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The Last Legends

Volume I:

Godslayer

Book Sample

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George Kissamitakis asserts
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THIS IS A SAMPLE OF THE BOOK THE LAST LEGENDS VOLUME I: GODSLAYER

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This book is dedicated to
my sister Maritsa Kissamitaki
and my brother-in-law Sergio Santos
who helped me bring the best out of me.

SAMPLE

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The Last Legends Volume I: Godslayer

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The oldest lie is this:

that Gods do not die.

But Death forgets;

and so, the world forgets with me.

Prologue

The Fall of Gods and Titans

THE SKIES were burning.

Divine spears of lightning and fire rained down upon the earth, splitting the clouds. With each strike, the very foundations of the world shook. Roars of Titans broke the air, their massive forms engulfed in flames and ice, as they clashed against the might of the Gods.

The Titanomachy. The ultimate war that would decide the fate of all creation.

Entire mountains crumbled beneath the fighters' footsteps. The seas boiled away under the heat of their fury. The Gods on one side, radiant and proud, wielded thunderbolts and celestial blades, while the Titans, on the other, primordial and unyielding, tore through the heavens with raw power.

Amongst them, Hyperion, *he who goes above*, one of the four pillars of the world holding the heavens from the East. His body blazed with an unbearable radiance, clothed in a garment of woven light that shimmered and fluttered as if stirred by cosmic winds. From beneath his golden helm, his eyes pierced the battlefield with a gaze that saw all, casting rays that outshone the morning, illuminating the arrogance and defiance of his kind. Bright locks streamed from his temples, framing a face that was itself a sun, and where he stepped, the shadows fled. He raised and swung his colossal sword, made out of the purest form of fiery light, burning and cleaving through divine warriors and Gods alike, as if they were mere insects.

"You dare challenge me?" He roared with fury towards the skies.

The corner of his eye caught the strangest of all things. A lone figure, standing amidst the scorched ruins of the battlefield.

A mortal?

No... something else.

There was a presence that did not belong. A flicker of fate misplaced. Hyperion's gaze locked onto the boy, and for a brief moment, the chaos of war a distant dream.

His eyes opened wide, shaken with surprise.

"You..." Almost a whisper, as words failed to form.

The boy could only stare, his mind refusing the impossibility before him. He stood in the midst of a divine apocalypse, frozen, as the heat of battle chilled his bones. Before he could speak, before he could even think ...

"You should not be here!" Hyperion stepped back in fear, his voice the rumble of an earthquake.

"I thought ..." His voice faded as he lowered his gaze at his sword. He nodded to himself and took a deep breath. He knew what had to be done, so, he moved swiftly and decisively.

The sword descended, joined by the Titan's anguished roar, to annihilate the threat. The air itself screamed as the blade tore through space, aimed directly at the boy.

There was no time to dodge.

No time to scream.

Only, Darkness.

The Dream Fades

ORION'S EYES snapped open as he bounced out of his dream with a scream. A few moments passed to clear his foggy mind. He could still see remnants of Hyperion in front of him dissolving like a ghost.

That dream again... he thought as he shook his head in an attempt to make it go away faster.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. His heart was racing like a horse, so he took slow, deep breaths to calm himself. The scent of wild thyme filled his nose as he felt the warm rays of the sun on his skin.

What a dream, he sighed.

With no cloud in sight, the sky above was clear and blue. No war, no Gods, no Titans. Just the gentle rustling of leaves, and the distant sound of waves crashing against the cliffs.

“Bark! Bark!”

A sandy coloured, Cretan hound appeared, *Argos*. He jumped on him, wagging his tail furiously.

What are you doing?

“I’m up! I’m up! No need to complain.” Orion chuckled, scratching behind Argos’ ears.

He got up and stretched, taking in the familiar view before him. Rocky ground and rocky hills, filled with herbs and wild grass. Some olive trees here and there, a flock of sheep grazing lazily, and beyond them, the shiny expanse of the sea and the horizon.

He took a deep breath, the ones that make you dizzy, and reached towards the horizon as if to grab it.

“An adventure, far beyond the horizon.” His eyes were shining full of hope.

“Would you like that?” He scratched Argos’ chin who, in return, waved his tail enthusiastically in agreement. What are we waiting for? Let’s go!

“You and I, adventuring through the whole Hellenic world.” He said with a swiping wave of this hand.

But then he turned and looked at Melite, a quiet coastal city-state of Crete, where people minded their own business but were nosy enough to know everything about everyone else.

I would miss this place terribly if I had to leave it though.

Yet, the fates had plans of their own and Orion was not prepared for them.

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A sharp whistle cut through the air.

Orion turned just in time to see three figures moving towards the flock. Two of them were huge and rough, with cloths covering their faces, their eyes fixed onto the sheep like predators. A lean, sun-burned boy led them, his hair tied back with a leather cord. He wore a short chiton¹ and a purple chlamys² faded by the sun, a failed attempt to mimic Cretan royalty.

“Eunomos?” Orion muttered.

The leader of the thieves, no more than 16 years old with a cocky smirk, turned when he heard his name.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t my old friend Orion; the strongest man in the whole of Crete!”

Argos growled, baring his teeth, but one of the other thieves kicked dirt at him. “Get lost mutt.” Argos yelped and bolted tail between his legs. The two thieves laughed but Eunomos looked at them angrily for a split second and shook his head. *Idiots.*

Orion’s fists tightened, ready to fight. “Leave the sheep alone,” he said, voice low. “You don’t want trouble.”

Eunomos turned his attention to Orion and snorted. “Trouble? From you?”

“Last time we met, you fought back and I *still* gave you that black eye.”

A dull ache pulsed above Orion’s cheekbone; a reminder of their last encounter. But this time, he wasn’t backing down.

“I’m giving you one last chance,” Orion warned lifting his fists.

Eunomos’ grin vanished. “And I’m taking these sheep.”

¹ a simple and versatile garment made from a single piece of cloth, worn by both men and women

² a type of Greek cloak, usually made out of wool and is worn pinned on one shoulder, usually leaving the right arm free

The first punch came fast, but Orion managed to dodge it, countering with a sharp jab to Eunomos' ribs. The thief grunted and stepped back, only to retaliate with a brutal swing that grazed Orion's cheek. The other two moved in, one grabbed him from behind while the other aimed a punch on his face.

"Ha, ha, ha! You can't move now!" laughed one of the thieves.

Orion managed to free himself by kicking the thief's shin. The thief let go of him and started hopping on one leg while holding the other in pain.

"Curse you!" he cried and fell on the ground.

Orion held on his own, landing a solid hit on the other thief's jaw, but he refused to go all out. These weren't enemies; they were desperate men.

I can't just break their bones...

A well-placed elbow to his back sent him sprawling into the dirt. Eunomos loomed over him, smiling. "Should've run away, Orion."

Damn, I might need to go all in. But his thought was interrupted by the sound of hoof beats.

The thieves froze as three riders crested the hill. At the lead was a broad-shouldered man, with a weathered face, a long and rich beard, an upward curling moustache, and a sword at his hip. Orion's uncle Aristodemus. Beside him, two city guards, their spears glinting in the sunlight. And at their heels? Argos barking triumphantly, *I brought help!*

Eunomos stood with his chin raised, a faint smile forming on his lips as he looked at Aristodemus. His eyes shined and waved at him. *Hello!*

"Run!" one of the thieves yelped. They didn't need telling twice. The three bolted, scrambling down the hill like startled rabbits. Eunomos gave Orion one last glance and winked at him with a wide, sincere smile, before vanishing behind the rocks with a sheep on his shoulders.

Orion let out a breath, sighing as he pushed himself up. Aristodemus dismounted, eyeing him with a mix of amusement and concern. "Was that...?"

"Yes, in the flesh. ...and he waved at you."

"Hmm, yes, I noticed. That boy is going to be the death of me..."

Orion remained silent, knowing he didn't mean it.

Aristodemus turned his attention to Orion. "You look terrible."

"Feel like it too," Orion admitted, wiping blood from his lip.

His uncle sighed. "One of these days, you'll have to stop holding back."

“They’re not worth crippling,” Orion muttered. “Remember what happened six years ago?”

“Hmmm, I remember.” he said lively. “But do you think letting them steal is better?”

The question hung in the air, as Orion frowned, feeling a wave of conflict wash over him. Maybe, he thought to himself.

With a shake of his head, Aristodemus gestured to the guards. “Round up the flock. We’re heading back.”

He patted Orion on the shoulder and said, “You are a good lad. I wouldn’t want you to cripple them either.”

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The journey to the city was quiet, with the only sounds being the gentle lapping of the waves against the shoreline and the occasional bleat of the sheep. Orion walked beside his uncle, thinking about Eunomos and his thieving friends, feeling the weight of the earlier conversation still lingering in his mind.

As the sun dipped low, it painted the sea in hues of orange and gold, creating a mesmerizing scene that momentarily distracted him from his worries. The beauty of the moment washed over him, but the conflict within remained.

Argos dashed up and down the coastal road, his tail wagging in excitement as he helped the guards herd the sheep. The dog's boundless energy was contagious, and it made Orion smile despite his heavy thoughts.

Orion glanced at his uncle, who seemed lost in thought, perhaps reflecting on Eunomos’ lawless life or perhaps the news of his dream.

“That dream again?” Aristodemus asked.

Orion stiffened. “...Yes.”

“The same one? With the war?”

“Mm.”

A pause settled between them. Orion felt the familiar unease twist in his stomach. It had been some time since he had those dreams, but now they were back.

Aristodemus gave him a long look and opened his mouth as to say something but said nothing more.

Not yet...

<<

By the time they reached Melite, the marketplace was winding down. Merchants packed up their stalls, fishermen hauled in their nets, and the scent of roasted meat filled the air.

After delivering the sheep to the livestock pens, they made their way home; a modest house near the edge of the city, overlooking the sea. As they stepped inside, Aristodemus tossed Orion a cloth soaked in cold water.

“For the eye.” Orion pressed it to his face, hissing at the sting.

“Tomorrow,” his uncle said, “we’re training. No holding back.”

Orion blinked, his surprise evident. “Eh?”

“If you’re going to fight, you’d better *finish* them.” Aristodemus stated his voice steady.

A smirk tugged at Orion’s lips, as the weight of the moment shifted from surprise to a tingle of excitement.

“Fair enough.” He replied with a determined glint in his eyes.

Chapter 2

The Weight of Strength

City of Melite, Crete

THE MORNING SUN hadn't yet burned away the chill in the training yard when Orion found himself facing his uncle again. Aristodemus at the ready, stood across from him, hefting his practice spear.

“Again,” the old soldier said, in that tone that left no room for argument.

Orion wiped sweat from his eyes and took up his stance. The wooden spear felt light in his hands; he always had to remind himself to grip it like it might break, as if his hands weren't capable of snapping the shaft like dry kindling if he forgot. Their weapons met with a crack that echoed across the yard. Forceful exchanges, one after the other, turned Orion to the defense, when he saw the opening after the fifth strike, a slight stumble in his uncle's footing, the way his grip shifted just enough to show fatigue. An opening any warrior would exploit but, Orion let it pass.

The next blow caught him across the stomach hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. He gritted his teeth against the pain, and gasping for air he fell on his knees.

“You hesitated.” Aristodemus didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. That quiet disappointment cut deeper than any shout.

“Again.”

Control isn't weakness, Orion reminded himself. He got up; their spears clashed again, but this time he moved faster, his body remembering the patterns drilled into him since childhood. He could feel the power burning beneath his skin, that strange strength that had nothing to do with training or discipline. He felt the heat taking him over; the surrender to this raw loss of focus...

He pulled the strike at the last moment.

Aristodemus twisted his wrist in a move that would have dislocated a normal man's shoulder, sending Orion's spear clattering to the dirt. For a long minute, the only sounds were their labored breathing, and the distant shouts from other training pairs.

Then his uncle stepped close, his voice dropping so only Orion could hear.

“You think I don't know why you hold back?” Orion moved his head, slightly sideways and downwards, and then back up at him.

“That night I found you,” Aristodemus continued, his hand gripping Orion's shoulder, “the ground was still smoking. The rocks had turned to glass.” His fingers dug in, testing the unyielding muscle beneath.

“You're not being careful, boy. You're afraid.”

Not of his strength. Not really. But of what it meant; No matter how gently he held the world, his hands would always be weapons first. The truth of it settled in Orion's chest like a stone.

“Strength isn't about hitting hard,” his uncle said, pressing the practice spear back into his hands. “It's about knowing exactly how hard to hit.”

He stepped back into his stance. “Today you learn control. Tomorrow, you learn why the Gods fear men who master both.”

As dawn's last chill surrendered to the climbing sun, something cracked within Orion, like river ice in spring. Not the catastrophic shattering he'd always feared, but the controlled fracture of a seed splitting to greet the sun. The spear's familiar weight felt alien in Orion's palms. Not the weapon, but the wielder had transformed.

His next strike sang through the air with terrifying precision. The practice weapon found its mark with just enough force to bloom a bruise on Aristodemus' shoulder, yet leave the bone beneath unbroken.

Perfect restraint. Perfect violence.

The old soldier staggered back. Then he did something Orion had never seen in all their years of training; he laughed. A deep and gentle, rolling sound, echoed throughout the training grounds.

“About time, son!” Aristodemus rubbed his shoulder, eyes filled with pride.

“Now you're starting to understand; real strength isn't in the arm.” He tapped his temple. “It's in the knowing.”

The morning's heat pressed down on them as Orion stared at his hands; the same hands that had once turned stone to dust.

They trembled now, but not with fear.

With possibility.

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Chapter 3

The City of Melite

GOLDEN COLOURS bathed the city as Orion, blinded by the Sun, walked the winding streets of Melite. Argos' steady panting kept the rhythm with their footsteps. The salty breeze from the sea carried the smell of baking bread from the ovens. Children's laughter erupted from the main square, mixed with the sound of running water from the mouth of a stone dolphin in the town's main fountain.

In the residential district, blue doors guarded against misfortune, each with the watchful blue eye hanging from them that guarded Melite's houses from evil. The sounds of daily life poured through the open windows; human speech, the rhythmic grounding of wheat, the sizzle of onions meeting hot oil, the voice of a mother knitting, a lullaby and the cry of a baby in the morning air.

Old ladies gathered in front of their houses gossiping, one of the most enjoyable entertainment they have.

“Orion, where are you going? How’s that handsome uncle of yours?” They would ask full of curiosity and a smile to their ears. Then they would treat him freshly baked biscuits, sending him to his business with their blessings and chanting “ftou, ftou, ftou,” while spitting three times, the customary way to ward off the evil eye, and to protect him against jealousy and misfortune.

Small shrines decorated the streets here and there, all dedicated to a different deity. They hosted offerings of fresh wildflowers, watered wine and honey, the sweetness of which mingled with the earthy smell of wood smoke coming from the clay chimneys.

“Orion! Orion!”

A storm of excited children surrounded him. A girl with sun-blond braids pulled stubbornly at his tunic. “Come and play with us! You promised!” she nagged.

Orion chuckled, ruffling the hair of a boy missing his two front teeth. “Did I? Or did you just decide that for me?”

“Both!” the boy shouted chuckling with enthusiasm.

With a bright smile up to his ears, Orion crouched down like an old man and while pretending to be a wolf he roared, “Run! Run! Or the big-bad-wolf will get you!”

The chaos that erupted sent chickens scattering as Orion led the giggling mob on a merry chase around the square. Argos soon found himself transformed into a noble warhorse, enduring the children's clumsy attempts at riding with dignified tolerance.

I'm a mighty horse! Charge!

When the sun climbed higher, Orion waved them off, his tunic wet with sweat and his face flushed red with laughter. “Enough! Your mothers will kill me up if I keep you from your chores any longer!”

The children ran, their voices full of joy echoing all around, as Orion straightened his tunic and turned toward the agora, the city's beating heart.

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The marketplace hit Orion like a wall of noise and smells, a swirling chaos of haggling screeching prices, a doomed chicken protesting its fate, and old Telemachus whistling a high-note melody while repairing the wooden roof of a shop. His assistant looked at him with worry as he carefully found his way next to him. Orion wondered how he could be so calm and sing, while keeping his balance at the same time.

The chaos provided a stark contrast to Telemachus' effortless demeanor. The old man's unwavering focus and joyful singing seemed out of place amidst the frantic ambiance of the marketplace. Orion pondered the art of balance; not just physical, but emotional as well.

True strength, he thought, isn't merely about physical prowess; it's about navigating life's complexities with grace. Orion felt a mixture of admiration and confusion. *How could Telemachus maintain such composure? Does he possess a secret that allows him to find peace in the turmoil?* Orion took a steadying breath, resolving to engage with Telemachus.

“How do you do it, old friend?” he called out, hoping to tap into the wisdom behind the man's calm exterior. “How can you sing so joyfully, when everything around you is in chaos?”

Telemachus paused, looking down from the roof with a twinkle in his eye. “Ah, Orion!” he chuckled, his voice warm and inviting.

“The chaos is just music waiting to be played. You see, I don't ignore it; I embrace it. The clamor of the market? It's a symphony. Each sound has its place.”

Telemachus stood and, while moving on the roof with the elegance of a dancer, he performed his speech, “Chaos is like a dance. You can choose to step into it or stand on the sidelines. I choose to dance! To sing. It helps me find my way through the storm. And in every storm, there's a melody if you listen closely.” His finger tapped on his ear.

The people on the street below him stopped and looked up at Telemachus, captivated by his performance. A worried old woman screamed, her palm over her mouth, “Be careful!” but her concern was drowned out by the rhythm of his spirit.

As Orion absorbed the old man's words, realizing that perhaps, true strength lay not only in facing adversities but in finding joy and harmony within them. Telemachus climbed down to face Orion. Feeling enlightened yet contemplative, Orion nodded. “So, it’s about perspective?” he asked, eager to learn more from this wise mentor.

“Exactly! Now you get it.” Telemachus replied, resuming his melody as he picked up a tool he needed and climbed back up with ease, to continue his repairs. “The world is full of chaotic notes,” he sang, “but together, they create something beautiful. Remember, it’s your choice to make music with them.”

Orion nodded, feeling a mix of gratitude and resolve. The wisdom of Telemachus resonated within him, inspiring a shift in how he viewed not only his training, but also the unpredictability of life itself.

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As he continued his path through the marketplace, Spring’s greed dripped from every stall; figs swollen and leaking sticky juice, almonds tumbling from baskets like they *wanted* to be stolen, acorns rolling underfoot whenever some distracted shopper bumped a crate.

The air felt like a battlefield. Oregano and thyme clashed fiercely, their scents vying for supremacy, while the sharp aroma of dried fish assaulted his nostrils. Just when he thought he might lose his breakfast, a warm, yeasty wave of fresh bread swept in, rescuing him like a benevolent deity.

Argos trotted beside him, nose twitching at every scent, tail wagging like a banner.

“ORION! You look hungry!” bellowed the fishmonger, holding up something silver and still twitching. The man’s hands glittered with scales like he’d bathed in them.

“Maybe later,” Orion called back, sidestepping a rolling acorn.

At the spice stall, old Petra was losing a battle with a crate. Orion ducked in without thinking, hefting it onto the shelf before she could unleash her legendary cursing. She had

earned a reputation all across western Crete and legendary songs were sung about her. Despite her gruff exterior, Petra was a beloved figure in the market and across the city, known for her fierce spirit.

“Opa!” she exclaimed taken by surprise. “Thank you,” she grumbled, but the wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she shoved a pouch of oregano at him. “Now get your furry menace away from my stall before he ‘accidentally’ eats someone’s purchases again.”

Argos wagged his entire back half, tongue lolling in a ‘*who, me?*’ grin.

“He’s innocent, I promise,” Orion mused playfully as he gently steered Argos away from the enticing aromas. Petra’s expression softened slightly as she returned to arranging her spices. “If you want to make your food sing, use that oregano wisely,” she called after him.

“A pinch can elevate a dish, but too much can drown it out. Measure, my boy, always with measure.” Orion nodded in gratitude and scratched the hound’s head.

As he turned around, a scrawny blur slammed into him. A bony elbow jabbed his ribs, and something cold pressed into his palm.

The thief, a boy with a smirk too cocky for his age, winked. “Eunomos says, hi!” Then he vanished into the crowd. Orion looked down. A silver bracelet glinted in his hand, delicate and *definitely* not his.

“THIEF! My daughter’s bracelet!”

A merchant’s roar cut through the marketplace. Heads turned. Voices hushed. Orion’s fingers curled around the stolen jewelry.

Damn it, Eunomos.

He considered chasing the thief, but he was just a young boy and already gone. Causing a scene wouldn’t help. Orion stepped toward the red-faced merchant.

“Found it on the ground,” he lied, pressing the bracelet into the man’s hand. “Must’ve fallen.”

The merchant’s fury flickered to surprise, then suspicion. “Orion?”

His daughter, a girl no older than twelve, her eyes still wide with panic, snatched the bracelet back with a gasp. “Thank you, Orion!” she chirped, clutching it to her chest. Then she gave a gentle bow.

The merchant squinted. “You didn’t see who took it?”

Orion hesitated. *I won’t rat out Eunomos’ lackey.*

“No,” he said flatly. “But keep an eye out. Crowds attract... opportunists.”

The merchant huffed. “Next time, speak up faster.” Orion nodded, already retreating into the crowd.

Argos' low growl alerted Orion before he saw the flash of purple. That damned cloak, faded now, edges frayed like old rope, but still flapping around Eunomos' shoulders with all the arrogance of a king's mantle.

His old friend-turned-nuisance leaned against a sun-bleached pillar, swirling cheap wine like it was the finest vintage, which it probably was, knowing him better than anyone. Their eyes met across the crowd. Eunomos' grin was all sharp edges; the same look he'd worn when they were kids stealing pomegranates from the temple gardens.

The ghost of a smile tugged at his lips despite himself. "Some things never change. Still dressing above your station, I see," Orion muttered under his breath, though he knew Eunomos couldn't hear him over the market's clamor. Eunomos' grin widened, as if he'd heard the jab anyway. He raised his cup in salute; the movement exaggerated enough to make his purple chlamys billow dramatically. The fabric had once been vibrant, stolen from some merchant's cart when they were twelve. Still, he wore it like royalty, just as he had when they were boys playing at being heroes. Now, it hung limp, the color washed out by sun and salt, but Eunomos wore it with the same ridiculous pride.

Cheers, brother.

With deliberate slowness, he brought the cup to his lips, drank deeply, and then vanished into the swirling crowd.

Orion exhaled sharply through his nose. "Cheers brother, indeed."

Argos whined at his side, nudging his hand with his nose.

Right; the day wasn't over yet, and neither are my duties. The endless game of cat and mouse can wait.

A merchant's voice cut through the hum of the marketplace, stopping Orion near the pottery stalls.

"Orion! Over here! Could you take this to Nereus at the docks? He's been waiting."

Orion tucked the sealed scroll into his belt. "I'm heading that way anyway."

The merchant had already turned to other affairs and didn't hear him. *Yes, I will help, but at least show some gratitude.*

Orion walked down the street, annoyed, without realizing he took the long way to the docks. The change underfoot told the whole story. One second he was navigating the familiar, comforting unevenness of the common quarter's cobbles, stones worn smooth in odd places by generations of sandals, boots, and bare feet, that actually belonged there. Then suddenly his heels were meeting stone so unnaturally perfect it felt wrong, like walking on a frozen lake. No cracks. No weathering. No haphazard patchwork here. Each slab fit flush

against the next, laid with the kind of care only gold could buy. Just cold, precise seams that probably cost some poor stonemason his eyesight. The kind of care meant to remind you where the poor quarters ended and where the palace district began. Citrus hung thick in the air, undercut by that metallic stink guards always carried with them, like they sweat oil from their armor.

He passed walls filled with color; some ancient king's victory here, a forgotten war hero there, the paint had held up better than the memories. Stairs led up to the palace, where it stood tall and impressive, yet there was a certain humility to its design. It had an air of grandeur, but it felt welcoming and unpretentious at the same time.

Ismini, a palace girl, his childhood friend and crush, caught his attention, prompting him to sidestep just in time as she rushed past him, nearly knocking him over. Her arms were overflowing with daisies, their cloying sweetness lingering in the air around them.

"I'm sorry, Orion!" She stopped for a moment and smiled at him. "I have to run! See you later!" She winked, and dashed off, her face flushed red.

"See you!" Orion waved, his whole face blushing. His gaze followed her till she vanished behind the wooden doors of a building, giggling into the flowers she held.

Orion couldn't hide his smile. *Ismini... That's a rare sight. If you are rushing for work, that means there's a lot to do at the palace.*

Further down the street, the city's fort hunched ahead like a tired old watchdog, its shadow stretching over the drill yard. Somewhere behind the racket of sparring recruits, the blacksmith's hammer fell in a steady clank-clonk sound, sparks spitting like an angry cat. Orion dragged in a breath. Iron. Leather. Smelled like the first time he'd outrun the city guard, knees scraped, heart pounding, grinning like an idiot.

A patrol rounded the corner.

Captain Leandros and his men crossed Orion's path, the old soldier's grin as rough as his voice. "Orion! Good work at the fort yesterday. That Kydonian spy didn't even know what hit him."

Orion smirked. "To be fair, he wasn't paying attention."

Leandros laughed, patting Orion's shoulder hard enough to sting. "Modest? You? Gods, man, act like you meant to drop that spy face-first into the horse trough."

His grin was all crooked teeth and crow's feet. "Seriously though. We are in your debt."

'No debt, but thanks.'

The docks greeted Orion with their familiar chorus; the groan of wood against rope, the cry of seagulls, and the rhythmic slap of waves against hulls. Fishing boats bobbed in the gentle swell, their nets spread like giant spider webs to dry in the sun. Old sailors sat mending ropes, their hands moving with practiced ease as they spun tales of storms and sea monsters for wide-eyed dock boys.

“...and there it was... a colossal sea serpent, twenty meters tall! ...its scales glistening in the sunlight, ready to devour us all!” The sailor's eyes widened as he recounted the tale, his voice filled with thrill and a hint of terror, captivating the crowd of children and men who gathered around him. Orion stood there, enchanted, as he listened for a millionth time the story of the great sea serpent.

Old Triton has the best stories.

A merchant's ship from distant lands disgorged bolts of fabric that shimmered like liquid gold in the afternoon light, while two triremes stood guard in the harbor, their sleek forms cutting through the water with predatory grace.

Nereus accepted the scroll with a nod of thanks, but before Orion could turn to his affairs, a harried-looking man, his disheveled hair and wrinkled clothes giving away the stress of his day rushed up.

“Orion! Thank the Gods. You have to help! The festival preparations are a disaster. The King wants everything perfect for the Athenians, and the damn ribbons won't stay tied!” Though he had much work to do still, Orion merely sighed and followed, Argos trotting faithfully beside him.

By the time the sun began its descent, painting the sky in hues of gold and rose, the banners fluttered proudly above the square, the tables stood ready, and the first notes of music filled the air in practice. The man clasped Orion's hand, his gratitude plain. “I don't know what we'd do without you.” Orion smirked, wiping sweat from his brow. “Probably have a lot fewer fixed roofs and caught thieves.”

NEXT CHAPTER:

The Athenian delegation

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