

THE
SOLDIERS
OF
ARIES

BOOK I FROM THE NEW WORLD ODYSSEY SERIES



GIORGIO GROOM

New World Odyssey

BOOK - I

The Soldiers of Ares

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PROLOGUE:

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS CHAOS...

A long time ago the entire world was under the rule of the just and powerful King Uranus. His rule was absolute and unchallenged. But Uranus was not arrogant in his power and treated even those who opposed him fairly. He was known as the Skyfather and was respected by all. But everything changed with the Skyfather's untimely death and a new king was to be chosen. Gaia, the queen and wife of Uranus, chose their most powerful son, Cronus as the new emperor. But even though Cronus had inherited his father's great power he had none of his kindness or wisdom. And soon the world plunged into chaos...

The people were unhappy with Cronus's rule as he and his generals, known as the Titans ruled with an iron fist like dictators, and soon old allies of Uranus began to oppose the Titan rule. But none were strong enough to overthrow Cronus and his empire. Cronus no longer feared any living being. But one day a great prophet told Cronus that his end would come from his own blood. Cronus realized that the only creatures who could gain the power to overthrow him were his own children. So, against the pleas and cries of his wife Rhea, Cronus threw all of his children into a prison, a deep pit known as the 'Titans' belly'. But Rhea

had grown tired of her husband's madness for power. So when her youngest son was born she used her ancient magic and created an illusion that a bag of rocks was actually her baby. Unaware of the switch Cronus threw the rocks into 'the belly' thinking that his troubles were finally over. Rhea handed the baby over to his grandmother Gaia so that she could hide him from his father's wrath, and told her to name the baby Zeus.

Gaia saw that Zeus would be the key to ending Cronus's reign of terror and hid him and trained him so that he could one day defeat his father. Years later when Zeus was finally ready, he broke into the 'Titan's belly' and freed his siblings and any who would join him in his war against his father. Then Zeus along with his two brothers Poseidon and Hades at his side, and an army of Cronus's old enemies finally challenged the Titans to war. The greatest war in the history of the world followed and the Titans lost. This would forever be known as 'The Titan War'. Zeus and his followers had won and the world entered a new age.

When the war had ended, the three brothers realized that one of their constant power would be needed to ensure that the Titans remained imprisoned forever. They realised the only way to decide this was to draw lots for the three regions that their father ruled. They were the sky, the sea and the underworld. Of these the underworld was a wasteland and it had been under this the great prison Tartarus was built to hold the Titans. Whoever got the underworld would have to rule over these

wastelands and constantly use his power to bind the gates of Tartarus forever. When the lots were drawn it was Hades who got this misfortune. But still true to his word he accepted his duties as the lord of the underworld whereas Poseidon would have the sea and Zeus would have the sky. Zeus had become the new Skyfather.

As time passed Zeus's rule became absolute. He formed a new empire and divided the world amongst his allies. They came to be known as 'The Olympian Gods'. Along with Zeus as their head the twelve Olympians ruled the world. The allies even fought amongst themselves for control over more power but as long as Zeus wasn't opposed he didn't care. So the present world stood with the twelve great kingdoms led by the Olympians, the seas ruled by Poseidon, and Hades in charge of the underworld with the Titans in deep slumber within Tartarus.

The era of the Gods moved forward, and technology and magic grew hand in hand. Humans, along with many other races such as centaurs and nymphs grew under the guidance of the Olympian Gods. The world has seen many wars and many heroes since then, and their tales have turned into legends. And now a new story begins...

I

Mars was one of the twelve great Olympian kingdoms. It was a large kingdom which owed most of its size to war and conquest. In fact it was called the war capital of the world. It was ruled by the Olympian god Ares. Ares was called the god of war and with good reason. His strength and ferocity were legendary, and he found conquest and tributes to be the best form of income for his country. The name of Mars's capital city was Thrace. In the centre of the city was Ares's castle. A huge fort covered in red and iron. There were more guns and weapons protruding from it than most armies had in their arsenals. Surrounding the castle were the huge barracks and residential units of the higher officers. All these were quite grand as Lord Ares poured most of its funds into his army. The problem was that this left the rest of the country to rot. On the outskirts of the city were the slums, they were nothing more than unpaved roads with old and cramped buildings on either side. These buildings housed the poorer sections of the city, which largely consisted of soldiers who were no longer fit for wars. Along with the houses the slums also acted as one of the world's biggest black markets. Anything could be bought here for the right price. The shops were littered with old weapons, defected magic gems and monster organs. Most of which could not be trusted. On the left end of the sellers' street was an old abandoned-looking building. The building was three stories high and

looked as if the next storm would take it down. On the top of the building in the attic there lived a boy named Maximus.

Maximus was seventeen years old. His friends called him Max. He didn't have a last name because he was an orphan of war. He never knew his parents or even their names. He wasn't sure if they were dead or alive. All he knew was from his farthest memories he was always an orphan. But this didn't bother him too much. There were plenty of orphans in the slums. If both the parents died in the army, and there was no one left to take care of the child they would be sent to an orphanage in the slums where they could only stay till the age of twelve. Following that, the army took them in and trained them as soldiers till the age of fourteen, after which they were thrown into war. Then it was three years of compulsory service after which they had a choice of staying in the army or leaving. Most would stay as being a soldier was the major occupation in Mars. Also, by then, following orders were all they understood. Well, that and killing. But Maximus had chosen to leave the army which meant that he was thrown into the slums with nothing but the clothes he wore. A decision he was regretting as he lay awake in the attic that day.

It had been seven months since Maximus had turned seventeen and left the army and entered the slums. And he had adapted quickly to the new surroundings, though it had been tough in the beginning. With no money and no one willing to hire him the only way to make a living was by

getting something to trade. And that was how his life as a scavenger had started. Scavengers were what the people of Mars called those who went to the outskirts to hunt or gather things. They would bring back what they got and the shops would pay them depending on the loot. It meant that some days nothing useful would be found, but at least they could gather food for themselves. Maximus had gotten ready to leave for the outskirts but he knew it would be a waste. Some new monster had entered their hunting grounds which had scared off their usual hunt. Which meant that the only thing left for scavenging were some fruits and maybe some herbs. Either way Maximus knew he had to at least try or would have to starve tonight.

Maximus took a look at his condition. The building he was staying in was abandoned and the first two floors were infested with rats, spiders and pixies. In fact, the only part of the building that was not covered in dust and rubble was the attic. But the stairs that led to it were long gone, Maximus had to enter it via a rope which he had tied to a pillar inside, and this led to the ground through the back window. In the attic he didn't have much. There was a bed on one side, of course bed here meant a bunch of torn blankets and old pillows he had sewn together the best he could. It wasn't very comfortable but it beat sleeping on the ground. There was an old dresser in a corner which was in the attic when he first found it. He kept what little clothes he had in it. There were also a few utensils scattered around and some firewood in the corner. The building

no longer had electricity but the pipes still worked and Maximus had managed to fix one up to the attic. Other than that the only things he owned were his scavenging equipment, a travel bag where he kept his loot, a small pouch with emergency herbs, combat boots, a pair of gloves and a leather armguard, which he had made himself from the hides of his kills. Other than that he had a sword; it was old and chipped in places, not really sharp either, but it was the only one he could afford. Maximus had specialized in close range sword and shield melee when he was in the army, but they didn't let you keep any weapons once you left. The only thing you could keep was your dog-tag and a small seven inch knife. The knife had 'III-75M' inscribed on its handle. The III stood for the third battalion, 75 was his number within the battalion and 'M' stood for the melee unit. The knife would have fetched him a good price in the market but he liked holding on to it. This was everything he owned. He also had one other thing; something which he wasn't sure was his. He kept it in the bottommost shelves in his dresser. What he had named as the cursed blade.

It was a sword he had found when he was still in the army. It was long and seemed to be of great power and quality, but Maximus had never seen the blade yet. This was because the entire blade and its sheath were covered in thick white wraps seemed to be made out of parchment. At the point where the hilt started was a talisman with symbols he had never seen before. It didn't take him long to figure out that the talisman

held some powerful magic which prevented it from being opened. The wrap wouldn't come off no matter how hard he pulled and it couldn't even be cut by his soldier's knife. He had taken it to a local shaman in hopes of removing the talisman, but he asked for an exuberant amount of money to do it, money which he did not have. The sword couldn't even be sold to a seller because they couldn't check if it was worth something. Of course, Maximus did not know any of this when he first found it in the ruins of a temple just three months before he left the army. He had found it in a secret basement under the ruins and knew that if he took it to his superiors he would never see it again. Instead, he left it there so that he could come and get it when he left the army. He was planning to sell it to get enough money to get started with his life. But his plan backfired when he realized he wouldn't be able to sell it. So now he was just stuck with it sitting in the corner of his shelf, and since it had ruined all his plans he had begun to call it cursed.

Maximus checked if the blade was still there. Then he grabbed his equipment and went down the rope to reach the ground floor. He had to meet his scavenging partner by eight and it was already getting late. This was his usual routine; they always met at an old pub by the road called the 'loose cannon'. It was quite a popular place among the scavengers, hunters and travellers among the trenches. The 'trenches' were what everyone called the slums. It didn't have an original name as it wasn't in the original plans of the city. It was built by the city outcasts, and

somewhere along the way people started calling it the trenches and the name just stuck.

Maximus had just reached the entrance of the 'loose cannon' when he heard the familiar voice of his partner greet him "You're late runt." Maximus wasn't actually a runt, quite the opposite. He was nearly six feet tall and pretty well built owing to his time in the army. He had dark black hair and matching black eyes. He kept his hair short, like most soldiers in the army. He no longer had to keep it that way but he was so used to having it short that he did not bother changing it. He couldn't grow any sort of facial hair, though, which bothered him a little. He was a little to the lean side, which served him well as it made him more agile and flexible with the sword. But he was in no way a runt, but then again almost everyone seemed like a runt to his partner. For one thing, he was a Minotaur.

Minotaur's were one of the many races that inhabited the earth, along with humans, centaurs, satyrs, nymphs and many others which made up the world community. Minotaurs were half bull, half human creatures who usually stood well over seven feet. They looked like bulls that had learned to walk on their hind legs. They were well known for their strength and horns. In fact, Minotaur horns were quite valuable but were illegal to sell. But a few still somehow found their way into the black market sometimes.

Maximus turned to his partner and said "What, you started missing me

already?” with a grin. His name was Rex and like all Minotaurs that was it. All Minotaurs had very short names like Zod, Gib or Bob. Rex was well over seven feet tall and had dark brown skin and fur covering his body, but Minotaurs were like that – they weren’t big on combing or shaving. He wore a pair of yellow and green camouflage pants that matched his eye, which was also a dull yellow shade. He didn’t wear any shoes as his hooves were tougher than Max’s combat boots. He also didn’t wear any shirt. It wasn’t part of their culture or something. Unless it was armour or something defensive Minotaurs usually walked around bare-chested and Rex was no exception. Maximus never really understood any of this, but when Rex had explained he just nodded along. Rex was pretty menacing looking – or he would have been if there wasn’t just half of him there. You see, Rex had also been part of the army and unlike Maximus he had planned to stay till he died. But all that changed when he came back to the barracks one day seriously wounded and bleeding. He had survived, but not entirely. He lost his left arm, eye and horn that day. After that he was forced to leave the army. After all, half a soldier would only be a liability on the battlefield. Or at least that’s what the superiors thought. But Maximus had seen Rex fight while they were scavenging, and he was still scarier than most of the soldiers he had seen. But no matter how many times Maximus asked, he still never told him how he had gotten wounded so badly.

“Come on Max, I told you to get here a bit early, you know the pickings

are scarce right now,” Rex said.

“I know,” Max replied, “but I really don’t think those five minutes are gonna make a difference.”

“Shows what you know, ya runt,” Rex said, “but at least you bought all your stuff right?” Max nodded and checked to see if Rex had bought all his weapons as well. When he was in the army, his weapon of choice was a huge battle hammer that literally shook the earth with each strike. But ever since he lost his arm he had to shift to a smaller one-handed sledgehammer. The hammer in question was still bigger than a bowling ball. Other than that he had a pistol and his army knife fastened to his belt. The knife had ‘VII-52H’ inscribed on it where ‘H’ stood for the heavy weapons division. He still wore his army dog-tag around his neck.

They started walking towards the entrance to their hunting grounds. But when they reached the stone gates which separated the trenches from the outskirts they saw a huge crowd gathered there. Rex moved forward and asked a fellow scavenger what was going on. “The soldiers ain’t letting no one to the grounds,” the man said, “say it’s off limits for now.”

“They figured out what the new monster is,” another one chipped in, “it’s a bloody Manticore.” Now this was really surprising news. Manticores were really ferocious beasts, very hard to track and even harder to kill. A manticore was a monster with the head of a lion, the tail of a scorpion, six legs and the size of an elephant. Maximus had never

seen one himself but had heard about them from other soldiers. There were three types: the ground manticores, winged manticores and the emperor manticores. Maximus asked around what type it was. "It's a ground manticore, a pretty big one too. It attacked four hunters yesterday. Only one person survived and he's in really bad shape," a centaur hunter told him.

Centaurians were another very common race in the kingdom of Mars. They were creatures who had the top half of a human and the bottom half of a horse. This meant that there were four legs instead of just two. This made them really fast runners. They were also excellent marksmen with all sorts of long range weapons such as crossbows and guns. In fact, a large part of the army's 'long range division' consisted of centaurians due to their outstanding aim. Maximus headed back to Rex to see their next move. "So what do we do now?" he asked.

"Not much we can do is there?" Rex answered. "Since the army's barricaded the main entrance we'll have to slip out some other way. But I think that we should maybe head back to the 'cannon' for now and see what the others are up to". Maximus nodded in agreement. If you ever needed information about anything happening in the trenches the 'loose cannon' was the place to go. It was by far the most famous pub here in the trenches and was always crawling with travellers and hunters, which meant that a lot of information got passed around here. Also it was a great place to pick up work. The 'loose cannon' had a huge bulletin

board on one of its walls. People would put up requests on these walls and offer rewards to those who completed them. As they reached the entrance of the cannon they noticed it was crowded as usual. Like most buildings in the trenches the loose cannon was also a run-down old place. The paint was faded and the wooden doors seemed like a good kick would break them. The windows were already broken from the countless number of bar fights that happened there. It also had an iconic century old cannon placed outside near the entrance. The cannon hadn't been fired for years. In fact one of its wheels was broken, and there was a cat sleeping in its barrel right now.

Maximus and Rex entered, and the place was crowded and noisy as usual. There was some old violin music being played from an old jukebox in the corner but it was barely audible over the shouting, singing and drunk laughing of its customers. There was a group of really loud and drunk satyrs (half man half goat) in one corner. Two humans, a Minotaur and a dwarf were playing poker in another. A fully cloaked man with a hood covering his face sat at the bar table. There were some soldiers on another table, but they didn't care about the mess around them. A centaur was even hustling some travellers at darts. Over at the table pouring drinks to his customers was Roderick. Roderick Evans was the owner and bartender of the loose cannon. He was a retired soldier from the army who had been in many wars and had the battle scars to

prove it. He had left the army after the death of his wife who had also served in his division. Now he had a quieter life in the trenches and he was pretty well respected around here; taking the drinks that he poured to the customers was his daughter Kayla. Kayla Evans was another reason Maximus loved coming to this pub, even though he didn't even drink. He had a huge crush on her from the first time they met. She was a brunette with her hair at just enough length for a ponytail, which she usually kept in a knot while she worked. Her skin was a bit tanned and her eyes were hazel coloured. To Maximus, she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen – even more beautiful than Empress Aphrodite, an Olympian goddess who ruled the kingdom of Venus. She was considered the prettiest woman in the world, and had even won the Miss World contest every time she participated, which was eight times. Of course, Maximus never told Kayla any of this. For one thing they were friends, and he was worried that if he said anything he would lose that. For another her father Roderick scared the crap out of him. Maximus watched as she moved from table to table. He was just thinking if this was what angels looked like when a sudden thump on the back of his head brought him back to reality. This was Rex of course, and he said, “Ya can keep staring at her after we get to our seats,” with a wide grin on his scarred face. Maximus scowled and followed him to the bar stool where Roderick was serving drinks.

Rex sat down at the bar table and Maximus sat beside him. The only other person there at the table was a cloaked man who sat silently sipping his drink. This didn't bother them as strange travellers were a common sight in the pub. "What will it be boys?" Roderick asked.

"Ox toxin for me, Roderick," Rex answered, "and I guess the runt will have baby milk or something."

Maximus gave Rex a punch on his shoulder for this remark, which just made Rex grin more. See, Maximus didn't drink alcohol, he had tried it a few times but he didn't quite enjoy it. In fact he didn't even get a buzz. So he stuck to regular drinks, but it gave Rex an excuse to laugh at him. "Root beer is fine for me thanks," he told Roderick.

"A fine choice Max, I think I'll have the same," said a familiar voice from behind. Maximus knew the voice well as it belonged to a friend of his, Hedger. Hedger glided in and sat in the seat next to Maximus. And Hedger literally did glide in on his wings as he was a sprite.

Sprites were another race of creatures that existed in the world though not that common in Mars. They were small and usually just three to four feet tall. They also had a long tail which sort of acted as an extra hand. Their heads were shaped like dogs complete with pointy ears and a snout. But what made sprites really special were their wings. Sprites had long and colourful wings, which allowed them to fly but not as good as

birds or any such thing. The colour of the wings tended to define a sprite and their surnames were based on it. Since Hedger's wings were green his name was Hedger Greenwing. The feathers were commonly used in magic and different colours had different properties.

Hedger was a salesman, well kind of. What he usually did was buy useless stuff for a cheap rate and sell it to unwitting travellers, saying it was something useful. His most famous one being convincing a group of Orcs that a common blue bird's egg was that of a phoenix. So in short he was a conman. But despite all this he was a really good friend of Maximus and sort of a friend of Rex. Rex always complained that he talked too much. But Maximus knew that Hedger's heart was in the right place and he was sure even Rex would agree.

"Hey Max, you know what would go great with a root beer?" Hedger said. Maximus knew that this was his usual start to a sales pitch so he answered "Whatever piece of garbage you're selling today."

"That's exactly right," Hedger said with a grin, "that is if you consider minced chimera meat as garbage."

Rex snorted loudly and asked, "So you just happened to walk past a dead chimera did you – or maybe you killed it yourself?"

"I'm sorry I don't recall asking Mr. Half-a-cow for his words of wisdom," Hedger replied with his tongue out.

"Knock it off Hedger," Maximus said. "Come on what is it really?"

“Some sort of rodent I think, but it’s edible. I got it off a couple of dwarfs who were barbecuing it,” Hedger said, “but no one’s buying.” Hedger took a sip of root beer and continued, “Tell you what, I’ll give you half if you cook it for me.”

But before Maximus could reply or Rex could make a snide remark a voice interrupted from behind saying “Are you trying to tell me you just hauled some dead rat into my restaurant?” It was Kayla, she had returned to the table after delivering her orders. She was wearing a tattered T-shirt and jeans which would have suited a boy more, and an apron she wore at work. The apron’s original white colour could barely be seen because it was covered in so many stains. She also had a sharp and annoyed look in her eyes directed at Hedger– and Maximus still thought she looked beautiful.

“Apologies my lady,” Hedger said with a slight grin and a bow.

“Yeah well just don’t take it out in my restaurant,” Kayla replied. Kayla was the only one who called the place a restaurant. It was what her father had originally planned. But the trenches were a place more suited for a pub than a fancy restaurant. Kayla poured another glass of ‘ox toxin’ for Rex and continued, “Honestly Dad, why do we still serve these idiots.”

“Because idiots are our best customers,” Roderick replied with a slight

smile. “Anyway, since the three musketeers are here I think I’ll take my break.” She pulled up a chair and sat beside them. This was all part of a regular day, only this was usually after Maximus and Rex had returned from scavenging.

“So no one’s going to the outskirts huh?” Kayla asked resting her head on her hands. Rex nodded in agreement “Not until the manticore is taken care of.” “So I heard,” Roderick added, “is the army going to do something about that?” “Yeah right,” Maximus said, “unless it attacks the city or something the army’s not gonna lift a finger, we are on our own.” The livelihood of the trenches was not exactly top priority in the kingdom. Maximus knew that the only way the army would get involved was if a reward was issued. Roderick said what he was thinking, “Guess we’ll have to put up a reward.” By ‘we’ Roderick meant the sellers’ council, it was something like the unofficial government of the trenches. It consisted of almost all the shop owners in the trenches including Roderick. “The rewards have got to be high if they want people to risk fighting a manticore,” Rex said. Roderick nodded in agreement but before he could reply a voice said, “Another round please.”

The cloaked man sitting beside them had just finished his drink. Roderick said “You drank enough to drown a Cyclopes, you sure you want another?” The cloaked man just nodded. After he took his drink he asked “So is there no way to get past the barricades?” Maximus realized

that he must have overheard them talking but he still didn't understand why he was so interested. "Not until the manticore is dealt with; there will probably be a reward on its head by tomorrow, but since the army blocked off the entrance only soldiers will be allowed to pass to the outskirts."

"Unless someone just happens to know a hidden shortcut," Rex said with a grin and a wink with his one good eye.

"Anyway, if you're searching for work try the jobs bulletin board," Roderick continued, "all the details will be there." The cloaked man just finished his drink and thanked him. Then he got up and left.

"Well what's our plan?" Maximus asked, "Do we take a path to the outskirts?" Rex scratched his chin, this was his thinking pose. After a while he said "Not today, the soldiers will be on high alert due to the attacks. We'll sneak outside tomorrow. Besides, I still got some food left from the last hunt and you got Hedger's rat to fill our bellies for today," then he finished off his drink, picked up his bag and hammer, and left.

"Guess it's just you and me buddy," Hedger said, and they were just about to leave when Kayla called them and handed Maximus a small basket of potatoes and olives. "Here," she said "they are a bit old but they haven't gone rotten yet, it should add some flavour to whatever's in Hedger's bag." She gave one last smile and went to the kitchen. Maximus just stood there watching her go. She was so kind he thought

to himself, and hardworking not to mention beautiful. But his daydreams were cut short when Hedger cleared his throat loudly and said “Come along Maxy, you got that I’m a lovesick kitten look on your face again.” Maximus scowled at him and then they headed back to his place.

Maximus climbed the rope back up to his place while Hedger just flew in the window. It was already evening and the day had been really unproductive. Maximus thought it would be impossible to escape this hellhole if things didn’t get better. He wanted to get out of here, and not just the trenches but the entire country of Mars. He had heard there were other countries where the lifestyle was more peaceful or where technology had gotten so advanced people didn’t even have to work anymore. And other places that were so magical that it was like being on another planet.

Maximus started cooking while Hedger flew around picking firewood from the nearby trees. Maximus liked cooking and he was pretty good at it. But this wasn’t something he shared with everyone. A guy could get mocked to death for saying he liked cooking in the army. The trenches weren’t any better. But he felt calm when he cooked. And when he was done Hedger remarked that it smelled great. “So what do you call it?” he asked.

“I guess we could call it skewed rat with potatoes,” Maximus replied. Hedger scowled and said, “You know I said rodent, didn’t I? Not rat but rodent, there is a difference.”

“Fine skewed rodent with potatoes,” Maximus said, “that any better?” Hedger took a bite off his plate and said, “Not really, but it tastes great, now if we call it chicken then I say we got something to sell.”

Maximus also took a bite and he was pretty pleased with his work. “I don’t see why you can’t just go and cook at the cannon. They could use you,” Hedger said. Maximus had had this conversation with him before, but even though he liked cooking he still felt he was a warrior at heart and spending all day in a kitchen just wasn’t for him. “You know why so stop asking,” Maximus said.

But Hedger didn’t drop it, he said “Oh come on, it’s perfect, we would never have to eat rats again, plus you could spend all day with Kayla,” and then he made a few kissing sounds. Maximus chucked a rat bone at him which he flicked off with his tail. “I’m a good scavenger and I’ll stay at that and I really wish you and Rex would stop mocking me with Kayla – the last thing I need is for her to hear that and ban me from the cannon.” Hedger glided around and put the dirty plates into the sink. He said “You’re right, better guys than you have tried and failed with her.”

This was a fact Maximus knew too well. Till now Kayla had turned down every guy who had ever asked her out. And most of these guys were older and usually better looking than him. Once, even a dashing young captain from the army had asked her out and she still said no.

Needless to say Max's chances with her were slim to none. "Although" Hedger started saying "she might start seeing you in a different light if you did something ridiculously heroic." Maximus narrowed his eyes and looked at his friend. He knew Hedger was up to something so he asked "And what heroic deed do you have in mind exactly?"

"Nothing too fancy, just maybe you know slay a mantichore," Hedger said. Maximus let out a small laugh, they had talked about doing things like this before. Fighting monsters and saving cities, but they were just stories not something he had any real intention of doing. Going up against a fully grown ground mantichore would be suicide.

"Sounds like fun," Maximus said, "but I think my rusty old blade would break before I even made a dent on its armour."

"But you do have another blade don't you?" Hedger said. Maximus knew he was talking about the cursed blade. Hedger was convinced that the blade was a very powerful weapon. He said it was a sprite's intuition. Sprites were more in tune with magic than humans, but Maximus still didn't know how a blade he couldn't even unsheathe would be useful in battle.

"Tell you what," Hedger continued, "why don't you take the blade with you tomorrow and maybe it might work against the mantichore."

"I think the idea is to avoid the mantichore Hedger," Maximus said, "now stop daydreaming and get some sleep, you can spend the night here."

Hedger finally dropped it and decided sleep wasn't such a bad idea. He flew in circles for a while and finally hung his tail on a metal beam and went to sleep. This was how sprites slept, upside down, hanging on their tails like bats. Maximus also turned in for the night, but somehow what Hedger said just didn't leave his mind.

II

The next morning Maximus had gotten up really early. The plan was to slip out early in hopes that the soldiers wouldn't have started their patrols by then. He managed to wake Hedger up as well and drag him outside, but it looked like just the sight of a comfy pillow would send him back to dreamland. He had told Rex to meet them in front of the cannon but when they reached the street he was already waiting there. He wasn't alone either – at least a dozen people were also standing there staring at the same piece of paper.

“What's going on?” Maximus asked Rex. Rex just snorted and stood there for a few seconds then he said “The reward for the manticore is out, 400 gold pieces.” That finally woke Hedger up, “Did you say 400 golden beauties, man, the sellers' council really wants this thing gone.” Maximus was also surprised at the reward. He had never seen such a high bounty before in the trenches. Then again they never had to deal with such a strong monster before. The world's money system was easy enough to understand. Ten pieces of bronze made a silver piece and ten silver pieces made a gold piece. This was the same under all the Olympian kingdoms under the order of the God-King Zeus. And four hundred gold pieces were a lot, at least in the trenches. With that kind of money a person could really restart his life. But he knew that the risk was too great, but then again he had already done something today

against his rational instincts. He had brought along with him the cursed blade.

They started to move towards the east part of the trenches, there was an old junkyard at the end of it. It was a place where a lot of the kingdom's scrap metal got sent, and in Mars, a large portion of these included war vehicles such as tanks, Jeeps and armoured cars. After anything useful was taken from a destroyed vehicle, whatever was left was hauled off to the junkyard. Out towards the back, where the larger vehicle shells were stored, there was a small opening which led to some underground caves that in turn led to the outskirts. The caves seemed to be built by dwarves, but had been abandoned for years.

Dwarves were an underground dwelling race. They were also natural born excavators. They had powerful front claws that were excellent for digging and they also had a keen sense of smell so that they could navigate the tunnels even without light. Dwarves also made the best blacksmiths, mechanics and building constructors. Anything that needed building or fixing was their thing. Maximus had read somewhere that most of the Dwarven population resided in the kingdom of Vulcan. But you saw quite a few in Mars as well. The problem was that dwarves only grew to about three feet tall, which made most of the tunnels inaccessible to them, especially for a big guy like Rex. But a few of the tunnels were made to move equipment and they were big enough for Rex to squeeze and crawl his way through. Obviously he wasn't looking

forward to this.

“Damn it, wish the army would just take out that manticore instead of blocking off the entrance,” Rex said. But Maximus knew that wouldn’t happen. The outskirts just weren’t considered as valuable territory. There was no way the army would waste resources there. And even though the blocking of the entrance was an annoyance to scavengers and sellers he knew that a lot of people slept better at night knowing that the army was guarding the entrance. Hedger glided down to shoulder level from a tree. He was munching on an apple; he tossed one each to Maximus and Rex. He took another bite and said “If anyone has the right to complain here, it’s me. I can’t believe you guys talked me into doing this again.” Hedger didn’t usually join them on their scavenging hunts, but the dwarf tunnels were way too complex and it was easy to get lost or stuck. Neither Maximus nor Rex could go through them easily. That’s where Hedger came in; he was small enough to fit through all the tunnels and lead the way for them. But he hated this more than Rex did as he couldn’t use his wings there. And not being able to spread his wings made Hedger kind of claustrophobic.

As they reached the entrance of the junkyard a familiar metallic smell surrounded them. Maximus liked the junkyard. It was filled with old relics of the past, each broken piece of equipment here had a story to tell and most would be Great War stories. When he was still in the army he used to admire the tanks and other battle machines used by the army. He

always preferred his sword but it was hard not to feel the power radiate from a R.A.M. tank. The R.A.M.'s or the Region Annihilation Mega-tanks were the army's ultimate weapon. Those double barrelled mega tanks could probably even take out a ground manticore without a scratch.

As they started walking through the junkyard, Maximus noticed that Rex wasn't really joining in the conversation and he had a serious look on his face. "What's wrong?" he asked Rex. He didn't respond right away, then in a low voice he said, "I think we're being followed." Maximus turned around slowly to take a look but he didn't see anyone. The junkyards were almost always empty; somehow the rusty machinery didn't exactly make it an attractive hang out spot. "I don't see anyone," Maximus said.

"Neither do I," Hedger said in agreement. But Rex still seemed unconvinced. "I don't know, somehow I feel it in my snout."

"Maybe you just got a bug or something stuck in there, your nose is sure big enough for it," Hedger said, "guess your instinct isn't just what it used to be." But before Rex could respond to that with some rather unconventional words a voice said "I wouldn't say that."

Maximus looked around to find the source of the voice, when Hedger tugged at his shirt and pointed to the top of a pile of scrap metal. A man stood there and he slowly walked down the scrap pile to meet them.

Maximus didn't recognize him at first, but then he realized that it was the same cloaked man from yesterday. It was Rex who reacted first, he pulled out his gun and pointed it at the man and said, "You're the guy from the pub yesterday, why are you following us?" For a guy with a gun pointed at his head by a seven foot Minotaur he seemed pretty calm. His face was still covered by his hood and only his chin and mouth were visible. His expression hadn't changed a bit. Then the man said "You're experienced in tracking with your nose, I'm guessing you and the boy are ex-military."

This was true of course, Minotaurs and other races with a keen sense of smell were taught special tracking methods related to smell and Rex had undergone it too. What Maximus didn't understand was how the man understood that he used to be a soldier as well. Rex narrowed his eyes and asked, "What's it to you?" The man still didn't seem bothered by the gun pointed at his face and this was starting to bother Maximus. Then the man said "I don't care about your past, what I do care about is a piece of information you let slip yesterday – you mentioned there was another way into the outskirts."

"Eavesdropping isn't very polite Mr. Hood," Hedger said, "so why don't you start by telling us who you are?"

"Actually Mr. Hood is just fine," he said, and Hedger had no response to that. Maximus was trying to figure out anything he could about this man but it was hard since his cloak covered his entire body. Even his feet and

shoes were covered in wraps. But Maximus could tell that he had a sword on his waist under his cloak. The fact that he wasn't unarmed wasn't that encouraging.

"Umm Rex, put the gun away, I don't think he's gonna attack us," Maximus said. Then he turned to the hooded man and asked, "Why do you want to go to the outskirts so badly anyway?"

The man turned to Maximus. Maximus was kind of amazed at how expressionless his face still looked. He had seen more feelings on a stone statue. "My reasons are not important to you but I can make it worth your while," the man said, and then he put his hand in his pocket and took out three gold pieces and showed them to the trio. "These are yours if you can get me outside." This sure got their attention. "A piece of gold each for just letting him tag along doesn't seem so bad," Hedger said

Maximus had to agree it was a sweet deal, but he wasn't stupid enough to trust a guy who wouldn't even show his face. Rex seemed to be thinking along the same lines, he said "And are we just supposed to blindly trust you?"

The man lowered his head and said, "I give you my word that I will not attack any of you unless I am attacked first. Besides, shouldn't I be the one who should worry? After all, there are three of you and you are well armed."

“Don’t think that we haven’t noticed the sword you’re hiding under your cloak,” Maximus said.

“Yes but I assure you that is all I have,” the man said, “unlike you I have no firearms.”

Maximus wasn’t too relieved by this. He knew that a swordsman with proper training and a powerful enough sword could easily take care of a group of gunmen. And his instincts told him that this man had both. Rex looked to Maximus. Even though Maximus didn’t trust this guy, the money he was offering was good, and they could really use it so he nodded in agreement. “Fine,” Rex said, “you can tag along but at the first sight of any funny business I am personally putting a bullet in your head.”

The man nodded in agreement, his face didn’t show any signs of worry that he had just been threatened or any signs of life at all for that matter. Then Rex held out his only arm and the hooded man shook on it.

After that they started walking to the cave entrance together. Maximus was pretty sure he had never been part of a more silent group, even Hedger wasn’t opening his big mouth. It was Rex who finally spoke. “So who the hell are you anyway?” Maximus felt that Rex was being a bit rude but it didn’t seem to bother the hooded man, instead he asked “What happened to your arm and eye?”

Rex snorted angrily at this and said “That’s really none of your business.”

“Then I don’t think my identity is any of your concern either,” replied the man. Needless to say there was no more small talk after that.

They finally reached the caves and Hedger began to lead the way. The rest of them followed close behind. Hedger could easily fit through all the caves but it was clear to Maximus that he didn’t like not being able to use his wings. *But at least he didn’t have to crawl around on all fours like the rest of us*, Maximus thought to himself. The caves were excruciatingly annoying for Rex who was bringing up the rear. Even though he was curled up into a ball and moving at the speed of a snail he was still just barely getting through. Once he even managed to get his horn stuck on a tree root that was sticking out and that just made his day. After about 20 minutes or so of torturous crawling they finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel and were thrilled that their little maze was over. They finally got out but they still had aching knees and dirt all over them.

“I don’t care if we gotta break down the barricade but we have to find another way back,” Rex complained. Maximus couldn’t help but grin at this, mainly because they had finally reached the outskirts. It was true that scavengers didn’t get much pay and the job was a lot of hard work,

but nobody ever said that the job was boring. There was something truly exhilarating about being out there and hunting in the wild. The three of them finally turned to the hooded man. Rex said “Well here you are, the great outdoors. So if you could just hand over the money you promised we will just be on our way.” The man nodded in agreement, “I have a question though,” he said. “There should be a trail nearby which off-road vehicles are supposed to use. Could you point me in its direction?” Maximus knew the trail he was talking about, there was only one such trail out here in the outskirts and he had travelled it a few times when he was still in the army. He had been aboard a convoy on transport duty. The trail was not there in any of the maps, and the things that were transported through here by the army were usually illegal stuff that never appeared in any of the military records. Maximus wasn’t proud of this but he had seen and turned a blind eye to worse in the army.

“It’s towards the north from here, just keep walking till you reach a small incline. You should be able to see the trail from there,” Maximus said.

“I have heard that there is a cliff there from which the trail is visible,” he asked again.

Maximus nodded and replied, “Yeah, you should be able to spot the cliff within five minutes.” The man nodded at this and handed over the money. Then he began to move towards the trail.

“How do you plan to get back to the city?” Maximus asked as he began to walk away. The hooded man stopped for a second and said “I don’t plan to,” and began walking again down his path.

Once the man was out of sight, Hedger said, “Well, that was weird to say the least. Wonder what he’s up to?” Rex let out a small grunt and said “Who cares. He already paid us, he can go and jump in a lake for all I care. Now come on, we got work to do.”

They started to move through the trees to their usual scavenging spots, but somehow Maximus couldn’t stop thinking about the hooded man. “Come on, let’s head to the taller trees first. Since Hedger is with us he’ll be able to get any fruits that are on top of them,” Rex said. Maximus nodded and they started to move towards the trees. Rex was still sore from being cramped up in the tunnels so he wasn’t in any mood to talk, and Hedger began chasing the moths that were flying around in the forest. This gave Maximus some time to think.

They had reached the area of the outskirts where the trees grew really tall. Among these were some apricot trees. The apricots that grew here were really sweet and were considered a luxury in the trenches. They were sure to be able to sell them at a good price back in the city. Since Hedger could just fly around and pluck them it didn’t really leave Maximus and Rex anything to do.

Maximus then started thinking about the time he was on transport duty. They were passing through the trail carrying a crate. The convoy just contained one armoured car with four soldiers inside, including Maximus. They were never told what was in the crate during the briefing. All they were told was that it was for the good of the country and for the glory of General Ares. Maximus was smart enough to know that this meant that if he asked more questions he would just attract trouble. The transport was going smoothly till it had reached the cliffs. That's when things started going bad. Their convoy was ambushed by a group of Orcs. There were around seven of them, but they weren't well trained enough to take them on though, they were easily dealt with. They managed to deliver the crate without trouble after that and they were asked to never speak of the mission to anyone. That's when it finally hit Maximus.

“Hey Rex I was just wondering about that hooded guy,” Maximus said. Rex gave Maximus an annoyed look. “I already told you to let it go.”

“I know, but listen,” Maximus said impatiently “Didn't you think it was weird that he wanted to get to that trail. I mean, the only thing it gets used for is the shady transports which the army does.”

“Yeah so?” Rex said.

“Also, he was asking about the cliffs right?” Maximus asked.

Rex's eye slowly began to widen "Are you trying to tell me that man is trying to ambush an army convoy?"

Maximus slowly nodded.

"But that would be suicide. A convoy will have at least three men all heavily armed." Maximus knew Rex had a point, but his instincts told him that the man they had just met wasn't exactly ordinary. "I know, but if he managed to pull it off it would be the perfect crime. Those transports never went into any records, if he got off with whatever they were carrying there's not much that could be done after."

"But even so..." Rex had begun to say when Hedger flew in and dropped some apricots on him. Rex managed to catch them just in time. "What are you ladies mumbling about?" Hedger asked. "Max thinks that the hooded guy's gonna try to knock off an illegal military convoy." Maximus had already told the story of those transports to Hedger before so he knew what they were talking about. "I thought you said those convoys were heavily guarded," Hedger said. "I mean unless Mr. Hood is packing a few explosives under his cloak what's he going to do?"

Maximus just stared at Hedger as if he had just told a horror story and he knew Rex was also thinking the same thing. Hedger had just told about the explosives as a joke, but both Maximus and Rex saw it as a very real possibility. "He was really keen about keeping his cloak on," Rex said nervously. It finally dawned on Hedger as well. "Wait, are you guys

seriously considering the possibility that he might try to bomb the convoy?” The three of them just stood there silently for a while. Maybe they were just being paranoid, Maximus thought, but this was not something he could just ignore if people’s lives were at stake.

III

“So what are you guys saying we should do?” Hedger finally asked. “It’s not like it’s any of our business.” Rex shook his head and said, “The fact that we are the reason he got here makes it our business. Besides, the people on that convoy are soldiers. Me and Max were once soldiers too so we can’t just ignore this.” Maximus wasn’t really that loyal to the army. He knew that the armies of Ares ran more of a dictatorship than a kingdom. And their great leader Ares was actually an over-powerful madman who enjoyed the war more than he enjoyed the victory. But he was also not willing to have any more blood on his hands, intentional or not. That was part of the reason he left the army. “Let’s go and have a chat with our friend Mr. Hood,” Maximus said, “and if he’s up to what we fear let’s stop him.”

They moved as fast as they could to the cliff. When they got close enough Hedger glided higher to see if he could spot anything. “Hey guys, I can see our hooded friend waiting on top of the cliff,” he said, “and I think you called it right Max, I can see some movement at the end of the trail. I think it might be a pair of military vehicles.”

“Is the guy armed?” Rex asked.

“I can’t see him lighting up any bombs, if that’s what you mean.” Finally, they climbed to the top of the cliff (Hedger just flew) and when

they reached there the man was already facing them. “Didn’t expect to see you three again,” he said.

“Yeah, well we were just wondering what you were doing all the way out here. It’s Not exactly the place for a stroll,” Hedger said.

The man turned back to face the trail. The convoy which Hedger had spotted earlier was clearly visible now. And it wasn’t just a single transport truck either, there were two armoured cars along with it for security. Maximus realized that whatever was being transported must be pretty valuable. “So what is it that you think I am doing?” the hooded man asked.

“Well, ambushing the military convoy heading our way with some explosives does come to mind,” Maximus said. The man turned to look at him but the expression on his face was still unchanged. “Well, you are only half correct,” he said. “I do plan to attack that convoy, but sadly I don’t have any explosives with me.”

Maximus was trying to figure out if this man was stupid or crazy. He was talking about taking on a heavily armed military convoy on his own and using what, just his sword. But what worried Maximus was the confidence with which he said he would do it. As if it was nothing more than child’s play. “You can see that we might not be very comfortable with letting you do that,” Rex said “after all it’s like you said we are ex-

military.”

The man just looked at the ground. “I guess soldiers can’t easily forget their loyalty even if it is to a sadistic tyrant such as Ares,” he said this more to himself than to the others. Then he turned to Rex and said “This is not your fight so just walk away.” But Rex pulled out his gun and pointed it at the man then with a grin on face, he said “Sorry, I never learned how.”

For a second Maximus thought that it would end here without any further trouble. But he realized how wrong he was a few seconds later, because what happened next happened in a blur. In a flash, the man who was standing at least seven feet across was suddenly right near their noses. And the only thing faster than him was his sword. Maximus didn’t even remember seeing him draw his sword but by the time he was in front of them it was already in his hand. Then with one swift slash he took out Rex’s gun. At first Maximus thought he had just knocked the gun out his hand until he realized that Rex was still holding the gun’s handle. The man had actually chopped off the gun’s muzzle in one strike. Now it was Max’s turn, and before he could even reach for his sword the man gave a kick on his chest. Maximus was thrown back by this. It was like being hit by a hammer more than a kick, like his foot was made of iron or something. Then in another fluidic movement he had his sword at Hedger’s neck. Then he said, “Now, let’s talk.”

As a swordsman, Maximus couldn't help but admire the man standing in front of him with a blade to his friend's neck. He had never seen such refined swordsmanship in his life. And there were some pretty good swordsmen in the army. But none of them had this kind of speed and precision. And his sword, now that he finally got a look at it, he couldn't call it anything lesser than a work of art. It was long and a bit broader than most blades and it had no curves. Instead the entire blade was straight and had sharp edges. The blade was silver and the hilt was black. Also, the hilt looked like it had been designed for royalty. It had magnificent carvings on it and had silver strands running across. It also had a dark blue gem at the place where the hilt and the blade met. Maximus knew that the sword was no ordinary weapon and he had no doubt that the one wielding it was any different. After all, he had just taken out their entire party, and even his cloak hadn't come off.

The man stood there with the blade still on Hedger's neck, but suddenly a rumble came from below them. The convoy had almost reached the bottom of the cliff. The man then sheathed his sword and said "I don't have time for this." Then he took Hedger by the shirt and threw him across, straight at Rex with enough force to knock him to the ground. Then he jumped off the cliff and amazingly just landed on his feet, or foot, as Maximus noticed that he let his left leg take most of the landing impact. Then he went and stood right in the middle of the trail waiting for the convoy.

The three of them finally got to their feet. “What do we do now?” Hedger asked. Rex looked down at where the man was standing, and said, “I guess we jump.” Maximus did not approve of this idea, he went to the edge of the cliff to look at the drop. He was sure that he wouldn’t die or anything, but he was also uncertain if he could walk away from it without a broken leg. “Umm, not sure if that’s a good idea Rex,” He said.

“Oh come on now we’ll be fine,” Rex said, and gave him a pat on his back. Too bad Maximus was standing a bit too close to the edge and the pat pushed him over it. In his panic Maximus grabbed on to the only thing he could, which was Hedger’s tail. Rex tried to catch them but it was useless, and he just ended up hurtling down along with them. They fell as a ball of hands, wings, and hooves, and landed roughly on the ground. Maximus finally got up from that mess and checked to see if he was alright. Luckily nothing was broken. Rex and Hedger got up too and Hedger said “Well that was fun,” shooting a dirty look at the other two.

The man barely took notice of the commotion they made. Maximus couldn’t blame him. With an entrance like that they wouldn’t have even scared a mouse. But Maximus had already decided that he was going to challenge the hooded man. Seeing him fight had stirred something inside him. Maximus was a good swordsman, but he knew that the man was better. But the thing was he just couldn’t resist trying to find out how

much better. “Hey hood guy,” he said drawing his sword, “let’s settle this man to man, sword to...sheath.” Maximus had tried to pull out his sword from his backpack but he had forgotten one thing, the fact that he had only bought his cursed blade along with him today. So when he tried to take out the sword it came out of his bag with the sheath still intact.

“Why the hell do you have that thing with you?” Rex said from behind. But Maximus didn’t have time to reply as the army convoy had just reached them.

IV

Maximus could do nothing more than watch and see what unfolded next. The man had drawn his sword again and was still standing firmly in the middle of the trail. The convoy had already seen him but it was evident that they had no plans of stopping. But this didn't seem to bother the man. Then he did something even more unexpected. He charged at the convoy. "That proves it, he is bat-shit crazy," Hedger said. Maximus agreed with Hedger, charging straight at an armoured car would just leave the man as road kill. But at the last moment, just inches before he made contact with the car's front, he shifted to the left and with his sword ripped straight through its side. The blade actually went through the metal and it had completely destroyed the two tires as well. The car skidded out of control and stopped right in the middle of the road, which also made it impossible for the other two vehicles to pass. Maximus wondered if that was the plan all along.

The other two vehicles stopped as well and soldiers started pouring out from all of them. Maximus counted ten in total, six humans, three satyrs and one Minotaur. One of the soldiers came forward. It was a woman and she seemed to be the one in charge. She was lean and her blonde hair was just visible under her helmet. She would have looked pretty if she didn't have an expression that said she would break the bones of anyone who crossed her. Maximus saw that she had a captain's badge on

her chest. “That was quite the neat trick swordsmen,” she said, “but it’s going to take more than just the four of you to steal this transport.”

Wait, what? Maximus thought to himself, *did she just say ‘the four of you’ like they were working with this man?* Maximus exchanged looks with Rex and Hedger, if they didn’t clear this up they could end up in a lot of trouble. “Excuse me,” Hedger started to say, “but we are not with hi...” before Hedger could complete his sentence he had three guns pointed at him. “QUIET,” the woman barked, “I don’t converse with criminals.” Then she signalled her men, and the soldiers had their guns pointed at the four of them. She said, “I am Captain Debra Sharp of the armies of Ares, and unless you want that to be the name of your executioner, I suggest you come quietly.”

Maximus had heard of Captain Sharp before, she was pretty famous within the army. If he remembered correctly she was an experienced melee fighter, but he didn’t remember what her weapon of choice was, and he couldn’t spot anything on her. But the hooded man didn’t seem to be interested in talking, instead he just readied his sword. Among the soldiers five of them had rifles and three had their swords drawn, only Captain Sharp and the Minotaur seemed to be unarmed. And now all of their weapons were pointed at the hooded man.

“Now’s our chance, let’s try to get out of here before things get messy,” Rex muttered. Maximus didn’t know if they could avoid the bullets if

they started running, but it seemed to be the only chance they had. And so they ran. “Shoot them you fools,” Captain Sharp yelled. That was it, Maximus thought he was going to die here. He turned back to see his end, he figured if he was going to die he would rather face it like a man than running away from it like a coward. But what he saw instead, was the hooded man coming to their rescue.

When Maximus turned he saw all five guns pointed at them. But they never got a chance to fire because a single slash had ripped through three of the barrels cutting the rifles in half. With this, the other two gunmen thought it might be a smart idea to take care of the hooded guy first, but they had no luck. With another slash, one of the gunmen began bleeding heavily. And with another the final gunner was disarmed. “What are you waiting for, switch to your swords,” Captain Sharp yelled. With that all the five soldiers drew their swords and the other three swordsmen joined in as well. “Lod,” Captain Sharp said to the Minotaur, “you go after the others.” Lod, the Minotaur, seemed happy at this proposal. He had a stupid grin on his face like a child who had just gotten a new toy. Then he started chasing after them.

When Lod got closer to them Rex tried to talk to him. “Listen Lod, was it? We are not with him, we are just some scavengers who were nearby.” Lod laughed at this. “Oh, just a bunch of scavengers, huh?” he said.

“Please, you got to believe us. I mean we’re ex-military,” Maximus said.

Lod just laughed even harder at this, “You think I care if you’re military or scavengers or dog trainers. I just want someone to break.”

“What?” Rex asked a bit confused.

“Oh you get it right,” Lod continued “You know how rare it is I get to break some bones. I mean human bones break easy but a fellow Minotaur is a real treat even if there’s only half of you left.” Maximus could see the rage building up in Rex’s eyes, he had his fist clenched around his hammer now. Then he said “I got a problem with guys like you.”

Then both Rex and Lod pointed their heads up, made a growl-like sounds and snorted. Maximus knew what this meant, this was how Minotaurs issued a challenge to others. This had turned into a clash of pride and Maximus knew that Rex wouldn’t want him to interfere in this fight. Maximus tried to figure out what to do next as the two Minotaurs began to clash horns and throw their fists. Behind them the hooded man was fighting eight armed soldiers on his own. And the thing was he was making it look easy. Most of the soldiers were already wounded or bleeding, but the man still didn’t seem to have a scratch on him. Captain Sharp was still watching all this in anger.

“What now do we run?” Hedger asked. Maximus didn’t know what to do, he couldn’t interfere with Rex’s fight and he definitely didn’t want to

run away. What he really wanted was to try and help the hooded man, after all he had just saved their lives from the gunmen, and Maximus didn't want to be indebted to him. But he knew that would just worsen things with the army. Besides, it didn't seem like the man needed any help as half of the soldiers were already on the ground.

"I don't know," Maximus said, "but we can't just leave Rex here." Rex and Lod were at each other at full force. Even without an arm and an eye Rex was still holding his own, which Lod really wasn't expecting. But Rex still couldn't find an opening to finish the job.

"Must I do everything myself" Captain sharp said. Then she pushed her cape aside to reveal a green crystal on her shoulder. Maximus knew what it was; he had seen it before with some high-ranking officers. It was a summoning crystal, a magic crystal that could be used to summon an object to its position. Maximus didn't know exactly how it worked, all he knew was it could only work with inanimate objects. He also knew that most ranked officers in the army used it for storing powerful weapons.

Sure enough, the captain tapped the crystal and muttered something under her breath and the next second a huge spear appeared in her hands. Maximus knew from just looking at it that it was no ordinary spear. The spear consisted of a long wooden body with a metal blade at its head.

What made it even more fearsome were the yellow sparks that kept buzzing at the tip. The captain then took her battle stance and the spearhead began glowing yellow.

“Oh man did she just pull out an energy spear?” Hedger said. Energy weapons were specialized weapons using technology or magic to add an extra punch in a battle. These were usually melee type weapons and in the hands of a trained professional could be more destructive than a tank. “Well, I guess we’ll find out just how good Mr. Hood really is,” Maximus said. The captain started off with a bang. A quick jab with the spear sent a blast of energy hurling towards the hooded man. He still managed to dodge it. The captain was a much better fighter than the other soldiers, but the mystery man was better. He was managing to fend off Captain Sharp and four other soldiers on his own. But that’s when one of the other soldiers finally gained consciousness. But instead of going for his sword he went for one of the rifles that were still not broken. He aimed straight for the hooded man’s head and at a distance he couldn’t miss. But before he could take a shot Maximus banged him on the head with his sheathed sword. Maximus didn’t know why he did that. Maybe he was just repaying the man for saving them earlier. Or, maybe, he just respected the man too much as a swordsman to let him be taken out by a bullet from behind. Either way he knew that there was no backing out now so he went to the man’s side to help. “What are you doing?” the hooded man asked.

“I guess I really don’t like being in debt,” Maximus answered, “anyway, I’m here to help.” Maximus began fighting alongside the man, which was a lot harder with a sheathed sword. But most of the soldiers were already wounded and tired so he could hold his own. Only Captain Sharp was the real problem.

The man turned to him and said “If you really want to help go get what’s in that transport to safety, I can hold them off here.” Maximus nodded in agreement and ran to the back of the transport truck while the man blocked anyone who tried to peruse him. As he reached the back of the truck Hedger flew in to join him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Hedger asked, “and when did you and Mr. Hood become best buds?” Maximus didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know hedge, I’m just going with my instinct here.” Maximus stared at the lock on the transport. There was a big padlock on it and he didn’t know how to break it.

Hedger was still ranting on about what Maximus had done. “Would you just shut up and help me with this?” Maximus said. Hedger stuck his tongue out at Maximus and looked at the lock. Then he sheepishly said, “Well, I might actually be able to help with that. He started searching his pouch and pulled out a long green feather with yellow inscriptions on it. It was also carved at the end. “A quill key,” Maximus said in surprise, “from where did you get that?”

A quill key was a magically enhanced key that could be used to open most locks. It was quite rare as the ingredients for making it were hard to come by. They were also illegal. And one of the main ingredients was a long sprite wing feather. And judging by the shape and colour of the feather used in this one Maximus could tell it came from Hedger. “Well a warlock said he would pay good money for five of my longest feathers,” Hedger began explaining, “and he didn’t have all the money he promised me with him so he gave me one of his finished products instead”

“I thought you were against selling your feathers,” Maximus shot back. Hedger stared at the ground and said, “Yeah, well business was kind of slow and morals don’t exactly fill your stomach, do they Max?” Maximus understood why he did it but he didn’t like it. Just possessing that thing was illegal much less producing it. If Hedger had been caught with that the army would have branded him as a thief for sure. “Look, can we please discuss my business ethics later. Like when we don’t have soldiers who want to kill us just a few feet away and focus on the task at hand,” Hedger said. Maximus nodded in agreement and took the quill key from him.

He placed the tip of the quill in the keyhole and it started to glow. A few seconds later the padlock was unlocked. Maximus started removing the bolt and Hedger said, “Okay, now let’s find out what all this fuss is about.” Maximus didn’t know what to expect inside, maybe gold or

magic jewels, or some powerful weapon. But when Maximus finally opened the door all he saw inside was a very thin and frail looking old man in chains curled up in the corner.

The man looked like he was at least a hundred years old. His hair was long and gray, and he had an overgrown beard that was at least a week old. His clothes were torn and dirty. He also had a chain attached to the wall around his leg. Not that he seemed to be in any condition to run away, he just sat there in a corner muttering to himself, and as far as Maximus could tell he hadn't even noticed that the doors had opened. "Umm, so all this is for a dirty old man," Hedger said. Maximus was really confused now. "Don't know, but he must be someone important, let's just ask him."

Maximus went up to the old man and asked, "Sir, who are you?" No response. "Uh sir," he said again. Still nothing. Then Maximus slowly put his hand on the old man's shoulder. The old man looked up so fast that it startled Maximus a bit. Then he said "Glaciers slowly melt as they travel from poles." Maximus didn't understand what he was talking about. "Excuse me," he said.

"Jumping squirrels make nests in hollow trees," was the old man's reply to that.

"Is this guy off his rockers?" Hedger asked.

"Light goes back to white when travelling through two prisms," was the

old man's next quote.

“Yeah, he's definitely nuts,” Hedger said, “so all that fighting wasn't just for any old man, but for one that's crazier than a drunken unicorn.”

“Whatever the case, we can't just leave him here,” Maximus said. He had no idea what was going on but he was pretty sure the army wasn't taking the old man to show him his retirement benefits. Maximus looked at the chain while the old man started talking about snowflakes, but he didn't find a lock or anything on it so the quill key would be useless. He knew he would have to break the chain. “Quick, get me a rock or something to smash the chain with,” he told Hedger.

“That won't be necessary,” said a voice from behind.

Maximus turned back to see that one of the soldiers had finally caught up with them. He was standing at the entrance to the truck and he had a rifle pointed at them. Maximus realized that it was the same soldier he had taken out earlier. He stood there with the gun pointed towards them. Maximus and Hedger froze. The old man still just sat there in his corner mumbling about potassium or something. “It looks like the end of the line for you two,” the soldier said with a grin on his face. That's when a giant scorpion's tail shot out of the ground and ripped right through the soldier's chest.

V

For a moment Maximus was very confused. He even thought he might be dreaming. He had just seen a giant scorpion's tail shoot out from the ground and kill a soldier. It was safe to say he hadn't quite seen anything like that before. But it wasn't long before he understood what was going on. He looked to his side and the look of sheer terror on Hedger's face confirmed what Maximus had already realized. The ground began to shake underneath them. Then the creature erupted from below, towering over the transport truck. The manticore had finally showed itself.

It was easily bigger than a bus. And it stood there like an immense statue. It had six legs, all of which ended in paws with very large and sharp claws on all of them. It had really hard-looking armour on its back, legs and tail. Like the armour of a scorpion. It also had a huge scorpion's tail complete with the stinger and everything, and it was oozing a green poison which was burning the grass below as it fell. It also had yellowish brown fur covering its entire body below the armour. But its most impressive feature by far was its head. It was a huge head of a fully grown male lion whose mane seemed to be as thick as its armour. And the manticore just stood there staring at the transport truck like it was a chew toy.

"Mant...manti...ma...MANTICORE!" Hedger screamed. As a soldier,

Maximus was trained not to falter in the face of danger. But it was really hard not to cry and run away screaming like a three year old in the face of that thing. Maximus tried to draw his sword, but of course the only thing he had was the stupid cursed blade that wouldn't come out of its sheath. That's when the manticore slammed the truck aside with its tail. The truck landed on its side with Maximus, Hedger and the old man still inside. Maximus had hit his head pretty hard in that fall, but luckily it wasn't bleeding. He looked outside to see the manticore staring at the soldiers, Rex, and the hooded man. Everyone had stopped fighting to look at the beast. "No sudden movements," the hooded man said, "it's a predator so it enjoys the case." Then suddenly the manticore took one of the unconscious soldiers from the ground, snapped him in two and threw him to the side. *Well, at least he died in his sleep*, Maximus thought to himself miserably. The manticore now had blood dripping from its mouth, which just added to its scare factor. Then it let out a roar. A roar so loud that it shook the trees around them, and could probably be heard for miles around. At this moment, one of the satyr soldiers decided to run, but before he could take five steps the manticore slashed him with one of its claws and he was dead too.

The captain slammed her spear on the ground and shouted "We are soldiers of Ares, the god of war. And we do not run. So let's kill this abomination and bring its head as a prize for our king." Saying this, she readied her spear into battle position. The other soldiers also yelled in

unison to show their support and came to her side. Soon a battle began between the manticore and the soldiers. Even the hooded man was helping the soldiers.

“What the hell is going on?” Hedger said, his face looked like it was about to burst into tears.

“Well, I would theorize that the manticore sensed the vibrations created due to the fighting done by the soldiers while it was still underground. Being a very territorial and predacious species it most likely decided to confront and attack the unknown threat, which had encroached into its habitat,” the old man said. Maximus and Hedger just stared at the old man with their mouths open. The guy who was blubbering nonsense just a few moments before had suddenly just spoken to them like a science professor, and just when Maximus had begun to think the day couldn’t get any weirder.

“So you’re not crazy then?” Maximus asked.

“Not at the moment, no,” the old man said, “but in another fourteen minutes and eleven seconds I will return to being the blubbering fool you first encountered. But I do suggest that we get out of here well before then my boy, unless you plan to die a rather horrific and painful death at the hands of a fully matured, male ground manticore.”

Rex had just reached the truck as well. He put his head in and said, “I

think that's enough scavenging for today don't you?"

The old man said, "Well, would you look at that – a Minotaur with a broken horn. You should consider yourself lucky for being born in this era my friend, a century ago that was considered as a sign of great shame among your people. Thank the gods that we have moved past such savage discriminations." The look of panic on Rex's face was replaced by one of utter confusion. "Who the heck is this," he asked.

"No idea," Maximus said. "He was a blubbering pile of mush a few seconds ago but now he seems to be the human encyclopedia." The old man put up his finger and said, "Well, there's a very simple explanation for that."

"Well it will have to wait, professor crazy-pants, because right now we need to get out of here," Hedger said.

The old man seemed to be a bit offended by this, but he decided to let it go. "I'm afraid I won't be going anywhere thanks to this," he said, holding up the chain around his leg. Rex looked at the chain then at his two friends, and said "Well do we take him with us?"

Maximus thought for a few seconds, and then said, "We can't just leave him like this. Not with that thing out there."

Rex nodded, then he took out his hammer and said, "Alright old man, stand back." Then he started hammering away on the chain. It took a few

shots but in the end it broke. “Much obliged,” the old man said, “but I must warn you within three minutes and fifty two seconds my mind will begin to wander again.”

Then the four of them stepped out, and the sight they saw was not comforting. Behind them the battle between the manticore and the soldiers was still going on, the only problem was that the soldiers were losing badly. Even Captain Sharp was wounded and on the ground. “Come on, let’s get out of here before...” Rex didn’t even have time to complete the sentence because the manticore had already turned its head towards them. The soldiers, seeing the gap, were retreating. Those that were still alive made a run for the remaining armoured car. Lod the Minotaur managed to pick up Captain Sharp before heading for the car. But the manticore didn’t care, after all it had just got a new batch of chew toys. It looked at the group with hunger in its eyes. “Ok Hedger, you and the old guy get out of here. Me and Maximus will try to slow that thing down,” Rex said.

“But...” Hedger began to say, but Rex cut him off. “No buts, just listen and do as you’re told,” Rex said angrily. Maximus knew it was harsh, but it was the best decision. They would only be in the way.

“Well this is it Max, we always did dream of fighting big monsters didn’t we?” Rex said. Maximus managed to pull off a smile to this and said, “Yup, everything is exactly as planned.” Then he picked up a

sword, which one of the soldiers had left behind, and charged at the manticore and Rex was right there by his side. They tried to go for one of its legs but within seconds he had gotten swatted aside by its tail.

Maximus actually blanked out for a few seconds there. When the manticore had attacked him it had hit his head pretty hard. But when he finally came to his senses what he saw was worse. The manticore had cornered Rex. He was still holding off his attacks, but just barely. Unless Maximus did something Rex was going to die. At that moment Maximus felt something inside him. It wasn't fear or despair like he expected. It wasn't disappointment either. What he felt at that moment was nothing less than pure and unrelenting rage.

Rage, that was the only word to describe it. Maximus had never felt so angry before in his life. He was so furious at the fact that he did not have the power needed to save his friend. At that moment all he knew was that he would kill that manticore, even if it meant going down its throat and ripping it apart from the inside. "Interesting..." a voice said suddenly.

Maximus didn't quite understand from where he heard the sound at first. Then again it was like he hadn't heard it at all. More like the words had just appeared in his head. "On further analysis it seems you might be worthy of using my power after all," said the voice. Maximus felt a vibration on his back. As he looked over his shoulder he noticed that it was coming from the sheathed blade. "Who are you?" Maximus asked.

“Someone who could lend you the power to save your friend. The question is will you take it?” Maximus didn’t know what was going on but without a moment’s hesitation he answered “Yes.”

“Good, not a doubt in your mind,” the voice said, “there is a price of course, but we will speak of the details later. For now draw your blade.”

Without a second thought, Maximus tried to pull out the cursed blade, and the talisman on its sheath broke, and in his hands was a sword that was glowing red like his anger.

VI

Maximus had never held such a weapon like this in his life. The thing was humming slightly and when he held it he just knew that it could do some damage. With new found confidence he charged at the manticore. He aimed for one of the back legs and as he slashed he expected to cut off the entire leg, but sadly things didn't exactly go according to plan, and even though the blade made a huge slash in the armour it wasn't quite enough to slow it down; never mind cutting the entire foot off. What it did manage to do was get the manticore's attention, and it turned to bear its bloody teeth at Maximus. Its roar alone pushed him back a few steps. Rex tried to help but he was in no shape to even get up, much less try to take on a manticore. He managed to land his hammer on to one of its knees, but a casual swat with the manticore's tail sent him flying. Soon, he was on the ground unconscious. Maximus was still able to dodge its shots – with its size the claws were much slower than Maximus. The tail on the other hand moved like a whip. The only reason it hadn't turned Maximus into a human shiskabab was the fact that it was too large not to see coming. But he knew it would end soon, he could feel his body tiring. Also, the Manticore had pushed him into a corner. Maximus couldn't run anymore, he just didn't have the energy. He was down on one knee and he stared up to see the manticore's tail aimed right at him. He knew he couldn't dodge it this time. He knew this time

it would kill him. Only a miracle could save him now. And the miracle came in the form of a blue slash.

Just when the tail had been above the manticore's head a blinding beam of blue light shot forward in the shape of a crescent. The tail was slashed right off and the acid-like poison started spilling everywhere, and most of it was landing on the manticore itself. Maximus ran for cover from the rain of poison that was spilling around him. The manticore started to roar again, only this time it was in pain. It began scrambling around, confused, trying to find what had brought it such pain. And then it found him. Because walking towards the now tailless manticore was the hooded man. And in his hand was his sword, but this time it was significantly bluer. There was a blue energy surrounding the blade, but unlike Max's sword, which merely had energy around it, this one was enveloped in it. It was almost as if the entire blade was covered in an enormous blue flame. Only the hilt of the blade was spared. Maximus knew now from where the crescent shaped blast had come. But now, what he really wanted to know, was what kind of monster that man was.

The man charged at the manticore. But even without its tail the Manticore was still a fearsome beast. It tried to slash the man with its front claw. The man, instead of dodging it decided to block it, which would have been impossible with an ordinary sword. But the man not only blocked the claw but he also thrust his blade further. Soon the claw lay beside him on the ground. Another roar of pain came from the

monster. In its struggle some of the acid spewing from its tail landed on the man's cloak, and it began to burn it away. The man then finally decided to throw away his cloak and hood, and Maximus saw that he was wearing black armour underneath it. Maximus couldn't help but feel that he had seen that armour before, but he couldn't quite place it – and he still hadn't gotten a good look at his face. It seemed impossible now because the cloak seemed to have been really slowing him down. However, now that he had got rid of it he was moving like a blur, and the manticore was making sure that he didn't stand still for long. But the man easily dodged and blocked all of the monster's attacks. By now the entire floor was filled with acid, but it didn't seem to have any effect on the armour, although it did manage to burn away the wraps around his legs. That was when Maximus saw it. The man's left leg was bionic. His left leg ended at the knee and from there on it was an artificial leg made of metal. That's when it hit Maximus, and suddenly he knew why the armour looked so familiar, the armour that did not cover the left leg. But that's impossible Maximus thought to himself – he was supposed to be dead.

The man had finally found an opening with the manticore. When the beast tried to take a bite out of him the man ducked under its head and was now below the manticore's stomach. Maximus realized what he was doing. The underbelly of the manticore had no armour, it was its weak spot. Right then, the man thrust his sword upward into the beast's belly

and with a final slash ripped a gaping hole in its stomach. Blood spewed from the wound. And the manticore was dead before its body hit the ground.

For a moment Maximus thought that the man was trapped under the corpse. But then he saw the man walking up to him, putting away his now normal- looking sword. He came right up to Maximus and said, “Just because you get a powerful weapon, does not mean you know how to use it, kid.” Maximus was trembling now worse than when he had seen the manticore. After all, Achilles had just called him ‘kid’.

VII

“You’re...you’re...” Maximus tried to say.

“Achilles” the man completed with a slight nod.

Maximus couldn’t believe his eyes. But standing before him was one of the greatest warriors in history, Achilles. The hero of the Trojan War, the invulnerable warrior, killer of Hector, a true legend among men.

“But you’re supposed to be dead,” Maximus said.

“So I have heard. Can you walk?” he answered.

Maximus nodded, and got to his feet. And now that he got a good look at him there was no mistaking it. It really was the great Achilles. Maximus had seen pictures of him before, even an old video of a fight of his during the Trojan War. Heck his bunkmate in the army had a poster of him hanging on their room wall. This was definitely him. His hair was black and had the same almost military style cut as Maximus. He didn’t have a beard but he did have stubble growing. Guess he didn’t have time to shave between plotting to take on a military convoy or something. It wasn’t hard to see that he was good looking. His features looked like they were sculpted and his body seemed like it was carved from metal. Maximus remembered a female soldier named Cindy once telling him what a pity it was that someone so handsome had to die in war. *Well, I*

guess Cindy was wrong, Maximus thought. He was definitely still alive. He even had the scar above his right eye. The one he had got in his legendary fight to the death with Hector. Which Achilles won, of course. And the armour – Maximus couldn't believe that he hadn't recognized it at first. It was almost as famous as Achilles himself. 'The armour of Styx', a legendary armour forged by the smith god Hephaestus, made from a rare black metal only found at the bottom of the powerful river called Styx that flowed in the underworld. It was said to be invulnerable to almost any form of attack. Maximus was looking at a piece of history itself.

Achilles walked up to him and asked, "Are you alright?" to which Maximus nodded. "I apologize for breaking away from battle for a while. But I needed time to charge my attack," Achilles continued, "and in my tired state it took longer than expected." Maximus wanted to respond, but he was still a bit too awestruck to form eligible words so he just nodded again. Achilles then walked over to Rex who was still unconscious. "You might want to find a way to wake him up," Achilles said. "I don't think carrying him is an option. Then get out of here as fast as you can, the soldiers will be back with reinforcements. The transport was carrying a high profile target."

Maximus realized he was talking about the old man. He still didn't understand how he fitted into the picture or why he was a high profile target. "So what are you planning to do?" Maximus asked, finally able to

pull himself together.

“I have to find him before the soldiers do.” Maximus thought about this for a moment, and he came to the conclusion that he might be safer with Achilles than the soldiers. Then he said, “Then um...sir, Mr. Achilles, I think we can move together. The old man you’re searching for is most probably with my friend, the sprite.” Achilles looked at Maximus, his expressions were still as stone-faced as ever. “Do you have any idea where they might be?” Even though they hadn’t planned it, Maximus had a pretty good idea where Hedger would be headed. “There’s a cave not far from here. Its entrance is hard to find unless you know it’s there, so it’s safe from most animals and monsters. We sort of use it as our camp between long scavenger hunts.”

Achilles nodded at this and said, “And your name?” holding out his arm. Maximus realized that he still hadn’t introduced himself. He shook his hand “Maximus, sir, and that’s Rex, by the way,” he said, pointing to his still unconscious friend. Well, despite everything that happened to him at least he could say he shook hands with Achilles.

It took a while to get Rex back on his feet again, but some water from a nearby stream finally woke him up. When he got up his first words were “Are we dead?” Maximus responded with a grin and said “No, but the manticore sure is.”

“How?” he managed to mutter, and Maximus just pointed at Achilles.

“Who’s that?” Rex asked.

“Remember the hooded guy?” Maximus said, and Rex nodded. Maximus was about to say more but Achilles cut him off. “If he can walk then we should get moving.” Maximus nodded and began leading the way with Rex closely at his shoulder. Achilles followed a few feet behind.

After half an hour or so Rex had finally regained whatever strength he could and his head was feeling better, too. When he was sure Achilles wasn’t near enough to hear he murmured to Maximus, “You know, now that I get a good look at him he kind of looks like...”

“He is,” Maximus said.

Rex let out a snort and said, “No listen, the guy I’m thinking of is dead.”

“Well he’s not,” Maximus replied “That’s him all right, with the scar and armour and everything.”

Rex turned back to look at the man again this time more wide eyed than before. “What makes you so sure?”

Maximus merely shrugged his shoulders and said, “‘cause he told me.” Maximus wasn’t sure if Achilles had heard them or not, but even if he did he didn’t show it.

After that Rex fell silent. Maximus guessed that the new piece of information must have made his head hurt again. After all he still couldn't believe it himself. After a few more minutes they reached the entrance of the cave. And when they went inside, Hedger was waiting for them with the old man, just like Maximus had predicted.

"You're alive," Hedger said with joy, "how the heck are you still alive?" Hedger started flying in circles around his friends.

"Thank him," Maximus said towards Achilles. Hedger looked at the great warrior and said, "I don't get it, you guys got rescued by a male super model?" Of course, Hedger was never in the army so he wasn't exactly familiar with what Achilles looked like, but Maximus was sure even he had heard of his name. "Hedger that's Achilles," he said.

It took a few seconds for Hedger to let what he had heard sink in. "Achilles," he said, "as in the Trojan War hero, Achilles." Maximus nodded, and he had never seen Hedger's mouth so wide open before. This was saying something as he rarely shut his mouth.

Maximus looked around the cave and saw that the old man was sitting in a corner mumbling to himself again. "What happened?" Maximus asked.

"Yeah, he sort of went back to his factory settings after we got separated," Hedger said, "but he did say that he would speak sensibly again in another eleven hours and forty five minutes or something, right

before he went coo-coo and started talking about tea cultivation methods.”

Achilles walked up to the old man; after seeing for himself what had happened he turned to the other three for explanation. Maximus and Hedger explained the best they could about how they had found the old man, and how he had turned normal for some time. At the end of their story Achilles said, “You sprite, he said he would be normal again in eleven hours?”

Hedger nodded and said, “And forty five minutes. But that’s all we know Mr. Achilles, honest. We have no idea what’s wrong with your grandpa.”

“My grandfather?” Achilles said, clearly not understanding that he meant it as a joke. Maximus was kind of glad he didn’t, Hedger had an annoying habit of making jokes when he got nervous. And Maximus really didn’t think this was the time. “I assure you that we are not related by blood. But I do owe a great deal to this man,” Achilles said. “You might have heard of him – his name is Daedalus.”

All three of them had definitely heard the name before. Daedalus was considered to be one of the greatest inventors alive, and was known for having nearly a thousand patents in his name. They said that his wisdom ranged into every topic imaginable, from physical mechanics to cellular

biology to sports statistics. It was said that if you had used a piece of technology in your life it probably had something Daedalus invented in it.

“So that old man is Daedalus, the great inventor,” Rex said, and Achilles nodded. “Great, and I called him professor crazy pants,” Hedger muttered. Achilles then sat on a rock and said, “It seems I will have to wait a few hours for some answers then, and I must thank you three for your help, even if at times it was unintentional.”

He was right about that. They had gone back to find him in order to stop him from attacking the convoy, and somewhere along the way they had all ended up in the same team. But now Maximus and the others were faced with a big question, what to do next?

Maximus knew that their troubles weren't over just yet. They had attacked and helped rob a military convoy. One that had been carrying a high level prisoner such as Daedalus just made it worse. It wasn't hard to figure out why Daedalus was taken prisoner. Mars has been at war with the country of Minerva for over five years now. Both Maximus and Rex had even fought against their soldiers and Rex had even been on the front line. The land of Minerva was ruled by Empress Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Their capital city of Athens was also named after her. Even though her official title said goddess of wisdom, her strategic brilliance and powerful army had earned her another name as well, the

goddess of war. This name greatly annoyed Lord Ares. But the war between the two countries was contained at the frontlines for now so the trenches were not really affected. Also the trenches were not exactly a place brimming with patriotism as most of the people were outcasts there. Anyway, Daedalus was a resident of Athens, fitting as it was considered as the innovative capital of the world. He was also a known advisor to the Empress there. It didn't take a genius to figure out the amount of Intel he could provide. But all this meant that the three of them were wanted fugitives by now.

“So what's the plan?” Hedger finally asked. Rex thought about this for a while then he said, “I think we should spend the night in the caves. For one thing I'm in no shape to start crawling through the tunnels again. For another, by tomorrow we can be sure if the soldiers are searching for us.” Maximus agreed. He knew that by now the soldiers who escaped would have reported back and that the army would start searching for whoever attacked them. And, as always, the search would start at the trenches. A soldier, a Minotaur without an arm and a green sprite was not exactly a very common team up and they would be identified instantly. They had to be real careful while entering the city tomorrow.

“So it's agreed then we'll spend the night here,” Rex said.

Hedger began flying around trying to find a good place to hang his tail.

“If you want us to leave I would understand,” Achilles said.

“Not at all sir, there are enough rocks here for all of us,” Hedger said and Maximus and Rex nodded in agreement.

“There’s no need to call me sir, Achilles is fine,” he said, and there was even a very slight smile on his face.

“Well I don’t know about you guys but I’m starving,” Hedger said.

“We still got the apricots from the morning, most got real squashed in the fight but they are still edible” Rex said. And so they all enjoyed a dinner of squashed apricots and water from a nearby stream. Even Daedalus ate some between his mumbling.

With this it was time to turn in for the night. Achilles decided to take the first watch, which everyone was fine with. If he had wanted to kill them he had plenty of other ways than in their sleep. And after the way he had saved them multiple times today even after they tried to stop him it was hard not to trust the guy. Maximus finally lay down on the most comfortable rock he could find and in a few seconds he was sound asleep.

VIII

Maximus opened his eyes and all around him all he could see was darkness. “I think it’s time we spoke, child,” a voice said, and he knew it was the same voice that had spoken to him before, the one that had unsheathed his blade. “Where am I?” Maximus asked.

“Why, we are inside your head. Not to worry, your body is still asleep. Just think of this as a dream.”

Maximus wasn’t sure what was going on but that had been happening a lot lately so he decided to just go with it. “Alright then, who are you?” Maximus asked.

“I am afraid I cannot tell you that. My identity remaining unknown is very important to my safety at the moment. But to you I am a friend.” *Great*, Maximus thought, *a voice in my head wants to be my friend*. He was pretty sure this was one of the first signs of insanity. “So, friend, this blade is yours?” Maximus asked.

“In a way yes, but you can have it, you just have to do a favour for me,” the voice said.

“And that would be?” he asked.

“Nothing too complicated of course. As you noticed this is an energy weapon. To be more specific it is a heat blade. The way it works is that it

generates heat around the blade that greatly increases its attack power. The heat increases depending on your strength and willpower, and sometimes it is also influenced by emotion,” the voice said.

Maximus thought about this and said, “Like when I got angry while fighting the manticore?”

“Exactly,” the voice said. “Now you are free to use it as you please as long as you follow one condition, when you come across a powerful enough energy source allow the blade to absorb it.”

Maximus was quite sure that he needed professional psychiatric help now. He wasn’t even able to understand the voice in his own head. “I’m not sure I follow,” he said.

“It’s simple, you just keep fighting monsters and anything else you feel like, everything has energy inside it and the blade will automatically absorb it, you need not do anything extra. But if I were to detect a powerful enough force I need you to go and absorb it.”

“And how do I do that?” Maximus asked.

“Simply make it come in contact with the blade. And you need not worry about locating them either, I will let you know if I sense them. So Maximus do you agree?”

Maximus didn’t like any of this business deal. But he knew that the blade was really powerful and he probably wouldn’t get another one like

it in his lifetime. He decided that the best course of action would be not to over-think it. “Alright then, it’s a deal,” he said. The voice sounded pleased by this. “Excellent, now it is important that you do not tell anyone that you have spoken with me. Otherwise I will make sure that the sword returns to being a useless piece of junk. Most would not believe you anyway. And to show my appreciation in our new-found friendship I shall give you this parting gift.”

The darkness began to fade away and soon Maximus was standing in a huge room. The walls and pillars were red and gold, and there were two Minotaur soldiers standing guard at the entrance. The walls were decorated with every kind of weapon imaginable including swords, shields, guns and even a couple of RPGs. At the centre of the room was a huge throne made of gold and encrusted with rubies. Its seats and cushions were made from red silk, and the top of the throne was decorated with a golden spearhead with a single huge triangular ruby at the centre. The red and gold spear was the symbol of Lord Ares. Behind the throne was a huge portrait of Ares standing in a battlefield with his spear raised in one hand and the beheaded head of a Cyclops in the other. Maximus realized that he was standing in Ares’s throne room. A chill ran down his spine. This really was one of the last places he wanted to be right now.

“Do not worry child, no one can see you here,” the voice said, “neither

can you interact with anything that happens. All you can do is watch and observe.” Just then the doors to the throne room opened and three men entered. And the one in the middle was none other than Lord Ares himself.

Maximus had seen Lord Ares before, but only while giving speeches through a monitor. But seeing him in person was not the same. He stood at about eight feet tall, easily dwarfing the two Minotaur guards at the door, and his body was as muscular as it was large, with arms the size of tree trunks. He was wearing a red uniform with a matching general’s cap with his spear symbol in the centre. His uniform was decorated with many medals and even buttons made of gold. His hair was short and he had a full grown but neatly trimmed beard, and both were a fiery red. He walked in and sat on his throne and it was easy to see from the expression on his face that he was not happy.

The other two men were not exactly ordinary citizens either. They were the two second in command officers in the army and were only outranked by Lord Ares himself. Maximus recognized the two generals. They were Deimos, the god of fear and Phobos, the god of terror. Both men were also dressed in the army’s red. Deimos looked young like he was in his late twenties but Maximus knew he was much older. He was the strongest mage in the army and was dressed in robes with a hood like most army mages. He also carried a long staff with him. Phobos on the

other hand was a pure warrior. He was almost as big as Ares and had long black hair till his shoulder, but no beard. He was dressed in full battle armour and had a huge skull of some monster for the shoulder guard. He had no weapon on him now but Maximus had heard that he used a giant club and a machine gun in battle. Last, he had heard both these generals were at the front line in their war against Athena; if they were called back it must be for something important.

“Sir, the report says that the convoy was attacked by a group of four. But that the prisoner escaped when the soldiers were assaulted by a manticore while engaging in battle with the attackers,” Deimos said. Ares looked at his generals with rage. “I do not want a report, I want Daedalus back in chains!”

“Do we know who did this” Phobos asked, his voice was like rocks grinding each other.

“Well it does not take a genius to figure out it was one of Athena’s men,” Ares said.

“Yes my Lord, but all of her most powerful soldiers are still on the front line including her champion, we already checked,” Deimos said.

“So?” Ares said, it was easy to see that he was annoyed.

“Well my Lord, of the attackers a swordsman, he was said to be quite powerful, he almost took out the entire convoy single-handedly. It is also likely that it was he who took out the manticore. He is definitely no

ordinary fighter.”

“What difference does it make if Athena begged for outside help? I do not plan to send a weakling to hunt down someone who dares steal from me,” Ares said. Just then a woman entered the room and said, “Brother, the soldiers you asked for have arrived.”

Maximus knew this woman as well. She was the third and final of Ares’s generals, Eris. She was also his sister. Eris was called the goddess of discord. A name she had earned due to her deceptive methods in battle, which she used to turn allies against each other. Maximus didn’t know the details, this was just something that he had heard while he was in the army. She had red hair like her brother and she let it grow long. Also, she would have been beautiful if her face wasn’t stuck with a permanent scowl. She was in full red battle armour that had enough jewels on it to buy a four storied mansion. Maximus couldn’t believe that he was actually witnessing a meeting between all the top officers of the army.

“Send them in,” Ares told his sister. On her command four soldiers entered. It was none other than Captain Debra Sharp and her team, the ones that had survived anyway. Only two humans and the Minotaur Lod were left with her.

“Captain Sharp is it? Can you explain to me why my prisoner did not

reach me?” Lord Ares asked almost mockingly.

“I have no excuses my Lord,” Captain Sharp said with her head bowed.

“Good, because I really wasn’t in the mood to hear any. But you see, whatever the reason, I am not someone who takes failure lightly.”

“Please, my Lord. The swordsman that attacked us was no ordinary man,” Lod said, “and then the manticore...” but Lord Ares had just got off his throne and that was enough to stop Lod in mid-sentence. Ares then walked up to the Minotaur and grabbed his neck. Then he lifted him with the ease of lifting a baby. Lod’s feet were not even touching the ground. “Perhaps you are trying to tell me that it was my fault for not providing adequate security.” He was choking Lod and he could barely speak.

“No...No my Lord...” Lod had begun to say. But it was too late. Ares, with a squeeze of his arm snapped the Minotaur’s neck. Lod lay dead on the ground the next second.

“Well Captain, I expect you to return with my prisoner or not to return at all, now go,” Ares said angrily. The captain and her subordinates left with a bow, not saying another word.

“And someone get this carcass out of my sight,” he continued. The guards at the door came and took away Lod’s body, they seemed to be used to doing this.

“Are you sure we should not let someone more capable bring back Daedalus my Lord, perhaps one of us?” Deimos said.

“Yes I am aware of that, but not any of you, Deimos. I want you and Phobos to return to the front line immediately. Eris, go join them within a few days with whatever supplies are needed for the war.”

The three generals nodded in agreement to this. Ares continued “And dear sister, give the task of finding Daedalus to our champion.”

Eris didn't seem too sure of this “Are you sure of this brother, to trust such an important task with the barbarian?”

“Yes, I believe he is more than capable,” Ares said, “just make sure to tell him that I want Daedalus alive and not to feed him to those wicked horses of his.” Then suddenly the scene began to dissolve and Maximus awoke with a start.

IX

When Maximus woke it was still night, and everyone else was sleeping. He thought of the dream he just had. No way was it just a regular dream, it was too real and intact, and unlike most dreams he remembered all of it. Well Lord Ares was definitely not happy about losing Daedalus and it seemed they had also been added to the list of the people who freed him. Maximus was starting to realize that it might be impossible to return to the trenches or stay anywhere in the trenches for that matter. They could try talking to the army but he had a feeling that the end result might be similar to Lod's fate. They could try returning Daedalus, but he didn't fancy their chances against Achilles. Besides it felt wrong. Advisor to Athena or not, a brilliant scientist like Daedalus did not belong in the dungeons of Ares.

Maximus realized that the best option they had was to run. He had dreamt of leaving the trenches for a long time but now that he was being forced to do so he wasn't so sure anymore. After all, this was his home. Besides, even if they did run where would they go. But if Ares's champion was after them they really couldn't linger around. A champion was a post given to only one warrior in any kingdom. He or she was like a personal fighter for a god. They usually out-ranked most military officers as well, and only took orders from their patron gods. Needless to say, the champions were very powerful and feared warriors. And Ares's

champion was a merciless killer. Another question arose in Max's mind. How was he going to explain everything he had just seen? Especially since the voice in the sword had specifically instructed him not to reveal its existence.

That's when Maximus heard a noise from outside. He went out to look and saw a figure walking around the bushes nearby. At first he thought it might be a soldier, but he knew that the army would never send just one person to do a search. He thought about his next move and he decided to confront the person, but not without backup. His first choice would have been Rex but he was still wounded from before, and he really did not want to wake Achilles. So he went with Hedger. That way he thought if things went bad, Hedger could fly back up and wake up the others. He slowly went to his friend who was hanging upside down with his tail wrapped around a stalactite fast asleep, and shook him to wake him up.

"Yes, I'll have another orange pastry," Hedger mumbled in his sleep. It took a couple more shakes to finally wake him up. He finally awoke and said "What happened now. Did some other famous celebrity walk into our cave?"

"Stop kidding around Hedge, there's someone in the bushes nearby and we need to check it out."

This woke him up. "You have a Minotaur soldier, and one of the greatest warriors in history right there and you call me for backup?" he said

angrily. “Rex is still injured, and if you want to wake up Achilles with no good reason be my guest,” Maximus said.

“But there might be a good reason, they could be soldiers,” Hedger replied. Maximus shook his head in response “I don’t think so. For one thing there’s only one guy and he’s moving around like he’s a bit lost.”

Hedger thought for a moment. “Alright, but you do the talking. At the first sight of trouble I’ll fly back up and call in the cavalry.” Maximus nodded and then both of them went down into the bushes.

They moved through the bushes as stealthy as they could and found their guy standing in a clearing taking a rest from his search. “You know with our luck I wouldn’t be surprised if this was the great Heracles.”

“I heard he goes by the name Hercules now, ever since he had a fight with Queen Hera,” Maximus said, “anyway, let’s focus on the work at hand and discuss world gossip at another time.”

Hedger nodded and said, “Ok you go on ahead and I’ll wait here. If things get ugly I’ll bolt back to the cave and call the others.” Maximus agreed and he stepped out into the clearing.

Maximus still couldn’t see the person properly, since it was still really dark. “Stop whatever you are doing and turn around slowly, and don’t try anything funny I’m already armed.” He said this with the most confident voice he could muster. He had his hand on his sword, ready to

draw at the first sight of trouble. The person turned, he looked at Maximus, or in this case she did, because the person was none other than Kayla.

Kayla ran up to Maximus and hugged him. Maximus felt his knees shiver. He also felt as though his stomach was doing a somersault. Kayla had never hugged him before, and Maximus had sort of dreamed of this moment in his head a million times. But now that it was here he was nervous and sweating. “Kayla. What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Searching for you, everyone thinks you’re dead. Rumours said that you guys were involved in the fight against the manticore and I feared the worse. Wait, where are Hedger and Rex?”

At that moment Hedger came flying out and said, “Right here my lady,” with a grin on his face.

“Rex is fine too. He did get injured in the battle so he’s resting in the cave” Maximus said glad and a bit disappointed that Kayla had let go of him. Kayla seemed relieved to hear that they were all okay. “I knew you guys would be at the stupid cave you always talked about. I knew it was somewhere around here, but I couldn’t find the entrance.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit hard to spot if you don’t know where it is. But you shouldn’t be here, especially at night, the outskirts are dangerous.”

Kayla gave him a look and said, “Oh please, don’t be such a guy, like I’m a helpless little lamb or something. You know that I’m just as well

trained as you.”

Maximus knew this was true. He knew that her father gave her regular combat training almost every day. Being the daughter of a paranoid ex-soldier was like that, he guessed. Also, there was a kind of toughness you got from growing up in the trenches and Kayla had plenty of it.

“Besides,” Kayla continued, “I bought one of my dad’s toys along just in case.” She pulled out a sub-machine gun from under her top, an Uzi, and showed it to them. “Remind me never to get on your bad side girl,” Hedger said, and Kayla smiled at this. The smile lit a small flame in Max’s heart, one that warmed him from the inside. Soon there was a grin on his face.

“I wouldn’t be grinning like an idiot if I were you. Just look at this,” Kayla said. She then handed him a piece of paper. He opened it to see that it was a wanted poster. One made for him, Rex and Hedger.

It was a standard military wanted poster. Maximus had seen many of them like this before. But he had never expected to see his face on one of them. It said ‘WANTED ALIVE’ followed by three boxes, two contained his and Rex’s photos, the ones that were used in their files in the army. The third contained a drawing of a weird green bird thing. Maximus realized that it was supposed to be Hedger, but it looked nothing like him. Below these were their names and details of a reward to anyone who could help find them. Also details on how to contact the

army were given at the bottom. It had the official seal of the army on it, the crimson and gold spear.

“Is that supposed to be me?” Hedger asked staring at the poster. “Has no one in the army even seen a sprite before in their lives?”

Maximus agreed, he felt that it was high time the army got a new sketch artist. “I wonder how much the rewards on our heads are though?” Maximus said. Kayla gave both of them a slight whack on the head. Then she said, “You guys are taking this way too lightly. Do you realize what this means. There’s no way you can return to the trenches now.”

Maximus had already feared this. He said, “Yeah I know.”

The three of them stood silently for a while. Finally, Hedger spoke, “Maybe we can sneak in and get our stuff at least.”

Kayla shook her head, “That’s not possible. The soldiers already trashed your homes searching for you guys. I’m pretty sure they still have someone watching them.”

Hedger stared at the ground and said, “So this is it then, we have to say goodbye to the trenches and everyone we know, just like that.”

No one answered him. After a few seconds of silence Kayla finally asked “How did you guys get into so much trouble, anyway?”

Maximus was about to answer when she said “No on second thought, don’t tell me. The less I know the better. They already know you guys

hung out at the cannon and the army mages have ways of getting information out of people. I think it will be better if I know nothing.” Maximus didn’t like this but he knew that it was the smart thing to do.

“Well I guess this is it then, I guess you guys got to get out of here and lay low for a while. You can probably come back after things cool down a bit,” Kayla said in a low voice.

“Don’t worry I promise that we will come back,” Maximus said, trying to give her an assuring smile. Then Kayla did something unexpected: she stepped forward and grabbed Max’s shirt. Then she kissed him on the lips. When she finally pulled away, she said, “Just in case you ever feel like breaking that promise,” and gave him a slight smile. Maximus just stood there dumbstruck at what had happened. He couldn’t even utter a single word.

“I have to get back before Dad wakes up, and say goodbye to Rex for me too Hedger.” Then with a smile she gave a final wave as she turned and left

X

It took a few seconds after she left for Maximus to return to his senses. When he looked at Hedger he had a grin so wide on his face that his lips were almost touching his ears.

“Not one word,” Maximus said before Hedger could say anything. The sun had risen by the time they got back to the cave, and Hedger had been snickering the whole way. They had stopped to gather water from the stream on the way, and by the time they got back Rex and Achilles were already awake. Only Daedalus was still asleep, curled up in a corner.

“Where did you guys go” Rex asked.

“Kayla was here searching for us. We just went to talk to her,” Maximus said. “And?” Rex asked. Before Maximus could say anything, Hedger said, “And they did more than just talk, if you know what I mean. Our young Max is all grown up now, kissing girls in the middle of the night”. Maximus scowled but a smile lit up Rex’s face. He patted Maximus on the back and said, “Well done Max. You sure did take your sweet time, but you finally manned up and did it. But you don’t seem too happy about it. She didn’t slap you did she?”

Maximus shook his head and said, “No nothing like that, and actually she kissed me.”

“Well so much for you manning up,” Rex said with a snort, “but you two finally kissed and the result is what’s important. So why do you still look so gloomy?” Maximus took out the wanted poster, handed it to Rex, and said “This is why.”

The smile vanished from Rex’s face and his head came back to reality. “Never thought we’d end up on one of these,” he said.

Maximus told him everything Kayla had said. “So in short we got every soldier, snitch and bounty hunter in the trenches on the lookout for us. There’s no way we can go back.” Rex nodded, but all this left them with one question. Where to next?

All three of them had spent their entire life in Mars. And as far as Maximus knew, neither of them knew anyone outside the country. “Maybe we don’t need to leave. I still got some friends in the army. If we can get to them we can talk our way out of this mess,” Rex said.

Maximus knew that it was no use, he shook his head and said “Unless your contacts just happened to be one of the three generals or Lord Ares himself, I don’t think it’s much use.”

All of them, including Achilles looked at him. Achilles asked “Why do you say that?” Maximus realized he still hadn’t told them about his dream. He wasn’t sure how to start either. “Um well yesterday, I saw a dream. And it sort of involved all the top ranks in the army,” he said.

Maximus went on to explain everything he had seen but he left out the part about the voice. He just told whatever he saw in the throne room. After listening to his story everyone fell silent. Finally, Achilles asked, “Do you have the gift of prophecy?”

Maximus shook his head and said, “No, at least I don’t think so.”

“Maybe it was just a regular dream, that’s all,” Hedger said.

But Rex didn’t seem to think so “It sure doesn’t sound like it. The details are too real”

Maximus realized that he had to give some sort of explanation. But he really didn’t want to lie to his friends either. He decided that the best option was to tell a part of the truth at least. “Guys, I think it has something to do with this,” he said, showing them his sword.

“That, what does any of this have to do with that?” Hedger asked.

“And what happened to the talisman that was on it?” Rex asked.

The two of them still didn’t know that he could draw the sword now. So he took it out and showed it to them. The sword looked magnificent, but it did not have the red glow around it this time. Rex took the sword from his hand to examine it and asked, “When did this happen?”

“When we were fighting the manticore, you were unconscious by then,” he answered. “I sort of just pulled it in mid-battle and the talisman broke. The next thing I know the sword was in my hand.”

When Hedger too had finished looking at the sword he gave it back to Maximus and said, “As weird as that is I still don’t get how a sword gave you psychic powers. I mean a sword that gives you vision just seems farfetched to me.”

“Farfetched perhaps, but not impossible,” said Daedalus from behind them. He had finally woken up and it seemed he was actually in his senses again.

“Eleven hours and forty five minutes, the timing works perfectly,” Daedalus said. It was the first time since they met that Maximus actually saw Achilles smile. “Daedalus my old friend, it’s nice to see you have returned,” he said. They shared a brief hug and shook each other’s hands.

“Oh I wish I was in a better state to greet you Achilles, nonetheless, I wish I had some way to thank you for the rescue,” Daedalus said.

“Well you could start by explaining why you seemed a bit off for the last eleven hours,” he said.

“And forty five minutes,” Daedalus added with a smile, there was a spark in his eyes now, “and that was no accident, either, my friend. It is the effect of my latest invention, a potion really, and I haven’t thought of a name for it yet. What this potion does is it makes the neuro-toxins within your brain go haywire, thus making the drinker for all purposes,

insane. But that's not the clever part; I designed it in such a way so that every twelve hours the drinker returns to their sane self for fifteen minutes."

Maximus sort of understood what he was talking about, but he had to ask "But why would you drink it yourself, sir?"

He felt like a schoolchild asking the teacher a question in a lesson.

"For security my boy," Daedalus began to explain. "When I got caught by Ares's men while researching the rare Haluclove flower in the forest, I quickly drank the potion so as to prevent them from extracting information from me. You see this way I couldn't tell them anything no matter what they tried, even torture. And even in the fifteen minutes I came to my senses I could still pretend to be mad while still in captive. Also, even in my state of madness I am still aware of everything around me, I merely cannot act on it since my body and mind are not connected at the time."

Maximus thought about what he just heard, it seemed a bit insane but it was effective. It would have been really hard for the army to get information on Athena's plans when their prisoner was a mumbling vegetable.

"But now aren't you sort of stuck like this" Hedger asked.

"Not at all, I have an antidote created for it already. But sadly it is still in my lab in Athens. And trying to recreate it would not be advised as I do

not have the equipment or the ingredients for it.”

Achilles looked at the old inventor with a smirk, and said, “Only you would think of something so crazy and brilliant at the same time.”

Daedalus gave a little bow and said “I humbly accept your praise old friend”.

“Now that you are all fully aware of my situation, I think it would be wise for us to listen to the young Max’s vision,” Daedalus said.

“So you think his visions are real?” Achilles asked. Daedalus nodded in agreement, “I most certainly do. Even if he is not a prophet there are still many ways he could see the visions. For one, someone else could be giving it to him. But I think he is on to something about his sword.”

“So you think the sword is giving him the vision?” Hedger asked, still a bit unconvinced.

“Well, I am not sure, but I did notice that the markings and designs of his blade are quite ancient. Perhaps even from a time when technology was not so advanced.” Maximus wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but he still nodded in agreement. So did everyone else. But Daedalus sighed; the blank expressions on all their faces were a dead giveaway.

“I believe a quick history lesson is needed here,” Daedalus said, “back in the old days during the Titan rule and such technology was still non-

existent. Still the Titans ran an empire nearly as well established as the gods. The reason for this is that magic was much more advanced in those days. But, once the gods took over, the world was built up from scratch again and a lot of things including advanced magic techniques and spells were lost to us in the Titan war. But when the Olympian empire began to grow magic and technology began to grow hand-in-hand. Even though this was a great achievement indeed, it had one drawback. Since magic and technology could make up for in what the other lacked it prevented both sectors from advancing beyond a certain point. In theory, technology would have advanced much further if there was no magic. Similarly, our magic today is not nearly as advanced as it was during the Titan age.” He stopped to see if everyone had understood.

“So, you are trying to say Max’s blade is from that era?” Rex asked.

“Exactly, and if that is the case it is quite possible that his blade could have enchantments on it which we have never heard of.” Daedalus concluded with that, and looked at them. “So it’s agreed then. We take the kid’s dreams very seriously,” Achilles said.

“All that’s great, but that still leaves us with nowhere to go,” Hedger pointed out.

“Perhaps I can be of assistance there as well, after all you are in all this trouble because you helped aid my rescue.”

Rex asked “What do you have in mind?”

Daedalus took a sip of water from the bottle they had filled, and said, “Well, as you know I am an advisor to Empress Athena, if you were to join me to Athens I am sure she would reward you handsomely for your deed. You could even live in Athens if you like.”

Maximus shifted uncomfortably at this and his eyes met Rex’s. He knew they were thinking the same thing. Mars and Minerva had been at war for years now. Somehow, Maximus didn’t think two ex-soldiers from Mars and their friend would be very welcome at Athens asking for a citizenship.

“I don’t think that would be a great idea Daedalus. They used to be Ares’s soldiers once, after all,” Achilles said. It seemed he too, was having the same train of thought.

“Oh well, I did not think of that. But I do hope you will join me till there and I personally guarantee all your safety in Athens.”

Maximus looked at Hedger and Rex, and after a few seconds all three of them nodded in agreement. After all, they had nowhere else to go.

“Excellent,” Daedalus said happily “and who knows, you might even change your mind about living there once you see the city.” He then suddenly looked up, somewhat distracted. “I am afraid I only have twenty eight seconds left before I return to my mumbling self. And Achilles, please do get me a watch as to time my episodes more

accurately.” Sure enough, after a few more seconds, Daedalus began muttering rubbish with a blank expression again.

After that they decided to leave as quickly as possible. Rex knew a few ways out of Mars. But the problem was that they led into the country of Vulcan. Vulcan was one of the neighbouring countries to Mars. It was ruled by the god of machines, Hephaestus. He was said to be one of the best blacksmiths in the world, and his mechanical skills were legendary. Because of this he was also known as the god of the forge or the smith god. The Vulcan kingdom was much smaller than Mars and it had only one major city in it, which acted as its capital. Since it was the only city in the country it was just called Vulcan city. Other than that, only a few minor settlements and villages were present. Vulcan city was situated right beside one of the world’s largest volcanoes called Mount Etna. Achilles said that they would head there first as he had a friend who could help them. The problem was that the path to the city was across a huge desert, and they would need transportation to pass it.

“Our best option would be to try and salvage the truck or the armoured car the army left behind in the fight against the manticore. Also, we are going to need some food and resources for our journey since we won’t find anything in the desert,” Achilles said. It was decided that two of them would go and scout if the vehicles were still there and gather some resources while the other two would stand guard over Daedalus.

Maximus offered to go with Achilles outside, but Rex said he was feeling much better and that he needed to stretch his legs. So Maximus and Hedger stayed back with Daedalus while the other two went out to find whatever they needed.

Maximus began practicing with his new blade. He was hoping to bring back the red glow from before, but it had no use. Hedger had just stepped out to see if there was anything edible nearby, when he came back Maximus asked, “How was the hunt?”

“Nothing great, just a few cherries and they are not that sweet either.” Hedger said it was easy to see he was in a bad mood and Maximus couldn’t really blame him. “Hey I know this is not the way we planned it, but we always said that we would leave the trenches one day. It just came a bit earlier than expected.”

That hadn’t exactly cheered him up. “Yeah, but did we ever have the army chasing us out as part of the plan?”

Maximus had no answer to that. He realized that nothing he said would cheer Hedger up so he left him alone. About half an hour or so later, Rex and Achilles returned. Rex had a couple of dead rabbits in his hand.

“A good hunt. We got us enough supplies to last us a couple of days at least,” Rex said. He dropped the rabbits into Hedger’s lap. Hedger looked at the dead animals sadly and said, “How could you kill something so cute.”

“By listening to my grumbling stomach instead of you,” Rex replied.

Rex and Achilles opened their bags to show some wild fruits and vegetables, a few eggs, some mushrooms and even a few fish. Maximus had no idea how they managed to catch fish without a rod or a net, but he figured Achilles had something to do with it. Guess he would have made a fine scavenger if he hadn't turned into one of the greatest heroes in the Trojan War.

“We scouted the vehicles. The good news is the army already came there and left, and they seemed to have taken the manticore's body with them, but they left their trucks behind,” Achilles said.

Maximus and Hedger nodded for him to continue. “The bad news, on the other hand, is that the armoured car is too damaged to use and we can only know if the truck still works if we can get it upright again.”

“Well, I guess we start moving then, they might still have someone move the trucks if we wait around for too long,” Maximus said. The group gathered everything they had and started moving towards yesterday's battlefield.

They started walking back carefully, just in case any soldiers were still patrolling the area. They were mostly silent, only Daedalus kept mumbling nonsense as he walked. And he often had to be nudged in the right direction to stay with the group. After a while Achilles asked, “You

said that other than the captain we fought before, Ares also sent his champion after us, correct?” Maximus nodded in agreement. Achilles then asked “Who is it?” Rex let out a slight grunt of disgust. This was not uncommon among the soldiers of Mars. The champion was not very popular among them. “You might have heard of him,” Rex said. “He is known as the Barbarian king, Diomedes.”

“I have actually, but I must say, not ever anything good,” Achilles said. Rex grunted in agreement “Not surprising. That man is no soldier. He is nothing more than a vile murderer with too much power. He is brutal without reason and not just to the enemies either. He has the blood of many of his own soldiers on his hands.”

They were close to the trail now. Maximus could see the cliff from where they had fallen. “He seems like the perfect champion for a tyrant like Ares,” Achilles said. Maximus was quite sure by now Achilles really despised Lord Ares and that was not surprising, most people outside of Mars did, many inside as well. But he was starting to feel that the hatred was more personal. “Have you met Ares before?” Maximus asked.

Achilles nodded “Yes, a long time ago, during the Trojan War. And I would have named him the god of cowards rather than that of war. The only thing he knows to protect is his own putrid hide.”

Maximus knew that Ares had been on the side of the Trojans during the

war, even though he first came to support the Greeks. During the war he betrayed them and decided to join with the Trojans. Maximus could easily understand why anyone in the Greek side would hate Ares.

They had finally reached the clearing where the battle had taken place, and just like they said the manticore's body was nowhere to be seen. The truck they were hoping to salvage was still there though. The only problem was that it was resting on its side. "So how do we make it right side up again?" Hedger asked.

"The hard way" Rex replied. Soon the four of them began trying to push the truck upright again while Daedalus remained mumbling at the side. But it was no use. After half an hour of wasting their breath Hedger finally came up with a bright idea. They used a few large logs from nearby and formed a sort of lever system. But it was still hard. The truck weighed a ton and it took nearly two whole hours for it to be brought back on its wheels. Achilles checked inside and luckily the keys were still there. The driver had just left it there while running away from the manticore. Or maybe the driver was killed by it, Maximus did not know.

Achilles sat in the driver's seat and placed the key in its keyhole and said "Pray to the gods that it starts." Maximus thought these were a very poor choice of words as their patron god was the one who was trying to hunt them down. It took a few turns but the truck did start.

“Excellent,” Achilles said, then he turned to Maximus and asked “Can you drive”.

He nodded yes. “Good, then we can take shifts driving this thing,” Achilles said. They all stepped out to get some more water from the stream and freshen up a bit before the journey. They also managed to scavenge a few things like two extra containers of petrol, a first aid kit with healing potions and emergency provisions from the wrecked armoured car. They loaded everything into the back and before going in Rex held Maximus and Hedger back, and said, “This is it guys, if we get in now there’s no turning back. We could be walking into a world of trouble.” Maximus got into the truck and said “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

XI

It had been a few hours since their little road trip had started and this was just the beginning. The landscape outside the truck had changed from the woodlands to rocky plains as they went further away from the city, and now they had finally entered into the sandy desert. The temperature had turned into a scorching heat with the hot desert sun above them. All around them, outside, all Maximus could see was sand. The dunes covered everything in the line of sight and he felt like he was stuck in the middle of a sea of dust. Only their solitary transport truck moved along the sands and the ride was definitely not comfy. Maximus was riding shotgun, and beside him Achilles was at the wheel. He said that it would probably take a couple of days before they reached the city. The others were at the back of the truck where Daedalus was being held. There was a window behind Max's seat which could be opened. It was large enough for a person to fit through, though probably not Rex. Through it, he saw that both Hedger and Rex were fast asleep. Rex had even begun to snore. Only Daedalus was still awake back there, still talking to himself. Maximus was pretty bored too, and Achilles wasn't in a very talkative mood. So instead he just sat there staring out at the sands, and soon he was lost in his own thoughts.

Well, he thought his life was definitely taking some drastic turns. They were heading to Athens, the capital of a country with which Mars was at

war. And being an ex-soldier of Mars he was still doubtful of going to Athens. Maximus had heard that Empress Athena was a fair woman who was renowned for her wisdom. But this did not reassure him enough to ride straight into an enemy capital.

Both Mars and Minerva were on the same great continent along with the kingdoms of three other Olympian gods, including Vulcan. There were a few other smaller kingdoms as well, but most of the continent was covered by the five kingdoms ruled by the gods. Ares dreamed of having the entire continent under his control. Since Jupiter, the empire ruled by Lord Zeus, was on a different continent, this dream of his did not risk angering the Olympian king. But what did stand in the war gods' way was Athena. Her empire was the only one on the continent that stood on equal grounds with Mars in term of size and military strength. Even though Ares had more soldiers, a larger army and a stronger magical unit, Athena's military was able to keep up with them because of their unimaginable and advanced technology and weaponry. They also had a very strong air force which acted as an advantage over Ares's forces, which were primarily land based. Maximus wondered whether any of the other kingdoms on the continent would be able to stand up to Ares if Minerva was defeated. It didn't seem a likely possibility and most would probably ally with Ares to avoid war. But all this was if Mars won. The war had been going on for nearly five years now without either side faltering. Maximus was still in deep thought about world politics, or

whatever he knew about it, when Achilles woke him from his daydreams.

“Are you listening to me Max?” Achilles said.

“Sorry, sort of drifted off for a second there, what did you say?” Maximus asked.

“I said that we are stopping for a while, I can see an oasis up ahead and it might be the only one for miles. We can collect some water there and according to my calculations it’s about time Daedalus woke up as well.” Maximus looked out the window and saw the oasis which Achilles was talking about, it was just a small group of trees with some water in the middle. It looked like an island in the middle of the sea made of sand.

“Good idea. Besides the tank’s almost empty, we’ll refuel it there as well. And I can drive for a while if you like.”

Achilles nodded in agreement. Even though there were five of them, only Maximus and Achilles could actually drive. Rex couldn’t drive because it really was a two handed job. And Hedger’s feet wouldn’t reach the pedals. Even if they let Daedalus drive it would only be for short bursts of fifteen minutes. So the job was stuck with the two of them.

Once they had stopped at the oasis, Maximus went to the back to wake

the others. Hedger got up and asked “Are we there yet.” Rex got up too, and he was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes “Man I haven’t slept so much in a long time. It’s so boring. We should have brought a pack of cards or something,” he said.

“Oh I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware we were planning to get kicked out of our homes and take a long road trip to an enemy country. But Rex if you already knew all this then a set of cards would have been great. Or maybe a travel chessboard,” Hedger said with a grin, and Rex just scowled at him and grumbled something under his breath. Maximus laughed at this and then he realized things could have been much worse. At least he had his two best friends with him on this insane road trip.

“Come on guys, there’s fresh water here and it might be our last chance to fill up on some for a while,” Maximus said, and they got out of the truck along with Daedalus and went to the side of the waterhole where Achilles was already sitting with his bionic foot stretched on the sands.

Hedger cannon-balled straight into the water with a splash. He hadn’t even bothered to take his clothes off, but Maximus knew that in this heat they would dry off quickly. Rex went up to the water and started washing his face and taking a drink. They had just begun to cool off when Achilles looked at them and said, “It seems we have a bit of company.” He pointed at the dry bushes at the side. At first Maximus saw nothing, and then he realized that there was some movement within the bushes. “What is that?” Rex asked. And as if to answer his question

a tiny man jumped out of it.

It wasn't actually a man at all. It was a goblin. And soon the one that jumped out was joined by seven or eight of his friends. They were yet another race present in this world. They were just about the size of a child, roughly Hedger's size. They stood on two legs and had two hands like humans but that was where the similarities ended. Their skin was a brown colour and it was leathery like that of a reptile. They had almost no hair whatsoever on their heads. Just a few strands popped up here and there. Also they had really pointy features. They had pointy ears, a long and pointy nose, and even pointy teeth. Maximus had seen goblins before in the trenches but not ones like these. For one thing the ones in the trenches were fully clothed. These, on the other hand, barely covered their private parts with some leaves and twigs. They were also carrying weapons in their hands that were made from wood and animal bones.

“Those are some real ugly babies,” Hedger said, getting out of the water.

“They are called sand goblins. And like most goblins prefer hot climates so they're really common in the desert” Achilles said.

The goblins were eyeing them with their weapons raised now. “Yeah, so what do they want with us?” Maximus asked.

“Well, it seems that this oasis is part of their territory and they seem to

think that we are trying to take it from them. So they will probably attack us now.” “Can’t we explain to them that we’re just taking a break?” Maximus said. Achilles shook his head, “No, I’m afraid not. These goblins don’t seem to have ever been touched by modern civilization. I don’t think they can even understand what we are saying.”

Rex stepped forward and said “So we gotta fight these little munchkins. That’s fine by me”. He took out his hammer ready to fight.

“It won’t be much trouble really. I have fought them before, they’re not very strong,” Achilles said.

Just as Rex was about to charge at them, Maximus stepped in and said “Guys, would it be ok if I take this one. It’s just that I’m not that familiar with my new sword yet, and I think that it would be good practice.” This was true of course, but he was also hoping to bring back the red glow from before. When he had practiced in the cave the glow hadn’t come no matter what he tried. Rex wasn’t too happy with this since he was really bored, but he grunted okay. Maximus moved forward and drew his sword while the others sat back and watched.

Just as Maximus took a few steps forward the goblins attacked. They were quite fast but their attacks weren’t exactly powerful. As long as Maximus kept away from the sharp edges he was fine. He was easily able to avoid his attackers and soon he started striking back. The sword felt fluid in his arms and its balance was perfect. But the red glow did

not come and he could feel the difference in power. It just didn't have the same strength as before. The goblins kept attacking but it was very random with no real planning, and because of this they kept getting in each other's way. Maximus didn't really have to try very hard. The goblin attacks were very predictable. One of the goblins tried to attack Max's arm but he dodged it and took him down with a single strike. Then he slashed another before it could even raise its wood and bone club. Soon enough, almost all of them were on the ground. Maximus faced them, expecting them to get up and fight again, and it seemed for a moment they were about to. But then, suddenly, all of them decided to run away instead. Wow, Maximus thought to himself. He had never scared anyone so much that they ran away from the fight. He was pretty pleased with himself when he suddenly felt that one was still left, and that he was standing right behind him. He swung his sword to the back but to his surprise it got blocked. It was not blocked by a Goblin but by a man. He had not just blocked it either, he had actually caught the sharp edge of the blade with his hand without even a paper cut. Maximus understood now why the Goblins had run. He guessed that it would be most people's first instinct when they were faced with a god.

XII

He had no idea how this person had got behind him or even come into the oasis so fast without anyone noticing, but Maximus knew who the man standing before him was. He was a pretty famous person and he had seen him on the big screen in the town square of the trenches many times. The screen was usually used to show important messages, and this was the man who normally gave them if the issue was of an international standard. He had wavy brown hair that looked messy and perfect at the same time. He was clean shaven and very good looking. Not the rugged kind of look Achilles had, but more of a playful and mischievous look. He looked like someone who could charm anyone with a smile and he had a smirk fixed on his face. His eyes were the colour of bronze and he was wearing a golden track suit with a matching pair of pants. He looked like someone who was going out for a morning jog. He even had sneakers on his feet with wing designs on them and a pair of earphones clipped onto his track suit. Oh, and he was also a god, the god of communications and messengers in fact, Hermes.

“Slow down kid before you poke someone’s eye out with that,” Hermes said with a smirk. He then let go of the sword and Maximus staggered back a bit. There was no mistaking it was him, he even had the symbol of his kingdom on the left side of his chest, a rod with two snakes coiling around it with a pair of wings on the sides. Hermes turned to face

Achilles now, who had already drawn his sword.

“What do you want Hermes” Achilles asked. It was obvious from his tone that he was not happy to see him.

“Why, I was just taking a stroll around this neighbourhood. When I heard my good old friends Achilles and Daedalus were in town. So I just had to check up on you,” Hermes said in a mocking tone “Besides you should know by now Achilles that if I want something I usually just take it.”

For a moment Maximus thought he had disappeared, but then he realized he was standing right behind him. And that was not all, he was holding Max’s blade in his hand. Hermes had stolen it from his hands and he barely had time to notice.

“You are called the god of thieves for a reason after all,” Achilles said. Hermes had an annoyed look on his face at this comment. “I prefer to be called the god of speed actually. After all it is my speed which allows me to steal whatever I want,” Hermes said, and then he started examining the blade. He turned to Maximus and said, “You know kid, this sword seems to be a bit out of your league. I could take it off your hands and give you a very handsome price for it”.

Maximus didn’t care if this guy was a god – that sword was the best weapon he had ever held. And he wasn’t going to sell it because a sleazy

sales-god just came asking for it. “No thanks, I think I’ll stick with it for a while,” he said.

“Ah, too bad, I could have given you good money for it,” Hermes said and tossed the sword back to Maximus.

“Your hustling skills are getting a bit rusty it seems,” Achilles said.

“Oh but I’m not here to buy swords now am I? I’m much more interested in all the trouble you two have been getting into”.

“So are you here to take Daedalus back to Ares?” Rex asked.

“Oh no my dear Minotaur, my business is not bounty hunting, it’s information. I merely want to know what’s happening that’s of interest around the world,” Hermes said with a smile.

“And selling the information to the highest bidder,” Achilles said.

Hermes had a grin on his face now “Well, I did say it was a business.” Maximus didn’t understand why a person like Hermes would want more money. He was the king of the land of Mercury and it was one of the richer countries of the world. Also he was the CEO of the company called ‘swift-foot’ industries. The company held the monopoly on a lot of things, almost all of which were communication related, including the post office, magic mirror messaging or M3s, and most importantly, the phone lines. Maximus wondered what kind of profit he could reap from being an information broker.

“Well we are not telling you anything,” Achilles said.

“Put down your sword Achilles, I have no reason to fight. Besides, my biggest question was who had rescued dear old Daedalus, and I already got my answer to that,” Hermes said. He then walked up to Daedalus and said “I just have to check one more thing, a rumour really that our good friend Daedalus here had gone crazy.” He was right next to Daedalus’s face now, “And judging by the fact that he has been so silent till now I guess the rumours are true.”

“Or perhaps I merely do not enjoy conversing with an arrogant and pompous god such as yourself,” Daedalus said with a smile.

“Why Daedalus, you’re still your old and charming self. It just goes to show that you can’t believe everything you hear,” Hermes said. Then he began walking away from them and said “Well that will be all boys, my rides already here.”

He pointed up and they saw a helicopter way up in the sky. “How do you plan to get up there though?” Hedger asked.

As if to answer his question the pair of wings sprang out from both his sneakers. “You can fly?” Maximus asked, somewhat impressed.

“No, I just use these to steer when I’m in the sky,” Hermes told him looking at the wings “In reality I’m just so fast that I can run on air. Well got to run. I heard one of Athena’s science geeks has invented a phone that requires no wires or anything. He’s calling it a cell phone or

something, and I just have to get in on that,” Hermes said, and then he shot up into the helicopter. Within a few seconds he was in the helicopter. It began to fly out of sight after that.

“It seems our luck has not run out. I came back to my senses just in time,” Daedalus said. “You never cease to surprise, Daedalus,” Achilles said. Maximus on the other hand was in quite a shock, it was the first time he had actually met a god. He realized why the gods ruled the world now. The sheer power that he felt from Hermes was amazing. Though he tried to hide it from the messenger god he knew that Hermes could have killed him so easily that he wouldn’t even have had time to blink.

“So that was Hermes huh. Any reason why he went out of his way to see us, or was he telling the truth about taking a stroll in the desert?” Hedger asked. Achilles looked up into the sky to make sure that the helicopter was nowhere in sight, only then did he put away his sword. “I have no idea but he isn’t the type to do something without a reason. I’m sure he has his own agenda.”

“But why would someone as rich and powerful as Hermes need to act as an information broker?” Maximus asked.

“Communication is his business and because of this a lot of information flows his way,” Achilles said, “and it’s not just money he’s after. Having

the right information gets him connected to the right people, gets him into places. And sometimes valuable information can be traded for favours, even among other gods.”

Whenever Maximus had seen Hermes on screen he had never thought of him as someone so dangerous. He always just thought of him as a wealthy guy who enjoyed the high life. But now that he had met him in person he seemed more cunning and menacing than most monsters.

“It seems he wasted a lot of my precious time though. I merely have two minutes left with my brain,” Daedalus said.

“I think we should start moving again. The faster we reach the Vulcan capital the better,” Achilles said. Then he turned to the old inventor and asked “Any words of wisdom before you leave us again?” Daedalus thought for a moment and said, “Yes, actually. The sun is beginning to set and the desert is a much more dangerous place at night since most of its predatory species are nocturnal. It would be wise to camp for the night instead of continuing with the drive if we wish to avoid them.”

“Just what kind of species are we talking about here?” Hedger asked simply. “Well, I believe there is a certain breed of desert serpents that may grow to over fifty foot long which is native to this desert,” Daedalus answered.

“Well, that should help me sleep peacefully,” Hedger said, clearly

regretting he had asked anything.

“Well then, we will drive for a couple of hours and then set up camp once it gets really dark, agreed?” Achilles asked.

But it was too late, Daedalus had just returned to his mumbling mode. “I think if he could he would say that he would love to camp instead of taking his chances with a giant desert snake,” Hedger said with a smile.

XIII

They packed up, refuelled the truck and started moving again, only this time with Maximus at the wheel. It had been a while since he had driven anything and it took some time to get used to again. But he was still managing to slug along even though the bumpy, sand-filled path wasn't helping. Achilles was in the back now, taking a nap, and instead Hedger was in the side seat. And Rex was peeking in through the window behind them. "You're veering to the left again," Rex said. His back seat driving had started since Maximus took the wheel and it was starting to get on his nerves. But Maximus knew that Rex had been a pretty good driver back when he had both his arms. But now driving was just one more thing he couldn't do. So Maximus just let it go.

The sun had completely set now and the change in temperature was drastic. It had been hot enough to cook eggs just a while ago, but now it was so cold that it made Max's teeth quiver. The path was much harder to see now, especially since one of the truck's headlights had been damaged when the manticore thrashed it. Actually, the entire left side was pretty banged up and Maximus thought it was a miracle it made it this far. "We should be stopping soon, right? I mean, it's getting pretty dark now. Besides I'm starving," Hedger said after about two hours or so. He was right, even with the headlight in high beam they really couldn't see much further. Rex pointed outside and said "Look, let's

stop at that huge pile of rocks over there and set up camp. The rocks should shield us from the winds. Maximus agreed with him and soon they were parked near the huge rock formation.

They got off and tried to set up camp, which was hard since they had absolutely nothing to make, even a tent. "I guess we all crash in the truck then," Rex said. "Yeah three of us in the back, one guy up front and the last guy has to stand watch anyway so he doesn't need to sleep," Hedger concluded. Maximus realized they still needed to eat something. "What we could do though, is built a fire to cook the rabbits we caught yesterday. Start looking around for dried twigs and stuff" he said.

"Those will be easy to find since we are in a desert," Hedger said sarcastically. "Stop complaining and start looking," Rex said, "and Max go and wake Achilles up he'll wanna know we stopped."

"Why do I have to do it?" Maximus protested.

"Well you're a human, he's a human. You know, birds of a feather," Rex said with a stupid grin. Maximus scowled at him and went into the truck's back to wake him. It was not something he was comfortable with, probably because the man slept with one hand around his sword, like he was ready to cut anything even in his sleep. Maximus just hoped that anything did not involve people trying to wake him up.

"Um...Achilles," he said, and barely touched his shoulder as the swordsman got up immediately. Luckily, he did not draw his sword.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing, just wanted to let you know that we stopped for the night.” After that, they helped Daedalus out of the truck and went to where the other two were trying to make a fire.

When they reached the side of the rock where the wind was the least, they saw that Hedger was sitting on the ground in front of a very small pile of scrubs and twigs, banging two rocks together trying to produce a spark. Personally Maximus thought, he looked retarded. Rex was still walking around searching for scrubs. “You know I’m starting to think that this grinding rock to make fire theory is a lie. You guys were all soldiers right, didn’t you get like, Boy Scout training, on stuff like this actually?”

Rex came back with some more scrubs and made the pile a bit bigger. “We did actually,” Rex said, “and you need a special type of rock called flintstones to make it work.”

“Well now, any of you wouldn’t just happen to have some flintstones laying around in your pockets would you?” Hedger asked the group.

“No, but I have something better,” Achilles said, then he pulled something out of his pocket. It was not a stone of any kind, but a lighter. He went ahead to light the pile with it and soon they had a fire burning, which just made Hedger look like an idiot with his rocks.

“Well that was easy wasn’t it Hedge?” Rex said while patting his back.

Hedger just grumbled and threw his rocks away.

They went ahead to start cooking the rabbits they had caught before, or at least Maximus did. But he was used to this. He was sort of the unofficial cook of the group. He didn't mind though, he liked cooking and more importantly, whenever the other two tried to help, whatever they were cooking usually turned to charcoal. The problem was he didn't have much to work with. But he still managed to add some flavour to the rabbits with the cherries Hedger had picked up. He even fried some mushrooms for the side. Soon they were all around their tiny camp fire eating their dinner.

"I thought you were against eating cute little rabbits?" Rex asked Hedger.

"You know once they're all cooked and fried they're not so cute anymore," he said taking a large bite from his rabbit leg. Achilles was enjoying the rabbit too. "You know Maximus, this is really good. I haven't had such a good meal for a while actually."

"That's our Max for you, great with a blade on the battlefield, even better with it in the kitchen," Hedger said. Even Achilles smiled at this. The only one not joining in the conversation was Daedalus, for obvious reasons. But still Maximus thought that the potion he made was something amazing. Because even though his mind was clearly not there, his body continued to do all the basic functions, like if you placed

some food in his hands he would eat it on his own. It was like his body was on autopilot.

After that, everyone began to turn in for the night and Maximus decided to take first watch, even though the others had all taken naps before Maximus insisted on standing guard. The truth was that he dreaded going back to sleep. Something about an enigmatic voice speaking to him through his dreams was kind of appalling. He knew he would have to sleep sooner or later, but he just chose to do it later.

Hours had passed and Maximus was feeling pretty drowsy by now, and he really wanted to go to bed. But he still refused to go to sleep since he had taken the responsibility of keeping watch. The rocks shielded him from most of the wind, but it was still really cold. He had climbed on top of the truck now, since sand kept entering his pants when he sat on the ground. He sat there for a while staring at the sands. Achilles had told them that Vulcan city was just a day's drive away now and that they should be there by this time tomorrow. After a while he heard the truck door open and someone came out.

It was Achilles. Maximus came down to greet him. "Out for a quick smoke?" Maximus asked casually. Achilles shook his head, he said, "Actually, I came to relieve you from the watch I don't sleep well at night anyway. And I don't smoke."

"Oh I just assumed since you had that lighter with you and all,"

Maximus said. Achilles took out the lighter from his pocket, “This is not mine. It belonged to a friend of mine who died in the war. I just hold on to it as a keepsake.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Maximus said, and he regretted opening his mouth now.

“Don’t be,” Achilles said. “Soldiers are born to die in battle. And if you survive it doesn’t make you great. It just means you were chosen to honour the memory of your fallen comrades.” Maximus nodded silently to this.

After a few seconds of awkward silence Maximus asked, “So are you a part of Athena’s Army then?” Achilles shook his head in response and said, “No, I haven’t been part of any army since the fall of Troy. And I don’t plan to join any either. I mostly just move around a lot now as a wanderer. But I do still work as a mercenary though, when I need money. Sadly the ten year Trojan War made fighting my only form of revenue.”

Maximus could relate to this. When he was in the army, fighting and killing were all he knew. But luckily when he got out these skills were pretty useful for a scavenger. “So someone hired you as a mercenary to save Daedalus,” he asked.

“No, this wasn’t a job,” Achilles said. “Daedalus and I go way back. And I owe him a great deal. When a friend of mine from Athens

informed me that he had been kidnapped I began tracking him down immediately.” Maximus nodded to the story, but he still didn’t get up to go to sleep.

“You don’t seem too eager to go to bed?” Achilles asked.

Maximus shifted uncomfortably, and said “It’s just that I’m not used to getting visions and all.”

“Yes those can be real annoying,” Achilles said. Maximus looked at him with surprise. “Have you ever got any?”

Achilles nodded in agreement. “Even if you’re not a prophet or oracle, visions can be given to you. Of course, there is some powerful sorcery involved. Back before technology had gotten so far they were one of the safest ways to give information, even if it is very annoying to the receiver. But these visions are only related to the past or present, you still need a prophet to tell you prophecies of the future.” Maximus processed this new information. This meant that whoever the voice belonged to was trying to help him survive long enough for him to absorb energy into the blade. He wondered what it was for though. As for whom the voice belonged to he still had no clue. There were thousands of powerful sorcerers, and even though a prophet was much rarer there were still enough of them around, too. And almost all the gods had incredible amounts of magical energy as well. “Yeah well, I have to sleep sometime I guess,” Maximus said with a weak smile.

He was about to go inside to sleep when an idea hit him. “Achilles, can I ask you something?” he said.

Achilles turned to show he was listening.

“Well, it’s just that my new blade is an energy weapon. But I can’t seem to make it work since the manticore fight. I was hoping maybe you had some advice in the matter.” Maximus thought it was a good idea, who better to ask about a sword than one of the best swordsmen in the world.

“Your sword skills and footwork are actually pretty good. Though you could still improve a lot,” Achilles said. “But when energy weapons are involved your will also comes into play. Unless you are able to channel your will into your blade it just won’t work for you.”

Maximus nodded, he kind of understood what he was talking about, but he didn’t know what to do about it. Achilles looked at him for a while and said “Tell you what, once we reach Vulcan city and there’s enough time, maybe I could give you some pointers.”

“That...that would be great,” Maximus said surprised. It was like a dream come true. After all, training lessons from Achilles was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He thanked Achilles and bid him “Goodnight” and finally went to bed.

XIV

When Maximus woke up the next day the truck was already moving. He woke up to see Rex sitting beside him and Daedalus curled up in a corner. “Hey you’re finally up,” Rex said.

Maximus got to his feet to see Achilles at the wheel again. Hedger was beside him combing through his wings. “How come no one woke me?” Maximus asked. Rex was busy chewing on a twig, Maximus realized he was using it like a toothpick. He took it out of his mouth and said “Didn’t see the point. No breakfast today since we’re low on supplies, and Achilles said he would drive so we thought we’d just let you sleep in. It’s not like we got anything better to do.” Maximus was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes now. “What do you mean low on supplies” he asked.

“Well, after the delicious dinner yesterday all we got left are some fish. And we really got to eat those soon, I think they’re starting to go bad,” Rex said. Maximus paced around the truck for a while. He didn’t get any visions or dreams last night. He guessed that the voice was not in a very talkative mood. But Maximus was sure he would hear from it soon enough. He got tired of pacing around and soon sat down looking out the window. Rex was right about one thing, there was nothing to do. All around them was just sand. The only forms of life out here were a few

cacti and the occasional gecko. They did see another group of sand-goblins but these ones left them alone. There were no signs of any giant desert serpents either, which Maximus wasn't complaining about.

After a while Maximus said, "Kind of dull compared to yesterday huh?"

"You mean with no gods popping out to say hi, yeah it kind of is," Rex said. "Don't relax just yet we still got a day to go before we reached the city. But I guess we have to stop to eat," Achilles said.

"I'll say. The fish are starting to smell," Hedger chipped in. Soon they stopped at another oasis. This one was not nearly as big as the last one, more like a really large puddle. They started up a fire again and soon enough they were chewing fish bones. "So, we gonna head into the city tonight or in the morning?" Hedger asked them.

Maximus just stared at him, confused. "Oh, I almost forgot, you didn't get the daily Daedalus update while you were asleep," Hedger told him. He explained to Maximus that when Daedalus was back to his senses this morning he mentioned that he had been to this area before. He said that the way they were going was a trail which people rarely took and had no real entrance to the city. So when they reached the city they would need the help of their border patrol to get in. Daedalus also mentioned that it might be smarter to approach them in the morning, since if they went at night they might get mistaken for bandits and get shot at.

“So what’s the plan?” Maximus asked, now that he was up to date with the whole story. “Well, that depends on whether or not we can make contact with my friend in Vulcan city before we reach it. If we do we can go in tonight. He will escort us in without any problems,” Achilles said.

“And how exactly are we supposed to contact him from the middle of the desert?” Hedger asked, throwing away the fish bone he was chewing on. Achilles opened his bag and started searching, then he took something out and said, “With this.”

Achilles showed them a black, rather bulky-looking box with an antenna. It was a walkie-talkie. “I have been trying to contact him every two hours or so since morning,” Achilles said.

Maximus had used them before while in the army. But he didn’t think that the range was so good that it could cover half a desert. “So your friend already knows we’re coming then?” Rex asked.

“Actually I haven’t seen him in quite a while. But if I know him he’ll have one of these with him all the time,” Achilles said, putting away the walkie-talkie. Maximus wasn’t so sure about this but he had learned to trust Achilles enough by now not to ask questions.

Soon they were on their way again. Maximus drove for awhile and he was doing fine until they reached a point where the trail had mountains

of sand covering it. At that point Achilles took over again. Outside the scene shifted from sands to sands with more rock formations. They kept on driving till the sun began to set again. That's when Daedalus had his second daily awakening. "Ah...Maximus. Good to see you up young man. You were still asleep when I woke this morning," Daedalus said with a smile.

"Likewise sir," Maximus replied. Daedalus looked outside and said, "It seems we are nearing the location. The Vulcan capital is built on a harder surface than the desert, and the increase in rock formations and such seem to suggest that we are in close proximity to the city by now". Daedalus then turned to Achilles and asked, "Have you made contact with your friend yet?"

Achilles shook his head and said, "Not yet, and it's already becoming dark out. I guess we'll have to spend another night in the desert before we reach the city."

Daedalus nodded, "Try to get as close to the city as possible before we set up camp. The guards shouldn't try to stop us until we reach the city walls." After fifteen minutes Daedalus went off to dreamland again and they kept driving through. Once a couple of hours more had passed they started to see something from the horizon. They were street lights and Maximus realised that they had nearly reached the city. Once the city lights were in view Achilles said "This is as close as we can get without being spotted. We'll stop here for the night and head to the city once

daylight hits us.”

They nodded in agreement and got out. The desert had become ridiculously cold again and they started to build a fire one last time. They were on the last strands of their supplies. They just had a few vegetables and the emergency provisions they had salvaged from the wrecked car. They turned out to be some very tasteless crackers. They ate and talked for a while. And soon enough they were heading to sleep with Hedger standing watch for the night.

XV

Maximus was in deep sleep when it happened. He was dreaming about a giant sand serpent offering to buy his sword, and it was offering chocolate ice cream in return. He was tempted to sell too. But that's when Hedger woke him from his very weird dream. For a few seconds he was confused, but when he came to his senses and looked around he saw that everyone was awake and staring at Hedger. Hedger on the other hand looked like he'd seen a ghost. "What's wrong?" Achilles asked.

Hedger was still white faced and shivering. "Well, there's a tank heading for us, just thought you should know."

All of them stepped outside to see what he was talking about and that's when Maximus saw it. Riding in from the direction they just came was a tank. And it wasn't just any ordinary tank either, rumbling towards them with both its giant barrels aimed at them was one of Mars's most powerful weapons, a R.A.M. Tank. Along with the tank were four jeeps filled with Ares's soldiers. The jeep in front had its top down and a woman with blond hair and a spear in her hand. She looked like she was shouting something, but Maximus couldn't hear her yet. But he knew one thing: Captain Debra Sharp had just found them.

"It seems like our old friend, the Captain has finally caught up to us,"

Rex said. “Man she is not a happy lady, I for one can wait a lifetime before seeing her again and it looks like she’s bought a battalion,” Hedger said. They all looked at Achilles for directions. He was stone-faced again. “Trying to take them all on will be suicide. Our best option would be to run and try and lose them in the city,” he said.

Without further delay they started up the truck and began moving again. Achilles really floored the pedal and the truck was moving as fast as it could. Suddenly, they heard an explosion on their side, one that could have easily levelled a building, then another one right behind them. The R.A.M. Tank was firing at them and the tremors from its shots could be felt inside the truck. Maximus looked outside to see that the tank was too slow to catch up to them but the jeeps were gaining on them. They were in shouting distance now. They started firing their machine guns at them, and now it was just the armour of the truck that was saving them. The only good part was the tank had stopped firing now since it didn’t want to hit the jeeps by accident.

“Don’t you guys have anything to shoot back with?” Achilles asked.

“Sorry, but you sort of slashed up the only gun I had, remember?” Rex said holding on to a wall so he wouldn’t fall from the really shaky ride.

“Maximus take the wheel,” Achilles said.

“What?” Maximus said as if he was crazy. “Just drive and keep heading to the city wall. Let me see if I can do anything about those jeeps,”

Achilles said. With some difficulty Maximus got into the driver's seat and took the steering. Achilles on the other hand kicked the window open behind them and jumped into the cargo hold.

Maximus was trying to move the truck forward as steadily as he could and it was not an easy task. Outside, he saw that the jeeps were right behind them now. In the back Achilles took out the walkie-talkie again. He handed it to Hedger and said "Keep trying to make contact with the city." Hedger nodded and went to work. Then Achilles drew his sword. It was glowing blue again and it looked like he was charging it up for something. He turned to Rex and said "On my signal, open the back door." Rex nodded and readied himself by the door. Daedalus had curled up in a corner again. It seemed to be his body's default response to danger.

Achilles's blade was humming now and blue sparks were coming from it. He steadied his stance the best he could by putting his metallic foot forward. "Now," Achilles shouted and Rex swung the door open. With a quick jab Achilles sent a bolt of blue energy at one of the jeeps. It wasn't as grand as the one he used against the manticore, but it did the trick. The bolt caught them by surprise and one of the jeeps skidded off to the side. This repeated for a while, but Achilles couldn't get a clear shot because of the unsteady ride and the jeeps were still on their tail.

Hedger had been trying to make contact through the walkie-talkie all this

time. Finally the static cleared and someone on the other side said, “Hello, haven’t heard from this thing in a while. Who is this? Over…”

It was a man’s voice, that much was clear, he also sounded pretty cheerful. “Umm…Well hello. This is a friend of Achilles. Over…” Hedger said.

“So what can I do for you friend, of Achilles. Over…” the man replied.

Achilles took the walkie-talkie from Hedger and said, “This is Achilles. We are right outside the city now coming through the desert trail.”

“Achilles!” the man said sounding excited. “It’s been too long. How are you man? And you’re supposed to say over, over.”

Achilles let out a sigh and said, “Not now brother. We are being chased by a barrage of Ares’s men, including a tank and we need entrance into the city.” “Should have known you wouldn’t pay a quiet visit. What vehicle are you in? Over…” the man asked.

“A transport truck,” Achilles replied.

“Not to worry, I’ll send word to the guards not to attack you. And I’ll be there to greet you in minutes personally,” the man said.

“Much obliged brother,” Achilles said, and with that the walkie-talkie fell silent again. Maximus wondered who the man was. If he was someone who could call off the guards at will he was certainly not someone ordinary. And Achilles had called him his brother, but the only

brother Achilles had was killed in the Trojan War. The story was pretty famous. His name was Patroclus and he was killed by the greatest warrior on the Trojan side, Hector. They say it was this incident which had driven Achilles with enough rage to challenge Hector in one on one combat and ultimately kill him. There was no way Patroclus was still alive. Then again he had believed that Achilles was dead until a few days ago.

Achilles stepped forward to Maximus and said, "Just keep driving to the end of the trail. There should be a gate there and we should be safe once we enter the city." Then he went back to try and slow down the jeeps. Captain Sharp's jeep was right by their side now and Maximus could see the loathing in her eyes. That's when Maximus saw the guards to the gate entrance. He didn't know what he was expecting, and he wouldn't have been surprised if the guards were humans, Minotaurs or even a Cyclops. But what he did not expect were a pair of giant freaking robots.

The robots were huge, nearly fifteen feet tall. They had two legs that ended in stumps. They looked like metal elephant legs; their bodies were long and straight and only widened as they reached the shoulders. They had two arms, one of which ended in a kind of clamp that looked like a hand. The other one had a barrel at the end from the elbow down. They also had a motor or something on their backs with steam coming out of it. It made them look like they were wearing backpacks. Their heads had no mouth or nose. They only had one huge eye on them that gave a

bright blue glow. Their head and body were bronze in colour while the arms and legs were made of steel. Also they had their barrel hands pointed right at them.

“Achilles, are you sure these guards are on our side?” Maximus asked, a bit worried. Achilles nodded and said, “My friend said they would be and I trust him with my life. And sure enough they passed through without much trouble. But when the jeeps came the giant robots blocked their paths and Maximus heard Captain Sharp shout into the radio “Don’t shoot the automatons you idiots, unless you want to be responsible for starting a war between our countries,” and the jeeps stopped behind the robots. But this still didn’t stop them from shooting. For a second Maximus thought that they were going to make it. But that’s when he noticed something.

“Guys we have a problem. The gates are completely blocked. And I mean boarded up,” Maximus said. The others came to see what he was talking about. Not only were the gates closed but large wooden planks were also nailed onto it. It looked like it hadn’t been opened in a while. “What do we do now?” Hedger asked.

“Well we can’t just stop now they’re still shooting at us,” Rex added. Achilles closed his eyes for a second to think; when he opened them again he said, “We hammer through.”

“What, are you crazy?” Maximus shouted.

“It’s our best option,” Achilles said.

Maximus still wasn’t sure of this. But he was still a soldier inside and he knew that sometimes following orders was the best course of action. So he floored the accelerator and drove straight into the gate, praying that they survived.

They crashed through the gate. Maximus first thought that the truck wouldn’t go through but it did, and they went on spinning out of control into the city. The truck slammed onto the tarred road and knocked over a lamppost. The truck came to a stop by itself without Maximus doing anything. And he was pretty sure that it probably wouldn’t start again even if he tried. Smoke was coming from the engine and it filled the driving seat. He expected the engine to blow up, but right then at that moment he did not care. However, nothing happened and when the smoke cleared he looked behind to see if everyone had survived. Everyone seemed to be alive, but all of them were on the floor breathing heavily. Achilles had sat up leaning against the wall panting. Hedger was still lying flat on the wall, laughing like a mad man at the fact that they were still alive. Rex was untangling himself from their bags which he had fallen into and Daedalus had curled up into a ball with his arms around his legs, still in his corner. The scene at the gate had changed too. The two robots had completely blocked the gate now and they couldn’t hear any shooting anymore, it seemed the soldiers had given up and left

for now.

Finally Achilles said “Is everyone all right?”

Everyone mumbled ‘yes’ without any real energy. Maximus thought it was all over now. But when he looked outside he saw something that made him think that the trouble had just started. Two more of the giant metal robots like the ones guarding the gate were pointing their guns at them. And in their middle there stood a man. He was a big man probably seven feet tall. His skin was also extremely tanned, almost like he had been sunbathing for a year. He had copper-coloured hair and beard, and looked a bit messy. He was wearing large boots with camouflage trousers. He was wearing a simple white T-shirt, which was covered in grease stains on top of which he was wearing a bronze chest plate complete with shoulder guards. Maximus also noticed that he had a wrist band with a yellow summoning crystal on his left arm. Then he took out something from his back pocket. It was a walkie-talkie and the man started speaking into it.

Achilles’ own walkie-talkie lit up again. The man’s voice came from it and said “If you’re in this steaming truck in front of me please do respond buddy. Otherwise we’re gonna light it up like a firecracker, over...”

Achilles grabbed the walkie-talkie fast and said “Don’t shoot, it’s us.”

A smile appeared on the man standing outside and on his signal the robots lowered their guns. Then the man came to the back of the truck and ripped the back doors open. He literally ripped out the doors with his bare hands and threw them to the side. Then he put his grinning face inside and said, “Well what are you waiting for, come give me a hug.”

XVI

The huge man helped them outside. Achilles was the last to come out and when he did the man gave him a bear hug that would have crushed most people's bones. Achilles didn't seem too comfortable with this but he said nothing. The man finally put him down and said "It's been too long, lead foot." "It's good to see you too old friend," Achilles said, his usual emotionless face had been replaced with a smile. "Come on now, let me introduce you." He then turned to the rest of them, put a hand on the big guy's shoulder and said "Everyone, this is Ajax."

Maximus was starting to feel like his life had turned into a television show, with all of the most famous people in the world guest starring in it. In the last few days he had already met the greatest swordsman of the Trojan War, the world's most famous inventor and even a god. And now he was standing there shaking hands with the mighty Ajax. Ajax was yet another famous warrior from the Trojan War. He had fought in the Greek side along with Achilles and was very famous for his legendary strength, and seeing him in person, Maximus understood why. He was considered among the strongest warriors in the entire war. If memory served him right his weapon of choice was a huge Hammer. Maximus had a feeling that's what the summoning crystal on his wrist would bring out if needed.

After being formally introduced to everyone, Ajax asked them “Well, what are you guys doing with mister cranky over here,” patting Achilles on the back. “Well, we’re originally from Mars, but we got into a bit of trouble,” Rex began, not sure what to say.

Luckily Achilles stepped in to explain. “They helped me rescue Daedalus from Ares’s soldiers. But when the army found out they put a reward on their heads and started hunting them. They had nowhere else to go so I told them to join me to Athens. It was the least I could do,” he said. Ajax scratched his beard and said, “Refugees eh. Well not to worry, any friend of Achilles is a friend of mine. You guys can stay here for as long as you like,” he grinned at them and despite his rugged appearance he seemed so welcoming now. Ajax then turned to Daedalus and waved his arm in front of him to see if he would respond. When nothing happened Ajax said, “I’ve met old Daedalus here before, he’s a friend of my boss. But he was a lot chattier then.”

Achilles explained to him about Daedalus and his potion, he also went ahead to explain the rest of the trip. When Achilles was done, Ajax said “Man you really can’t stay out of trouble can you?”

Ajax then went ahead to give some orders to the giant robots. And soon they picked up the wreckage that was their truck and hauled it off. “Don’t worry, I’ll have that truck better than new in no time. Fixing up cars is sort of a hobby of mine,” Ajax said. “In the meantime I got my ride parked just around the corner, we’ll go in that.”

As they walked Hedger asked Ajax “So who’s your boss.”

“The smith god Hephaestus of course, didn’t Achilles tell you I’m his champion now,” Ajax answered.

That sure explained a lot Maximus thought to himself. As the champion he probably had control over the giant robots along with most of Vulcan’s army. No wonder Achilles thought coming here was a good plan, no one would touch them here with Ajax around. “What I want to know though is how the soldiers found us in the first place. I mean we had been travelling for two days and our trail wasn’t exactly easy to follow” Rex said.

“I was thinking about that as well,” Achilles said, but he suddenly stopped walking and looked at Maximus.

Maximus turned to him and said “Wait, I didn’t do anything,” a bit worried with the look he was getting.

“Of course you didn’t Max. But could I just take a look at your sword?” Achilles said.

Maximus handed him the sword and Achilles began inspecting it. After a few seconds he found something below the sword’s hilt and showed it to them. It looked like a button in the shape of a small golden wing. Achilles crushed it in his hand and with loathing in his voice said, “Hermes.”

“Is that a tracker?” Hedger asked.

“Sure does look like it” Ajax said looking at the now crushed piece of technology in Achilles’s palm. Maximus had understood what had happened. Hermes was working for Ares. I mean who better to track someone than the god of messengers, thieves and travellers? But Maximus couldn’t believe he had been so stupid. Hermes had planted the tracker when he had pretended to examine his blade. Even after that the blade had been with him this whole time and he hadn’t even noticed it. He was feeling angrier at himself now than at Ares.

Hedger noticed his face and said, “Hey, Max it wasn’t your fault, none of us knew.”

“He’s right Max,” Ajax said, “but I still think that it’s a bit weird that Hermes came himself for this. I would have guessed that taking orders from Ares was beneath him.”

Achilles still looked angry, he said, “Who knows why? That double ended snake always has a plan of his own.”

Ajax placed his arm on his shoulder and tried to calm him down. “Come on Achilles, relax. You found the thing didn’t you? We haven’t seen each other in years now, so don’t let Hermes ruin the moment.” Achilles still didn’t look happy but he grunted agreement to this.

Ajax then turned to the rest of them and said, “Now, don’t let his grumpiness fool you. This guy is one of the greatest people you’ll ever

meet. I mean me and him, we go way back. We're more than just friends, we're brothers in arms. We fought the entire Trojan War side by side and I could tell you a few stories about this guy. Oh the things he'd done, the fights he fought and the women he'd charmed, there's just no end to it." He then stared at Achilles with a grin on his face.

"Let's start sharing old war stories after we get to Hephaestus' castle shall we?" Achilles said, and he seemed somewhat eager to change the subject.

They had started walking again and in a minute Ajax's ride came into view. It was a pickup truck, or at least it had been at some point, because Ajax seemed to have made some serious modifications to it. Maximus could just say one thing about the truck, it looked awesome.

"I think I'm in love," Rex said staring at the truck.

Ajax seemed pretty happy to hear this, he said "Isn't she a beauty? I'm real proud of her, too. I built her up from scratch myself." The truck was big and black in colour. On both its sides there were identical half green, half blue designs. On a closer inspection, Maximus realised that it was the word 'Ajax' written in a really big square font. On the back it had a dual exhaust, and on top of the truck were five lights in a row pointing forward, like the ones seen on mountain vehicles. In the front the entire grill was covered by a huge metal guard.

Maximus believed it was called a bull-guard. The hood was also

modified and had a rectangular elevation with an improved air intake system on it. “So this is how you keep busy these days” Achilles asked.

“It sure is,” Ajax said, rubbing his two hands together, “and now I’m going to take up your truck as my next little project.”

“That’s fine. Just don’t make it too fancy. We are on the run after all,” Achilles said, and Ajax nodded. Then the two of them got in the front. There were only two seats so the rest of them sat in the open back of the pickup truck along with their luggage, and then they started moving through the city. The city was nowhere nearly as tall as Thrace, the capital of Mars. The buildings were not very tall either. But Maximus did notice a few huge chimneys that seemed to start from underground. He wondered what it was.

Behind the city was the famous Mount Etna, one of the largest volcanoes in the world. And he had heard somewhere that it somehow provided all the energy for the entire city. Between the city and the Mountain there was something huge built. It didn’t look like a building, but it was still night and too dark to make out what it was. But whatever it was, it was the biggest thing there. They finally reached Hephaestus’ castle, which was the largest building in the city. But it still couldn’t have been more than ten stories high, nothing really to the towering Castles which Ares built.

Maximus was really sleepy by now. So when Ajax took them to their

rooms, he didn't even bother to look around. He just collapsed onto the bed without even removing his shoes or his sword.

XVII

When Maximus got up the next morning he thought he was still dreaming. The room he was in was so big he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed any of this yesterday. It was as if he was in a luxury hotel, and it had everything: a television, a fridge, air-conditioning and a huge bathroom. He decided to hit the showers first and once he had freshened up he went outside. He was standing in a corridor with rooms similar to his all around them. He was wondering where the others were when a small robot with four wheels, two hands and a monitor for a head just rode up to him. It had steam coming from its back like the other robots. The monitor said 'Welcome' and the robot handed him a cup of coffee. Once Maximus had accepted this the robot said in a metallic voice "Please follow me to the dining room sir, breakfast has been prepared." The robot started moving again and Maximus followed it. About three rooms across, they stopped at a set of large wooden doors. A skinny, skeletal looking robot was waiting there for them, and as Maximus approached it the robot opened the doors for him. The robot he had followed till then showed 'good day' on its monitor and left. He stepped into the room to see that it was a huge dining room, and most of the guys were already there.

The room was huge and there was a long table in the middle surrounded by at least twenty four chairs. They were made from some really strong

looking wood and were decorated by bronze lining. Maximus was starting to see a pattern here, almost everything in the country had some bronze in it. On one of the chairs Rex was already seated munching on some toast and jam. Opposite him were Ajax and Achilles, they seemed to be catching up while they ate. It was the first time Achilles had taken off his armour since they met. Now he was wearing a normal grey T-shirt instead. But he still had his sword with him though. But what really surprised him was when Daedalus came up to him and said, "Max my boy. Hope you had a splendid night's sleep." Maximus nodded to him and said good morning. "Well you're in luck. I would have gone back to my other self in another five minutes and fifty three seconds. Do take a seat," Daedalus said with a smile.

Maximus joined him at the table and placed his coffee cup on it. He greeted the others as well and checked what was there to eat. There was a lot of food on the table. Toast, butter and jam were sitting right in front of him. Next to that was a steaming pile of bacon. There were also at least three types of cereals and bowls of freshly cut fruits. There was also orange juice, milk and water for drinking. There was also a machine moving along the table refilling cups of coffee. Another robot came into the room on wheels. It was similar to the one that had brought him to the dining room except it had eight arms. It came in and placed a plate and a glass in front of him. It also served him a spoon, a fork and a knife. Then it asked "Good morning sir. What would you like to eat today?" in the

same metallic voice as the other robot.

“Bacon and toast please,” Maximus said. The robot instantly served him what he had asked for.

“And would you like eggs with that?” it asked.

“Okay,” Maximus said.

“What type of eggs sir? Scrambled, salted, poached, boiled, bulls-eye?”

“Eh...bulls-eye?” Maximus said, not really sure. Another machine popped up from the table and it clanked for a while. Then it served out a plate of eggs. Next the machine that was serving coffee came up to him. It had four buttons on it labelled coffee, milk, juice and water. Maximus pressed the one that said juice and the machine went ahead to grab the orange juice and pour it into his glass. “Quite fancy eh Max. We don’t gotta lift a finger,” Rex said.

He was right, in the trenches they barely got enough food to get through the day, and now it was like they were kings. “I don’t think I have ever eaten like this since...well, ever” Maximus replied.

He looked around to see more robots moving around doing chores. “Is the entire city filled with robots?” he asked.

Ajax chuckled and said, “Nah, we got people too. But most of the workers at the castle are though. Ol’ Hephaestus trusts machines more than living things.” “These robots are called Automatons. And

Hephaestus invented them himself. All of the ones you see here are of his design. He really is one of the most talented mechanical engineers I have ever had the pleasure of meeting,” Daedalus added.

“So will he be joining us?” Achilles asked, taking a bite out of the bacon sandwich he was eating.

“Not now no. He’s busy with one of his projects again. And he could be shut in his workshop for days now. But he’ll probably join us for dinner tonight when Daedalus here awakens again,” Ajax said.

Daedalus chuckled and said, “Well, we inventors are like that sometimes. Once we find something of interest we might become a bit obsessed. I’m afraid I am no better at that.” He then went on to finish his cornflakes and said, “Well I’m afraid my mind will wander again in a few more seconds, when it does please have someone escort me back to the room. And Achilles, please do buy me a watch from the city when you get the time. It would be very helpful to keep track of my mood timings.” And just like he said, within a few seconds Daedalus began mumbling again, his face went blank. Ajax had a robot escort him back to his room.

Maximus was somewhat sad that Daedalus couldn’t properly enjoy his stay here. So he asked, “Couldn’t he make another batch of antidote from here, I mean this place will certainly have the equipment.” Achilles shook his head, and said, “I’m afraid not Max, I already asked him. You

see it's not that simple, a few of the materials required for the potion are extremely rare and some herbs that are needed for it grow nowhere near here. And even if we managed to get all those, making the antidote requires a lot of accuracy and time, not to mention knowledge in the field.”

Ajax was eating a bowl of cereal and a very colourful one at that. It was almost funny to watch such a big man eat with such a small spoon some very colourful brand of breakfast cereal. He said “donf whrhi tu muck,” which nobody understood of course. Then he swallowed his mouthful of cereal and tried again, “Don't worry too much Max. We are gonna take excellent care of him. Besides he has already been here a few times, he's seen it all before. But it's the first time for you guys right, so I'm taking you all sightseeing.” He looked at Achilles to see if he would refuse, but he nodded his approval and said, “That's fine. I can get Daedalus a watch when we go out as well.”

The doors opened again and Hedger glided in lazily. It was easy to see he had just gotten up. “Good morning all. And does sleeping in not exist in the dictionary of you people?” he said as he took a seat. Once he got a good look at the breakfast spread he was excited again. Maximus could tell he was really enjoying being treated by robotic butlers as well.

“Ok, so maybe sleeping in was not a great idea. Man, this is the life,” Hedger said.

“Glad you guys like it. But finish up fast, there are a lot of things to see in Vulcan city” Ajax said. Once they had all finished Ajax said again, “You guys might want to change before we head out. No offence but you all look like you guys just came out of the sewers. Sort of smells like that too.”

Maximus had to agree. Even though he washed up in the morning he still wore the same clothes he had been wearing for the last three days. And sweating in the desert heat hadn't left them smelling like flowers either, they reeked. The same could be said for Hedger and Rex. None of them had another pair of clothes with them either. Only Achilles seemed to have had a change in apparels.

“I agree with you but this is all we got,” Rex said. Ajax thought for a second and said “Hmm...I think we might have some clothes that would fit you guys.” He then turned to Hedger and asked, “A dwarf's cloths should fit you, right? I mean we don't have many sprites here but we got plenty of dwarves.” Hedger nodded and Ajax said, “Great. Just go wait in your rooms and I'll have some butler-bots send them up to you. Rex why don't you come with me, I think one of my old pants will fit you nicely.” With that Rex left with Ajax and the other three left for their rooms.

The three of them reached the corridor where their rooms were. All five of their rooms were right next to each other. Maximus went into his room. He had never had such a comfy place to stay ever in his life. His

first memory of a home was the orphanage and all the boys shared a single huge dormitory there. While in the army he had to share a room with a roommate. He had quite a few roommates too. This was because they kept dying in war. From there, at the age of seventeen, he started living in the trenches; the first few days were brutal and he had spent those nights on the street. Then he met up with Rex whom he already knew from the army. His place was cramped, but he still let him stay and that's when he started out as a scavenger, since that was what Rex did and he didn't have a partner. He met Hedger, Kyla and Roderick within the next week along with many others. It was Hedger who found him his home in his abandoned attic, and that was the first place he had to call his own. Compared to all that, it was like he was in a five star hotel now. He went out into the room's balcony to see the view of the city.

The first word that came into his mind was Steampunk. It was the best way to describe the city structure. All the buildings had a lot of metal on them and most of it was bronze. Everywhere he looked there were bronze covered structures which were spewing out smoke and steam. The chimneys that rose from the ground were everywhere too. He made a mental note to ask Ajax what they were used for. Maximus already knew that Vulcan was famous for mining and industries. And he spotted a few of the mines along the now inactive volcano Mount Etna. Besides the mines he spotted the huge structure which he had seen the night before. Standing at the base of Mount Etna was a huge bronze statue.

The statue didn't seem to depict anyone in particular as it had a huge ancient looking helmet on it. It seemed like the standard helmet worn by ancient Greek soldiers. Similarly, it also had ancient Greek armour on it. In its hands was a huge sledgehammer. The head of the hammer touched the ground between the statue's feet. The giant Greek soldier held the handle with both its arms. Its head was lowered so it looked like it was looking at the city. The statue was at least fifty feet tall. Maximus knew what the statue was. It was called 'The Colossus' and it was quite a popular tourist attraction.

Despite all this, Maximus felt that the city was too small, there were just about twenty to thirty buildings in total. And he felt it odd that he couldn't spot any factories in the industrial capital of the world. Just then his doorbell rang. Maximus didn't get it at first as he had never had a doorbell before. But when he finally figured it out he went out to check. It was another robot on wheels, or butler-bots, as Ajax had called them. The butler-bot handed him some clothes and a pair of shoes and left. Maximus went inside to change and was glad to find that at least there was no bronze on the clothes. They were just a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt with the symbol of Hephaestus on the left side of the chest, a bronze coloured hammer covered in flames. He tried on his new clothes and shoes, and they fitted him nicely. He then grabbed his sword and went over to Hedger's room.

When he went into his friend's room Hedger was already dressed too. He was wearing a thick brown coloured jacket with matching pants. They were definitely dwarf clothes. When Maximus entered he turned to him and said "Hey you look nice. I don't think I have seen you out of your scavenger's special leather, ever. But this is good, you actually look like a teenager. Who knew you could pull off something other than dusty brown leather?"

Maximus scowled and threw a pillow at him, then he said "Wish I could say the same about you. It looks like you're wearing a large sack." Hedger looked at himself in the mirror, "Yeah, leave it to the dwarves to make their clothes so bulky. But hey at least I got my stunning good looks," he said with a grin. Maximus wished he had another pillow to throw now. There was a knock on the door and Achilles came in. He was back in his black 'armour of Styx' now and his blade was on his belt again. And he seemed to have cleaned his bionic leg too. It was a bit shiny. But still he seemed as though he was going for a war rather than sightseeing. He also seemed to have got himself a new cloak to cover up his armour, and he was holding it in his hand.

"Are you guys ready? I just got word that both Ajax and Rex are waiting near the elevator." Achilles nodded. They nodded and together all of them stepped outside the room. A butler-bot was waiting for them and it led them to the elevator. Ajax and Rex were already there. Rex was wearing a pair of blue overalls. Maximus thought he looked like a

farmer. Hedger seemed to be thinking the same thing as well because he said, “Great, you’re a farmer and a cow, that sure is interesting.”

“Shut up you stupid green pigeon,” Rex said, and Maximus knew these guys would never change no matter where they were. And he was kind of happy about that.

XVIII

The elevator came and the doors opened. The five of them stepped inside and as the doors closed Ajax pressed floor minus thirty. Maximus looked at the buttons and found it to be very weird. First, there were the regular floor buttons, one that said roof followed by the numbers one to ten for the ten floors, followed by a large 'G' for ground. Now came the weird part, there were thirty more buttons on the panel ranging from minus One to minus thirty and Ajax had pressed the very last one. Maximus had heard of having one or two basements but having thirty seemed a bit much.

“Shouldn't we stop at the ground floor to go outside?” Maximus asked Ajax. “Nah only if we want to get down on the over-city, and there's nothing much to see their other than The Colossus. I think we should go to the under-city first.”

Maximus stared at him even more confused, and Rex and Hedger joined him. It was Achilles who stepped in to explain, “It seems you don't know, but Vulcan city is the biggest subterranean city in the world. The entire city is actually underground and the underground area is called under-city. What you see above is called over-city and it's actually the higher floors of the buildings in under-city that are too big to fit underground.” Maximus took in the new information. He knew about

subterranean cities before. They were entire cities that were built underground. Mostly by underground dwelling races such as dwarves and goblins. But he had no idea that the entire Vulcan capital was one.

“Self-turning screwdrivers, you guys didn’t know that. Achilles didn’t you explain anything to them on the way?” Ajax said, with a hand on his head, “you guys didn’t really think what you saw above was the entire capital did you? The real city’s just coming up.”

With that the doors to the elevator opened and they stepped out. Floor minus thirty seemed to be the real ground floor and it was buzzing with life. The elevator opened up into a huge lobby, with lots of different people of different races moving around, going about their daily business. Maximus noticed that the majority of them were dwarves, humans and goblins. These goblins were all dressed though, unlike the ones in the desert. One of them was even wearing a suit. Maximus also spotted some other races such as Minotaurs, elves, satyrs and nymphs although they were much lesser in number. There was even a Cyclops in the corner wearing a security uniform, holding a club. There was also no shortage of robots or automatons, or whatever they were called. All around them these machines were whizzing and rolling around doing different jobs. There were two of the giant robots with a gun for a hand from yesterday, standing outside the main door.

A lot of people seemed to know Ajax. Not surprising as he was their champion. But unlike the champion of Mars he actually seemed to be

liked by the people. “You guys wait here while I go clear up some formalities,” Ajax said and went along to one of the many reception desks situated around the lobby. Meanwhile, Achilles had worn his cloak again and put his hood up. A smart move since the world thought he was dead. After a few minutes, Ajax came back to them with a tissue paper in hand. Maximus noticed there was a lipstick print on it. “Got your paperwork sorted out. And got the number of that pretty nymph receptionist in the process. Guess you’re not the only one who can pick up girls now, eh Achilles?” Ajax said.

“I never said that,” Achilles said with a smile, “I just said I don’t have to try very hard. Besides women were the last things on my mind since my ‘death’.” After that they went to the main doors. Ajax pushed them open and said “Behold, the great Vulcan city”.

All of them stepped outside, and the first thing Maximus noticed was how huge it was. The entire city seemed like it was sitting inside a cave. And the entire city was covered by walls. The word Steampunk was still the design of the day. The whole city seemed like a giant metal and bronze maze, with large gears and other devices at work, also the city was spewing steam here and there. The smoke on the other hand was being let out above ground. There was a huge system of vents that interconnected all the building exhausts into huge chimneys that went above ground. Maximus now understood what the chimneys that he saw above ground were for. He also finally spotted the factories. All around

them, nearer to the cave walls, were huge industries that seemed like giant machines at work. There was a lot of equipment outside the buildings as well with large gears and levers. But the area they were standing in seemed like a large and open road. It was really noisy and crowded here and there were an endless number of shops on either side of the street. This seemed like the main market area of the city and the street was way bigger than the trenches.

“The city is split into three major parts. The place we are at right now is the market area and it makes the innermost area. If we moved a little outward into the next area we would reach the residential area. After that the third and outermost one is the industrial area and that’s where all the factories are. So if you ever get lost here just remember to keep moving inwards,” Ajax explained. Even though they were completely underground now it was like there was still sunlight here. Maximus looked up to see huge floodlights on the cave ceiling. The kind they used in sport stadiums or gladiator arenas only much bigger. Ajax saw Maximus looking at the lights and said, “I see you have found our light source. It’s a clever little invention from Lord Hephaestus, the intensity of the light changes according to the light outside. So we have regular days and nights, only without the desert’s scorching heat or chilly nights. Maximus had to agree that despite how crowded and confusing it was, the entire city seemed to be designed to run like clockwork.

They started walking and Rex asked, "So what about the army barracks?" "Those are situated behind the castle, actually. It's not very big since we have a comparatively small army," Ajax said. "Also, more than half of our army consists of Automatons and they can be turned off and stored easily during peacetime." Maximus didn't care how small the army was, if it had battalions of Automatons it seemed pretty scary to him. "Other than the automatons our soldiers are few. In fact we don't even have any generals, the general's duty also sort of falls on me. I'm sort of the head of the entire army," Ajax added but he didn't seem too happy about that.

They started moving through the market now, and there were some really amazing things for sale there. The main goods here seemed to be metal works. And there were some really fine swords around which caught Max's attention. He was actually saving up for a new sword, but now that he had unsheathed the 'cursed blade' it would be pointless to buy another one. Also he had to think of a better name for his sword than the cursed blade. He thought that maybe he should buy a shield instead. There were plenty of those here too. While he was in the army, sword and shield was his specialty, but now that he was travelling, carrying a huge metal shield around would only be more troublesome. Besides, now that they were on the run, spending the money didn't seem wise. They might need it for something more important later. But swords

and shields weren't the only things here. The shops were littered with a variety of stuff. Gauntlets, energy crystals, oranges, rat soup, grape wine and electric motors were just some of the things they passed by. Then, Maximus saw something that he knew would surely get Rex's attention. There were even a few shops selling bionic limbs scattered around the market place. He knew that Rex wanted a bionic arm badly, but they were simply too expensive. He would have to save up almost all his earnings for at least five years to even think about getting one. He caught up with Rex to talk to him privately. "Hey, Rex. You want to go check those bionic arms out. Maybe there's something here, right up our ally," he said.

Rex looked at him and snorted. "It's no use Max, you know how much they cost."

"You know I was saving up for a sword, I don't need it any more. So maybe I could chip in." Rex gave him a sincere smile and said, "Thanks for the offer Max. I appreciate it, I really do. But I don't think we'll be able to buy a bionic finger even if we pool in all our money much less an entire arm." They walked past the bionic limb store without a second glance.

"You guys go on ahead, I still need to go and get a watch for Daedalus," Achilles said and went off.

"Yeah and I think I might need some new clothes as well. As much as I

appreciate these overalls, Ajax, I'm not used to covering my chest. Only the females of our race do that," Rex said.

"That's fine, Rex," Ajax said, patting him on the back. "In fact, I know the perfect place to find clothes for big guys like us." Then he turned to the other two and said, "You guys coming?"

"Nah, I think we'll hang out here for a while," Hedger said, and soon he and Maximus were browsing the stalls alone.

They were at this for a while when someone said, "Hey, you, the boy with the sprite." Maximus turned around to see who had called. He saw that it was a dwarf. He was barely half of Max's height like most dwarves. He had thick brown hair and an unruly beard. He also had a look on his face like he had just eaten a sour bowl of grapes. "Yeah you come over here," he said.

Maximus didn't like his tone, but he went over anyway.

"Yeah what?" he asked.

"Show me your sword," the dwarf said. Maximus was really not liking his tone. "Why should I?" he asked.

"Because I said so kid," the dwarf said angrily, then he snapped his fingers and three goblins surrounded them. One of them snatched the blade before Maximus could do anything.

“Hey, give it back!” he shouted. A crowd was gathering now but the dwarf ignored all this and looked at his sword. “This is no fake. It’s the real stuff, a pretty high quality sword. So how did a piece of trash like you end up with it?” “I don’t think that’s any of your business,” Maximus answered; he was really getting angry now.

“You stole it didn’t you, you little thief. Well too bad for you only we dirt-picks do the stealing around here,” the dwarf said. Then he re-sheathed the blade and with a sick smile on his face said “So why don’t I just take it off your hands.”

That did it, Maximus was mad now. He grabbed his blade from the dwarf and shoved him to the ground. But the sheath was still in the dwarfs hands. Only the blade was with Maximus and it was glowing red.

Maximus was staring at his now glowing red blade. But Hedger nudged him on the shoulder and said “Eh...Max.”

Maximus looked around to see they were now surrounded. A few dwarves and humans had joined the goblins and all of them were armed with swords and metal rods. “An energy weapon, there’s no way I’m going to let a beggar like him have that. Get him,” the dwarf he had pushed, said. *Well things got bad real fast*, Maximus thought to himself. But there was no way he was going to just give up his blade without a fight, especially since it was glowing red again.

Suddenly someone cleared his throat very loudly behind them and everyone turned to see Ajax standing there. He walked into the middle of the commotion and stood beside Maximus and Hedger. He then asked the dwarf “What seems to be the problem?” The dwarf was stuttering with fear now. “No...no...nothing Mister Ajax. This bo...boy has a very expensive sword with him. I think he stole it.” Ajax took the sheath from the dwarf and handed it to Maximus, and said, “Well, this boy happens to be a very good friend of mine, and I can vouch for him personally. Achilles and Rex also entered from the crowd and stood on either side of them as well. Most of the dwarf’s goons had decided to drop their weapons and move away quietly. Ajax then broke his knuckles and said, “So if there’s nothing else bothering you, then scram.” The dwarf didn’t need telling twice, he picked himself up and ran as fast as his tiny legs could take him. His goons were also nowhere in sight now.

The crowd that had gathered to see the show had started to disperse. “So what was all that about?” Achilles asked. Maximus and Hedger explained the entire incident. Finally Ajax said, “You shouldn’t blame them Achilles. I know that dwarf from before. His name is Munroe and he’s as rotten as they get. He and his gang have been causing trouble for a while now. But they’re not usually this ballsy.”

“So these dirt-picks are like a street gang?” Hedger asked.

“The dirt-picks, why do you say that?” Ajax asked, sounding confused.

“Well he sort of said that he was a part of a group called dirt-picks,” Hedger said.

“The dirt-picks are the dwarven mafia that exists in the city. I heard they were recruiting. I guess Munroe’s gang joined up with them. Damn it, if I knew that I wouldn’t have let him go.”

They started walking again and Achilles asked, “So are these dirt-picks causing you trouble?”

“Well, they were always around but recently they have been trying to expand their men and territory, and if they keep it up me and the army should be the last of their worries.”

Maximus didn’t quite understand what he meant by this. What would worry those criminals more than the army? “Anyway, let’s forget all that and get on with the tour. Let’s head back and get my ride. Then we can head to the industries.”

The rest of the day didn’t involve much trouble. They visited the factories that made everything from paperclips to tank armour. A few of them were tall enough to touch the ceiling. “A building has to be at least thirty stories high to touch the top. The floors after that are what you see in over-city” Ajax explained. After that they stopped for lunch where they had something called mixed-meat kebab. It didn’t seem very healthy, but like most things that weren’t, it tasted great. They were

heading to over-city next, there was a trail that lead directly up from the residential area without going back to the castle to do so. As they passed the residence Hedger asked, “So do you stay around here Ajax?”

“No, as the champion I got an entire floor in the castle to myself. It’s got everything including a gym and a garage, even a swimming pool. It’s actually quite the sweet deal.” Soon they were above ground again and under the scorching desert sun. They were about to reach the last stop for the day: The Colossus.

The giant bronze colossus was even more impressive up close. It looked like a towering icon for the entire city, like a personal guardian to all the people here. On the platform it was standing on it said, ‘The Colossus: warrior, worker and protector’.

“The entire thing was designed and built by Hephaestus himself,” Ajax said. “Wow this thing must be at least fifty feet tall. It must be impossible to build something bigger,” Hedger said.

“It’s seventy feet actually, and you would be surprised – they say that the original Colossus was bigger than this,” Ajax said. “The actual colossus, you mean there’s another one?” Rex asked.

Ajax nodded. “Not a lot of people know about it really. It’s a piece of history that goes back to the Titan war.”

If the story was as old as the Titan War then it really was ancient history.

That war happened almost a thousand years ago, the one which the Great Emperor Zeus fought along with his two brothers against their tyrant father Cronus. Their victory was what started the current chapter of the world.

“Well, a long time ago there was an island kingdom called Rhodes. It was ruled by a Titan and he was ruling it well until several hundred years ago,” Ajax said. “Wait, weren’t all the Titans put into the great prison Tartarus when the war ended, and that was almost a thousand years ago?” Rex asked.

“Most did. But not all the Titans were on Cronus’s side during the war. A few remained neutral, and this particular Titan actually sided with the gods in this War. So even when the War ended he was allowed to keep his kingdom by Emperor Zeus. Now on this island of Rhodes there was said to be a Colossus that was nearly a hundred feet tall,” Ajax said.

Hedger let out a whistle and said, “That is one big hood ornament. So if it’s so big, how come none of us have heard of it?”

“That’s because like I said before, the Titan only ruled hundreds of years ago. After that the Titan disappeared without a trace. And the strange thing was the Colossus of Rhodes disappeared with it. The kingdom didn’t last much after that either. The entire island was ransacked within another fifty years without the Titans protection,” Ajax said. Maximus thought about the story he just heard and it sounded more like fiction to

him, but then again he had heard some weirder stories about gods and Titans. “So why do you guys have a Colossus here?” Achilles asked. Ajax lifted up his finger and said, “Ah well, that’s because the original Colossus was ol’ Hephaestus’ favourite structure and he was already around when it went missing. He built this one as a tribute to the old one. But he refused to make it as big as the old one because he had too much respect for the original.”

After that, they decided to return to the castle. It was late and Daedalus would wake soon, which also meant that it was time to meet Lord Hephaestus.

On their way back in Ajax’s pickup truck, Maximus got lost in his own thought again. He had almost forgotten how old the gods really were. All of the twelve Olympian gods were at least over five hundred years old. If memory served him correctly the youngest of the twelve Olympians was the great Dionysus, the god of wine. He was called so because he invented the drink. Now he ruled over the land of Bacchus, which was the largest producer of wine and alcohol in the world. It was also famous for its casinos and other forms of entertainment. And the parties, they lasted for weeks sometimes. He knew all this because it was Rex’s dream vacation spot. And it was not just the gods, even his new companions Achilles and Ajax were both also about a hundred years old. The Trojan War had happened a century ago. In this world, if you turned powerful enough the rate at which you aged slowed down. Some people

like the gods were so powerful that they were practically immortals. And this was not just measured in battle power. Sometimes, if you excel in a something to such an extent the same thing happens and your life span increases. This is probably what happened in the case of Daedalus due to his unimaginable intelligence. Also some gods were even capable of bestowing immortality onto others. But you had to be at another level of power to do so. In fact, Maximus was only sure of one god who could do so. The great and magnificent Emperor Zeus, the most powerful living thing in the world.

They finally returned to the castle and went inside. But before they took the elevator to their rooms, Achilles pulled Maximus aside to talk to him privately. "It seems you managed to activate your blade again," Achilles said.

Maximus nodded, "It just seemed to happen when I pulled it from that dwarf." "In other words it happened when you got angry," Achilles said.

Maximus was reluctant to agree to this but he had to. It was true.

"It seems that training you with that sword might be more important than I thought. We could start tomorrow if you're up to it," Achilles said, and Maximus agreed to it. Then they went up to their rooms and had just enough time to freshen up before dinner. Maximus was a bit nervous now, after all, they were going to have dinner with a god.

XIX

Maximus joined the others and went down to the dining hall again. Ajax was already waiting for them with a drink in his hand. When they came in Ajax offered them some. Maximus was surprised to see that it was the drink ‘ox toxin’. This was an alcoholic drink that was specifically made for Minotaurs. Humans usually didn’t drink it and for good reason. The thing tasted disgusting and you needed a stomach made of iron to hold it in. But somehow Minotaurs loved it. Maximus had actually tried it once on a dare from Rex. But he puked it out immediately, and for two days after. Rex on the other hand was happy to see his favourite drink. “Don’t mind if I do” he said, and grabbed a bottle from Ajax and took a seat. Achilles seemed saner than those two though, he said, “I don’t know how you guys can drink that sludge. Don’t you have something else like scotch or whiskey maybe?” On his command, a butler-bot poured out a glass of scotch with ice and brought it to his seat. Since both Maximus and Hedger didn’t drink liquor, they settled for some cola.

“So I checked out that truck of yours and it’s pretty bad. But luckily I’m an expert on salvaging vehicles. Still it’s going to take at least a week,” Ajax said, opening another bottle of ‘ox toxin’. He didn’t use a bottle opener either just his hands. In fact he was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt now, and Maximus could see that his arms had more muscles on them than most people had in their entire bodies. He also noticed that Ajax

had a tattoo on his left arm under the shoulder. It looked like a symbol of some sort, but he had never seen it before.

“Anyway, you guys are welcome to stay here as long as you like,” Ajax added. “That’s fine. Now that we got Daedalus out we don’t have to rush. But still it would be wise to leave as soon as possible. I’m sure Empress Athena will have a lot to discuss with her personal advisor regarding the war,” Achilles said.

Ajax took another sip and said “So did you send a message to Athens that you got old Daedalus back?”

Achilles nodded, “Yes, I sent a mirror message when I got here and explained our situation, even telling them to locate the antidote for his potion. I’m sure nobody got it in Athens”.

Mirror messages were a magical form of communication. Unlike telephones, one could not only hear, but also see the person who sent the message, although it was for messages and not conversations. This meant that once the message was sent the receiver had to send another message as a reply. They couldn’t just talk like they did on telephones. But Maximus was confused, it sounded like Achilles said that nobody had got his message, he was sure he meant to say somebody did.

They were still talking and waiting for Daedalus and Hephaestus to join them for dinner when suddenly Rex, who had been silent for a while, shouted “That’s it!”

Everyone looked at him now and he was pointing at Ajax. “What’s it?” Hedger asked, somewhat worried that Rex had a bit too much to drink.

“That tattoo on your shoulder,” Rex said looking at Ajax. “I just remembered what it stood for. It’s the mark of the Omega seven.”

Maximus was sure he had heard the name before, but he just couldn’t remember what it was. “Omega seven, what are they, some sort of rock band or something?” Hedger asked.

“What, no,” Rex said. “The Omega seven consisted of the seven most powerful warriors on the Greek side. They were formed during the war, or at least that’s what the rumours say. There was no official record of its existence. Only a symbol, The Greek letter Omega with a seven running through it.”

Maximus looked at Ajax’s tattoo and realised it was the same symbol Rex was talking about. Rex continued “That tattoo is proof that the Omega seven existed and that you were a member.”

Ajax laughed and said, “It looks like you got all the facts right. But you shouldn’t be so surprised. In fact Achilles here is a member too.” Achilles rolled up his sleeve to show an identical tattoo on his arm as well.

“So being part of the seven is a big deal?” Hedger asked.

Maximus nodded and said, “Yeah, actually. I’ve heard this story too. It

meant that they were the most powerful soldiers the Greeks had to offer. They say that even the unflinching walls of Troy trembled when all seven of them entered the battlefield.”

Ajax and Achilles shared a smile. It seemed the topic had made them nostalgic. “Those were the days, right Achilles?” Ajax said.

“So are you guys still active?” Rex asked.

“Well, we are all still alive if that’s what you meant. But we are all scattered across the world now. I haven’t actually seen a few of them in a long time.” Achilles finished off his scotch and said, “You might be lucky enough to meet one more of us. Nobody will be there in Athens.”

Achilles and Ajax laughed at the confused look on the faces of the other three. Maximus felt it was some sort of inside joke between the old friends. They were about to ask more when the doors opened and Daedalus walked in.

“Good to see you all this evening gentlemen,” Daedalus said. Daedalus seemed to have cleaned up. His full grey hair was cut and neatly combed and his beard had been trimmed. He was also wearing a fresh blue set of robes and he really did look the part of a great inventor now. “Well, you’re looking much better Daedalus,” Hedger said.

“Thank you my friend. And it’s all thanks to these magnificent automatons,” Daedalus said looking at the butler-bots.

“Oh, I was supposed to send word to Hephaestus when you arrived,” Ajax said. Then he called one of the butler-bots and typed something on its monitor. The robot sped away out the door, probably to fetch the smith god. Daedalus also took a seat among the others.

Achilles informed Daedalus that they would be staying for another week. “That is a fine decision. I must say I have actually begun to enjoy the time I have in my head. It gives me so much time to think and I have already thought of at least twenty new experiments to try when I get back. I might begin to drink the potion to get away from my busy schedule from now,” Daedalus said.

“My only worry is about the soldiers chasing us,” Rex said. Ajax gave a loud laugh and said “Those stiffs are not going to dare enter the city. You see the truth is they can’t afford to piss off the Vulcan Empire.”

Maximus wasn’t quite sure about that. Ares was the kind of guy who would gladly go to war for less. Hedger said what Maximus had been thinking “I don’t know Ajax, Ares is the god of war because he enjoys the war more than the victory. He has no trouble picking fights.”

“Well all that is true, but he still won’t make a move against Vulcan,” Ajax said taking a sip. “Let me explain. You see Vulcan provides weapons and ammunition to both Mars and Minerva now. If Mars was to attack us then Athena would instantly come to our support. Then the supply of weapons to Mars would stop and we would completely side

with Athena. This would definitely turn the tides of war against them. In fact, if it wasn't for this I personally think Ares would have attacked us long back.”

“If you don't trust Ares, why don't you just side with Athena already?” Achilles asked. Just then the doors opened again and a man came in, and he said, “Because I have no interest in their bloody politics”.

XX

Lord Hephaestus had finally shown himself. Maximus had seen many gods on television and in pictures. He had also met Hermes in person so he wasn't sure what the smith god would look like, but this was definitely not what he had expected. He was big. And by big he meant bigger than Rex and Ajax. He had thick brown hair and a beard that was so overgrown and untidy that you couldn't really tell where the hair ended and the beard began. His eyes were the colour of copper and he had dark circles under his eyes like he hadn't slept for days. Also, one side of his face looked like it had been hit by a truck. He even had a few teeth missing. *No wonder I have never seen Hephaestus on television before*, Maximus thought. He definitely had a face for the radio. There was even a screw stuck in his beard. Below his neck he had a huge barrel chest with a lot of chest hair protruding out. His hands were so big they could easily have squashed Maximus like a bug. He was wearing nothing but a sleeveless white undershirt, and it was so covered in grease and muck that its original colour was barely visible. He also had a huge hammer in his hand that was bigger than Maximus. He was also wearing a large bronze machine on his back that made it look like he was wearing a backpack. But the real surprise was from his waist down. He had no legs. Instead he came rolling in on tread wheels, the kind he had seen only on tanks. He was connected to these wheels, and other gears

and equipment from where his legs should have been. Maximus thought he looked like a Centaur only instead of being half horse he was half tank.

Hephaestus rolled in on his wheels. Maximus remembered Ajax saying that the smith god liked machines more than living things. That was understandable, since he was more than half machine himself. "I've told you a million times not to move around the castle on your wheels boss, it makes the floor dirty and you sometimes end up crushing furniture," Ajax said.

Hephaestus looked down at his feet or wheels in this case, and he said, "Oh I forgot I had them on again. Just a second I'll change now." He closed his eyes and concentrated for a second. Suddenly his wheels began to transform. The wheels and metals around it also began to change place, and within a few seconds instead of wheels, Hephaestus was standing with a big pair of bionic legs made of bronze and metal. Maximus could tell how tall he really was now, and he was nearly ten feet tall. He was even taller than Lord Ares.

"It seems you have made some improvement to your feet old friend," Daedalus said. Hephaestus walked forward to greet Daedalus. He was using his hammer like a cane. "It's so nice to see you active again. Instead of just staring off into space," Hephaestus said.

Daedalus chuckled and said “Yes, it seems one of my own experiments has caused me a hindrance again. And it’s definitely not the first time.”

“And if I know you it won’t be your last,” Hephaestus said.

“You’re one to talk, if I recall correctly you have had quite a few backfires from your works as well. Remember the whole Iron giant Talos incident?” Hephaestus laughed loudly at this and it made their chairs shake. “Lucky I encrypted a deactivation module in the processors of its foot or I would have never heard the end of it.”

“I hope you learned your lesson with artificial intelligence and function encoding with that. At least now you sustain a termination program within all your automatons,” Daedalus said. They continued to talk like this for a while using words which Maximus didn’t completely understand. He was pretty sure a few of the words weren’t even in the same language.

After a while, Daedalus turned to them and said, “It seems I must turn in for the night. I only have one minute left on my clock. And speaking of clocks did you manage to get me a watch, Achilles?”

Achilles nodded and took something out of his pocket. It was one of those old pocket watches complete with a chain and everything. “Here I got you this since I knew you loved collecting old technology,” Achilles said. “I also got a wristwatch for myself so that I can keep in check of

your timings.”

Daedalus took the pocket watch happily. It looked like someone had given him an early birthday present. “You know me too well my friend,” Daedalus said, then he turned to Hephaestus and said, “Well, it seems like I must take leave now. But we’ll catch up again tomorrow. Please have one of your Automatons escort me back to my room and bring me some dinner there.”

Daedalus just had enough time to wish the rest of them a good night before he turned into his mumbling self, and then Hephaestus had one of the butler-bots escort him back to his room.

“Great man Daedalus. One of the greatest minds I have ever met,” Hephaestus said. He then turned to the rest of them and said, “Who the heck are you people?” Ajax sighed and said, “I already told you about them. They’re the crew that rescued Daedalus from Ares. Plus, you promised to behave better when we had guests.”

Hephaestus scratched his beard and he finally found the screw that was stuck in it. He threw it on the ground and one of the butler-bots cleaned it up immediately. “I suppose I did agree to that,” Hephaestus grumbled. Then his eyes lit up, and he said, “That means one of you is Achilles.”

Achilles stepped up and said, “That would be me sir.” Hephaestus sized him up, “So you’re the great warrior everyone talks about. Ajax had

already told me you weren't really dead, clever move though. By the way your mother was an old friend of mine. In fact, she made me make some armour for you during the Trojan War. Now don't tell me you lost it?"

Maximus knew he was referring to the 'armour of Styx'. He hadn't lost it of course, but he seemed to have left it in his room for dinner, Maximus thought, but he still had his sword though. Just then Achilles put his hand in his T-shirt and took out a chain he was wearing around his neck. In the place of the chain where the locket would have been was a summoning crystal. He tapped it and in a flash of light Achilles was wearing the 'Armour of Styx'. Hephaestus seemed delighted to see his old work.

"Yes, this truly is the greatest armour I have created. I never had such amazing materials to work with, either. I still don't know how your mother managed to get her hands on the black metal from the Styx." He checked to see if the armour had any scratches or nicks on it, and he found nothing. "Well, this really is the invulnerable armour," Hephaestus said, "a pity I ran out of the rare metal to complete the armour, and I see you had to pay dearly for that."

Maximus knew the story. It was a famous one. The invulnerable 'armour of Styx' had covered Achilles from head to toe except at one point, at his

heel. It was the only point in his body that was vulnerable, but no one was able to hit him there during the entire war, not even the great Hector. But at the end of the war Hector's Brother Paris made the most amazing shot in history. With a poisonous arrow he managed to hit Achilles right in the heel. The poison had supposedly killed Achilles. But Maximus knew now that this wasn't the case. But this incident had coined the term 'Achilles Heel' and it meant something's 'weak spot.'

"You know I always wondered this. I have met that runt called Paris who supposedly made that amazing shot. He's the champion of Venus now. But he really didn't seem like the type to even lift a bow without shaking with fear, much less shoot with such precision in the heat of battle," Hephaestus said narrowing his eyes, almost certain that something was amiss. Achilles nodded to this and said, "That's because he didn't. The one who actually made that shot was Apollo."

Hephaestus began laughing and shouted "I knew it." But the news caught everyone else by surprise. Even Ajax asked "What? Why didn't you tell me." Achilles just lowered his head and said, "What difference did it make? By the time I woke up again the war was over and we had won. That was what was important." Hedger glided in between everyone and raised his arms, and said "Alright, now wait just a cotton picking minute here. My history may be a little rusty but didn't Emperor Zeus forbid any of the gods from directly entering the war?"

This was true of course, to make sure that the Trojan War did not turn

into a world war Emperor Zeus had forbidden any of the gods from directly entering battle. But they were free to support the side they chose in any other form they chose. When no one corrected Hedger, he then asked, “Then why didn’t Lord Zeus punish Apollo for what he did?”

“Maybe he just didn’t know,” Achilles said. “Apollo had made sure that Paris got the credit for killing me in order to mask his involvement in the war. Maybe like everyone else Lord Zeus believed this as well.”

This made sense to Maximus, but then Hephaestus said, “You would be surprised what Zeus would let Apollo get away with. After all, he and his sister Artemis have always been Zeus’s favourites.”

“So wait, how did you survive the poison then?” Rex asked.

“Well after I got shot, a few members of the Omega seven, including Ajax here found me and rushed me to my old master Chiron and Daedalus. The two of them managed to prevent the poison from killing me. But my leg was too damaged by then and they had to amputate it. It was almost a month before I regained consciousness, and by then the world already thought I was dead.” Silence followed what Achilles had just said and finally Hephaestus asked, “So was it Daedalus who fitted you with a bionic leg?” and Achilles nodded yes to this. That probably was not the question Maximus would have went with but he wasn’t a god so what did he know? “And I also recall a nice shield I had built to

go with the armour. You didn't lose it did you?" the god asked.

Achilles showed him his left Gauntlet; it had a blue crystal on it and Maximus realised it was another summoning crystal.

"Excellent," Hephaestus said. Maximus wanted to know more about what happened during the Trojan War, but just then the doors swung open and around five butler-bots came in with trays of food. Their dinner was finally here.

On seeing the food that arrived everything else was wiped clean out of Max's mind. He thought the breakfast here was too good to be true. But this was something else. He didn't know where to begin. Right in the middle of the table was a huge, fully cooked, wild boar. The entire thing was covered in gravy and it had an apple in its mouth. Next to that were sizzling plates of kebabs made from every meat imaginable, like chicken, beef, mutton and even moose. There were two fully stuffed turkeys on both sides, and a big hot plate of large chicken drumsticks. Maximus thought that the chickens must have been on steroids because each leg was bigger than his arm. There was also a spicy duck pot roast and a literal mountain of sausages on another plate. There was also a large cylinder of spinach soup.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you guys are not vegetarians," Hedger said.

“What gave it away?” Maximus said with a grin.

“Nonsense,” Ajax said, “we have green food, here look spinach soup.”

The soup was definitely green, but it looked a lot like barf. Maximus was glad when Achilles decided to put the lid back on it. They started to dig in and everything was delicious. The spinach soup sat there forgotten. Even Hephaestus had eased up a little more once he had some drinks in him. He was drinking huge jugs of cold beer, but it really didn't seem to get him drunk.

“You know, I always wondered why it was ok for Minotaurs to eat beef,” Hedger said.

“The same reason why it's ok for you to eat birds, we are nowhere near the same species. We just look alike. So shut up and eat your chicken,” Rex said. “Well at least you admitted you look like a cow,” Hedger snickered.

Hephaestus took a large bite from a turkey leg and said “Okay, so I know who Achilles is, but who the heck are you guys. Are you soldiers from Athens?”

They all looked at each other, and then they explained how they had helped with rescuing Daedalus. Hephaestus heard the story and said, “Martian soldiers helping out Athena, well that's a first, I can understand how that would put you on Ares's bad side.” He took another bite and

asked, “So you guys are refugees with no country now, huh?”

The three of them nodded in agreement. “And you too are ex-soldiers. So what happened to that job,” Hephaestus asked next.

“Well, Max here quit the first chance he got. And, well, I got thrown out after my injury,” Rex said looking down.

Maximus knew he was not comfortable talking about this. But Hephaestus gave an understanding nod and said, “The world is not kind to you when you’re crippled. I know that personally from experience. But thankfully, there was nothing wrong with my brain and I was able to build my own limbs.” He was referring to his mechanical legs of course. Rex just grunted in agreement. Hephaestus started scratching his beard in deep thought, and finally he said, “Rex was it. You don’t seem like a bad guy, so how about I fix you up with some metal limbs?”

Rex’s eyes widened and he clearly couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He slowly said, “But I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Oh don’t talk nonsense dear lad, I got plenty of money. I’ll do this for you free,” Hephaestus said taking another huge sip from his jug, “and don’t think I’m doing this out of pity either. I love working on bionic limbs, they are so complex and a real challenge. And I love a good challenge. Yours should be really interesting since I’ve never worked on a Minotaur before. So what do you say, you in?”

Rex just stood there so dumbstruck he couldn't say a word, but luckily Hedger helped him out and said, "I'm sure if he hadn't just swallowed his tongue now from all the excitement he would have said yes, and thanked you a million times," and Rex nodded to this.

"Excellent. It looks like I got myself a new project," Hephaestus said, and he sounded like a child who just got a new toy. He then turned to Ajax and asked "When are they leaving?"

"In about a week's time, I guess," Ajax answered.

"That's even better. A deadline should really help me work more efficiently and it amps up the challenge. Have all of his things shifted to one of my labs, use lab three." Hephaestus then turned to Rex and said, "A week is a real challenge so you'll be staying in one of my labs the whole time since we have no time to waste. And don't worry I'm going to make you the best bionic arm and eye you have ever seen. And maybe even fit something on your horn if we have the time."

He started walking away, "Come on now, let's start right away, I'm going to get this done in a week even if it kills you," he said sounding real excited.

"He's joking of course?" Rex asked Ajax.

"Of course he is. I mean a few of his guinea pigs have died before in his experiments, but I'm sure that won't happen to you," Ajax said with a sheepish smile. On that reassuring note Rex followed the smith god out

the door.

After they had left Hedger began to yawn and said, “Well, that was an exciting dinner, but I think I’m going to hit the sack now.” Everyone agreed, and they all got up to head for bed. Before Maximus went into his room Achilles stopped him and said, “Try to go directly to sleep. I’ll come and call you early in the morning for your first training session.” Maximus agreed to this and went inside. He fell straight on to his bed when he entered his room. And it only took a few minutes before he was fast asleep.

XXI

Maximus thought that he would sleep like a log after such a long and tiring day. But within minutes after falling asleep he opened his eyes again. There was darkness all around him. He felt like he was awake again but he knew he was still asleep in his bed. And he was pretty sure it had something to do with the voice that came free with his sword.

“Hello,” he called out, “the voice that haunts my dreams. You there?” At first there was nothing, then slowly the voice said, “Enjoying the visit at the smith god’s kingdom I see.”

Maximus thought it was really annoying that he could only hear a voice. So when he talked to it he never really knew where to look. All he could do was stare into the darkness. “Well, I actually didn’t think I would be hearing from you so soon,” Maximus said.

“As did I my child, But it seemed that fortune has smiled upon me and because of this I require your assistance.”

Maximus nodded for the voice to go on. He was pretty sure it could see him somehow. “I told you in our last encounter that if you came across a form, any form of powerful energy you were to absorb some of it. Do you remember that child?” the voice said and he nodded again. “As it turns out there is one close by,” the voice said, “you are aware of the powerful volcano Mount Etna near to the city. It has an immense energy

from which I wish to borrow some.”

Maximus didn't like any of this and he wondered what the voice was hoping to gain by gathering this energy. But he had given his word that he would help in exchange for the sword and if nothing else he was someone who kept his word.

“Alright then, so what do you want me to do?” Maximus asked.

“It's quite simple. I merely require you to go to the volcano and dip your sword in the magma, the sword will do the rest,” the voice said.

Maximus wasn't sure the voice had thought the plan through. “But I thought the volcano was inactive now.”

“Not quite,” the voice began, “the volcano still has all its power. The smith god is actually using its energy to power his entire city with the help of his technology. A volcanic power station if you will. Due to this no magma gathers within the volcano's top anymore, and it appears to be inactive. But the magma is still flowing deep inside. And if my calculations are correct you should be able to find passages that lead deep into the volcano that should let you come in contact with its magma. And do not worry child, the passages should be safe enough for you to pass through without you dying.”

Those were not a couple of 'should's' Maximus was happy about, but he still agreed to do it. “I'm not saying I'll do it first thing tomorrow, but

I'll get it done before I leave Vulcan city," he said.

"I understand and agree to your condition," the voice said, "I also feel as though you still do not trust me. I assure you that I do not wish to bring any harm to you or your companions. The ones I wish to harm are much more powerful." Maximus nodded his head again but something about what he said last bothered him. It seemed the voice had a deep vengeance against someone. Maximus just hoped he didn't get caught in the crossfire.

"Good. Then child do you wish to see what your enemies are plotting again?" the voice asked. Maximus realised that it was asking whether he would like to see a vision again and he decided to take it. After all any soldier would tell you intel on your enemies was always helpful. "Sure, if it's not too much trouble," Maximus said.

The darkness began to fade away and soon he was standing in the throne room of Ares just like before. Lord Ares was on his throne staring at the door. But he noticed that there were no guards at the door now. Ares sat there with his face resting on one of his arms, and a very impatient look on his face. He kept staring at the door as if expecting someone. A few minutes passed and finally the doors opened and a man came in. And it was none other than Hermes, The messenger god.

It was Hermes alright. There was no mistaking his wavy brown hair and

bronze eyes. He walked in with the confident smirk that seemed to be always fixed on his face. But he did have a change of clothes though. Instead of the jogger's outfit he was wearing the last time Maximus saw him, he was now wearing a tailor-made brown suit that matched his hair. Inside he wore a white shirt with a brown tie with bronze lining, which really brought out his eyes. He looked like a famous television anchor, or the CEO of a big company, both of which he actually was. He was also holding a golden sceptre with him that had two snakes, one made of bronze and another made of silver coiling around it. His shoes had wing designs on their sides and Maximus was sure they would spring out again at their master's command.

“Well you sure took your sweet time. For the god of speed you seem pretty slow today,” Ares said. Hermes didn't seem too bothered by this insult. He merely smirked and said “Unlike you, I have better things to do than sit around on a throne all day. A busy schedule can slow anyone down, even me.”

Ares was starting to get annoyed. He was clearly not used to people talking back to him. But he just gritted his teeth and said “Well, the tracker you placed seemed to have stopped working so now we have no idea where the escaped prisoner is.”

“Well, they were bound to find the tracker sooner or later. And as for their location there's no need to worry. They're still with Hephaestus and they seem to be stuck there for a while,” Hermes said twirling his

sceptre around playfully.

“Well, we can’t attack them while they’re in the city, not without going against that crippled blacksmith. And his ammunition is quite important to my kingdom right now,” Ares said.

Hermes gave a small laugh and said, “I think old Hephaestus is the least of your worries. The big guy wants to talk to you.” Then Hermes clapped his hands together and a huge monitor appeared as if it had been summoned using a summoning crystal. The monitor was facing Ares and from where Maximus was standing he could only see its back. But whatever it was Ares saw on the monitor he didn’t seem happy to see it, and if Maximus wasn’t mistaken, what he saw in Ares’s face now was fear.

“My Lord,” Ares said.

“Shut up you fool,” a loud voice said from the monitor. It was so powerful that it literally made Maximus shiver a little even though he wasn’t even really there. “I gave you one job. To bring the prisoner to me safely and you failed me.” It was a man’s voice but that was all Maximus could tell. And if it was someone who could talk like that to Ares it was someone truly scary.

“My Lord, we have the prisoner’s location and I have sent my champion after him. I have received word that he has joined up with the crew that

was pursuing the prisoner and he will not fail you.”

“Just see that he does not for your sake. Or it will be you I take in chains,” the man in the monitor said, and with that the monitor disappeared again.

“Well, he did not seem happy did he?” Hermes said with a smile. Ares was gritting his teeth again, “Do you know who it is that rescued the prisoner. Was it Athena’s champion perhaps?” he asked.

“No, my sources tell me her champion is still in Athens overseeing the war,” Hermes said. “All I know about the rescue party is that it is led by a cloaked swordsman and a group of mercenaries he hired.”

Maximus wondered why Hermes was lying. He obviously knew it was Achilles but he still chose to hide the fact that he was alive. Maximus was also somewhat surprised to be called a mercenary, but he felt it had a nice ring to it. Then suddenly he heard someone knocking at the door. At first he thought that someone was knocking at the doors to the throne room until he woke up abruptly and fell off his bed onto the floor. It took him a few seconds to realise that the knocking was coming from outside his own room.

XXII

He got off the floor and checked out the window, there was still no sign of light outside. He wondered who was knocking at his door at this hour. He went to check and saw Achilles standing there. He was already in his armour and, as always, his sword was with him. “Get ready” he said.

Maximus was still half asleep, he said “What time is it?”

“Four thirty,” Achilles said, “your training starts at five. Meet me on floor minus twenty seven, there’s a private gym there big enough for us to practice. Don’t be late.” He said this and went to the elevator.

Maximus was used to getting up early while he was in the army. But this was ridiculous, even in the army you only had to get up at six. But the sword training was his need so he really did not have a voice to complain. He got ready fast and soon he was out of his room with his sword, wearing his leather armour. Well it couldn’t exactly be called armour. Basically it just consisted of a thick brown leather chest plate, a pair of leather gloves, his combat boots and an armguard he had made himself. It wasn’t much but it was all he could afford. He went over to the elevator and pressed the button for floor minus twenty seven.

Once he reached there the gym wasn’t hard to find since it took up most

of the floor. Maximus went inside to find Achilles already waiting for him. The gym itself was mostly empty. It had some basic training equipment like weights, dumbbells and a treadmill on one side. And on the other wall were a bunch of basic melee weapons such as swords, spears and hammers. There were also a few closets and a huge garage door on one side. Other than this the room was empty, and all this open space was perfect for sword training.

“Shall we begin?” Achilles asked and Maximus nodded. “Then put away your sword,” Achilles said.

Maximus was a bit confused. “Don’t I need my sword for the training?”

“Not right now. First you start with basic exercise, you were in the army, you know the drill. Push ups, sit ups the works,” Achilles said.

Maximus nodded. He hadn’t done any of that since he left the army, but he was sure he could still manage it. He was about to remove his armour when Achilles said, “Leave it on. It will help you to be used to their weight in a fight.” Maximus nodded and began; after a few hours he realised that he was wrong. He was not nearly in the shape he was when he left the army, and he could just do half the number of push ups as before. The extra weight of his leather wasn’t helping. Achilles was training too, but he was doing all-out sword combos instead of exercise. Maximus couldn’t help but admire the flow at which he used his blade, it was like an extension of his arm and it moved precisely according to

his will. His face showed complete focus, his eyes unwavering below the scar on his forehead.

After another hour or so Maximus was sweating and on the floor. He had no idea his stamina had taken such a beating. Between the lack of training and the inadequate amounts of food in the trenches, his body was nowhere near his old form. Achilles sheathed his blade and came over, and he was barely sweating. Maximus was still on the floor, and Achilles said “That’s enough for now. We shall continue after breakfast.”

Maximus removed his armour and left it at the gym. Achilles merely taped his locket again and the ‘armour of Styx’ disappeared. They went off to the elevator after that. They stepped in and went back up to the dining hall. “Why leather? Metal armour is always best for a swordsman. And if you wanted dexterity there is always Kevlar,” Achilles asked once inside the elevator.

“Trust me it wasn’t by choice,” Maximus said. “I used to use metal armour while in the army. But they didn’t exactly let you keep any equipment once you left. So I just salvaged whatever I got.”

Achilles just nodded and the elevator reached their floor. When they entered the dining hall Ajax and Hedger were already there, but there was no sign of Rex. Hedger was munching on an apple and Ajax had

already finished his breakfast and was reading a newspaper. The newspaper was called 'the flying times'. It was one of the largest newspapers in the world and was owned by the company Swift-foot, Hermes's company.

"Wow you look like you just climbed Mount Etna," Hedger said as he saw Maximus. Maximus was still panting a bit as he sat down and his clothes were drenched with sweat. There was an amazing spread for breakfast as usual but the only thing he wanted right then was some water. He chugged down an entire bottle before he spoke. "Was training with Achilles," he said finally catching his breath.

Ajax put down his paper and said, "Well, Achilles taking someone under his wing, that's a first. Your old master would be so proud."

Achilles just smirked and said "I doubt anything I do would please that old geezer," and Ajax laughed at this.

"So anything worth reading in that?" Achilles said, looking at the newspaper. "Just the usual horse manure, no real update on the war either, if that's what you were asking," Ajax said.

Achilles nodded and said, "And I guess Hermes still hasn't mentioned that I'm still alive either."

"That's for sure, I mean even Ares still doesn't know." Maximus just remembered that he had not told them about the latest vision yet. So he began to explain and once he had finished, Hedger said, "So you're

saying that there's somebody behind Ares pulling the strings on Daedalus being kidnapped. But who would Ares take orders from?"

Achilles thought for a moment, and said, "The highest possibility is one of the other gods. And judging by the way Ares acted it sounds like one of the big three." The big three consisted of three of the most powerful gods in the entire world, the three brothers who had ushered in the era of the gods themselves, Zeus, Hades and Poseidon. All three were emperors of vast and powerful nations that held more influence than most other countries combined. Achilles was right about one thing, even Ares would have to cower before their might. "Isn't there any other god who has that kind of influence?" Hedger asked.

"Maybe Queen Hera would be since she is the wife of Zeus and all, but Maximus confirmed it was a man's voice," Achilles said.

"Now let's not jump to any conclusions here," Ajax said. "After all, there is another group of creatures that might be just as powerful." Everyone looked at him and Achilles asked, "Are you referring to the Titans?"

"Wait, hold on a sec, I thought all the Titans were locked up in Tartarus in deep slumber?" Maximus asked.

"Most are, but not all. Some still roam free hiding away from the gods. They are still out there waiting for a chance to free their brethren and

bring forth the Titan Age once again,” Achilles said. The thought of some horrifically powerful Titan roaming free plotting to take over the world didn’t exactly put his mind at ease. They all sat there in silence for a while until Ajax finally said “Well, sitting here and staring at the ground is not going to solve our mystery. Besides with fixing up your truck and my regular duties as champion I got a full plate already. So if you guys don’t mind I’m going off to work now. With that Ajax got up and left.

Achilles turned to Maximus and said, “We should get back to training as well.” Maximus was still kind of tired but he agreed to his new teacher. “What about you Hedger. Do you wish to join us?” Achilles asked.

“Me, nah. Training’s not really my thing you know. Besides, I heard that this place has a huge game room on the twenty second floor, I think I’ll just chill there for a while.” With that Achilles and Maximus left for their gym again.

On their way back, Maximus asked, “By the way, how come Hermes still hasn’t told Ares that you’re alive and the one who rescued Daedalus?”.

“Because Hermes doesn’t give away anything for free, especially information, and right now knowledge of me being alive seems to be quite valuable. So he’s probably going to hold on to it.” They had reached the gym again and Maximus went ahead to put his leather

armour on again.

Achilles went ahead and took a seat, he then took out his lighter, flicking it open and shut. "Alright, now draw your sword and show me what you got," he said. Maximus drew his sword and waited. Usually, when he practiced he had something to hit. Like a tree or a dummy while in the army. But he saw nothing like that here, and he felt that swinging his sword around in the air would just make him look like a moron. "Is there something I can hit in here?" he asked. Achilles pointed to a closet behind them and Maximus went ahead to check what was in it. Inside he found an automaton, it was standing on four wheels, but from there on up it was designed like a human. It even had a wooden sword in one hand and a shield on the other. It was also wearing a bike helmet on its head. It was like a hi-tech practice dummy.

He pushed the automaton to the centre of the room. Once it was in place Achilles gave him the word to strike. Maximus drew his sword and went to work on the automaton. His first shots were weak. But once he got into his form his swings became more precise and stronger. He was afraid that the robot might break, but it seemed to be made for taking a real high amount of damage. After a few sword combinations Achilles told him to stop. Then he said, "That was good. But now let's try with the automaton being active, shall we?" He went up to the robot and pressed a button on its back. The eyes of the automaton lit up red and it

readied its sword and shield for a fight. Achilles then said, “Now, this is a practice device, so it’s used to taking a lot of damage so don’t worry about going all out. Also, these practice-bots have ten levels of difficulty. Now, one and two are too easy, and all they really do is block. So I’m going to start you off with level three.” He then went ahead to return to his seat, leaving Maximus to fight against the automaton.

It was much harder to hit something that hit back and Maximus knew this well, but he still managed to fend off the attacks pretty well. This went on for a while and Maximus didn’t really have any trouble against the bot, though he was starting to get tired again and the robot didn’t seem to have that problem as it ran on batteries. Finally, it was lunchtime when they stopped but they didn’t go up to the dining hall for their food. Instead, Achilles had one of the butler-bots bring a couple of burgers to their gym. “It seems I underestimated you. You’re handling level three with no trouble. I think we should put it up to five after lunch,” Achilles said while they ate. Maximus nodded to this and took a bite from his burger. The fight had made him really hungry. “But you still don’t seem to be any closer to unlocking the blade’s true potential.” This was true, even though he was getting well practiced with the blade he still had no idea on how to make the red glow come out. “It looks as if I can’t control it when this thing lights up at will.”

“Have patience,” Achilles said, “after the next few rounds we will try some focusing techniques to help improve your willpower. That should

also help you to control your sword.”

They started the training again, only this time with the automaton at level five. The robot was much faster now and it blocked a lot more of Max’s attacks. This went on for a while until he got too tired to keep fighting. He just couldn’t keep up with the machine anymore. He was beginning to lose focus and he let his guard down. The automaton nearly got a shot right on his head but luckily Achilles stepped in and blocked it. He switched off the practice-bot while Maximus sat on the ground exhausted. “You’re focusing too much on your sword. Every move you make is based on it,” Achilles said.

“I’m a swordsman, what else am I suppose to focus on?” Maximus asked, barely able to talk between panting for air.

“It is true that your sword is an important weapon, but you keep forgetting that the swordsman is an important weapon too. It is possible to win with a weaker sword against a more powerful one if you are the better swordsmen.”

Maybe it was the lack of water in his system right then, but Maximus was not getting a word he was saying. Achilles must have figured this out because he then said, “Perhaps it would be better if I showed you”.

Achilles got up, but left his sword on his seat. He then went ahead to

pick up a wooden sword from the back wall. Maximus cleared the field to see his teacher in action. Achilles walked up to the practice-bot and turned the level up to ten, the last level. He then switched it on and its eyes began glowing red again. The practice-bot was moving at a ridiculous speed now and Maximus could barely keep up with it. He was sure that if he had been the one fighting the robot now he would have been on the ground with a broken arm. But not Achilles, it was amazing how he was able to evade all of the bots attacks and look so refined while doing it.

“You see I don’t even need to use my sword now, as long as I’m able to use my body correctly,” he said while still coolly avoiding the attacks. After a minute Achilles stepped back somewhat and the automaton raised its sword for another attack. But the bot was too slow, with a swift strike with his wooden sword Achilles made contact with its head. The head came straight off and rolled on the ground with its helmet broken and lying on the side. Well at least Maximus had learned one thing today, and that was to never challenge Achilles to a sword fight even if he was only going to use a broken twig as his weapon.

“I think that’s enough swordplay for today, now let’s try to get your focus in tune,” Achilles said.

They continued to a type of meditation and Achilles kept talking about how he was supposed to visualize his energy blending with his sword. Maximus had no idea what he was talking about. He just sat there

staring at the sword waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. After a while he began to feel stupid, but he wasn't complaining. At least he wasn't sweating it out with the practice-bot anymore. Time passed and finally Achilles said, "That's enough for today. We will continue with it tomorrow. Besides, it's almost time Daedalus got up again. We already missed him this morning and I still haven't told him about your latest vision." They packed up their things and headed off to their rooms. Maximus took a shower and it was only when the water hit him that he realised how much his muscles were aching.

XXIII

He got ready after that and went over to the dining hall again. Daedalus, Hedger, and Achilles were already there. “Ah Max, my boy. I just heard the good news, training from the great Achilles himself. It is not something that many are offered,” Daedalus said with a smile. Maximus took a seat beside him and he greeted the old inventor. “I was just telling him about your new Vision to see if he had any Idea who our mystery man is,” Achilles said.

Daedalus looked a bit grim now, the smile had left his face completely “I am not sure who the man is. But I may have a clue on what he is after. And it has nothing to do with the war or Athens, I’m afraid.”

“If not intel, then what are they after?” Achilles asked.

Daedalus shook his head and said, “I am afraid I cannot explain it out in the open like this. Let us leave the matter for when we reach Athens. I have a special room designed in my laboratory there, which is protected from all sorts of information leaks, whether they are magical or technology based. I am afraid I can only discuss the matter there. This information is a bit too critical.” Maximus wondered what could be so valuable that Daedalus would go to such drastic methods to just talk about it and have even gods running after it. But he knew there was no point asking now, and so they decided to drop the subject.

They talked for a while after that, but then it was time for Daedalus to leave. Ajax joined them for dinner. But there was still no sign of Rex. Maximus wasn't too surprised by this since fitting bionic limbs sometimes took nearly a month. And since they had only a week here he was sure Hephaestus was not going to waste any time. But still Maximus wished he could at least visit him. But Hephaestus was very strict about letting people in his labs, and the only ones among them allowed to enter them were Ajax and Daedalus. Ajax joined them for dinner, which was extravagant as usual. He told them stories of him and Achilles during the war, and would have told them about all the women that had fallen for Achilles too if Achilles hadn't kicked him in the leg with his bionic one.

"This guy really never knew how to take a compliment," Ajax said, rubbing his leg. They left for bed after that, and Maximus was really glad when he got to lie on his bed again after a very tiresome day. He slept off a bit disappointed that he would have to get up at four thirty again the next morning.

The next couple of days went in the same method. Maximus spent most of his time training, stopping only in between for food. They had visitors in the gym sometimes. Ajax came in once to tell them how the truck was coming along. He stayed for a while and gave a few pointers himself about weapon balance. Hedger visited often enough, whenever he got bored of playing video games and stuffing himself with junk food. Even

Daedalus came by once when he had his head screwed on, and he informed Maximus that Rex's bionic transplant was going well and nearing completion. Maximus still hadn't seen him in the last few days and Daedalus had told him Rex wasn't even allowed to leave the lab.

They had reached the end of their third day of training, and Maximus was doing the meditation thing again with no real progress. That's when he remembered that he still had to do the quest, which the voice had given him. "Achilles is it alright if I take tomorrow off?" he asked.

Achilles narrowed his eyes and asked why.

"Well, I just wanted to visit the city again," Maximus said.

"What for?" Achilles asked.

Maximus really hadn't thought this through, but he said, "It's just that I was saving up for a sword before, but now that I got this one I thought maybe I could get some decent armour. You said it yourself, the one I have now is not exactly great."

Achilles nodded and gave him permission. Maximus was not really planning to buy any armour, but it looked like he would have to now since he had already told Achilles. He just hoped he had enough time for all this after visiting the volcano.

Maximus got up early the next morning as well. Mainly because he

wasn't sure how long everything would take. But also because he wanted to leave before Hedger woke up. The thing was Hedger might want to come along with him to the city. And if that happened then he would have to explain why he was going towards the volcano. And that explanation would have to be a lie. He really didn't want to lie to his friends more than he had to. He went out in full battle gear and decided to grab something quick for breakfast. When he went into the dining hall he saw that Achilles was already sitting there drinking coffee. "Well, you're up early. I thought you would sleep in considering it was your day off."

"I guess I just got used to waking up early again. So I decided to get an early start on things. What about you?" Maximus said.

Achilles sipped his coffee. "I'm just heading to practice as usual. By the way, why do you have your armour on? I thought you were just going shopping?" he said, sounding a bit suspicious.

"Oh I just thought I would take it along. You know, maybe get a discount or something if I could exchange it for the new armour," Maximus said, thinking quickly. He didn't stay for long after that, he just grabbed a sandwich and left before Achilles could ask any more questions.

Maximus took the elevator to the lobby in the bottommost level. The

lobby was much less crowded now than when he had come before. Understandable, as most people were still getting up. He went outside and the artificial sunlight was just beginning to shine lightly. He went ahead to look for a way to get near to the volcano and found out that there was a bus to the Colossus site. But it wasn't for another hour. He decided to maybe look around the shops in the meantime, but most of them weren't even open. So he started walking down the street eating his sandwich. The streets were mostly empty except for a few stray pedestrians here and there. He was walking along minding his own business when suddenly someone ran by him and snatched his money pouch from his belt. At first he thought it was a little kid, but then he realised it was a goblin. Maximus yelled at him to stop, but like all thieves, he just kept running. Maximus decided to chase after him and ran behind him for a while. Then the goblin took a right into an ally. The alley was a dead end and he knew he had the goblin cornered. That's when someone hit him hard on the head from behind, and Maximus fell to the floor unconscious.

XXIV

When he awoke again his face was wet. Someone had splashed water on his face, no it wasn't water it smelled different. It was beer. Maximus slowly opened his eyes to find himself in a tavern. It was a noisy place with very little light coming inside. The entire place was crowded with dwarves, goblins, humans and a few satyrs here and there. There was also a group of Orcs at a table and a Cyclops was smoking a really big cigarette in the corner. Maximus tried to get up, but he was being held on his knees by an Orc and a human. In front of him was a dwarf sitting with an empty beer can in his hand. He seemed to have been the one who woke him up.

Maximus realised that it was the same dwarf that he had met the other day, Monroe or something, Ajax had called him. "Well, it was a stupid move of yours to come to these streets again with what you did, kid. And even dumber to come here alone," Monroe said with an evil grin on his face, "but I guess it was fate that this sword should come to my hands again."

He realised that his blade was sitting beside Monroe. Maximus was pretty angry now, but there was no way to get his sword.

"Give it back you low life," he shouted.

The dwarf started laughing and said "Ha-ha, shout all you want, no

one's going to save you here. This here is the dirt-pick headquarters and all these are members of my new crew. And don't think about a rescue coming either, no one outside the dirt-picks knows its location. Especially not that smith god's dog, Ajax."

Maximus knew he was in deep trouble now, and he couldn't really see a way out. Even if he managed to get his hands on his sword there was no way he could fight his way out through all these people, and especially not a Cyclops. He decided to wait and see what they would do with him. They insulted him for a while and even gave a few slaps, but he kept his mouth shut the entire time. After a while Monroe said, "This one's no fun. Just send him to the dungeons and let him rot."

The two men holding him carried him off to the basement. There were a group of cages there and he was thrown into one. All the other cages were empty, except for the one right next to him. In that one someone was sitting curled up on the floor covering their face. The two men who brought him here just laughed at him and left.

There was still an Orc guarding the main door, but he was dozing off. Orcs were perhaps the ugliest race in existence and every one of them that Maximus had met had a nasty attitude to go with it. Maximus guessed he would be unhappy too if his face looked like something that belonged in a barf bag. They were built like humans but were a lot stronger. They also had a very good sense of smell. But their eyesight

was poor and Maximus had never heard of an Orc becoming a scientist either.

He walked around his cell checking to see if he could find something to use. But the only thing inside was a small stool and a deep hole in a corner that Maximus realised was supposed to be the toilet. They had taken all his money and his sword, but he still had his armour. He guessed it wasn't valuable enough to steal. But he had nothing on him that would get him out of this mess. He kicked the stool in frustration. A voice from the cage near him said "Now what did that poor stool ever do to you."

Maximus looked to his side to see his fellow prisoner. It was a girl. She seemed young, probably a year or two lesser than him. She had brownish-red hair which was kept short at shoulder length and she was staring at him with big green eyes. She looked cute and somehow reminded Maximus of a cat. Her nose was tiny and Maximus half expected her to meow. But instead, she asked "So what are you in for?"

"What?" Maximus asked a bit confused.

"You know, what you did to piss these guys off," she said.

"I didn't really do anything. They just caught me and took my sword," he said picking up the stool and sitting on it.

"Oh so you're the victim," she said leaning on the wall. "That's sad."

“So what about you?” Maximus asked.

“Oh nothing, I sort of stole from them,” she said casually.

“So you’re a thief,” Maximus said. If she stole from the local mafia she was either really brave or really stupid.

“Well thief is too strong a word really,” she said, “you see I was hungry and I saw a few of these guys bullying an old man for money. I figured anyone healthy enough to bully someone really didn’t need the extra calories. So I stole their lunches.”

“But you got caught,” Maximus said.

“Well, that obviously was not part of the plan, idiot. Besides, how was I supposed to know these guys were gangsters or something?” she said. They sat there in silence after that and Maximus was still irritated at the situation he was in.

“So you got a name Mister moody?” the girl asked after some time. This girl’s tongue was starting to annoy him.

“It’s Maximus. What’s yours, kitty or something?” he said.

“What, why would it be Kitty?” she asked like it was the dumbest question she had ever heard. *Obviously she has never seen a mirror in her life*, Maximus thought to himself. “It’s Mia by the way,” she said.

“Did you just meow?” Maximus asked.

Mia rolled her eyes. “What, are you obsessed with cats. I said Mia. M, I,

A Mia,” she said, spelling it out for him. “It’s short enough for even you to remember.”

Okay it was official, this girl was annoying him. “Well I am so happy to meet you,” he said sarcastically and went ahead to brood on his stool.

About an hour passed with no real change. The Orc guarding them woke up once, but it went back to drooling in its sleep within minutes. Soon Max’s frustration was replaced by boredom. So he tried to start a conversation with the girl again. He noticed that she was wearing a cloak with a hood, kind of like the one Achilles wore, only this one was brown instead of black, and it was way more tattered underneath that she wore knee length jeans and a top with full-sleeves. He thought it was an odd choice to wear full-sleeves in this heat. “So what’s with the hood?” he asked.

“It’s not a fashion statement, you idiot. We’re in a desert, covering your head is just common sense,” she shot back.

Maximus sighed and began to say, “Look maybe we got off on the wrong foot,” but just then a dwarf ran into the room and woke the Orc. He seemed tense and soon the two of them went up the stairs leaving the two prisoners alone.

“What was that all about?” Maximus asked.

“I’ll tell you what it was. My chance to get out of here,” Mia said. She

pulled out a set of pins from her jeans and went ahead to pick her lock. The lock opened within a minute. She opened her cage door and stepped out, then she turned to Maximus and said “Well it was a pleasure meeting you, Max. And I really do hope you will get out of here somehow. Anyway I’m leaving, so bye.” She gave him a wave and started walking towards the door. “Wait, aren’t you going to let me out?” Maximus asked, worriedly. Mia put her hands behind her back and turned to face Maximus again, then with a mischievous smile she asked, “And if I do that, what’s in it for me?”

“You want to get paid for helping me?” Maximus asked in disbelief.

“Very good Maxy, you figured that one out all by yourself. Maybe you’re not as dumb as you look,” she said.

“But they already stole all my money,” he said.

“Well that’s too bad, but unless you offer something up I’m not letting you out of that cage,” she said putting out her tongue.

Maximus couldn’t believe how she could be so greedy. “Listen, I’m travelling to Athens with my friends. I’m sure one of them could...”

Maximus began to say but Mia cut him off and asked, “Wait, did you just say you were going to Athens?”

Maximus nodded.

“But you can’t just go to Athens. You need a visa and permission to go

there, and the borders are impossible to sneak past,” she said, narrowing her eyes. Maximus didn’t know any of this, but he said, “Let’s just say I got a few influential friends there.”

“You’re lying,” she said.

“Why would I lie about this?” he shot back.

Mia closed her eyes to think for a second. When she opened them again she said, “Alright, I’ll let you out on one condition. Take me with you to Athens.”

“Excuse me?” Maximus said.

“You heard me. I want to join you to Athens and you have to get me inside. Otherwise you can just rot here in your cage,” she said. Maximus thought about what she was asking and it didn’t make much sense.

“Why do you want to go there anyway?” he asked.

Mia crossed her arms and said, “That’s really not any of your business. Just say if you want the deal or not.” Maximus didn’t have a lot of time here, the guards could be back at any minute.

“Alright then,” Maximus finally said.

“Really?” Mia said sounding all exited. “You won’t change your mind once I let you out, right?”

“Hey, I’m a soldier, or at least I used to be and I don’t go back on my word,” Maximus said as if that was final. She seemed convinced because

she started to pick the lock to his cage and soon enough he was out too.

“Now what?” Mia asked.

“Well we try to sneak out of here,” Maximus said. “Once we’re out I’ll come back with my friends to get my sword back.”

“Sounds like a plan, but let’s get out here first,” Mia said, “also try to find a weapon of some sort, just in case.”

Maximus already had that covered. He pulled out his Army knife from his left boot. Luckily the kidnappers hadn’t found it when they took his sword. “Wow I feel much safer now. What are you planning to do, scratch their backs with that?” Mia said sarcastically.

Maximus just scowled at her and said, “Just shut up and follow me.”

They headed out the door and up the stairs as quietly as possible. Soon they were at the door into the tavern, but there was a path to its side and if they were lucky it would lead outside. But as they got near to the tavern door he stopped and said, “Do you hear something?”

“No,” Mia said.

“Exactly, there’s no sound coming from the tavern at all,” Maximus said.

“So what?” Mia asked impatiently.

“So the place was pretty noisy when I came in an hour ago,” he said

“Maybe everyone has left.” Maximus opened the door slowly to see what was going on. But when he saw what was inside he wished he hadn’t.

XXV

There was blood everywhere. The walls were literally painted with it. And the floor was littered with bodies. Freshly killed corpses of humans, satyrs, orcs, goblins and dwarves lay all around the room. Even the Cyclops he had seen before was lying dead in a corner, its chest ripped open and covered in blood. He spotted the Orc that was guarding them dead on the floor too. And right next to him, with a blank expression on his face, was the corpse of Monroe the dwarf. And standing in the middle of the room surrounded by all this madness was a man. He stood at about six feet tall and he was dressed in full black. Not even a single part of his skin could be seen. Even his hands were covered in black gloves. He wore a long black trench coat with a hood. The trench coat was buttoned and the hood covered his head. And underneath his hood was a skull. Maximus realised that it wasn't an actual skull, but a helmet covering his entire face, designed to look like one. Also, he had a gauntlet on his right hand which was fitted with a long sharp scythe blade. And he just stood there surrounded by all those corpses looking like a modern day grim reaper.

Mia peeked through the door as well to see what Maximus was staring at. But when she saw the sight she began to scream and Maximus had to put his hand over her mouth to make it stop. But it was too late. The man in black had already heard them. He turned to the door and said, "Come

out.” His voice alone was deep and cold. It was enough to send a chill down Max’s spine. Also, it was clear from his tone it was an order, an order which they had no choice but to follow.

They stepped outside slowly. Maximus held his knife ready but he was sure that if it came to a fight they would probably join the Darven mafia. Mia was hiding behind him trying her best to go unnoticed. The man in black looked at them. His skull shaped helmet was fully white. And the eye sockets were covered by black visors. He walked up to them and in his cold voice said, “Are you one of them?” Maximus realised that he was asking to see if they were part of the dirt-pick gang. “No...No we’re not, we were being held captive here and...” Maximus began to say, but the man in black raised his hand to silence him.

“A simple no would suffice,” he said. “I can tell when someone lies to me.” With that he turned around and walked out the door without another word. The two of them still hadn’t moved an inch. They just stood there frozen as if even the slightest movements would summon him back inside. Finally Maximus went ahead to check if he had left. And when he checked the street there was no sign of him. It was as if the man in black had disappeared.

“What in the name of Tartarus was that all about” Mia asked.

“I don’t know, but the dirt-picks seemed to have pissed off the wrong

people,” Maximus said. He remembered Ajax saying that if the dirt-picks kept expanding, then the authorities were the least of their worries. He wondered if this was what he meant.

“Let’s just get out of here. I really don’t want to stand here in this slaughter house a moment more than I have to,” Mia said.

“Wait, I still don’t have my sword,” Maximus said.

Mia nodded, “Yeah, my bags are with these dead guys too. Come on, I know where the storage room is.”

“And how do you know that?” Maximus asked.

“I may have been here before scouting for some work. But they threw me out though when they caught me snooping around,” she said like it was no big deal.

Maximus reminded himself that her life was not his problem and followed her into the storage room. His money pouch was there and so was Mia’s bag, but still no sign of his sword.

“Where is it?” he asked getting frustrated again.

“Was it really expensive?” Mia asked.

Maximus wasn’t sure what it would get on the market, but he nodded yes. “Then it might be in their boss’s room. Come on it’s on the next floor,” she said.

Before they left she picked up the remaining money pouches and stuffed them into her bag. “What are you doing, those aren’t yours?” Maximus asked.

She frowned at him and said, “Yeah, well dead guys don’t need pocket money. But I do, okay? So stop acting all high and mighty and just keep walking.”

They went up to the next floor and saw the dead body of a Minotaur lying in front of the boss’s room. He seemed to have been standing guard before his chest got slashed open. They went inside to see a dwarf sitting on a big chair inside. He was wearing expensive looking clothes too. Maximus guessed that he was the dirt-picks’ boss. And like all the other members of his gang he was dead.

“Hey I know this guy. His name is Roscoe or something, and he was the leader of the entire dirt-pick crew. It looks like the guy in black is taking out the entire organisation,” Mia said. The sword was also their like she guessed. They took it and left the tavern fast as they could. And soon enough they had returned to the main market street.

It was almost noon now and the streets were busy again. No one even gave a second look at the two of them. They stopped at a small fresh juice stand to get something to drink. “So what do we do now?” Mia asked, “shouldn’t we tell the authorities about what happened in there?”

Maximus nodded and said, “Don’t worry about that. I’m planning to tell exactly what happened once I get back to the castle. But I got an errand I need to finish first.”

“What do you mean when you get back to the castle?” she asked.

“That’s where I’m staying,” he answered. Mia’s eyes widened when she heard this, “But you have to be like a guest of the king for that.”

“Well I did meet the king once. But I guess we’re more like the guest of his champion Ajax,” he said a bit pleased that she was impressed. She had her mouth open in amazement for a few seconds, then she asked, “Seriously, who the heck are you,” and he just smirked at her.

They finished their drinks and started walking again. “So as I was saying there’s something I have to do. So why don’t you go home while I go get that done,” Maximus said.

“Nice try, but I’m not letting you out of my sight. You may be the only chance I ever get for entering Athens, and I am not about to let that slip,” she said. “Besides, I’m a traveller and everything I own is already in my bag. I usually just crash wherever I get a place to sleep.”

“So you’re a hobo,” Maximus said.

She punched him on the shoulder for this. Her fist was tiny but it still hurt a bit. “I am not a hobo. I just move around a lot, okay?” she huffed. Maximus realised that there was no arguing with her. “Alright you can

come along. But you can't mention this to anyone. Even not to anyone back in the castle," he said.

"Why is that?" she asked curiously.

"I don't really think it's any of your business," Maximus said, repeating her exact words from before.

They walked over to the bus stop and waited. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the Colossus," he said.

"Your big secret is that you're going sightseeing?" she said holding back a laugh.

Maximus scowled at her, and said, "No, I just need to find something near there."

"Well then, maybe I can help, I did spend a lot of time up in Mount Etna when I first got to the city," she said.

Maybe bringing her along would be useful after all. "Ok do you know any caves near there that go deeper into the volcano? And I'm talking about where you can literally see the lava deep?" he asked.

Mia thought for a while and then she said "Well, there is one. But I've never been inside it. And it's a bit far away from the Colossus statue. Actually it's a pretty remote area and people rarely go there."

“That’s all fine but can you get me there?” Maximus asked, and she nodded.

The bus they were waiting for came after a few minutes. They boarded it and travelled for about half an hour. They got off at the stop before the Colossus since Mia said the cave was closer from there. The desert sun was scorching above them as they started walking towards the cave. The walk was long and tiring, and their throats were parched by the time they got to it. When they got to the cave entrance, Mia said, “Well this is it. But don’t think it will be any cooler inside. It’s a volcano remember, and it will only get hotter the deeper you go.”

Maximus nodded and together they began to venture into the cave.

It was dark inside, but luckily Mia had a flashlight in her bag. They walked through the cave trying not to trip on any rocks. Mia was right, the deeper they went the hotter it got, but there was still no sign of any magma yet. They kept walking until they began to see a glow coming from the end of the tunnel. As they reached it they found themselves in a big clearing within the cave. It was like a huge dome within the volcano and in the middle of the dome was a lake of magma.

“Well, there you have it, all the lava you want. Now can we get out of here before I catch on fire?”

“Hold on. I didn’t come here for the view, you know there’s something I have to do,” he said and he climbed down. Mia decided to take a break and sit at the mouth of the tunnel. Maximus began to walk towards the lake with his sword drawn. If he understood what the voice had told him he had to dip the sword in the lava and wait for something to happen. He was almost at the lava lake when he passed a peculiar looking rock. It was a pretty big and wide looking rock, but what was weird about it was a noise that was coming from it, kind of like a hissing sound.

He went to check what it was and put his hand on it. To his surprise he felt some sort of movement. “Hey, Mia, you got to check this out. There’s something odd about this rock,” he said.

He turned back to look at her and was surprised to see her face was white as marble with fear. “Max I don’t think that’s a rock. Look up fast,” she said. Maximus was confused, but he looked up anyway. And what he found was a giant snake’s head coming out of the rock with its eyes fixed right at him.

XXVI

Ok, so maybe thinking it was a rock was kind of stupid, he thought to himself, as a giant snake stared at him, confused. He guessed that it was not used to food approaching it and waking it up, practically asking to get eaten. It was kind of like home delivery.

“No sudden movements,” Mia whispered from behind an actual rock. Easy for her to say, there wasn’t a giant rock-hard serpent with what seemed to be hot lava coming from its mouth instead of saliva.

Maximus tried to stay as still as he could, but the snake on the other hand had different plans. It struck where Maximus had been a second before, and he would have stood there if he hadn’t followed his instincts and run like a race horse. He ran straight to where Mia was hiding and she shouted, “Why the heck are you running to me?”

The snake began to follow. What Maximus had thought to be a rock was actually its coiled up body, which was at least twenty feet long. The two of them ran back to the tunnel through which they came, and the snake was too big to fit through it. They kept running till they couldn’t see the glow of the lava lake anymore. Mia switched on her flashlight and Maximus asked, “What the hell was that?”

Mia sat down on the floor and said “Well, I didn’t have time to ask its name but I’m pretty sure it was a Basilisk.”

Maximus had heard of these monsters before, but they were not found anywhere near Mars. But they weren't in Mars anymore. "Wait isn't a basilisk supposed to turn you to stone or something?" he asked.

"It looks like you have been watching too many monster movies. Basilisks can't do that, they're fire serpents that live in very hot climates such as these. Also their saliva is hotter than lava. The only monsters I know of that can turn you to stone are Gorgons," she explained.

"Well at least it explains why no one comes around here. So are there any other caves with Magma around here?" he asked.

"What?" Mia shouted. "You nearly got eaten by a Basilisk and you're worried about finding magma." Maximus didn't have time to respond, because suddenly the cave started rumbling. Then the ceiling erupted and the basilisk put its head out from the hole in front of them. Then it did something even more unexpected, it started breathing fire.

They ran all the way back to the lava lake, since it was the only way to run. It seems that the basilisk could actually fit through the cave. It had just used a shortcut to cut them off before. They were at the side of the lake now, and they had nowhere else to run to.

"What now?" Mia asked as the basilisk closed in on them with fire spewing from its mouth. Maximus had no choice but to fight now and he readied his sword. "Stand behind me. And if you see an opening I want you to run into the tunnel and get out of here."

But instead of getting behind him Mia stood at his side and said, “I’m not useless you know. And I definitely don’t need saving.” Then she took out a small piece of wood that looked like a drumstick.

“What’s that, for the basilisk to use as a toothpick after it eats us?” he asked. “Just shut up you moron,” she said and went ahead to mutter something in a language Maximus did not understand. The stick in her hand began to grow and soon a full-fledge staff was in her hands. At the tip of the staff was a gem glowing green. Maybe there was more to this girl than he thought. The basilisk was close now and it used its flamethrower breath on them. But they were protected by a green barrier that Mia had just formed.

“You’re a witch?” Maximus asked amazed.

“Can we please talk about this later?” she said. “I can’t hold back the fire for long so do something.” Maximus readied his sword again, and the moment the snake stopped to take a breath he struck. He made a few clean strikes at its body but its hide was too thick. He kept at it for a while avoiding the basilisk’s strikes, but he had failed to watch its tail. A sudden attack with the tail had sent Maximus rolling on the ground. When he got up again he saw that the snake had cornered Mia. It looked like she had used up all her magic as well. The gem on her staff wasn’t glowing anymore. *There is no escape for her*, Maximus thought to himself. This girl was going to die because of his stupid little quest.

At that moment his blade started glowing red again and he gave a mighty stab at the basilisk's tail. That got its attention and it turned to face him . He started attacking again and his strikes were much more powerful now, but they still weren't enough to break its hide, and Maximus knew why. His blade's main power was the extreme amount of heat it produced. But this was not much help against a monster that practically lived in lava. It was like trying to kill a fish by drowning it.

But Maximus still had a plan. "Mia can you distract it for a second?" he shouted. As a response she fired a small ball of green energy at the basilisk. It wasn't enough to hurt it but it was enough to give Maximus an opening. And he took it. While the basilisk was distracted he aimed his sword straight at the monster's eye and stabbed it. And he didn't just stop. He plunged his sword deep in the eye and into its head and just left it there. The basilisk squirmed around for a while, but it finally fell to the ground dead, and blood oozed from its head.

Maximus went ahead to pull his sword out of the dead snake and sat on the floor panting. Mia came and sat down next to him. Both of them were tired and their clothes were burnt, but they were alive. "When you were spewing fun facts about the basilisk before, how come you failed to mention it had a flamethrower for a mouth?" Maximus asked.

"Thought it would be a nice surprise," she answered.

“And you’re a witch, was that supposed to be a surprise too?” he said.

Mia got up and patted the dust off her jeans, and said, “I’m an apprentice sorceress not a witch. There is a difference you know. And as you may have noticed, I’m not very good at it. Now are you going to sit there or are you going to do whatever it was you came here to do?” Maximus got up again and took his sword to the lava lake. She was right. He was tired of this boiling cave. He just wanted to do his job and get out of here.

He wasn’t sure on what to do. The voice had told him to have the sword make contact with the lava. So he just dipped it in and held it there. The sword started glowing again but this time it was a lot brighter. There was also a sound coming from it like when water hits a very hot plate. This went on for about a minute until the sword returned to normal, and Maximus pulled it out of the lava again. Mia had come over to watch and she asked, “Is that it?”

“I guess so,” he answered.

“So what was it for?” she asked next. Maximus just sheathed his blade. Despite just being dipped in lava the blade was cool again.

“Wouldn’t tell you if I knew,” he said, “now come on, you want to play twenty questions or do you want to get out of here?” They started walking again, leaving the lava lake and the dead basilisk behind. Once outside the sun had gone down, and it was starting to cool for the night.

Maximus wanted to rest for a bit but Mia told him that they might miss the last bus back to the city. While they were walking he said, “Listen, don’t mention any of this to anyone in the castle alright? This quest was something personal.” Mia thought for a moment and then said, “Alright, on one condition. You tell no one that I can use magic.”

“Why?” he asked. “Most people would be amazed that you’re a witch.” “Apprentice sorceress,” she corrected him, “and most people would be impressed to know you killed a basilisk as well, but I’m not asking for your reasons.”

They both agreed to this and kept on walking. After a few minutes she said “If you don’t want people to know you were in that fight I would get rid of your armour if I were you.”

Maximus knew she was right. His leather breastplate was scorched and it had gaping holes in it where the basilisks saliva had made contact. He knew it was beyond any kind of repair. His armguard was in bad shape too. It had cracked down the middle and it was being held on by a single strap. He knew he had to get rid of both of them. He didn’t mind losing the breastplate, but the armguard had some sentimental value. After all, he had made it himself. But there was no other option and both were useless now anyway. Maximus just left his now worthless armour and walked on ahead to the bus stop.

XXVII

They got the last bus to the city; Maximus slept through most of the trip and Mia had to wake him up when they reached their stop. The bus dropped them off right in front of the castle entrance. They walked up its stairs and Mia looked a bit nervous.

“I’ve been here for a few months now, but I’ve never actually even been inside the castle grounds. Are you sure this is okay?” she said.

“Don’t worry, you’re with me,” Maximus said, and they went through the main doors.

Just as they took a few steps inside, one of the reception nymphs came running towards them. “Mister Maximus everyone has been searching for you. You sure did pick a bad day to take a stroll. There have been a string of murders around the city. The champion and the others are waiting for you in the dining hall,” she said.

Maximus had a feeling that the string of murders she mentioned had something to do with the man in black they had seen before. The nymph went with them to the elevator, and when they reached it the nymph turned to Mia and asked “Excuse me, but who are you. My list does not show any mention of a female among the guests.”

Mia didn’t know what to say, and she turned to Maximus for help.

“Don’t worry she’s with me,” Maximus said. The nymph had an annoyed expression on her face. She obviously didn’t approve of Mia being there, but she didn’t object; instead, she said, “All right sir, if you’re sure. You just have to sign this form here as proof that she’s your responsibility when she’s in the castle.”

She talked like Mia was a stray cat or something he had brought with him, which wasn’t such a bad comparison seeing as she still reminded him of a cat. The nymph handed him a form and a pen. Maximus just stared at the form for a while.

“What’s wrong? You’re not planning to just leave me here are you?” Mia asked.

“No it’s not that. It’s just that I have never signed anything before,” he said, a little embarrassed. The truth was, he never had the need to. In the army they only used fingerprint scans. And what was he supposed to sign in the trenches? “By the Olympian gods, you do know to read and write don’t you?” Mia asked. “Of course I do,” he said.

“Then just write your name in a fancy way and your jolly good to go,” she said.

Maximus decided to just go with it. Once he had signed, the nymph gave one last dirty look at Mia and went on her way. Once her back was turned Mia put her tongue out at her and said “Are all the castle staff this

nice?” Maximus grinned and said, “Don’t worry, most staff are robots and they can tolerate anybody, even you.”

Mia responded by saying, “Nice sign by the way, real feminine. But dotting your ‘i’ with a star was a bit much don’t you think?” and Maximus just scowled at her.

They took the elevator to the dining hall and when they entered Achilles, Ajax and Hedger were waiting for him. “Damn, it Max, where the heck were you?” Hedger began to say, but he stopped suddenly when he saw Mia with him. He just stared at her, then back at Maximus and asked, “Who is this?”

Maybe I should have thought this through, Maximus thought. He turned to Mia and said, “Maybe you should wait outside while I clear things out.” But she was clearly trembling; in a whisper she told him, “That’s the champion, Ajax.” Maximus turned to the others and said, “Excuse me,” with the best smile he could. Then before any of the others could stop him he dragged her out. Once outside she said, “That was really Ajax. I got to say I didn’t believe you at first but there’s no arguing now. The other guy with the scar above his eye looked kind of familiar too.”

“Yeah, you probably have heard of him. His name is Achilles,” he said, and her eyes widened, but before she could say anything he said, “Look yeah, I know it’s amazing to see two heroes from the Trojan War and it

doesn't stop there. There's also Daedalus and Hephaestus here as well, and you might run into them too. But please don't lose your cool. Now, I'm going to go back inside and tell them what's going on. You wait here till I come and call you. Understand?" Mia didn't say anything but she nodded in agreement.

Maximus went back inside and it was Ajax who spoke to him. "If you were going to be late on a date you should have let someone know. There were some bad things going on in the city."

"Yeah I heard. But she's not my date," Maximus said.

"Okay then who is she?" Hedger asked.

Maximus did not know what to say so he just blurt out the first thing that came to his mind. "She's going to be joining us to Athens."

The three of them just looked at him. "Do you know this girl from before?" Ajax asked. Maximus shook his head to answer no.

"Wow, so you met a girl and convinced her to run away with you to another city. He might be better with women than you were, Achilles," Ajax said. Achilles still hadn't uttered a single word, and this worried Maximus a little. In the past few days he had found a new kind of respect for Achilles as a mentor, and the last thing he wanted to do was disappoint him.

"No it's nothing like that. I sort of promised her I would take her with us

to Athens,” he said.

Achilles finally looked up at him and said, “Explain.”

Maximus started off with how he had been robbed and kidnapped from the market. He explained the deal he had made with Mia for helping him and finally about the man in black. It was the truth until this point, then he said that they were hiding for the rest of the time in case the man in black came back. His story was followed by silence. Finally Ajax asked, “Was the name of the tavern ‘dirty dishes’?”

Maximus didn’t know, but he roughly described the location, and he confirmed it was the same.

“That tavern was one of the four places where mass murders took place today. And all four were run by the dirt-pick crew,” Ajax said, “from what I understand every member of the dirt-picks is now dead and the reports say it was all done by a single man.”

Maximus tried to take in what he had just heard. A Mafia crew like that usually had around a hundred members, maybe more, and most of them would have been hardened criminals. And Ajax had just said they were all killed off by one man. Maximus wouldn’t have believed him if he hadn’t met that man himself. But the person he had met seemed capable of worse.

“We will discuss this later, once Hephaestus has joined us as well. For now what about the girl?” Achilles said.

“Do you know why she wants to go to Athens?” Hedger asked.

“Why don’t you just ask her?” Maximus said.

He went outside to fetch Mia and found her listening at the door.

“Yeah I heard everything. These doors aren’t exactly soundproof you know,” she said, “and don’t worry I’ll handle it from here.”

They went back inside and the others waited for her to begin. So she did. “Hello, my name is Mia Damocles. I’m from a small village in the country of Bacchus. I’m a traveller and it was always a dream of mine to visit Athens. But it’s nearly impossible to get in there without the proper paperwork. So when Max let it slip he could get me inside I made a deal with him. I hope that’s all right.”

The entire dialogue seemed a bit reversed to Maximus, but it did get to the point. Achilles was not convinced though “There’s a reason it’s hard to get into Athens. They are at war and we can’t just bring someone along, for all we know you could be a spy.” He was so cold when he said this, that Mia was almost about to cry. But luckily Ajax stepped in. “Come on Achilles, ease up a bit. She’s just a little girl.” Then he turned to Mia, and said “I’m sorry but he’s right. Athens is on high alert right now so you can’t go there. And look, it’s pretty late now so why don’t you spend the night in one of our guest rooms and you can leave in the morning. And I’m sure we can get you something else for helping out

Max.”

Ajax then called a butler-bot to show her to a room, but Mia did not move. Instead she looked down at the floor and said, “There is one other reason I want to go to Athens. She pulled up the left sleeve of her shirt and revealed a mark to them. At first Maximus thought it was a tattoo. But then he realised the mark was burned into her skin. Like how cattle were branded on farms using heated iron. The symbol was of a candle with thorny vines growing on it and the fire on the tip of the candle formed the letter ‘C’. Maximus had no idea what the symbol meant but the looks on Achilles and Ajax told him they did. Mia, on the other hand, was staring at the ground trying not to make contact with anyone’s eyes, she looked like she was really embarrassed about something and about to cry. After a few seconds she covered up the symbol as quickly as she could.

“Isn’t that...” Ajax began to say, but Achilles raised his hand to silence him. Mia still hadn’t looked up from the ground, and it didn’t look like she was planning to. But Achilles said, “Alright, you can come with us.” Maximus expected her to jump with joy on hearing this but she merely nodded with her eyes still facing the ground. “Why don’t you go and rest in your room for now. We can talk more in the morning,” Achilles said more gently now. Mia nodded again and followed the butler-bot out of the hall.

“Now what was all that about?” Hedger asked, just as confused as

Maximus “and what’s with the mark?”

“If you don’t know, I think it’s better that you don’t find out. Besides, it’s not our place to say anything. It’s her story to tell,” Ajax said “Besides, we have a more pressing matter at hand and the boss should be here in a minute.” Maximus decided to leave Mia and her mark in the back of his mind for now. Ajax was right, the murderer was more important at the moment.

Hephaestus joined them after a while and he came rolling in on his wheels again. But the sharp look from Ajax gave him the hint and he switched to his bionic feet. “This better be good. I was just about to fit the Minotaur with an electronic eye socket when you interrupted me,” he said.

“How is Rex anyway?” Maximus asked.

The smith god’s face lit up with a smile on this enquiry. “Oh, he’s coming along nicely. You’ll all see the finished product soon enough. Everything is right on schedule or it was until you people interrupted me,” he said. “Well, I’m happy your new project is going well boss, but you have duties as the king as well. And right now the city is facing some difficulty,” Ajax said. Then he continued to explain the killings done by the man in black.

Maximus chipped in and said what he had seen as well. Hephaestus

listened to all this silently in his seat. After they were done he asked, “So, all the people who were killed were dirt-picks, in other words criminals.” Ajax said yes to this. “And none of the civilians, or our own soldiers, came to be harmed, correct?” Hephaestus said and Ajax nodded to this also. “Then what’s the problem. Give the guy a medal, for all I care he seems to have done the city a favour,” Hephaestus said and he sounded serious.

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Ajax said.

“No actually it is,” the smith god began. “What has happened here has nothing to do with us. It was a turf war between two groups. And this is precisely what happens when a puny group like this Darven mafia tries to go up against the real underworld. So I choose not to interfere.”

“So you’re going to sit by and do nothing?” Maximus asked.

Hephaestus looked at him a bit annoyed. “Would you rather have me start a war with the underworld Mafia. Because I can tell you right now that is not a war we can win.”

Maximus was confused now. Hephaestus was talking like the entire underworld was all part of one huge Mafia organisation. Maximus asked him this and the smith god said, “That is exactly what it is. Listen kid, I’ve been around for a long time. And I’m talking centuries, and I have seen quite a few things. So let me tell you a little secret, the members of the Mafia in different countries are all interconnected. And the strongest

mafia families in every single country ruled by a god or anyone else, actually belong to the same organisation and report to the same man, the Don. And it is this organisation which I call the underworld.”

Maximus thought about what he just heard, this meant that the underworld actually controlled the darker side of the entire world while pretending to be different groups as to avoid detection. “Not a lot of people know this reality. The person who took care of all the dirt-picks is probably a high ranking member of the underworld,” Hephaestus said.

“Judging by the power and skill of this guy I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a Capo,” Achilles added.

“What’s a Capo?” Hedger asked.

“Capo is short for Capo-regime. It’s a rank within the underworld mafia given to only the most loyal and powerful of their soldiers. Think of them as the mafia generals,” Ajax said. “It’s a very high rank within the organisation and they only have to answer to the Don.”

“They say that the Capo-regimes of the underworld are as powerful as the Olympian gods themselves, including me,” Hephaestus said, “but they are a mysterious group and no one knows who they are or how many of them are there. The one thing that is certain is that all of them are unwaveringly loyal to the Don.”

Maximus tried to remember the man in black and he had to agree he

seemed to be as dangerous as any god. But then Maximus wondered who would possibly be influential enough to control such a dangerous man, and others like him.

“So who’s the Don then?” he asked. Hephaestus straightened in his seat and looked directly at him, and said, “They say he is the richest man in the world, and that the darkness itself shifts to his will. You all must have certainly heard of him before. He is the lord of the underworld, Don Hades.”

XXVIII

Don Hades. One of the three great powers that governed the world along with his two brothers, the ruler of all the seas, and oceans Admiral Poseidon, and the Emperor of Olympus himself God-king Zeus. He was definitely not a man to start a war with. Maximus knew he was powerful, but he had no idea that his influence ranged so far, or that he had such unimaginable warriors under him. He knew that Hades was the only ruler who did not have a champion in his army, but with people like the man in black under him he really didn't need one.

“Hades, as in one of the three great brothers Hades, the guy who is said to be able to rule the dead Hades, why would local grunts like the dirt-picks try to go up against him?” Hedger asked.

“They probably didn't know. They probably just thought that after they recruited enough members that they were the biggest bullies in the playground. They had no way of knowing that the underworld ran all the way to Pluto,” Ajax said.

Pluto was the name of the country Lord Hades ruled. It was in the southern most part of the world and the country was a continent on its own. It had no neighbouring countries around it, and was surrounded by water on all sides. The entire continent was sometimes called the land of Hades, because of his absolute rule there. The entrance to the great

prison Tartarus was also somewhere there but its exact location was unknown, and a closely guarded secret between the three brothers.

“So now that you all know the entire story, anybody who still wants me to go up against the undead king, please raise your hand,” Hephaestus said. Everyone just sat there silently, and no hands went up. Hephaestus got up and said, “Well, if that’s everything you’ll have to excuse me. I have my experiment to...I mean your friend to return to.”

He left after that, his huge steps shaking the furniture as he walked. “Well today was exciting, but I think I’ll turn in too. I got to get up early tomorrow to work on your truck,” Ajax said. Everyone had started to go off to bed when Maximus said, “Wait, I still haven’t eaten anything yet.”

Ajax scratched his beard and said, “Ah well, we ate dinner long before you came, but just wait here. I’ll have the butler-bots bring you something. Oh, and take some up to that poor girl too, would you. She could use a bite.” Maximus didn’t want to deliver food to Mia but he didn’t complain, she was kind of his responsibility.

Maximus waited in the hall while the others left for bed. After a few minutes one of the butler-bots brought him his dinner, half a dozen ham and cheese sandwiches with two bottles of cola. He decided to eat in his room after he gave half of it to Mia. Her room was easy enough to find, it was the only other room on their floor with the lights on. He went over

and knocked on her door. There was no response. He tried again a few times but there was still no response. He thought of leaving the food outside, but it seemed like a stupid idea. He tried the door and found it wasn't locked. He wasn't sure about going in, but Ajax was right, she hadn't eaten anything the whole day.

He went inside slowly, and said, "Hey, the door was unlocked so I came in." "Go away," she shouted.

Maximus didn't spot her at first, and then he saw her huddled up in a corner crying. His first instinct was to leave right then. He had no idea on what to do when someone was upset. But he couldn't, it just didn't feel right.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm just dandy. So why are you here, come to give me some pity after seeing my mark?" she said, barely holding back her tears.

Maximus had no idea on what to say, so he just said the first thing that came to his mind "Alright, two things. First, I have no idea what that mark is, I'm not that smart, remember?"

This got a small smile from her. Reminding her that he was an idiot seemed to have helped. "And second," Maximus continued, "I would never pity you, I might think you're annoying and have cat genes in you, but I would never pity you." Maximus didn't think it would work, but it had. She was wiping away her tears and returning to her normal self.

“You think I have cat DNA?” she asked confused.

“I don’t know why but you remind me of a cat. I think it’s your tiny nose. You’re just missing some whiskers,” he said.

Mia bonked him on the head with a pillow for this, but he didn’t mind, at least she wasn’t crying anymore. She came and sat by him on the bed and said, “So why are you here.”

“Why, serving you dinner madam,” he said, imitating a butler, “today’s special is ham and cheese sandwiches with sparkling cola, enjoy.”

“I’m actually a vegetarian,” she said.

Maximus opened up a few of the sandwiches and removed the ham from them. Then he handed them to Mia and said, “Ok, just cheese sandwiches then.”

She accepted these and began to eat. Maximus stuffed the extra ham in his own sandwiches and joined her. “So why don’t you eat meat?”

“I’m a sorceress, remember, and the magic I do is nature based. When I eat meat it disrupts my aura.” Maximus nodded like he understood, but he really had no idea what she was talking about. They talked for a bit after that while they ate their dinner, and he told her about the killings around the city. They were getting sleepy now and Maximus thought it was about time he left. But before he left he said “Hey, listen don’t worry about the mark thing alright? I’m sure no one even knows what it

means. I mean, sure Ajax and Achilles do, but they're like a hundred years old. But I'm sure Hedger doesn't."

Mia nodded, and asked "Who's Hedger?"

"That green thing you saw flying around earlier. You should like him, he's kind of annoying, too," he said with a grin. Mia just stuck her tongue out at him and slammed her door on his face. He went back to his room, and straight to sleep after that.

XXIX

The next day started as usual with Maximus heading out for training with Achilles. He didn't see Mia again until it was lunchtime and by then she was her happy and childish self again. Lunch was amazing as usual, and everyone was stuffing themselves, well everyone except Mia who must have really regretted being a vegetarian right then. Every dish on the table had meat in it. "I'm sorry but I'm a vegetarian. Is there anything here that doesn't have dead animals in it?" she said.

Ajax scratched his beard and then he finally opened a pot containing spinach soup. Maximus was worried it might be the same spinach soup he had seen the day they came. "I'm sorry dear but this is all we got," Ajax said. Mia had no choice but to gulp down the soup, and her face told them that she would rather have gone hungry. But other than that, Mia was doing fine in the castle. She was getting along well with everyone, and she had even met Daedalus. Daedalus, being the kind old man that he was, did not mind having her along on their journey. "We were missing a feminine touch in our little group," he had said. Mia seemed to be enjoying herself too. She didn't seem to have had a proper place to stay in for a while. She spent most of her time with Hedger playing video games.

The next couple of days went by fast. Maximus got busy with his

training again. Achilles had asked what had happened to his armour and he had to lie that the dirt-picks had stolen it, and that he didn't have time to search for it since he was more worried about the man in black at the time. Achilles said that he would help get him some proper armour, but only once they reached Athens since they couldn't waste another day of training here. Something more suited for a swordsman he had said, though Maximus was a bit worried that he did not buy the whole stolen armour story.

The days passed and finally they were sitting at their final dinner in the smith god's castle. And as an added bonus Ajax had informed them at lunch that Rex would be joining them tonight. Only Maximus, Achilles and Ajax were at the table right now and they were waiting for the others. Daedalus had already come and then returned to his room. Ajax had pulled out some expensive liquor since it was their last day, and he and Achilles were sharing a few pegs. "Well, your sword skills have improved dramatically. But sadly we are no closer to unlocking the sword's power," Achilles said. They were going over their training of the past week, and he was right. Maximus was better with his sword now than he had ever been, but sadly he still couldn't get the red glow to come at will.

"I'm sure he'll get the hang of it soon," Ajax said with a reassuring smile. The doors opened and Hedger and Mia came in. "That's right seven – three. I clipped your wings again today, Hedge," Mia said as she

came in.

Hedger was just pouting. Maximus knew he was a sore loser.

“Hey guys,” Mia said to them, “another victory to me. Wish you guys could have joined us.” They had been playing the entire day while Achilles and Maximus were training. Ajax was busy adding the final touches to the truck. But Maximus had to agree it would have been interesting to watch Achilles and Ajax play video games.

Dinner began and there were extra servings of great food. Maximus chomped down like there was no tomorrow, since he had no idea when they would get such an extravagant meal again. There were even a few special vegetarian dishes for Mia to enjoy. They were halfway through their dinner when Hephaestus entered the room. There was a grin on his face and excitement in his eyes.

“Good you’re all here, except Daedalus, but he’s already seen my latest creation,” he said. Then he turned to his butler-bots and said “Drum-roll please.”

The robots started to play an audio track. Hephaestus turned to the door and said, “Presenting my first ever cyborg Minotaur, Rex.” Rex walked into the room slowly and his face lit up when he saw all of them. And did he look different. The first thing that Maximus noticed was the arm. What had been just a stump a week before was now fitted with a huge

metallic arm clearly bigger than his right. The bionic arm seemed to be really high tech, and Maximus even spotted some gears and pistons on it. It ended with a kind of claw that had three fingers and a thumb. Rex seemed to be able to move them freely. Next was his eye – before it was always held closed with a huge scar running over it. Now there was a bronze and glass eye covering the socket, it moved and turned a little as it saw all of them. There was a yellow glow coming from it. The edges of his scar were still visible around it though. Finally, his damaged horn seemed to have been replaced by a shiny new metal one, the same size and shape of the other one. In all he looked like a real force to be reckoned with, even more than a regular Minotaur.

“So fellas, what do you think?” Rex asked.

“That you look like something born when a cow marries a refrigerator,” Hedger said. Rex went over and bonked him on the head with his new arm for this, but Hedger was still laughing.

“You look amazing, man,” Maximus said.

“The parts are not just for looks see. Their multi-functional, show them, Rex,” Hephaestus said. Rex nodded and put his bionic hand up and it began to transform, just like the smith god’s legs. First it changed into a hammer that could easily break bones, and then a few seconds later that was replaced by a gun with a pretty long barrel. “Now, the arm has three

modes: the claw, the hammer and the gun. And as you have just seen he can shift between them at will, just by thinking about it.” Rex shifted the arm back to claw mode. “Now the eye is like that too, first the binocular mode,” Hephaestus said. Rex’s new eye popped its lens out a bit, like a zoom function on a camera. “Then we have night-vision,” the smith god said next and the eye’s glow turned green. “And finally as an extra feature I have synced the eye with his gun mode. So that he can aim with better precision,” Hephaestus concluded. Rex changed his arm to a gun again and this time his eye turned red. Maximus noticed a cross-hair also appeared inside his lens. Everyone moved around checking Rex’s new attire. Hephaestus seemed happy to see everyone admire his latest work. Rex on the other hand was just glad to feel complete again. Maximus was happy for him too, he couldn’t think of anyone who deserved better.

They all sat down to eat after that. And once they did Rex said, “And who are you. I don’t think we’ve met.” He was looking at Mia who had been pretty quiet for the entire demonstration.

“I don’t think I’ve seen this one before either,” Hephaestus added. Before Mia could respond, Hedger said, “That’s easy, she’s Max’s new girlfriend.”

Maximus and Mia were sitting oneither side of Hedger. And both of them stamped him on his tail at the same time. Hedger yelped in pain.

“What, you’re kidding?” Rex said shocked. Maximus felt a bit insulted that the idea of him having a girlfriend was so shocking.

“He is. My name is Mia Damocles and I’ll be joining you till Athens,” Mia said. Maximus went ahead to explain all that had happened while Rex was stuck in the lab. After hearing everything, Rex said, “Well, happy to have you on board Mia,” with a smile.

They enjoyed their final dinner there and it was getting pretty noisy. Ajax and Rex were pretty drunk now and they started to sing. It was like hearing frogs choking on themselves, but it was still fun to watch. After a while most of them joined in as well. And by most he meant everyone except Achilles who just watched with a smile. Once it was passed midnight everyone decided to turn in for the night. “Now, I want everyone to be on high alert, from tomorrow the soldiers are still after us and this time they probably have their champion with them,” Achilles said.

“Who’s Mars’s champion?” Mia asked; Maximus had already told them that Ares was after them. The information had made her somewhat nervous, but she still decided to go with them.

“It’s a ruthless barbarian called Diomedes. He’s a real piece of scum,” Rex told her. Suddenly Ajax banged on the table. It shook madly and Maximus was sure another one like that would break it.

“I will not let you insult my friend like that,” Ajax said angrily. The

others were all confused and worried whether Ajax had got a bit too drunk. But Achilles said, “Calm down Ajax, he’s not talking about our Diomedes. This one used to be a barbarian king. They merely have the same name.”

Ajax listened to this and sat down again, and said, “Well, why didn’t you say so?” and gave them a drunken smile. Then he went back to singing some ancient war song, but the words weren’t very clear. Soon after that they all left for bed. Well, Rex had to be dragged to his room but Ajax could still amazingly walk, but Maximus wasn’t sure he might reach his room though. After dropping off Rex along with the others, Maximus headed back to his room to sleep in that bed for the last time.

A familiar darkness came to him. And he knew it was time for another meeting with the voice.

“Hey you there,” he shouted.

“No need to be so loud child, I can hear you,” the voice said.

Maximus looked around and there was still nothing to look at “So what is it now?” he said.

“Nothing at all, I merely wanted to tell you how grateful I am for what you did. The energy from Mount Etna has helped greatly,” the voice said. Maximus didn’t know what to say to that “Welcome, I guess. But there’s really no need for that. We had a deal right and I was just

keeping my end of it.”

“Yes, I understand, but still I have met many who do not value their words. But I see you are different,” the voice said. Maximus didn’t mind the praise. He had killed a basilisk for the guy after all.

“So any new visions for me this time?” he asked.

“Yes, well about that – I don’t think it would be wise for me to show you more at the time. There is a reason why we could not see Ares’s master. He had powerful magic guarding his identity. Sadly I do not have the strength to break through at the moment and if I were to risk it, my identity own might be revealed. And that is something I cannot risk yet,” the voice explained.

Maximus nodded, not sure if the voice could see him. He was not surprised to hear that whoever was ordering Ares had powerful magical protection, but he wondered why it was so important to keep his identity a secret. The voice was doing the same thing as well. He felt like he was watching a movie in which half the characters were wearing masks.

“Alright then, maybe you can answer another question for me?” Maximus said. “Ask my child,” the voice replied. “My sword, why can its power only be activated when I get angry?” he asked.

The voice didn’t answer for a while then it said, “Is that so? How very interesting. But I’m afraid that has nothing to do with me or the sword.” Maximus did not understand, “If not with the sword then with what?”

“Well, I have seen your fights, Maximus, and it is not anger that empowers the blade. But instead it comes from when you feel someone has been wronged. But it is true you also get angry when this happens,” the voice said.

Well it made sense, all the times the sword had lit up, either he, or one of his friends had been in serious trouble. “So is that how the sword works?” Maximus asked.

“It is not how the sword works, but how you work. Not surprising considering your lineage,” the voice said.

Maximus stood there with his mouth open. What did the voice mean by his lineage? He was about to ask this to the voice, but then the darkness began to dissolve and he was looking at Hedger’s face.

Maximus woke up startled, and Hedger said, “Rise and shine buddy, it’s moving day.”

“What, how did you get in?” Maximus asked. He held up his quill key and said “Wanted to see if this baby would work on the locks here. You know just curious. But no harm done right? Anyway, everyone’s already up and waiting on the ground floor, so pack up your things and come down fast.” He gave a final grin and left the room.

Maximus was alone again and his thoughts went back to the dream he just had. The voice was saying that his power came from his lineage, his parents. Maximus hadn’t thought about them in a long time. When he

was younger he used to dream that maybe both or at least one of them were still alive and would come and take him away. It was a dream most orphans shared he guessed. But from his earliest memories in the orphanage to his training period in the army no one had come. Not even some far off relative. By the time he joined the actual army reality had set in. He accepted that they were most likely dead and that he was on his own against the world. But now he heard this. Sadly, he did not have time to ponder this further since Hedger was right, he was late and he hadn't even packed yet. He packed his bag quickly and took a look at the room one last time. He was going to miss this, and if he was lucky things wouldn't be too bad in Athens either. That was, if he made it that far, Captain Sharp and her soldiers were still after them, and not to mention the champion Diomedes. Maximus had heard he was more dangerous than a group of R.A.M. tanks.

He grabbed his bag and his sword and took the elevator to the ground floor and soon he was standing in the lobby of the upper-city. It was as spacious as the lower one but it wasn't as crowded. Maximus went outside to find everyone waiting for him. Even Daedalus was mumbling there next to Mia. "Well it's about time, Max. We were waiting for you for the big reveal," Ajax said, indicating a large rectangular thing covered by a sheet. Maximus was pretty sure that their truck was under there. Ajax went ahead and pulled the sheet off, and underneath it was a truck alright, but it sure did not look like the one they had driven over

here to.

The truck in front of them looked brand new. It was tough looking and seemed to be armoured up like a tank. The entire thing was black and the detailing was done with chrome. Its wheels were huge and looked like it could plough through a minefield without flinching. It looked like a war machine rather than a transport truck now. It also had a raised hood, powerful head lights, and a dual-exhaust system. Ajax looked at all of them standing there with their mouths open. “Judging by your expressions I’m guessing you like it,” he said with a grin.

“You really outdid yourself brother,” Achilles said.

“Ha-ha, I just did what I could. Now I could just add a few extra features since I had so little time,” he said and went and opened the back door. They looked inside to see four beds mounted on the inside wall, they were on top of each other like bunk beds.

“Now you guys should be able to sleep more comfy on these. One of you will have to take the floor though. The seats in the front can be connected as well so it can also be used as a bed if no one’s driving,” he said. “Also I’ve removed the split between the front seats and the back so you guys should be able to move around easily. He was right, the wall that split the containment unit with the driver’s area was completely removed. “The truck is fully air-conditioned now and I’ve also added a small fridge in the side so you guys can beat the heat,” he added.

Hedger just screamed out, “This is so awesome,” and flew into one of the top beds. “This is what you did with little time, what would you have done if you had more, added a deluxe spa?” Rex asked in disbelief, and Ajax just smirked at him.

“Now, there’s just one more thing to show,” he said. He went over to the driver’s seat and underneath the steering-wheel was a switch. He flicked it and two compartments opened up on either side of the hood, and out them a couple of very large cylindrical guns popped out. Maximus had seen these guns before. They were called Gatling-guns or mini-guns, though there was nothing mini about it.

“These are just in case you run into some trouble. But I’m hoping you won’t have to use them,” Ajax said, and Achilles nodded. Once they had all finished admiring the truck Ajax said, “Maximus come with me, would you? I have a few supply crates for you guys in the back. Just help me carry them into the truck.” Maximus nodded and followed him into a garage.

Once inside Ajax showed him the two boxes with their supplies. But before he picked one of them up Ajax told him to hold on. “Listen Max, I wanted to talk to you about something before you left,” he said.

Maximus turned to him to listen. “Well the thing is, and I don’t know why, but Achilles seems to have taken a special liking to you,” Ajax

said.

Maximus was not sure how to respond, “Are you sure?” he said. Ajax nodded “Now listen to me, Achilles is like a brother to me. And this is good; I haven’t seen him connect with anyone for years now. He kept wandering on his own ever since the war.” Maximus nodded to show he was listening. “But somehow he has decided to trust you and your friends. And I haven’t seen him train someone since, well – Pat,” Ajax said.

“You mean Patroclus, his brother” he asked.

“They were cousins, but they were actually closer than brothers. When he died it changed Achilles. He turned sadder and more serious, he had lost the cocky attitude he had brought with him when we first met. For a time rage was all that consumed him, but after the war ended that left him too. He just lost interest in everything. Glory, wealth and power all turned into nothing to him. It didn’t help that almost everyone else he knew and every woman he loved also died around him,” Ajax said.

Maximus just stood there silently, not sure on what to say. Ajax sighed and said, “Turning immortal is not as great as you think. It has downsides too, it means watching the people you love age and die. My real family died a long time ago and the closest thing I have to one now is the Omega seven, and I’ll have their backs to the death, even if a few of them get on my nerves. So you can understand why I’m a bit

protective of Achilles. Basically, all I'm asking you to do is not to get killed, alright?" Maximus took in everything he just heard and with a weak smile he said, "Don't worry, I don't want to get killed either."

They picked up the supply crates and went to the others after that. They put them in the truck's back and it was time to say their final goodbyes. Ajax bear-hugged everyone and Maximus thought his ribs would break. "Now don't be strangers. If you're ever anywhere nearby come visit. Oh and ol' Hephaestus sends his regards as well. He would have come personally, but he got a new experiment stuck in his head again," Ajax said.

He then pulled Achilles aside and said, "Now don't do something stupid and go get yourself killed by Ares or his goons alright?" Achilles smirked and said, "Don't worry brother, I haven't even had to pull out my shield." Ajax smiled at this, but then in a serious tone he said, "Let the wind or fire or gods stand before us."

"The seven shall stand united," Achilles completed.

They then gave each other half hugs and it was finally time to leave. Achilles started up the truck again and they started to move towards the city limit. Maximus watched as Ajax went out of sight. He would miss him, but he felt like he had a crazy uncle now. They kept on driving and soon the castle was out of sight, and they reached the city borders. The

giant robots with guns for hands, Cannon-bots Ajax had called them, let them pass without any trouble and soon they were on a highway that led to Athens.

XXX

They were on highway 77, which connected Athens to Vulcan city. It was a busy route and the roads got more crowded as the time passed. Their new ride seemed to be quite the attention grabber, and many heads turned to see it as they passed by.

“I told that idiot not to make it so flashy,” Achilles said, a little annoyed. As they rode, the scenery outside also began to change, and soon they had left the desert sands behind and now the roads were travelling through grassy plains. Maximus saw this as a great improvement. It was nice to be surrounded by the greenery and the decrease in heat was truly uplifting. They had already left Vulcan city long behind and would be entering Minerva by sundown according to Achilles. But it was still a long way from the country’s border to the capital city of Athens.

“So where are we?” Mia asked after a few hours of travel.

“Still in Vulcan, but in another couple of hours we should reach Minerva,” Achilles said.

“Well, it should be a much smoother trip than the one through the desert. The highway leads us directly to Athens, right? Plus we don’t have to worry about supplies, and even if we did run out of something there are still plenty of gas stations on the road,” Rex said.

“Don’t relax just yet. The Martian soldiers are still on our tails. They didn’t do anything in Vulcan because we were with Ajax, but I’m guessing they’re already in Minerva waiting with an ambush,” Achilles said.

“Hold on, I thought it was impossible to get into Minerva, isn’t that why Mia’s with us?” Hedger asked.

“I think you’re a bit confused my boy,” Daedalus said. It looked like it was time for his fifteen minutes of clarity again. “I had forgotten it was time for you to wake while driving,” Achilles said.

“No worries old friend,” Daedalus said, “now I believe our friend Hedger here has a doubt so let me clarify. Getting into the country of Minerva is easy, there are dozens of official roads and many unofficial paths one can take to get in. It is quite a big country after all. But getting into its capital of Athens is another story.”

He looked around to see if everyone understood, like a teacher taking a class. The rest of them nodded to him. He continued, “The city of Athens is perhaps the most advanced city in the world, perhaps second only to Olympus itself. But Olympus is a blend of both magic and technology; if we were to look at this from a purely scientific point of view, Athens would surely emerge on top. Along with these advancements, Athens also acts as the strategic stronghold for its army. Needless to say, being such an important city a powerful defence

mechanism was needed for the city, and this duty was given to me. And thus I created the AEGIS, a dome-like barrier that covered the entire city and is impenetrable to any form of attack. The dome is not only effective against attacks, but also acts as a shield from any form of detection, both magical and scientific. Even Hermes can't break into our communication networks due to this. The AEGIS makes Athens one of the safest places in the world."

A barrier that covered the entire city sounded like a very effective defence system, but barriers usually needed a large amount of energy to maintain. Maximus wondered what Athens used to sustain such a big one all the time.

"Wait a second, if the barrier is impenetrable, how do people pass through?" Hedger asked.

"Ah well, there are three entrances into the barrier through the ground, two for civilian use and one for the military. And all three are very heavily guarded. But entering through the air is a different story. All the aircraft with permission to enter Athens are fitted with a device that lets them pass through the barrier freely. Also each aircraft has to transmit a pass code to the command tower in the city. This is to prevent people from entering by stealing one of our aircrafts, even if they manage to do that they won't be allowed to pass without the code. If the wrong code is given the aircraft will be shot down by the large anti-aircraft guns within

the city,” Daedalus explained.

“If the barrier is impenetrable, then won’t the gunshots just be blocked by it?” Maximus asked.

Daedalus seemed happy that he asked this question. “For that let me explain how AEGIS works. It stands for Attack Enabled Giga Ion Shield. It is called attack enabled because unlike conventional barriers that merely act as an energy wall, the AEGIS only blocks anything from entering it. This means that objects can exit it freely. This allows the shield to be active at all times and there is no need to power it down to counter attack,” he said. Maximus was amazed at this. It was the perfect defence strategy. No wonder every attack Mars had ever tried on Athens failed miserably. It really was the perfect defence. Daedalus was active for a few more minutes before he went off to his own world again. And soon night began to fall. Achilles took a side road out of the highway and into a clearing. They decided to spend the night there.

They opened up their supply crates for food. There were some grilled chicken sandwiches in there which they decided to have for dinner. Mia took a can of baked beans instead. They all sat around the truck and reviewed their plan. “I expected to cross the border before tonight, but it seems we’ll have to wait till morning,” Achilles said, “but once inside Minerva it’s still a four to five day journey to Athens.”

Maximus wished that there was a faster way. He really didn’t like

travelling while a battalion along with Mars's champion were chasing them. "Once we cross the border we have to be more careful. I personally know they can get into Minerva without much trouble. And chances are they won't be even expecting any Martian soldiers here, since we are nowhere near the frontline," Rex said.

He was right, the frontline where the war was going on was towards the north of Minerva while they were entering through the far west. The capital city of Athens was somewhere in the centre. Achilles nodded and said, "Yes, and about that, what can you tell me about the champion."

"You mean Diomedes? Well, other than the fact that he's a scum-bag I heard he's real old-school. He seems to be the type that sticks with ancient weapons, but personally, I just think he's too stupid to understand technology. I heard he doesn't use cars either and that he still rides around in a chariot. But the chariot is pulled by four monsters. They may look like normal horses but don't be fooled; I heard they have a taste for human flesh and I don't think they would mind some Minotaur and sprite on the side either." This information sent a chill down Max's spine. Like hearing something from a horror story only this was real and chasing them.

"Anything else?" Achilles asked.

"Yeah, I've heard he uses a huge battle axe and that he uses it to cut up his victims before feeding them to his horses," Rex said.

Mia let out a low whistle, and Hedger said, “Those are some horses I definitely don’t want to pat.”

Achilles nodded and said, “Hopefully we can slip past them somehow, but in case of a fight, Daedalus still gets top priority.”

Maximus was surprised when he heard this, and even more so when they all nodded in agreement. It was like they were working for Athens now. Although he had no sense of devotion to Ares or Mars anymore, Athens used to be their enemy and Daedalus was one of their top advisors. But Maximus had to agree he felt more loyalty towards Daedalus and Achilles than he ever felt for Ares. He decided right there that his allegiance would lay with his friends, and whoever he thought was just. Not to a tyrant like Ares, just because he was born in his kingdom.

“So what do we do once we reach Athens?” Maximus asked, while thinking *if* they reached Athens to himself.

“Well, we head to the Empress herself, and Mia, I know the person you have to meet. He’s actually an old friend.” Maximus didn’t know what they were talking about but he was sure it had something to do with her mark.

“Achilles, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that but I don’t think I can come to the castle.”

Achilles stared at him a bit confused, “Why not? If you’re worried about being from Mars there’s no need for it. I will personally guarantee your

safety.” Maximus thought he knew why, unlike him, Rex had been a warrior in the frontline. He had probably killed a lot of Athena’s soldiers as well. His insides must be a roller coaster just going into Athens.

Rex shook his head and said, “It’s not just that. The truth is meeting the Empress puts me in a high risk of coming face to face with the guy who cut me in half.”

Everyone’s eyes widened at this. Rex hadn’t told anyone about how he got so badly injured, not even Maximus or Hedger. “You think the soldier who did this to you might be in Athena’s castle?” Maximus asked.

He shook his head again, and said, “Actually, I’m kind of sure of it. He is Athena’s champion after all.”

“Who’s Athena’s Champion?” Mia asked. Maximus knew who it was and he had heard tales of the sheer number of Mars’s soldiers he had killed. He turned to Mia and said, “Theseus the Minotaur slayer.”

“You fought against Theseus?” Hedger said in disbelief “and you didn’t think it would be something worth mentioning?”

Maximus couldn’t believe it either; someone like Theseus, or any champion for that matter, were not something regular soldiers tried to fight. “I don’t understand. I was there when you came back with those injuries. But your battalion never came back and a lot more should have

ended up dead and injured if he was involved,” Maximus said.

“That might be because my battalion didn’t face him. I went and challenged him myself,” Rex said. Maximus was a bit impressed by this act, but more than that, he couldn’t believe Rex was so stupid. After staring at him for a while Hedger asked “Why.”

“Oh come on you know why. You know the story. You know why he’s called the Minotaur slayer.”

It all began with a Minotaur named Tor. He was the greatest Minotaur hero of all times and was the proud champion of an ancient king, Minos. Tor was unbeatable and the pride of Minotaurs around the world. But one day he had to face Theseus, and that was the day he died. This earned him the name ‘Minotaur slayer’. Many Minotaurs challenged Theseus after this, and he killed them all, making his fame as the slayer grow. Soon it became a legend, sort of like the ultimate quest among the Minotaur community to kill Theseus. But all of them failed. And it looked like Rex decided to try his luck at it as well and failed miserably.

“He took me out in a single blow, cut right through me. He probably thought I was dead, otherwise he would have finished the job,” Rex said.

“I have not met Theseus personally, but his reputation precedes him. It would have been suicidal to try and take him out yourself,” Achilles said.

Rex sighed and said, “Too bad I only figured that out after I had chunks of me removed. But you understand why I don’t want to run into him again.”

No one knew what to say, and everyone finished their dinners silently. Finally, Achilles spoke. “Let us leave this discussion for when we reach Athens shall we? And if you are truly that uncomfortable you can skip meeting Athena.”

They decided to go to sleep after that and Rex insisted on standing guard. Maximus lay on his bed, finally aware of what happened to his friend and realised he couldn’t blame him. He followed a dream. A dream which a lot of Minotaur warriors had. But the truth was when you chase a dream reality hits you back hard, which is why most people leave their dreams behind. After all, look at what happened to Rex when he tried. Maximus wondered if he was given a chance to chase a dream, would he take it, or would he succumb to the fear of failing?

Maximus woke the next morning a bit disappointed. He was hoping for a visit from the voice again to ask it about what he meant by his lineage, but he had no luck. He did, however, sleep like a log, and in the middle of all the madness surrounding him that was something. It was his turn to drive today, but when he awoke the truck was already moving, and Rex was at the wheel.

“It feels so good to be back on the wheel. I still got it,” Rex said gleefully. Maximus was happy that he had got something to distract his whole Theseus episode. He knew he hated talking about his injury. Before, when he was in the army he was one of the best warriors in the heavy weapons division. That fight had changed his life forever. From being a respected soldier he had to turn into a lowly scavenger to make a living. Though he got brand new metallic parts now, Maximus knew that he would still prefer not to lose the originals in the first place.

“Well you’re up early Max,” Mia said. Only she and Rex were awake. The rest of them were still asleep, even Achilles, which was surprising.

“Don’t tell, me Achilles is still not up yet,” he said.

“Actually, he just went to sleep. He took over the watch after me,” Rex said. Maximus got up and took an apple from the crate, and started munching on it.

“We passed the border by the way, and now we’re officially in Minerva. There was no trouble at the border either. Just a board that said ‘welcome to Minerva: the land of innovation’,” Rex said.

Maximus nodded to this. Mia was staring at the ceiling and humming a tune. Finally, she stopped and said, “Who knew a road trip could be so boring.”

“I thought you said you were a traveller, shouldn’t you be used to all this?” Maximus asked.

“Yeah, well usually I got to worry so much about reaching somewhere without running into trouble that I got no time to be bored,” she said.

Maximus sighed and said, “Next time we stop somewhere I’ll be sure to buy you a ball of yarn for entertainment.”

“You’re never going to let go of the cat thing are you?” she said.

“Oh come on, how can you not see this. Rex back me up here, doesn’t she remind you of a cat?” he said.

Rex was still too happy to be driving to care. “What? not really. But then again all you humans look equally ugly to me,” he said.

“Oh Rex, you say the sweetest thing,” Mia said sarcastically.

Maximus went ahead to watch the pastures and the passing cars. But around half an hour later Mia started whining again. “By the gods there has to be something to do, Max let’s play a game.”

Maximus looked at her like she was crazy. *It was like dealing with a three year old*, he thought to himself.

“Yeah that’s not going to happen ever,” he said.

“Alright, then let’s do something else. Like maybe tell me a story,” she said.

“I don’t know any good stories, sorry,” he said annoyed.

Mia thought for a moment and said “You know the story about the

Trojan war right. Just tell me that.”

“What, you don’t know what happened in the Trojan War?” Maximus asked surprised. It was probably the most famous tale in the world, how could anyone not know it.

“Hey, don’t talk to me like I’m stupid. I know the basic story, okay? But I never really liked history much, so a lot of the details are a bit fuzzy. But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to know it now, especially since meeting a few of the living legends from it,” she said.

“You might as well tell her Max, it’s not like you got anything better to do,” Rex said. “Besides, I don’t think she’s going to shut up till you do.” Maximus sighed; he knew Rex had a point. So he sat down on his bed and began to tell the tale of the Trojan War.

XXXI

Around a hundred years ago the great Trojan War took place between two huge armies The Greek Empire and The kingdom of Troy. The Greek empire was actually a large alliance formed by various different kingdoms and all the kings led by the king of Argos, called Agamemnon. The large continent where the kingdoms resided was called Greece, and hence the alliance was named the Greek Alliance. Troy, on the other hand, was a large and powerful kingdom to the west of the Greek continent and was led by King Priam, and the people of Troy were called Trojans.

Now the spark for the war began when Paris, Priam's son, paid a visit to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Menelaus was married to Helen, a girl who was said to rival the goddess Aphrodite herself in beauty. Paris fell in love immediately with Helen the moment he laid eyes on her. But he couldn't do anything as she was married to Menelaus. During Paris's visit to Sparta, Menelaus got news that his uncle had died, and he went immediately to attend his funeral leaving his wife Helen to be host to the prince of Troy. Paris on the other hand decided to use this situation to his advantage, and with the help of goddess Aphrodite who he was favoured by, seduced Helen, and even convinced her to run away to Troy with him. They left before Menelaus returned. When Menelaus finally came back he was shocked at the betrayal of Paris. To betray

one's host was the highest order of disrespect in Greece and Menelaus, consumed by rage, went to his brother for help. His brother was none other than Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek alliance. On hearing his brother's story he summoned the other kings of Greece for their assistance. Soon, a huge army was formed, and over one thousand two hundred Greek warships set sail for Troy to defend the honour of the Spartan king and make Troy pay for this betrayal.

Once the Greek soldiers reached Troy, Agamemnon met with King Priam and demanded that Helen be returned. He also demanded that Paris must also be given to the Greeks as a prisoner, so that he may be punished for his actions. Priam refused to do so and Agamemnon declared that the entire city of Troy was to pay for this decision. Agamemnon knew that Priam would not accept these conditions and was pleased to go to war against Troy. The reason for this was Troy was said to be impenetrable. A wall surrounded the city called the Trojan wall, which was over fifty foot tall and indestructible to all forms of attack. This wall had made the city impenetrable for hundreds of years and whoever managed to seize Troy would become a legend. Agamemnon wanted to be that legend and he was willing to start a war and sacrifice countless lives to do so. And so the Great War began, and both sides were too evenly matched in strength.

The Olympian gods could no longer stand by and watch as the war

unfolded, and they began to choose sides. But Emperor Zeus would not let the war consume the entire world, and he ordered the Olympians not to directly get involved in the war, but they were allowed to support either side in any other way they pleased. It was also decided that God-king Zeus himself would favour neither side in the war and would instead act as judge.

And so the gods began to choose sides. On the Trojan side were Aphrodite the goddess of love, the sibling gods Apollo of the light, and Artemis of the hunt, and the war god Ares. Ares had first favoured the Greeks, but the beautiful Aphrodite convinced him to quickly change sides. The Greeks on the other hand were favoured by Athena, the goddess of wisdom, the smith god Hephaestus, Hera wife of Zeus and the queen of the gods, and also Admiral Poseidon, the god of the sea. The other gods chose to stay neutral, although Hermes acted as the official messenger to both sides and as a personal ambassador of Lord Zeus.

But even with the gods involved, the two sides were still too evenly matched, and the war went on for ten long years. During this time, many powerful warriors emerged who became heroes to their respective sides; the most famous of these being Achilles of the Greeks, and Hector of Troy. These two were the strongest warriors on either side and their skills were evenly matched. But on the tenth year of the war something unexpected happened. Achilles, had a quarrel with Agamemnon and

refused to go into battle for the Greeks. This greatly shifted the tides of the war in the favour of Troy, as Hector began to slaughter the Greek forces unopposed.

“Wait hold on a second,” Mia said.

Maximus looked at her and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Well, why did Achilles have a quarrel with Agamemnon in the first place?” she asked.

“It’s Agamemnon,” Maximus corrected her “and I don’t know maybe he didn’t like his new haircut or something. You could ask him yourself when he wakes.” He could tell by Mia’s face that it was not a conversation that would ever happen.

“Perhaps I can shed some light on that subject,” Daedalus said. He had startled them a bit, but Maximus realised that it was time for him to get up again. Daedalus smiled and said, “I was awake for a while now, but I just did not want to interrupt the story.”

“So you know why Achilles fought with Agamemnon...Agamemnon...The Greek leader guy?” Mia asked.

Daedalus checked to see if Achilles was still asleep. Once he confirmed this he said, “I don’t know if Achilles is comfortable talking about this, but the reason he and Agamemnon had a disagreement was because of a girl.”

He looked around at all their confused expressions and said, “Let me explain. When the Greeks seized one of Troy’s temples the people there were taken as prisoners. And among them was a very beautiful girl named Briseis. It was Achilles who had led the capture of the temple and he had met Briseis there. She had stood up to him when he threatened to kill her and he was so amazed by this that he fell for her immediately. But when the prisoners were taken back to the Greek camp Agamemnon too was enticed by Briseis beauty and wanted her for himself. This, of course, Achilles opposed, but Agamemnon still kept her as his prisoner. Achilles was enraged by this and he declared that neither he nor his men would fight for Agamemnon any longer.”

“So what happened next?” Mia asked, barely containing her excitement.

“Well once Agamemnon saw how pathetically they were doing without Achilles, he immediately sent Briseis back to him along with many other gifts. But Achilles was stubborn and still refused to join the battle again,” Daedalus said.

“Then what finally changed his mind?” Mia asked.

“Ah, well I think it would be best if Max told you the rest, my time is almost up,” Daedalus said.

“Wait, one more question, where is Briseis now?” Mia asked.

Daedalus looked down with sadness and said, “I’m afraid like many others she did not survive the war.”

Silence followed these words. Maximus remembered what Ajax had said about Achilles losing nearly everyone close to him. And he kind of understood now why the great warrior kept the fact that he was alive a secret, and wandered the world alone. After a few moments Daedalus said, “It seems I am off again. But Max, please do keep the story going would you?”

Maximus nodded to him, and with that Daedalus went blank again. Maximus helped the old inventor to his bed again and turned to Mia, and said, “Now where were we?”

Achilles was out of the battle and the Trojans were gaining control of the war. Patroclus, who was like a brother to Achilles, and his best friend tried to reason with him to rejoin the war. But Achilles in his stubbornness refused. That’s when Patroclus decided to take matters into his own hands. He stole his best friend’s armour and led his men into battle, pretending to be Achilles. The plan was going well, with the Trojans thinking Achilles had returned, lost their moral to fight, and began to flee. That was until Hector came into the battle. Hector challenged Patroclus to a duel, thinking that he was Achilles. But even with the great warrior’s armour, Patroclus was still no match for Hector and he fell on the battlefield. Only after ripping through the armour and killing his foe did Hector realise what he had done. News of his friend’s murder and how it came to be reached Achilles, and he went into an

uncontrollable rage. It was also at this time Achilles's mother requested armour for her son to the smith god Hephaestus to replace the one broken by Hector. Thus, the 'Armour of Styx' was forged and given to Achilles. Legend also says he was given a powerful shield as well. With his new armour and shield, and unimaginable rage he went ahead to slaughter hundreds of Trojans. He then went forth to the gates of Troy and challenged Hector to one-on-one combat to the death, which Hector had no choice but to accept.

The war itself was stopped for the next day as everyone gathered at the gates of Troy to witness the two mighty warriors fight. When Achilles came he refused to wear his helmet so that Hector could be sure that he would be facing the real Achilles this time. What followed was said to be one of the greatest battles in history. Hector was a great swordsman and he fought well. But armed with his indestructible armour and with anger boiling within him Achilles was unstoppable. The fight went on for hours, but in the end Hector fell and Achilles emerged victorious. When Achilles stood over Hector's lifeless body, the only wound that could be seen on him was a scar above his right eye, a scar that he still had. But Achilles was not done with Hector, even in death. His anger still blazed within him and his revenge was not complete. He tied Hector's corpse to the back of a chariot and dragged it across the battlefield to further desecrate the once great warrior. Hector's father Priam and his brother Paris watched helpless along with the rest of Troy

as the body of their fallen Hero was humiliated. Achilles even refused to return Hector's body to Troy so that he may not even be given a proper funeral.

With Hector gone and Achilles back in full force, the moral of the Trojans fell greatly and it was not long before the Greeks took over the entire battlefield. The Trojans retreated and hid behind their walls, only counterattacking from within. The Greeks were faced with a new problem now, though the battle field was theirs they still had no method of getting past the Trojan wall. Luckily they had a brilliant strategist on their side. He was one of the greatest Greek heroes and said to be the greatest tactician to fight in the war, and his name was Odysseus. Now, it was Odysseus who came up with a plan to take down the Trojan wall from the inside. After a week of relentless attacks on the wall the Greeks decided to pack up and leave. So when the Trojans went to check the next day they found all the Greeks and their ships gone. But on the seashore the Greeks had left a huge wooden horse encrusted with gold, diamonds and other precious gems as an offering to Admiral Poseidon for his support in the war, as horses were Poseidon's sacred animal. The Trojans on the other hand decided to claim the horse for themselves as the spoils of war. They quickly moved the wooden horse within the gates before Poseidon's men came to claim it. All this was happening according to Odysseus's plans. He knew the Trojans would claim the horse for themselves, so he built it in such a way that few warriors could

fit within it. Legend says that the horse could only fit seven warriors and so the Greeks had to send their strongest seven into Troy. They say this is how the Omega seven came to be formed. Once inside the seven warriors waited till night to exit the horse. They then went ahead to take out the remaining guards and open the gates of Troy. The rest of the Greek army had not left either. They merely circled back at night and waited for the Omega seven to open the gates. Once the gates were open the Greeks stormed into Troy, led by Agamemnon and laid siege to the entire city in one night. When morning came the Greeks had finally won the ten year long war.

Maximus got up to drink some water. His throat was parched from telling the story.

“Wow, that’s quite the tale, huh?” Mia said. “So I get that Troy was destroyed in the war. But how come the Greek empire isn’t around anymore either.” “Well, the war greatly weakened the Greek empire as well and soon civil war broke out among them. To end all the madness and prevent further wars Zeus himself interfered, and added the entire Greek continent to his own kingdom.” Rex said “There are still a lot of smaller kingdoms around the world though. But none are as large as the old Greek continent, or nearly as powerful to challenge the empires of the Olympian Gods.”

Mia nodded to show that she understood, but then she asked, “Wait, but the entire war happened because Paris and Helen were in love, and the

Greeks fought against that. Doesn't that sort of make them the bad guys?"

Maximus did not know what to say to this, but luckily he didn't have to say anything.

"Someday you will realise there are things worth fighting for, greater than love." They all turned to see that Achilles had awoken. He got off his bed and sat in the front seat next to Rex. "What could be more important than love?" Mia asked. Achilles did not turn to look at her. He continued to coldly stare out the window and said "Loyalty."

XXXII

They kept on driving across the pastures. They stopped by a small town on their way. It was strange, since even though the town was small the technology there could have rivalled Mars's capital Thrace. It was strange to see even tiny huts sprouting multiple antennas, and he even spotted a few schoolchildren carrying portable computers. Maximus had heard of these before, they were called laptops or something. But he had never actually seen one anywhere in the trenches. They did not have much time to explore as Achilles wanted to reach Athens as fast as possible without wasting time. They did not stop anywhere at night as well, because of this. It was decided that one of them would keep driving through the night while the others slept. Since Maximus was well rested and tired of doing nothing all day, he volunteered to do so.

It was past midnight now, and Maximus had been at the wheel for almost four hours. He realised now that he was not as well rested as he had thought. His eyes were barely open and his foot was aching from managing the pedal all night. All he wanted to do was to park the truck and get some sleep. But he had taken up the responsibility himself so he was not about to stop driving just because he felt a bit tired. As he drove, his thoughts began to wander back home to the trenches. He was a long way from there now, and he had no idea when he would be able to see it again. But he was sure about one thing, he would go back. After all

Kayla would be waiting for him there, he was sure of it. He still regretted not asking her out while he was there, but hey, it didn't end that bad, after all he had got a kiss at the end. He just wished he knew when he would be able to see her again.

Almost an hour passed when someone said, "Wow you're still up and driving." Mia had gotten up, she came up careful not to step on Rex, who was sleeping on the floor and moved to the front to sit next to Maximus.

"Well you're up way too early," he said.

Mia shifted her eyes and said, "Yeah well, I had a bad dream. And I never could go back to sleep after one of those. Maximus noticed that she was clutching her left arm, the part where her mark was and he knew better than to ask what the dream was.

"Wish I could go to bed though. I don't think I'll have any trouble falling asleep," he said.

"Then why don't you. I could take over for a while?" Mia suggested.

"What you?" he said.

Mia frowned at this, "And why are you so surprised, is it because I'm a girl?" "No, but it is because your kind of young. How old are you anyway?" he said. "I'm not that young you know. I'm nearly your age. Almost fifteen and a half, I think," she said.

“You think?” he asked. Mia hesitated a bit before saying anything. “Yeah, well I was stuck in a place where I didn’t exactly celebrate any birthdays alright? And I’m not sure on how long I was kept there. So yeah my time line is a bit hazy.” Maximus didn’t know what to say to this. But it was clear from her tone that she didn’t stay at that place by choice. They remained silent for a while. Then he said “So you want to drive or what?”

They stopped to the side to switch seats. Maximus didn’t go to sleep just yet, he wanted to make sure that Mia actually knew how to drive. She started up the truck without much trouble, and she wasn’t kidding about knowing how to drive either. All this just made Maximus realise that the girl sitting next to him was shrouded in mystery. The worst part was she had made it clear that her past was an off limit topic. But he couldn’t just let all this go, he had to ask something: “So, why do you want to go to Athens so badly anyway. You at least owe me that.”

“Actually, I don’t owe you anything,” she said.

Maximus decided to drop the subject. Fine, he thought to himself, if she didn’t want to share, it was okay; it was her life, after all. He was just about to get up and go to sleep when she said, “If you really want to know, part of the reason I want to get into Athens is because of AEIGS.”

Maximus sat down again “The energy shield thing which Daedalus told

us about. Why, you expect an air strike on your head?”

“Ha Ha, very funny, Aegis is not just a shield against physical attacks you know. It also blocks unauthorised communication channels and traces even magical ones,” she said.

“So what, someone’s trying to trace you?” he asked.

She hesitated to speak again, like just talking about it was bad luck.

“Look, I got some people after me alright, some bad people. And Athens is kind of like the safest place I can be from them,” she said.

Maximus nodded to this. It wasn’t the whole story, but it was something. He decided to take Achilles’ advice and leave it. Maybe someday she would tell him herself. But he just had one more question, “You said that AEGIS was one of the reasons you wanted to reach Athens. What’s the other?”

“Well, there is supposed to be someone there who is on real bad terms with the people chasing me. I was hoping that maybe he could help me,” she said. He thought for a second and said, “Kind of like an enemy’s enemy is your friend.” She nodded, “Yeah, something like that. Achilles says he knows the man personally and that he would introduce me. Now, can we please drop the topic, and weren’t you about to fall asleep a few seconds ago?”

Maximus knew that asking her anything more would be useless.

“Alright, if you can handle it then I’m off to bed,” he said. She nodded

and Maximus went to the bed below Hedger's and he fell asleep almost immediately.

Maximus woke up late again the next day. He was a bit disappointed that the voice hadn't paid him a visit yet. He woke up to see Achilles back on the wheel and the rest of them sitting around the truck. It was nice to see that no one was sleeping for a change. The day went past uneventfully and Maximus wasn't complaining, because an eventful day probably meant confronting a barbarian king who rode around with man-eating horses. Not to mention the troops under Captain Sharp's command. But it was easy to see that everyone was tired of being cooped up in the truck all day. The only time they stopped was to refuel at gas stations. These were also the only places they had to freshen up. And the toilets there were worse than an underground sewer. But they had no choice but to keep moving to Athens.

The sad part was they were only halfway there. But when Daedalus awoke in the evening, he said, "Might I suggest that we spend the night at a motel tonight. It seems our entire travelling party feels a bit car sick at the moment." "I second that Idea. The bed is nice and all, but I'm used to hanging by my tail to sleep you know, and there's nothing to dangle from in here," Hedger said. "In that case you can take the floor next time," Rex said.

Maximus felt it was a good idea as well, but they all looked to Achilles

for approval. He had sort of become the unofficial leader of the pack. “We shouldn’t waste any more time than we have to. The sooner we reach Athens the better,” he said.

“Come now Achilles, Athens is not going anywhere and you should know how important it is to stretch your legs once in a while,” Daedalus said.

“I think you mean leg,” Hedger said, and Mia elbowed him in the stomach to shut up. It took a while to convince him, but Achilles finally agreed to stop for the night at a motel.

“That’s the spirit,” Hedger said. “I mean what’s the worst that can happen?” And Maximus kind of felt like he jinxed it by saying that.

They stopped that night at a place called ‘highway palace’. It was a beaten up old place with broken windows and faded paint. The neon sign outside had half its letters missing.

“Well this looks luxurious,” Mia said.

“Would you rather take a bath in the gas station?” Rex asked, and that shut her up. They rented two rooms from an old satyr at the reception desk with a hearing aid. Achilles, Maximus and Rex took one while the other three got the room right next to them. The place was nothing great, but it felt good to be on solid ground after moving all day. They had dinner at a small twenty four hour diner nearby. The food wasn’t great and Maximus was really starting to miss the banquets at Vulcan city. But

they talked and laughed as they ate their dinners. Everyone was in a good mood at being finally out of the truck. But they would have to be moving again in the morning, and Athens was still a couple of days away. They all went back to their rooms after that.

Achilles opened the door using the key he got from the reception. They went inside to turn on the lights to their empty room. Only when the lights came on they realised that the room was not empty at all, a man in a golden-brown suit was sitting in the chair in the corner. Maximus recognised the man's smirking face immediately. Hermes was paying them a visit again.

XXXIII

Both Achilles and Maximus drew their swords. Rex had changed his new arm into gun mode and the barrel was pointed right at Hermes's head. But the messenger god still just sat in his seat unaffected by all this, not even his smirk had left his face.

"I'm sensing so much hostility in the air. I wonder why," Hermes said. Achilles stepped forward and said, "You know why, so give me one good reason not to cut you right here."

Hermes got off his chair, now he stretched his arms like he just got up from a nap. "Well, how about because you couldn't even if you wanted to?" he said. In an instant he was behind the three of them, his sceptre with the snakes on it had appeared in his hand. Rex and Maximus were still staring at the spot where Hermes had been a second before, but not Achilles, he had turned around swiftly just as Hermes came behind them. They heard a sound of metal clashing as his sword met with the snake coiled sceptre.

"Not bad," Hermes said. "Not a lot of people can say they are fast enough to keep up with my movements. But you should know if I get serious I'm a lot faster." Maximus had no idea what that would be like. He couldn't even see Hermes move as it was.

"What do you want Hermes?" Achilles asked. His sword was still

crossed with the god's sceptre.

"Put away your blade for a while and I'll tell you," he answered.

Achilles didn't move for a few seconds, then he slowly pulled his sword away. But he still did not sheath it. "Now was that so hard?" Hermes said mockingly, his smirk was now a wide playful grin.

"That clash of weapons was so unnecessary. My Caduceus is not even a melee weapon you know. Now let's talk like civilized beings," he said.

Maximus figured that Caduceus was the name of his sceptre. A lot of powerful weapons were given names and any weapon that a god used had to be powerful. Hermes walked past them back towards the chair. "Such a lovely place you guys found. It has a nice abandoned building meets rat infestation theme going on, so retro," he said looking around at the room.

"Did you come here just to redo the furniture then?" Achilles asked.

Hermes smirked at him and said, "No, no not at all. I'm actually here to make things right between us. So there would be no hard feelings."

"You put a tracker on us that nearly got us killed," Rex said.

"And I'm real sorry for that. But you see it was all part of a business deal. But I felt so bad about it later that I decided to come down here personally to apologise," Hermes said, and it was clear from his face that he wasn't sorry for anything.

Achilles raised his sword again and said, "Get to the point."

"To help of course," Hermes said with a grin, "by giving you the most valuable thing I have, information."

They were all listening to him now, and Achilles nodded for him to continue. "Well, here's what I got. This little motel you guys are standing in is going to be turned into a pile of ash and dust by midnight. Ares's men have this place surrounded with a rather wonderful R.A.M. tank with its guns pointed right at this building. They should blow this place up within an hour, so I suggest that you run," Hermes said.

"How did they find us?" Maximus asked.

Hermes looked at him and said, "There are plenty of other ways to track someone you know. I just had to wait till you guys stopped moving for a while to get a good read on you."

"Why tell us this?" Achilles asked.

"Because I want to get on someone's good side, now I know you know me and Ares are working for someone. I felt a little magical spyware peeking into our last meeting. It was well-hidden but I am the god of communication after all," he said. Maximus remembered the voice telling him that it was not safe to show him visions for a while, and now he knew why.

"And how would saving us make you look good?" Achilles asked.

“I’m glad you asked Achilles,” Hermes said, mocking the tone of a teacher, “you see if you live it makes Ares look like an incompetent idiot. And that’s when I’ll sweep in and provide some very useful information, making me a savoir. So, for the moment at least, I’m rooting for you guys.”

Maximus understood now what Achilles meant when he said that Hermes always had an agenda of his own.

“Wait so what information will you provide?” Maximus asked. Hermes looked at him with a grin and said “Why, information on the enemy of course, a very useful bit of gossip that the great hero of the Trojan War, Achilles is still alive.”

Hermes moved towards the window and opened it. The window was large enough for him to fit through easily. “Well, you guys should really start moving. The clock is ticking you know.

With that the wings on his shoes came out again. He jumped out the window and within seconds he disappeared into the air.

“Well, what now?” Rex asked.

“Wake the others, we are getting out of here as fast as we can,” Achilles said, and they ran to the next room to do so. It took a while for Mia to come and open the door, and when they stepped inside Daedalus was mumbling on his bed, and Hedger was already asleep, hanging upside

down with his tail wrapped around a coathanger on the wall.

“What’s going on?” Mia asked as Maximus went ahead to wake Hedger.

“We have to get out of here now. The soldiers have found us,” Rex said.

That got everyone’s attention. “Are they in the building?” Hedger asked, now fully awake. Achilles shook his head and said, “Not yet, but the RAM tank is pointed right at us and the only reason they haven’t shot us yet is because they need Daedalus alive.”

They grabbed their things and went ahead downstairs where the old satyr was fast asleep. They decided to take the back exit, but it was locked. Hedger could have used his quill key or Mia could have picked it easily, but Rex decided that the most efficient method would be to kick the door open. The entire door lay broken on the side as all of them rushed outside towards their truck.

They got in quickly and once they started to move Hedger asked, “Okay, where are the soldiers? I don’t even see a bunch of dust bunnies here.”

Like an answer to his question they heard a huge explosion from behind. They turned to see the motel they had been in seconds before was burning down to its ashes.

“I thought you said they needed Daedalus alive,” Mia screamed.

“They must have seen us pull out. That was probably a warning shot,” Rex said. Mia was whimpering now. “But there were other people

inside.”

Mia had just sunk into a corner, clutching her knees. Maximus realised that despite everything, she was not a soldier and she must not be used to seeing people die. He remembered how freaked out she was when the dirt-picks got taken out. Maximus went up to her and said, “Listen, I know that this is hard. But you have to keep it together. I know you’re not used to seeing people die.” Mia shook her head and said to him in a whisper, “You don’t understand, I have seen too many people die already. I just don’t want to see it anymore.”

Maximus didn’t know what to say to this. “Look, just keep your eyes on the prize. You have to reach Athens remember. That’s all that matters and I promise you we will reach there,” he said.

Mia straightened up again. “You’re right, Athens is all that matters.” She then got up and said, “Sorry, lost my head for a moment. But I’m alright now. So what’s the plan?”

“That’s simple, don’t get killed,” Hedger said.

XXXIV

They were off the highway now and Achilles was taking them through the grassy pastures as an effort to lose them. But it was no use. Four jeeps were on their tails spraying them with bullets; the RAM tank wasn't in sight just yet but they were sure it wasn't far behind. "Running isn't helping Achilles," Rex said. Achilles nodded and asked Maximus to take the wheel. He went ahead to charge up his sword again. It had begun to glow a bright blue when suddenly the truck began to lose control. "I think they hit one of the back tyres" Maximus shouted. Achilles closed his eyes to think, when he opened them he said, "Max stop the truck, you me and Rex are going to get out and hold them back. Mia you know to drive right, you and Hedger keep the truck moving as far away from us as possible. Whatever happens we cannot let Daedalus fall into their hands again." On these orders, Maximus stopped the truck and the three of them jumped out. Mia took over the wheel and started to drive away. But with a fully flattened wheel they weren't driving so well.

When the three of them got out they were faced with four army jeeps mounted with machine guns on their hoods aimed at them. Maximus thought he was going to die right there, but as always Achilles had a plan. His blade had been blue for a while now and with one huge slash it sent a wave of blue energy hurtling towards the vehicles. The energy had

formed an arc that was wide enough to hit all four of the jeeps, and all their mounted weapons stopped firing instantly as all of them stopped moving. The blue arc had acted like an electromagnetic pulse of some sort, but they weren't out of the fire just yet. The soldiers began pouring out of the vehicles and soon they were surrounded by around twenty of them, including Captain Sharp. The soldiers were from an assortment of races such as humans, satyrs, centaurs, and even a couple of Minotaurs. And all of them had their weapons raised.

“Get them,” Captain Sharp yelled. More than half of them charged and a few with guns stayed back to attack from a distance. But they weren't the only ones with guns this time. Rex raised his arm and aimed the barrel straight at the gunners and started to fire away. And one thing was for sure, Rex definitely had the better gun. It fired yellow balls of energy that gave off mini explosions on contact and soon the gunners were running for cover. With bullets out of the way, Maximus and Achilles were left to handle the rest of the soldiers. They began the fight – the two of them against around fifteen of Mars's finest. Achilles was easily keeping up with them as usual, and to Max's surprise, so was he. It looked like all the training had really paid off, and he was able to handle three soldiers at once. Achilles wasn't fooling around this time either. Around him five soldiers were already down and out. Captain Sharp had pulled out her yellow energy tipped spear again, and she too, started to face off against Achilles. But he still held his own without much trouble

now, although that's when they heard a rumble behind them as the R.A.M. tank had finally caught up.

The lights from the R.A.M. tank lit up the night as it drove towards them, its dual barrels aimed and ready to fire. Maximus was still too busy with the soldiers on him to even think about this now. Suddenly, Achilles broke away from the attackers and came to his side. "I'll take care of the soldiers. You get to Rex and make sure that the tank does not get past us." Maximus nodded and made a run for it towards Rex; a few of the soldiers tried chasing after him but were stopped by Achilles. Achilles on the other hand had around ten attackers along with Captain Sharp on him now, and somehow he was still untouched. Maximus was a different story, even though the lack of armour had made him a bit more agile, he had nothing to defend himself with now. He was used to taking heavy hits on his armguard and now that he had lost it he had to drastically change his fighting style. The result of which were multiple cuts and bruises all over his body. He reached Rex, who was still firing away at anyone who even tried to take a gun.

"Hey Max you saw that double barrelled death machine heading towards us right?" Rex said.

Maximus nodded and said, "Yeah, and we have to stop it." Rex looked at him like he was crazy, and said, "You make it sound so easy." They managed to take care of the last two gunners and started moving towards

the tank with no real plan in mind.

That was when they saw it. There was something moving in from behind the tank, and now quickly overtaking it. It wasn't a car or truck of any sort, either. For one thing it had only two wheels, and for another it was running on horse power literally. Maximus had never seen one before. The army had stopped using them long before he was even born, when cars got invented. But riding towards them was a chariot. The chariot itself was nothing compared to the four horses pulling them. They were huge – the size of their truck probably. Even Hephaestus could probably ride on one of those. And using these horses to pull the chariot made sense once they saw the man riding on it. He was big, well over eight feet tall. And not just tall either, the guy was fat, morbidly obese even. He was so huge that Maximus could probably use his shadow as a shade during a sunny day. His armour seemed as ancient as the chariot, with a weird mix of metal, leather and heavy clothing. He also had a bearskin tied around his neck like a scarf of some sort, with the bear's head resting on his shoulder. And his face matched that of the bears a bit, too. His entire face and head were covered in thick black hair that seemed to have never been cut in his life. It was also braided in odd places with what looked like tiny bone fragments. He also had the biggest battle axe Maximus had ever seen, strapped to his back; one clean sweep from that thing could make oak trees fall. The chariot rode faster now, gaining

speed, but when it reached them it did not stop. Instead it just rode past them towards the skirmish in which Achilles was in and came to a halt. As the huge man stepped down from his chariot, the only thing Maximus could think was that the champion Diomedes sure did go to a lot of trouble to look the part of the barbarian king.

XXXV

Diomedes got off his chariot and the fighting stopped for a minute “What is this? The vermin is still alive! As expected from you, woman,” he said. His voice was loud and harsh like he was gargling rocks.

“Champion these fighters are not...” Captain Sharp began to say, but Diomedes shouted “SILENCE! I don’t want your excuses. Now where is the inventor.”

“Still on the move sir,” Captain Sharp said.

The barbarian went to his chariot and pulled on a latch. The leashes tying the horses to the chariot fell to the ground. The horses were free now and the first thing they did was move to the fallen soldiers and start feeding on them. It was disgusting to watch, and Maximus wasn’t even sure if all of them were dead. “Sir, those are our men,” Captain Sharp said in shock.

But Diomedes turned to her, “If they have fallen so easily in battle then it is an embarrassment to call them the men of the war god. They shall serve well as horse food though,” and he said this with a grin. Captain Sharp fell to her knees and whispered, “How could you?” But Diomedes turned to the five remaining soldiers still standing, and said, “Finish off this scum or I’ll personally feed you to my horses while you are all alive.” The soldiers didn’t need to be told this twice, they went ahead to

attack Achilles.

Diomedes then went to his horses whose mouths were wet with blood now. “You can feed later my pretties,” he said. “Now go and hunt the old inventor. You have his scent, so bring him back to me alive. But you can snack on anyone else you find.” The horses neighed at this, and they started running again in the direction in which the truck went. The barbarian king then went ahead to sit on his chariot to watch his soldiers face off against Achilles.

Maximus was watching all this from a distance, and he felt like someone had replaced his blood with lava. It was like he was holding back from exploding. He felt so disgusted by the champion that he felt physically revolted by the man. His blade had begun to glow red again, brighter this time than ever before. It was now a bloody crimson, a colour which reflected his emotions quite well. And at that moment the only thing he wanted to do was to drive his crimson blade straight into the Barbarian king’s heart. But Maximus had been so distracted by this that he had failed to see that the tank had fired at him. He would have been dead if Rex hadn’t tackled him out of the way.

“Max, listen, I know how you feel . And I know Diomedes does not deserve to live. But we have to leave him for now and concentrate on the bloody tank,” Rex said.

Maximus didn’t say anything, but he nodded in agreement. Then

together they went to face the tank again. The tank had gotten much closer now and it showed no signs of stopping. Rex began to start firing at the tank with everything he had, but sadly it didn't even leave a dent. Its armour was simply too good.

“What do we do now? My shots aren't working. Do you think that sword of yours could cut through its metal?” Rex asked.

Maximus didn't know. He had seen Achilles cut through metal before, but he was in a completely different league than him. But Maximus was so angry and his blade felt so powerful now he knew he had to at least try. “I'll see if I can slow it down,” he said.

Rex nodded and said, “Listen try and keep it occupied for a while. I got something that just might work against that thing, alright? But I can only use it once, so I need a clear shot.”

Maximus agreed and began to charge towards the tank.

The RAM tank kept firing at Maximus. But without any sort of armour slowing him down he managed to dodge all of its shots. Finally, he was close enough to the tank to use his blade. As an added advantage he was too close to the tank now for it to point its barrels at him. Maximus went ahead and started slashing at the tank's armour. The tank was still moving, but it was at such a slow pace that he could easily keep up with it. The only problem was the armoured hull was too strong for his blade

to make a scratch on it. From afar, Rex was still firing at the tank, but now the tank was concentrating its fire on him. There was no way he could get a clear shot for whatever he was planning while under such heavy fire. Then an idea sparked in Max's head. It was true that his blade could not cut through the metal alloy armour hull of the tank. But there was still one part of the tank that was not covered by it, its tyres.

With all his might Maximus took a huge slash at the tread-tyres of the R.A.M. tank. The tyres were pretty thick as well, and an ordinary sword would never be able to cut through it. But his was no ordinary sword. His overheated blade slashed straight through the tank's tyres, finally bringing the metal behemoth to a stop.

Maximus thought that was it, but his troubles did not end there. The hatch at the top of the tank's hull opened and a soldier popped out of it with a gun pointed straight at Maximus. 'Bang', a shot was fired, but Maximus was still standing. This was because it was Rex who had taken the shot before the soldier could pull the trigger. The soldier lay dead on the ground now. But Rex didn't stop there. He began to run straight at the tank as if he was going to meet it with a head-butt. As he got closer he shouted "Max run!"

Maximus had no idea what he was planning, but he decided to take his friend's advice and bolted away from the tank. As he turned back to see what was going on he saw that Rex was aiming his head at the mouth of one of the tank barrels. Then he saw that a small red light was blinking

on his metal horn. When he got close enough the horn ejected itself towards the tank. It travelled like a miniature rocket, straight into its barrel, and Maximus heard beeping sounds coming from the inside now. After about three beeps, BOOM, a huge explosion occurred and the tank was up in flames. The blast had blinded Maximus for a few seconds, but when he finally regained his sight he saw that the entire tank was destroyed and only its burning hull remained. It looked like Hephaestus had fitted Rex's horn with a mega-bomb, who knew?

But Maximus had no time to celebrate as he saw Rex's body lying right next to the burning tank. It seemed he was too close to the tank and got caught in the explosion when it happened. Maximus ran to his friend, praying that he was still alive. He reached him and was relieved to see that he was still breathing. But he was still bleeding badly from a wound in his chest, and he needed some medical attention real soon. Maximus tore out a piece of his sleeve and used it to try and stop the bleeding. It had helped but it was not enough. He dragged his friend's body away from the flaming wreckage, but he had spent all his energy in doing so. He sat down next to Rex and did all that he could to try and cover up the bleeding wound.

Behind all this Diomedes was still sitting in his chariot. The tank explosion had distracted him for a few minutes, but he finally looked

back at the fight with an annoyed expression on his face. Only the fight was over, and Achilles stood there with his bright blue blade surrounded by fallen soldiers of Ares.

“Well you really are something aren’t you?” Diomedes said. He still had no idea who Achilles was. His face was still not clearly visible in the darkness and the only light now came from his blade. “Or maybe it’s just that the ones chasing after you were utterly useless,” he continued.

He got off his chariot and walked up to Captain Sharp who was still kneeling on the ground, clearly having lost her will to fight. “Bah, what use do I have with broken toys like you?” the barbarian said. He then drew his humongous battle axe and made a hack straight for the captain’s neck. But the axe never made contact as it was swiftly blocked by a blue blade. As Achilles stood their defending Captain Sharp’s life, he said, “Why don’t you try that on someone who can fight back?”

The blue glow from his blade was shining on his scar now and the expression on his face was more dangerous than ever. It wasn’t the unaffected emotionless face he had before, or the expression of utter focus he had while fighting. What was seen on his face now was pure and unimaginable anger.

XXXVI

This had got the barbarian's attention. "You would defend your enemy. Why, because she is a woman, or because she is unarmed?" he said as he held his battleaxe up again.

"Neither. I just couldn't wait another second to end you," Achilles said. And then it began. Diomedes took the first strike when he tried to bring his axe down on Achilles. But he was easily dodged. Soon the battle went into full swing. Diomedes was surprisingly fast for someone of his size and his strikes were swift and accurate. But there was no way he could match Achilles in speed. He dodged everything that was thrown at him. He managed to land a few blows on the barbarian, but they were ineffective – no matter how hard the strike was it just didn't go through his amalgam of metal and leather.

"Oh you're starting to notice aren't you, my armour is not just for show. It has been blessed with very powerful magic and even if you get past that my very skin is harder than stone. It will take a lot more than your blue glow stick to cut me," the giant Barbarian said.

At these words Achilles pushed back and held his blade ready. It was already glowing blue, but then it let out a kind of pulse. The blade's glow turned more violent now and the sword looked as though it was covered in blue flames. Then he took one swift slash aimed at his foe's

large chest. The slash cut straight through the bearskin and the metal underneath it. His chest was visible now and there was a cut on it. Achilles's blade was now stained with the barbarian king's blood. Diomedes staggered back and he was shocked at the sight of his own blood. "Perhaps, I should not take you so lightly," he said gritting his teeth. He held his axe with both his arms and it started to get bigger. The axe began to change its colour as well. It did not glow but the entire battleaxe turned bright red, like it had just been soaked in blood.

"Now tremble at the power of my 'Blood-seeker.' The axe that can cut through anything on earth," Diomedes shouted and brought the axe down on his enemy. The very ground shook at the strike. The land beneath them cracked and fissures appeared. The entire battlefield was covered in dust, all by just one blow from the great axe.

But when the dust began to clear the barbarian king saw something that made him stop moving. The axe had not made contact with Achilles or even his blade. Instead, it had been blocked by a large circular shield and the axe had no effect on it. The shield was black and made from the same metal as the 'Styx Armour', and it was also highly decorated with the ancient symbol of the earth. And even the barbarian Diomedes knew what it was.

"Perhaps your axe can cut anything on the earth. But cutting the earth itself is a different matter," Achilles said. Then with a mighty thrust he pushed away the axe. Diomedes was wide open now and within a matter

of seconds his entire body was covered in wounds and blood. Diomedes staggered and fell back onto the ground. Achilles stood above him with his shield, and his now blue and blood-red blade at the barbarian's neck.

“No, it can't be – but that's the ‘Terra shield’ forged against Troy. And you wear pitch black armour,” Diomedes said. “You can't be...you're supposed to be dead.”

Achilles did not bother to answer the fallen champion. He was about to deliver his final blow, but Diomedes was not done yet, he slammed the ground with his axe and the ground below them crumbled. In the confusion he ran back towards his chariot. Achilles had staggered a little, not enough to let the barbarian go. The barbarian king had decided that running for his life was the best option for now. But then, suddenly, they heard a rumble from behind and Diomedes looked on in glee as his four man-eating horses came charging towards them.

“Ha, it seems you missed your chance. My pets are coming to my rescue. It doesn't matter even if you are the great Achilles, they will still eat you alive,” Diomedes said. “And nobody will save you now.” Achilles couldn't help smiling at this. He turned to the barbarian and said “Yes, it seems ‘nobody’ will.” Diomedes finally looked up to see what was really happening. His precious pets weren't running towards his rescue. They were running away from something that was chasing them from the sky. As they got closer Diomedes saw that a very heavily armed helicopter was firing at his horses and his pets were merely

running to escape its bullets.

The first rays of daylight came and they could see a symbol painted on the side of the helicopter, an owl with an olive branch in its mouth, which was the symbol of Athena. Along with the helicopter was a man with mechanical bronze wings also chasing the horses. He was shooting at them with the two machine guns he had in each arm. And bringing up the rear of this very weird sight was Mia and Hedger, driving along in their now three-wheeled truck.

Maximus was watching all this from a distance, and he wasn't sure if it was all real or whether he had finally gone insane. He had helped Rex the best he could, and now he watched as the man-eating horses ran right past Achilles. Diomedes had managed to grab onto one of his horses, and he was now riding on it as far away from this place as possible. Seeing their champion run away, the remaining soldiers, including Captain Sharp, decided it was best to follow him. The surviving soldiers were able to fit inside a single jeep.

Achilles started chasing after them in one of the jeeps they left behind, but he came to a stop when he saw the state Rex was in. As the helicopter came nearer he also signalled for them to land. But it was the metal-winged man who landed first. "What are you doing? They're going to escape," he said. Achilles looked at Rex and said "One of our

comrades needs immediate medical attention. And his life is more important to me than gaining a few prisoners of war.”

The winged man just nodded to this. Maximus could not tell if he was angry about this because he wore a mask. The mask was strange, as it had no openings for the mouth or nose. It looked like a full bronze, oval-shaped plate with two holes in it for the eyes alone. In fact his entire body was covered in a bronze suit that matched his wings. His suit also had silver designs on it, and a silver owl symbol on his chest. He was clearly a member of Athena’s army, but Maximus had never seen a soldier with wings before. The helicopter landed and the winged man said, “Don’t worry we have some medical supplies aboard the copter and we can get him to Athens fast enough.”

The blades of the helicopter finally stopped spinning and its large side doors opened. Out of that four heavily armed Athenian soldiers stepped out and stood in formation. Then the pilot stepped out of the cockpit and the other soldiers greeted him with a salute. He was wearing high grade armour which was light blue and the edges were lined with silver. The markings on the armour were clearly Greek like that of Achilles. He was also wearing a dark blue cape with Athena’s symbol on it. It was the kind that only very high ranking officers in the army used; he did not have any weapons on him, but Maximus was sure he probably had them safely tucked away in summoning crystals.

But he did hold an ancient Greek helmet in his hand, complete with a

large blue plume on top that looked like it came from the same set as his armour. From his face, it looked like he was in his in his forties, but it still maintained some striking good features. His hair was black, but with streaks of grey mixed in with it on the sides; he also had a neatly kept beard, which also carried strands of grey. He had brilliant grey eyes that went nicely with his hair and they seemed to house a lot of wisdom. His armour was also decorated with various medals. He seemed to be the man in charge, but when he saw Achilles he smiled and said, “Never fear with ‘nobody’ here.”

Maximus was still kneeling next to Rex’s unconscious body, and he only got up once the soldiers had taken Rex inside the helicopter to get him treated. Mia had managed to drive the truck back to them somehow, even with one of its tyres completely shredded off. She and Hedger got out of the truck and helped Daedalus out as well. The winged man glided to them immediately and hugged Daedalus. “Father you’re alive,” he said.

It dawned on Maximus that Daedalus had a son, and one with mechanical wings too. But of course, his father did not return the sentiments as he was still off in his own world.

“Icarus your father is still not well,” Achilles said.

“Ah yes. Ajax told us about the predicament Dad had gotten himself

into. But not to worry, we have the cure right here,” Icarus said. He turned to the man in blue armour and said, “General the antidote please.” The General searched his pockets and pulled out a small bottle with some green liquid inside. He handed it over to Icarus who helped his father drink it. Nothing happened at first, but then a smile appeared on the old inventor’s face and he said, “It’s so good to see you as well my son.” Daedalus seemed to have finally made a full recovery. Maximus was happy to see the father and son reunited. But also a bit sad as this was something he could never have.

Mia and Hedger came over and stood by his side now. “Quite a cool rescue huh,” Hedger said and Maximus was glad to see that his friends were alright. “How’s Rex?” Mia asked.

“Pretty bad,” Maximus said, “but they’re treating him inside now and he’s the toughest bull I’ve ever met. I’m sure he’ll make it.”

They nodded to this and Hedger asked, “Rex has beaten worse, so no worries. Any idea on what’s going on though?”

Maximus shook his head and said, “Not sure, but that Icurus guy seems to be Daedalus’s son. As for the guy in charge, I think his name is General Nobody.” “What kind of name is Nobody?” Mia asked, confused.

Achilles who had overheard their conversation turned to them. There

was actually a small smile on the serious warrior's face. "‘Nobody’ is a nickname we have for this guy," he said, "you see once when he was caught by a Cyclops tribe chief he told him his name was ‘Nobody’. So when he escaped and started attacking the Cyclops it started screaming that ‘Nobody’ was attacking him. The other Cyclops thinking that then nothing was wrong did not bother to enter their chief's cave." General Nobody came up to them now and said, "It was a silly move, but luckily Cyclops weren't known for their intellectual decision-making skills. And as for the name ‘Nobody’, my friends still use it, just to annoy me." He then held out his hand for Maximus to shake and said "Allow me to introduce myself, I am General Odysseus of the Athenian Army."

XXXVII

Odysseus was not a name you just never heard about. He was the man who ended the Trojan War. The entire Trojan horse was his idea. He was said to be one of the greatest strategic minds in the world, and the current leader of Athena's Army. The only thing that surpassed his skills as a warrior was his cunningness. Maximus had heard that though he did not visit the battlefield itself frequently, it was he who orchestrated all of Minerva's battle tactics. He was the brains behind the entire operation. And considering how well Athena's forces were keeping the much larger army of Ares at bay, Odysseus was doing his job pretty well. It took Maximus a few seconds to realise that he was staring with an open mouth at the general. And he quickly shook the hand offered to him after that. "I guess you all already have an idea on who Odysseus is. You should also know that he is another member of the Omega seven," Achilles said, then he turned to Odysseus and said, "These are Maximus, Hedger and Mia. The Minotaur inside is Rex. They have been a great help in reaching this far." Maximus was pretty sure Achilles could have made it even without their help, but he chose just to take the compliment.

"In that case you are all welcome to join us in Athens. But you might not want to mention to anyone you are from Mars," Odysseus said.

“How did you know?” Maximus asked.

“You still have your Army dog-tags. I saw one on your friend Rex, as well. I would suggest you remove those before entering the city,” Odysseus said. Maximus nodded and went ahead to do so. Daedalus walked up to them now and said, “I see all of you have already gotten acquainted. You have already met my son Icarus, I suppose.”

Icarus nodded at them, but he didn't say anything. Maximus had a feeling he was not the very friendly type. One of the soldiers came out of the helicopter and said that Rex was stabilized, but that he still needed proper medical care as fast as he could.

“Not to worry,” Odysseus said. “My ‘Phaeacian pelican’ is one of the fastest copters in the world. It was a gift from the Phaeacian king to haste my return home from the Trojan War. And I have kept it up to date with the latest of Athenian technology. It will get us to Athens in under an hour.”

Maximus had to agree the helicopter was a real marvel to look at. It was three times the size of any ordinary helicopter and it had a very futuristic design. The copter was grey and white, which kind of made it look like an angry storm cloud and it had multiple guns and cannons on it. Its rotating blade was as long as the helicopter itself and it had two smaller blades also. It also sprouted two wings that were short for the copter. But each one did hold two very large looking missiles and a heavy machine

gun at each end. It also had four very large jet exhausts in the back, so Maximus did not doubt what Odysseus said about its speed. The helicopter looked like it could take out multiple battalions without much trouble.

They got onto the copter while one of the soldiers drove their truck into its cargo hold. The insides were pretty luxurious as well, and all of them could fit in easily. Once all of them, except Icarus were inside they took off, and the winged warrior followed them closely behind. Maximus went to sit next to Rex who looked much better now. But he still hadn't regained his consciousness. They were flying through the air in no time and Maximus had to admit, the pelican was fast. Odysseus had let one of his soldiers drive so that he could join them in the back. They were all getting their wounds treated now. Maximus was the worst of the bunch, with multiple wounds and even a few broken ribs. Now that the fight was over and his adrenaline level had dropped back to normal he could feel every bit of pain in his aching body. But he was no stranger to wounds or broken bones, and he knew he would be alright. Even Hedger and Mia had some minor bumps and bruises. It seemed driving away from a pack of man-eating horses had been pretty rough. The only person who didn't seem to have a scratch on him was Achilles. He had removed his armour once he boarded the helicopter and the armour had protected him from everything. The 'Armour of Styx' true to its legend really was invulnerable. Only his Bionic leg had sustained some

damage, and Achilles was trying not to move it much. But he looked really tired and he had chugged down two bottles of water when he first entered.

“So how did you find us anyway?” Achilles asked.

Odysseus chuckled and said, “Don’t think Ares is the only one who knows how to track someone. I had called up Ajax once I got back from the battlefield yesterday. He informed me that you had already left, but he did tell me the route you would be taking. And once I heard that an entire building had blown up in that route I just put two and two together to figure out that you were involved. You always were a magnet for trouble.”

Achilles nodded to this and Odysseus turned to the rest of them, “So you lot are from Mars huh? Can’t say I’m friends with a lot of people from there for obvious reasons,” he said with a smile.

“Actually Mia here is not. But I think you are quite familiar with her home as well,” Achilles said. Maximus did not understand what he was talking about and judging by the expression on Odysseus, neither did he. Maximus realised that Mia hadn’t uttered a single word since she met Odysseus, but she seemed to know what Achilles was talking about. She pulled up her sleeve again to reveal her mark of the candle with the burning ‘c’ and showed it to Odysseus. The smile vanished from his face immediately, it was replaced by an expression of pure shock and regret.

“Oh my poor child,” he said, “how did you escape?”

“I managed to sneak aboard one of the ships that brought in people. I hid in their cargo hold till I reached the mainland,” she said in a low voice.

There was sadness in Odysseus’s eyes now. “We haven’t had a refuge from there in quite the while now, and I hoped that the place had finally met its end somehow. The fact that it still survives is a matter of great personal shame to me.” Maximus could feel the regret in his voice now. It took a few seconds but Odysseus regained his composure and said, “Mia, I promise you that I will personally help you in any way I can. Please rest for now.” He did not seem to be in a mood to talk anymore and he excused himself to check something in the cockpit. Maximus opened his mouth to ask something, but Achilles gave him a stern look that said ‘let it go’. Mia got up and went to the corner as well and she made sure to avoid eye contact with anyone.

Maximus tried to get some sleep after that, but the throbbing pain from his broken rib kept waking him up. He looked around to see what everyone was up to. Hedger had hung himself upside down with his tail on a hook, which was meant for parachutes, and gone off to sleep again, and Rex was still out cold. As for Mia, she was still in a corner not talking to anyone. Achilles had begun meditating. He used to do this sometimes while training him and Maximus knew he hated to be disturbed while doing this. But opposite to him, Daedalus was looking out the window with a sad expression on his face, which Maximus found

weird, since he expected him to be real happy, returning home with his mind back in control. He asked the old inventor what was wrong.

“Ah Max it’s nothing important. I just wish my son would ride with us inside.” Maximus looked outside to see that Daedalus was looking at Icarus flying right beside them.

“Why doesn’t he?” Maximus asked.

Daedalus looked at him sadly and said, “Well Max, my son does not enjoy the company of people. Not anymore anyway.” Maximus had felt that Icarus was not very friendly. But he thought it was just towards them. But the way Daedalus put it there was something else going on.

“What happened?” he asked.

Daedalus looked outside at his son and said, “He wasn’t always like this. He was a happy boy while growing up. When he was around twenty, Emperor Zeus had called me to Olympus. He was so impressed with my work that he offered me immortality. I requested of him to do the same for my son as well, since I did not want to live forever alone and the Emperor agreed. As years passed he grew adamant about joining the army. As his father, I did not want a warrior’s life for him, but it was his choice and since that was what he wanted I did not stand in his way. To help him I built him those wings and it gave him a great advantage in his fights. But armed with those wings he grew arrogant in his skills, he thought he was good enough to take anyone on. Then one day he was

flying over the Sun god Apollo's territory. Apollo was not happy about this and he ordered him to leave his air space or to face his wrath. But instead of flying away Icarus accepted the Sun god's challenge. This was the worst mistake he had ever done. The Sun god thrashed him in battle, and in his final attack burned his skin and melted his wings. Icarus fell to the ground and was barely alive when he was returned to Athens. I managed to keep him alive and even mend his wings, but no matter what I tried his burns would not heal. Now that suit is the only thing that keeps my son safe from excruciating pain."

Maximus listened to the whole story and had no idea what to say; finally he muttered "I'm sorry."

"Ah well, so am I for giving him those wings in the first place," Daedalus said with a sad smile. "But I just wish he would forgive himself. He was never the same after that, he grew detached from his old life, even from me." Daedalus then continued to stare outside the window. Maximus wished that he hadn't asked what was bothering him. The story had left him feeling like he had eaten some rotten eggs.

Maximus also decided to just stare out the window and watch the clouds pass, trying his best to forget about Icarus. A few minutes passed and that's when Maximus saw something appear on the horizon. He turned to Daedalus and asked "is that...". Daedalus was smiling now "Beautiful isn't she. You might want to show your friends as well. They

wouldn't want to miss this," he said and Maximus went to do just that. First he woke up Hedger from his nap. "What?" Hedger asked, "are we under attack again?"

"No, but you might want to look out the window," he said. He then went ahead to Mia and said, "Hey Mia" but she cut him off.

"Look Max I'm really not in the mood to..." she began to say. But she stopped in mid sentence since she too had just seen what was outside. "Wow," she said as she went ahead to stare out the window.

Because, appearing on the horizon was the most amazing city they had ever seen. It was huge, bigger than Thrace or Vulcan city. And the buildings were tall, a few of them would have easily crossed fifty floors. They were made entirely of metal and glass, both of which reflected the sunlight falling on them, which made the entire city shine. The structures weren't just giant rectangles either. There were constructions of every shape imaginable. One of the towers grew slimmer and slimmer as it went up until the last floor could only hold a single room. Another one was lean all the way to the end and on top of that was a huge oval. It looked like a blimp was balancing on a pole. There were others too of different shapes and sizes like a dome with a large telescope coming out of it, and a curvy one that looked like an open book. Almost all of these had obscene amounts of glass and silver on them. The buildings did not have smoking chimneys like in Vulcan, but a lot had multiple antennas

and other weird mechanical devices. It also had a very long highway system that ran through the entire city like a giant snake. A few of these roads were so raised and curvy that they looked like they belonged on a rollercoaster. The city itself was on a raised platform, and it was surrounded by a sea of green grass as far as the eye could see. And it was surrounded by a perfectly circular wall. The wall itself was not very tall, but it was emitting an enormous energy barrier that covered the entire city like a huge dome. Maximus realised that this was AEGIS, but he hadn't expected it to be so big. AEGIS was clear enough to see through it, but it had a bluish tinge that made its boundaries easily distinguishable. It made it look like the entire city was encased in one huge snow globe. And surrounded by the green grass and with a clear sky in the background it looked like a beautifully painted picture.

Everyone was staring at the city now. Even Achilles had stopped his meditation to take a peek at this work of art. Odysseus came back from the cockpit again. His smile reappeared on his face as he said, "Well folks, I present to you Athens."

Epilogue:

The doors to Ares's throne room were closed shut and there were only two people inside it now, the war god Ares himself and the messenger god Hermes. Ares was in a very foul mood right now. He had just heard the news that even his champion had failed to capture Daedalus, and that the old inventor was back in Athens now under the watchful eyes of Athena. Needless to say he had had better days. He took his anger out on anything he could find. His entire throne room was a mess as broken furniture and twisted weapons littered the floor. There were also the bodies of two of his guards who had just been unlucky enough to be there when Hermes brought the news. Ares went ahead to throw a decorative shield at the wall cracking it.

“Now whatever did those poor shields do to you?” Hermes asked. Ares turned to him with all his rage and said “How can you be still making jokes at a time like this. Even my champion has been defeated. We failed our mission.” Hermes put his index finger up and began to shake it. “No, no no, my dear war god. Let's make one thing clear, you failed your mission not me,” Hermes said. “My mission was to locate the inventor and provide sufficient intel on his rescuers, both of which, I did perfectly. Recapturing Daedalus was your department. So in short it was you who failed.” Ares looked angry enough to break the messenger god's neck at these words but he restrained himself and said, “And I'm

sure you put it exactly like that to our boss.” Hermes didn’t respond to this in words, he merely gave a mischievous grin.

Ares decided to take a break from his wrecking spree and went ahead to sit on his throne. “So, you’re sure it was him who rescued Daedalus” he said.

“When has my information ever been wrong?” Hermes said, “Besides your barbarian champion confirmed it himself.” Ares brought his arm down on his throne with great force, the metal armrest broke off “So then Achilles is still alive. He was a pain in the neck during the Trojan War too. I was so glad when I heard that he was killed at the end of the war, but just my luck to have the greatest swordsman in the world return from the dead against me.”

“Now don’t go throwing around that title to just anyone Ares,” a new voice said. The two gods looked to see a man leaning in the corner covered by the curtain’s shadow. The man slowly came out. “Last time I checked, I was a pretty good swordsman myself,” he said putting his hand around the hilt of his sheathed sword.

“Well look who it is,” Hermes said.

Both the gods recognised the man now. “How the heck did you get in here?” Ares asked.

“Oh, please Ares, I have got into much harder places than this temple of ego you built,” the man said. “So the real question is, what am I doing

here?” Hermes gave a small chuckle and said, “It seems our benefactor has given your job to a more capable hand Ares.”

“I always liked you Hermes. And you’re right. I just got called in to clean up this little mess,” the man said. Ares’s face was almost as red as his armour with rage. “Then what are you waiting around for?” the war god said, gritting his teeth.

“Patience is a virtue Ares. And I don’t plan to jump in and do something stupid like you did. Anyway, I’ll be staying here in the meantime and I’ll help myself to your supplies,” the man said and walked away to the door. He stepped outside saying, “I’ve already checked myself into one of your deluxe suites,” and with that he left. Once the man was well out of earshot Ares said, “The boss must really want Daedalus back if he brought him out of retirement.” Hermes nodded to this and said, “You got that right. When all is said and done he knows how to get the job done.”

“He’s not that great,” Ares grumbled. But Hermes just smirked at him and said “Try telling that to every quest, monster and warrior that he has faced and defeated. Even the most powerful Gorgon in history, Medusa herself fell to his blade. The man is a true living legend. They call him Perseus, the original hero.