the ocean the arrow flew, glinting in the sun, straight at the sea dragon. It struck the monster in one of its sinuous necks, penetrating its blue-scaled armor.

The serpent-god's hiss of pain ripped through the air. My cry of triumph was like a trumpet peal, and I could feel the sinking courage of the Rhylians revive, just as the invaders on their rowing benches faltered.

"Well shot!" my consort exclaimed.

But the serpent twisted another of its heads to seize the arrow in its teeth and draw it out. Its tail lashed the water in defiance, and the rowers took up their tireless stroke once again.

There were fifteen ships, with thirty fighters to a ship, against three hundred Rhylian warriors. But the invaders would be spent from their work at the oars while the defenders had the advantages of home ground and their chariots. I glanced at the Rhylian host for a sight of the king and frowned—why was his chariot back toward

the rear? Was not the king's place at the head of his host? But then Enyalios bent over his chariot rim, pitching his voice for my ears alone. "Their weapons are iron."

Bronze blades and bronze armor would now be matched against iron. This new factor entering into war could weight the odds against the Rhylians. But, then, they would have all the more need for battle courage. Enyalios raised his gold-bladed spear, and we urged our horses forward toward the enemy, the cheers of our warriors following us.

And not only cheers. As the serpent-ships came within the range of mortal bowmen, the Rhylian captains ordered their archers forward. Bows of wood and horn were drawn back, and arrows flew toward the oncoming ships. The oarsmen had the protection of the wooden planking, but here and there a cry of pain told of an arrow finding its mark, and a few men tumbled from their benches.

"See how they fall!" Enyalios shouted aloud in encouragement. "Half of them don't even have armor!"

The armor they did have was various—whatever they had looted from the bodies of their victims, leather helmets nodding in unison with battered, tarnished bronze. The invaders were swarthy men, muscled from life at the oars, a life of hardship and piracy. Despite the Rhylian arrows, they came on, their oarstrokes barely checked.

Then the first serpent-prow was cutting through the surf, and oars were rising up, and men were vaulting over the sides to bring it onto the beach. But the Rhylians were ready for them. Shouting their battlecries, they charged in a mass to meet the invaders.

I urged them on, reveling in the clash of arms. Godlight flashed from my armor as I quickened their souls with courage. The fighting was hand to hand, with confusion greater every moment as more ships pulled onto the beach and engaged the defenders.

Spears thrust down from chariots, javelins and arrows flew through the air, swords slashed out. Bronze spearpoints were thrust through leather and flesh, iron swords penetrated bronze armor. Already there were bodies rolling lifeless in the surf, their blood staining the foam.

But even as the Rhylians fought, they were learning that this was a kind of warfare new to them. It was not only the iron blades of the invaders that made the difference. This enemy cared nothing for the formal combat of heroes, as Ajax had fought Hector beneath the walls of Troy. There would be no battle trophies won on this beach, no quarter given, no ransomed prisoners, no truce to tend the wounded and bring the bodies of the dead to honor. Only butchery and slaughter and death.

We could feel Rhylian courage begin to erode as the serpent-god fed the bloodlust of the invading enemy. Enyalios raised his spear, its golden blade glowing with godlight. Straight at the god-monster his chariot charged, at fifty feet of writhing, scaled frenzy. Its three heads darted back and forth, its tail lashed, spraying sand. His arm drew back as he thundered past, then thrust the spear, piercing one of the serpent's heads through the throat, transfixing its jaw. The hiss of rage and pain

made both sides start with horror for an instant, until the Rhylians, heartened, pressed their advantage.

The serpent seized the spearshaft with one of its other heads, clamped its jaws down until the wood splintered and broke in half, leaving the spearhead still embedded.

By then Enyalios had wheeled his chariot around and taken up another spear. He charged once more, but this time the dragon twisted aside and the spearthrust slid harmlessly along its armored scales. And as the horses charged past, it struck, venomous fangs clashing against my consort's golden breastplate. He staggered, and then the serpent-god's coils were around him, dragging him out of the chariot.

I felt the shock like the Sundering blow of an axe as the coils crushed his armor, broke his back, as the deadly fangs sank into his throat and life drained from my other self. My knees went weak, and I sagged for an instant against my chariot rim. Eyes glowing red with triumph, the serpent-god reared high, to show the Rhylians the lifeless body of their wargod clenched in its jaws.

Panic seized them, and his brother, Rout, the sons of War. Everywhere on the beach Rhylians were throwing down their weapons and fleeing from the battlefield, the triumphant enemy at their backs, cutting them down as they ran to escape the slaughter.

*No!* Shouting to my horses, I charged toward the god-monster, drawing back my bow. The gold-tipped arrow flew, straight for the serpent-god's blue scaled throat. And I watched, in utter dismay, as it shattered harmlessly against the armored scales.

The battle was lost. The demoralized Rhylians fled toward the safety of their walls. I could see the chariot of the king being led from the battlefield by his captain, Eteokles.

But there were others whose courage had not deserted them, still fighting a rear-guard action. That was my place, to hearten them as well as I still could with my diminished power while they held off the enemy until the rest could make it through the gates. Only when the last warrior had joined the retreat did I abandon the battlefield, taking a last, despairing look back at the shredded remains of my brother-consort, still transfixed by the serpent-god's fangs.

Bodies littered the beach behind us, and reddened sand.

Inside the citadel, with the gates shut behind the last of the returning chariots, panic filled the streets with demoralized and wounded soldiers, newly-made widows and orphans, despairing cries. The captains fought for order, ordered men to the walls, to defensive posts. I strove to encourage the defenders, for the city had not fallen, its walls were still intact. But the Rhylians had seen Enyalios fall to the serpent, and the radiance of my godlight was dimmed, so they no longer had to shield their eyes.

The barbarian invaders had encamped outside the walls, beyond bowshot range. Dusk was already gathering, and it appeared that they were going to put off their assault on the gates until the next day. And the reason soon became clear to the

defenders gathered on the walls.

Toward the campfires there were figures being dragged, wounded Rhylian soldiers taken from the battlefield. The pirates laid them on a makeshift altar, and the serpent-god began to feed upon their living bodies.

Do mortals think the gods cannot shed tears? Even War, whose way is death and defeat as much as victory, wept that night. Those same fangs had torn the body of my brother-self. And, strengthened by bloody sacrifice, the serpent would seek my defeat once more the next day.

As it fed, the ceaseless cries of anguish corroded the spirit of the Rhylians, their will to resist. Sundered from my consort, my power to aid them was diminished. Though they had called me the sacker of cities, now I must see the Rhylian walls breached, the people slaughtered.

I despised my own weakness as a Rhylian warrior went to his knees in front of me, despair choking his voice. "Goddess, Lady Enyo!" he cried, "Help us!"

I envied mankind at that moment, that they have gods to pray to. I prayed, also, to the depths of my own immortal strength.

And found, possibly, an answer. I felt the faint glow of godlight once again as I ran to climb down from the wall, to the king's palace. He was still in his armor, standing beside his captains as they planned the city's defense.

Their heads turned in surprise to see me there, but I ignored them, went directly to the king beside them, Alektryon, and stared into his eyes. Yes! What I sought was there.

Then, "You must attack," I urged the warriors. "It's the only way, the thing they will never expect. They think they have us beaten already. But we'll show them how wrong they are! Attack, and War will be with you."

The captain Eteokles stared, wondering, but I had no time for him. I pulled Alektryon away, toward a private room of the palace, and ordered the servants, "Get out of here, find a weapon and get ready to fight for your lives, if you think you deserve them!" They fled when they saw the flash of my eyes.

Then I turned to Alektryon, who was speechless in his confusion.

"Come," I told him, "it is time for the king of Rhylios to become the consort of War."

He went white with shock, gasping out a protest.

I ignored it. "The soldiers saw Enyalios die. It took the heart from them, the will to fight. And it diminished my own power. The two of us are one. I *must* have another consort."

This was not absolutely so, what I told Alektryon. In other places, to other peoples, I am War in my own right. But in this place, in Rhylios, War was two, the brother-sister consorts Enyo and Enyalios, wargod and goddess. There must be two once again.

"The Enyalios you saw die was only an incarnation," I explained. "War itself—all the gods—are immortal. War can be incarnate here again... in you."

"I?" he choked.

"You are the King, the god-descended, aren't you? Whom offers up the sacrifices for your city? Who else could your people accept?"

He still held back, and I frowned impatiently, but then caught sight of my reflection in his polished bronze corselet.

My face was War's. Eyes like lightning flashed from behind my helmet, its fierce black crest tossing. And Alektryon—from his face it was as if he had just been told he was to couple with a gorgon.

I pulled the helm off, shook out my hair, dimmed the flashing of my eyes. Then I recalled the king's chariot being led away from the battle, the way the captains made their plans without consulting their lord. I reached out a hand to touch the softness of his young beard and asked, "You are a man, are you not, King of Rhylios?"

His young pride was touched then, and he lifted up his eyes directly to meet mine. "Man enough to be father of a son."

"Here, then," I said, "help me with this," as I started to unbuckle the rest of my armor. I felt strange without the weight of it, my godlight extinguished. And as I held out my leg so he could unfasten the buckle of my greaves, I was not totally unmindful that the gesture exposed the long white length of my thigh.

Aphrodite, too, was the consort of War, of Ares, the mother of his dread sons. That, too, had I been, as War was worshipped in the city of Menelaos. Other incarnations, other names, were all growing dim. I was not eternal War now, standing before Alektryon, wearing nothing but a linen chiton.

Only this place, this time existed, as I reached for the buckles of his own armor. I was flesh, as I must be, to couple with a mortal.

He hesitated still, as I pulled him down to me. "How... what will happen?" His voice was shaking. He feared to lose his whole self to the god.

"When the time comes, the power of War will overcome you. The godlight will be in your eyes, and your people will recognize it. The things you do then, you may not remember clearly. It will seem like a dream, afterwards, when you return to yourself."

Then I added, summoning all of the Aphrodite that was in me, "Can it be so unpleasant, to couple with a goddess?"

And it must have been sufficient.

It was not as it had been with Enyalios, with rapacious War. I could remember, but only dimly, the violence of those couplings.

"Lady," Alektryon murmured; and, as his flesh responded to mine, we could feel the power of War move within us, and we were one, again.

"You know," he said when the godlight had dimmed, "I never loved war before.

My captains claimed I was too young to command, too inexperienced. And today they held me back from the fighting. My first battle. I don't know..."

"When the time comes," I assured him, "you will know that you are War."

"I don't feel like a god," he said, smiling at me shyly.

I laughed with him. "I feel now as if I had never been a goddess before. Truly. Each incarnation is a renewal. I am War, yes, but this time a part of me is yours." And I knew then that I was no longer the city-sacker in this incarnation.

We dressed, and I armed myself. "You will have other armor," I told Alektryon. My consort.

The Rhylian captains, when we found them again, looked drained by fatigue. But they stood when they saw us re-enter the room, and bowed, sensing that something had changed, the rebirth of our power.

"You are ready to attack?" I asked.

Eteokles nodded wearily. "Just before dawn. We've sent scouts out over the walls. The pirates are still... celebrating—the ones who are awake and conscious. They have only a few sentries. When it's time, our scouts will cut their throats.

"Our chariots will leave from the far gates. We ought to be in position before dawn to attack from the rear. When they're engaged, our foot soldiers will sortie from the main gate and trap them between us. If you approve, of course, Lady," he added.

Tactics and strategy we leave to mortals. But I turned to Alektryon. "My consort and I will lead the sortie."

The captains glanced at each other, at Alektryon, and saw the godlight in the eyes of their king. They bowed.

There was much to do before dawn. We went through the city, showing ourselves to the people, encouraging their will to resist. Now we turned the serpent-god's work against him. There could be no safety, we told the Rhylians, no hope except in the destruction of the enemy. No one would be spared, not the children, the women, or the old. The city would be looted and burned over the bodies of its citizens.

And they responded. The report spread out ahead of us, from street to street: *The gods are with us once more.*

Fishermen, slaves, maidens, merchants—they all found some kind of weapon and headed toward the walls. Children gathered, ready to fetch and carry. Old men brought out half-corroded armor and forgotten spears. The women assembled on the ramparts, armed with stones and jars of oil to set alight and hurl onto the assailants. It was better to die resisting them than to fall into their hands.

I remembered the warlike tribe I had led against these walls so many generations past. War was no longer the same for them, as I was not the city-sacker.

Finally we came to the rear gate, where the chariots were assembled. Scouts had already slipped over the walls to eliminate the pirate sentries. Here the warriors stood

in silent, grim purpose, honing the bright edges of their weapons while the chariot drivers wrapped the bronze-rimmed wheels to silence them.

Here were men who knew already what they had to face, who burned to avenge the shame of their defeat the day before. There would be no retreat this time. They would die, if they must, even as their wargod had died.

But he was now alive again. We could see the godlight reflected back from their eyes, along with hope. It flowed into their hearts like a surging tide. War was with them again!

"They think they have you already beaten," we told them. "They think your spirit was destroyed. But War is alive! And this time, War is Rhylios! Their numbers, their iron blades—none of it will save them. Not if you have the spirit to press the attack. Strike them down, Rhylians! No quarter, no mercy—slay them in their sleep, if you can, trample them under the hooves of your horses! And if you grow tired, if your own blood runs down your arms, then remember—if they defeat you, all Rhylios will be an immolation on the altar of their bloodglutted serpent-god!"

Eteokles took off his bronze helmet and bowed his head. "Lady Enyo... and my Lord, if you bring us this victory, I promise you such sacrifices as heaven will remember for all time to come."

Then, slowly and in silence under the cover of darkness, Eteokles led the first of the Rhylian chariots through the gates. Alektryon yearned to be among them, to be driving at the head of those brave warriors as they charged into the enemy's camp. But they were all seasoned combatants, used to the ways of battle, and they had need of no more courage than already beat within their hearts. Eteokles their captain could lead them well enough.

Our place now was elsewhere, at the main gate. There, behind the foot soldiers, armed with whatever came to hand, were the mass of the Rhylian citizens, waiting for their gods and their king to lead them.

Now I brought up the black horses that draw the golden chariots of War. And there, gleaming in readiness, was the panoply of the wargod. I helped Alektryon to arm himself, and as he did the godlight blazed forth in its full splendor. The Rhylians raised their hands to shade their eyes as we drove through their ranks.

Then, as Dawn began to stir in the east, we could hear the first clashes of combat from the enemy camp, the Rhylian warcries as they drove down upon the serpent-god's worshipers.

But the pirates were men who had grown hard through the years of reaving, who could sleep in their armor with weapons at hand and be on their feet fighting within an instant of the alarm sounding. And they knew they had no walls to shelter behind. Howling their own battlecries, the enemy seized their iron blades and fought back with the wild ferocity of a cornered boar. Horses screamed as iron found their legs and bellies, chariots spun out of control. In a few moments, the superior numbers of the invaders began to blunt the thrust of the attack.

"Now!" cried Alektryon, and the gates of Rhylios swung open. The chariots of



War glowed brighter than the newborn day upon the battlefield. The serpent hissed with rage and dismay as we charged toward it, the spearpoint of Alektryon a beacon for all to see. This time I could feel the power in my arrow as I let it fly. And behind us came the Rhylians, pouring out of the city gates in the wake of War.

As Alektryon's spear drank the serpent's dark lifeblood, the invaders quailed before the fury of the Rhylian people. They fled before us, and the chariots pursued. So few of them survived to fight their way back to the beach that only a single serpent-ship escaped. The others were all burned on the altar of sacrifice, piled full with offerings to War.

Alektryon performed the rites, his golden armor gleaming even without the godlight. He was War no longer, but now he was truly king, and the Rhylians called him Enyalios, the warlike.

Yet there was one more outcome of that incarnation, when for one night he was my consort. I will be sending her to her father one day soon, arrayed in her gleaming bronze armor, and her name is Soteira, the city-savior.