

Summer of The Gods

Sascha Kersken



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*Before the time I did Lysander see,
Seem'd Athens as a paradise to me:
O, then, what graces in my love do dwell,
That he hath turn'd a heaven unto a hell!*

-- William Shakespeare: "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Act I, Scene I

I. Thursday

With a sigh, Dustin Graham sat down on his as yet untouched hotel bed. It had been another hard day of negotiations; neither of the two parties had agreed to the tiniest compromise. He combed his greying, sweaty hair with his hands, got up again, and walked towards the window.

The twelfth floor of the Athens Hilton, opposite the National Gallery, offered a breathtaking view of the city, but Dustin didn't notice any of it. Even though the sun had set fifteen minutes ago, the outside temperature was probably still over thirty-five degrees Celsius on this Thursday evening. Graham had never been more grateful for air conditioning.

He walked over to the small mahogany-coloured hotel room desk, picked up the receiver of the telephone, and pressed the button to call the reception.

„Parakalo?“ the receptionist asked.

“Good evening”, Dustin said, “this is Graham, room 1235. Please bring me a bottle of champagne to my room, your finest choice.”

“Very well, sir”, the receptionist answered in flawless English.

Dustin sat down on the only chair in the room and began to skim the Financial Times. The Dow Jones had recovered after a few turbulences, but the Euro seemed to be remaining in free fall. The editorial dealt with the Athens negotiations; the International Monetary Fund was mentioned and its position was criticised, but Dustin himself was not mentioned by name. That was one of the privileges of only standing in the second row of a huge organisation where the real work was done, but not the public representation.

While he was browsing commodity future prices, there was a knock at the door. “Come in!” Dustin called.

A young man in a fancy bellman's uniform entered the room; on his right hand, he was balancing a silver tray with a crystal champagne glass and an ice bucket that contained a bottle of Moët & Chandon with a white cloth around its neck. The bellman took a brief bow with his head and said with a slight Greek accent: “Here's your champagne, sir”.

“Thank you”, Dustin said while fingering a somewhat crumpled five Euro bill out of his pocket and put it into the man's left hand. “Just put everything onto the table, I'll open the bottle myself. And then leave me alone, please.”

“Of course”, the bellman answered, “and thank you very much, sir.”

“You're still here, aren't you?” Graham said grumpily. The young man hurried to the door, opened it and began to step out.

“Not so fast, my lad!” said someone who was obviously standing right behind the door, with a droning bass voice. The bellman stepped back into the room, and right behind him, with heavy steps, entered a figure unlike any Dustin had ever seen.

The man had to be over two metres tall as he stooped a little to fit under the doorframe. He had curly black hair and a similar full beard. Instead of a suit, jeans, or any other modern clothing, he had donned a flowing white robe. Around the hips, he was wearing a broad belt with a golden buckle and a scabbard attached to it that, in turn, contained quite a long sword. In his right hand, he was holding a wooden staff, which was almost as tall as he; its brass knob was richly garnered with ornaments. His enormous feet were clad in sandals that were laced almost up to his knees.

“Good evening”, droned the giant. “I hope my visit does not bother you.”

"Listen, if this is meant to be a joke, then it's not a very good one", Dustin flared up. "Who are you? And what are you doing in my hotel room? Are you one of those cosplayers who dress up as warriors to go to those conventions? My nephew is one of them, too; once he even painted himself green from head to toe because he wanted to look like that Hulk guy."

"Silence, mortal!" thundered the man, pounding his staff onto the floor.

The bellman turned his head from the giant to Dustin and back again, embarrassed, then he cleared his throat and stammered, looking at the giant: "I must ask you to leave our guest's room, sir".

That seemed to amuse the bearded man. With a restrained snicker, he said to the bellman: "I like you, lad. You're brave". Then he placed his staff on the bed, walked towards the bellman, laid both hands on his temples and whispered something in a language that Graham did not understand. Instantly, all embarrassment seemed to have left the boy.

"Will you tell us your name?" the strange man asked the bellman.

"I am Christos, my Lord", he answered.

"A beautiful name", the huge one answered. "Please be so kind and get two more glasses, my lad", he instructed him in an almost fatherly tone. Solemnly, Christos set out on his way.

"And now to you, Dustin Robert Graham", the stranger said next. "Sit down, we need to talk." With an open hand, he pointed to the bed. Dustin was in half a mind to protest, to ask the man to leave him alone, or to call the police, but something about the imposing man's presence did not seem to allow anything like that. So he sat down on the bed, obediently, and stared at the other man with a mixture of curiosity and cold fury. The man sat down astride the chair, folding his arms on the back of the chair, and began to talk again.

"I must admit that I do have an advantage over you", he explained. "I know you, but you don't have any idea who I am. Well, my name is Hades; I have been reigning over the Underworld for aeons."

That was too much. Presence or not, Dustin jumped up, walked a few steps toward the guy who called himself Hades, looked at him in a way that he hoped was threatening, and said, very slowly and very clearly: "Now, listen well. You come into my hotel room that probably costs more per night than you make in a month, and then you're telling me such nonsense?"

The self-styled Hades didn't say anything. He just watched Dustin, silently but piercingly. And even though his lips did not move, Dustin heard the giant's voice inside his head, sounding even more threatening than before: *You know it's me, Dustin. You have known it's me from the moment I entered your room. So sit down, be quiet and listen!*

He couldn't help sitting down anyway – very suddenly, he felt dizzy, and he had a piercing headache. His mouth was dry and his hands started to shake uncontrollably.

Before Hades could say anything, Christos came back. He placed another silver tray with two more crystal glasses on the table, opened the bottle expertly and poured champagne into all three of the glasses. He took up the tray with the two new glasses and held it out for Hades, who took a glass, and then walked a few more steps towards the bed to give the other glass to Dustin. Finally, he took his own glass and lifted it up. "Here's to you, Hades!" he shouted, and took a big gulp.

"Here's to the mortals!" Hades said, taking his glass to his lips, and emptied it at once. "Say what you will about the mortals", he remarked while wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "But you truly are experts in noble beverages."

Reluctantly, Graham lifted his glass as well, said "Cheers" to no one in particular and carefully nipped the champagne. He usually liked the drink, but now it tasted like bitter medicine to him.

Christos sat down on the other side of the bed and watched Hades expectantly. It seemed obvious that this strange person didn't scare the boy in the slightest, while Dustin still had no idea what to think of him.

"You're justifiably wondering what I want from you, Dustin", Hades began. "I will tell you. We Gods have been watching, with growing sorrow, what has become of the country that was entrusted to us so many millennia ago."

He continued. "Of course it wasn't always peaceful before – the tribes of Greece fought numerous wars against each other, foreign powers conquered the country over and over again, and there were famines and natural disasters. But it was never as tough as it has been during the last few years – it looks like people have lost all of their courage and their hope while their country is ripped from their hands and sold to narrow-minded merchants from all over the world. Merchants like you, Dustin Graham."

Dustin cleared his throat, but the God made him remain silent with a gesture.

"We have discussed for a long time", he continued, "whether we should interfere, because we haven't done so since the days of the Trojan War and of Odysseus. But you're leaving us no choice. We cannot stand on the sidelines any longer. Your disastrous rule needs to end. You, Dustin Graham, are our appointed cat's-paw."

Dustin's thoughts were racing between his throbbing temples. The Greek politicians, themselves, brought their country into the current situation in which it could only survive by financial help from the IMF and other institutions, didn't they?

He had come here to help finding a solution for the problem. That this solution wouldn't be possible without sacrifices from the debtors – Greece and its people – really wasn't his fault. He was a diligent and correct civil servant who always did his duty. He was not to blame. Or could he be?

Bewildered, he took another gulp of champagne, a bigger one this time. It still didn't taste better, but Dustin emptied the rest of the glass at once.

"You are a diligent and correct civil servant who always does his duty", Hades continued. Was that goliath able to read Dustin's mind? He wasn't sure what to believe any more. He got up, walked to the desk with shaking knees and filled his glass again. "Anyone else?" he asked the others.

"With pleasure", Hades answered and held out his glass. Dustin filled it as well. The God lifted it, saying cheers, and took a smaller gulp than before.

"Thanks, not for me", Christos said. "I need to get up very early tomorrow morning. I'm currently working double shifts. My mother is seriously ill, and the costs of her experimental medication aren't covered."

"You see, that's what I mean", shouted Hades, pointing at Christos with an open hand. "He waits on people like you hand and foot, and instead of thanking him for it, they let his mother bite the dust of an illness that's actually harmless. This is a shame." He deposited his glass on the desk, too forcefully, and barked again: "A shame!"

"You don't need to do this degrading work any more. My nephew Asklepios will take care of your mother, and I will take care of you."

That said, Hades stood up, approached Dustin and placed both hands on his temples, too. Again, he whispered something. For a moment, Dustin had the impression that he saw a glaring flash of light and heard something that sounded like music but which was greater and more overwhelming. His headache, his sickness, his tiredness and his heavy thoughts fell off him like a dirty shirt you could simply strip off. He looked at the God, overwhelmed. He only had one wish left in him: to follow Hades, even if he would lead Dustin right into his home, the Underworld.

At about 10 p.m., Norbert Voss was standing at a busy outward road in Athens and hailed a taxi. The driver didn't seem to notice him and just kept driving. A second and a third taxi rushed past, too. The fourth one stopped a few metres past him, but two young women seemed to appear out of nowhere, entered the taxi through the rear doors, and the taxi sped away before he could say or do anything.

After the day's negotiations, Norbert had eaten dinner with a Belgian and an Italian colleague. Their hotel was located in another area of Athens, and they had already left with another taxi. Norbert was annoyed. What were those taxi drivers thinking? Could they see, or even smell from afar that he was a member of the European Commission? Admittedly, he was wearing a very expensive dark blue suit, he was carrying a leather briefcase and his light blonde hair seemed to be the most eye-catching detail about him.

He had just decided to walk to the hotel; it would take about half an hour and would be pretty exhausting because even at this hour the heat was still unbearable. But suddenly, an elegant, dark grey Mercedes S Class stopped next to him with a full braking, and the window on the passenger's side slid down. "Norbert Voss? Get in", the woman behind the wheel called in flawless German.

Bewildered, Norbert asked: "Who are you?"

"I'll tell you on the road", the woman said with a reassuring smile. "Come on, get in."

Norbert's curiosity took the upper hand over his caution. He opened the passenger door, got in and closed the door again, carefully making sure not to shut it on his crease-resistant trouser leg. He fastened the seatbelt and placed his briefcase on his lap.

Immediately, the woman stepped on the accelerator of the automatic car. The car's acceleration pressed Norbert into the seat, and the driver kept a surprisingly high speed in the heavy traffic, skilfully using both lanes and sometimes even overtaking on the inner oncoming lane if it happened to be empty for a moment.

Norbert eyeballed the unknown woman. She was wearing a simple red dress, comfortable flat shoes, and strikingly attractive. No! More than that; she was breathtakingly beautiful, Norbert found. She had a head of flowing, light brown curls, big eyes the colour of which he could not figure out in the dark car, a straight, even nose, and full lips. She didn't seem to wear any makeup and didn't leave the impression of needing it, either.

After his divorce two years ago, he had not been near any women, except at work and he wondered whether that was part of the reason for the extreme attraction he experienced now. But that alone couldn't be the reason – something about her was simply overwhelming.

"Chewing gum?" she asked him now, holding out a pack with her right hand while continuing to steer with her left.

"No thanks", he answered, somewhat bemused – something as mundane as chewing gum did not seem to be in line with a lady like her.

"Please allow me to introduce myself", she continued. "My name is Aphrodite. I have travelled very far to meet you and to ask you for a small favour." Even her voice was hypnotic – quite deep for a woman's voice, melodic, pleasant.

"Aphrodite? Like the Goddess of Love and Beauty?" Norbert asked. If there was one woman with a right to this name, it would be her. He knew quite a bit about Greek mythology because his father had loved ancient legends, and he used to tell them to Norbert as bedtime stories.

“No, not *like* the Goddess of Love and Beauty”, Aphrodite answered, “but *the* Goddess of Love and Beauty. And of fertility, mind you”, she added, which seemed to amuse her. “But don’t worry, I’ve already got more than enough children, from more fathers than you can imagine.”

Great, Norbert thought. *Once in a lifetime, you meet a really fascinating woman – and then she turns out to be crazy.* “Please stop, I want to get out!” he said insistently.

“We’re not there yet”, she answered. “And this is not a very secure area. If a delicately suited gentleman like you showed up here, people might steal his briefcase, his money, his expensive Rolex watch, and probably even his clothes. Who could hold it against them? Most people here need to get along with less money per month than you have paid for your shoes – for the whole family, mind you.”

That said, she quickly turned her head to Norbert and kissed his cheek, ever so slightly. She turned back immediately to watch the traffic, as though nothing had happened. Norbert’s heart was racing, his palms were sweating and he was convinced that she was telling the truth.

A few minutes later, they arrived at a shabby, suburban bed-and-breakfast inn. Aphrodite parked the car, turned off the motor, and said to Norbert: “We’re here.”

“I beg your pardon? This is not my hotel”, he replied reproachfully.

“Correct. It’s mine”, the Goddess answered unaffectedly. They both got out of the car, and Aphrodite led Norbert to the B&B’s entrance. The door had been left ajar. Norbert pushed against it and deferred to Aphrodite. She marched past him into a dimly lit corridor. At its end, there was another door; Aphrodite pointed at it. Norbert pushed the door handle and deferred to the Goddess again.

In a small room behind that door, an old man who appeared to be a little long in the tooth, was sitting behind a battered wooden desk. He wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses and he was skimming through a Greek newspaper with a bored expression on his face.

Aphrodite said something in Greek to the concierge who stood up slowly, hobbled to the key hooks behind him, took one of the keys down, and gave it to the Goddess.

To the left of the reception desk, creaking, winding, wooden stairs led to the first floor. Aphrodite started to climb them, and Norbert followed, stumbling, even though he had no real idea why. In the dark corridor upstairs, Aphrodite turned right. The floor was wooden like the stairs and creaked just as much; a single neon lamp spread cold, insufficient light. At the third door, a room with the number 12, they stopped. Aphrodite put the key into the lock, pulled lightly at the door to allow it to open, and turned the key. She pointed towards the room with an inviting gesture. Norbert stepped inside; the woman followed, turned on the light, and closed the door behind her.

“Sit down”, she said to Voss who was standing in the middle of the small room, looking awkwardly from the bed to the dresser and back again. The walls were covered with yellowed ingrain wallpaper, and on one of the walls, there was one of those corny pictures of a white house with blue door and window frames like the ones on Greek islands. Norbert only had seen them on travel websites—he had never been to such an island. Even though the window was gaping wide open, it was stuffily hot in the room; there obviously was no air conditioning.

Norbert placed his briefcase on the floor, against the wall. As there were no chairs, he sat down on the narrow bed. Aphrodite said: “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.”

Voss got back up, took off his jacket and his tie, put both pieces of clothing onto the small dresser, moving the clock radio as much to the back as possible, and finally took off his polished leather shoes as well. He sat back down and waited.

What am I even doing here? He didn’t know the woman at all. And even though he believed, or wanted to believe, that she was a Goddess, that didn’t have to be true. What if she was with a terror group who wanted to kidnap him or to hold him to ransom for money or for concessions?

At this moment, Aphrodite came back. She was carrying a bottle of ouzo under her arm and two simple drinking glasses in her hand, which she placed on the dresser. She moved Norbert's jacket to the side, opened the bottle and poured ouzo into both of the glasses. She gave one of them to Norbert and kept the other one. Then she sat down next to him and said: "To your health, Norbert Voss".

Both of them took a careful sip. Voss didn't particularly like the drink, but that didn't matter to him now.

"You are an important man", she remarked. "Tomorrow, you are going to co-determine the fate of this country. We Gods think that it isn't fate, but that it can be steered into another direction. That's why you're here."

Just as he had thought! Norbert had known it from the start. She would threaten him, blackmail him, or try to bribe him—but why him? He was only a Deputy State Secretary, a better kind of civilian administrator. Why had she picked him instead of the EU Commissioner for Monetary Affairs, one of the finance ministers, or even the President of the Commission?

"Just think about it", Aphrodite said, as though she knew what he was thinking. Maybe she did know, Norbert wasn't too sure about that. "If we manipulated the people who appear every night in your news or talk shows, everyone would notice it right away. Their colleagues or superiors would doubt their sanity, they would be sent to psychologists for examination, or at least, no one would trust them any longer.

"That's why we decided to concentrate on their staff. You and the likes of you are completely unknown to the public. But you have more influence than you think. While your superiors smile into cameras, making generic declarations of intent, you negotiate the details of contracts they will eventually sign, earning thunderous applause or scathing criticism. Most of them don't even read those details."

Norbert had to admit that she was right. She might be crazy or dangerous, but she definitely wasn't stupid – which made her even more dangerous. And yet, at the same time, he still felt attracted to her and had the feeling that he couldn't help doing everything she would ask of him.

At that moment, he heard fast, rumbling steps from the stairs and then from the corridor. The room of the door was torn open, and two men with crew cuts, black suits and sunglasses stormed in, pistols at the ready. Bodyguards of the EU Commission, Norbert knew right away. They seemed to have tailed him the whole time and they had obviously followed him to the B&B.

"Get up and put your hands behind your head!" the bodyguard who had entered first shouted at Aphrodite in English, pointing his revolver at her. The other one turned to Norbert and asked: "Are you alright, Mr Voss?"

Aphrodite didn't bother in the least to get up. Neither did she put her hands anywhere, but she still held her glass in her right hand and kept the left one casually in her lap. With an angelic smile, she turned her eyes to the man who had threatened her. Slowly, she lifted her head, and the agent mimicked the motion with the hand that held the weapon, like in a trance. Then Aphrodite nodded once, vigorously, and he dropped the revolver to the floor. With a fast kick, the Goddess shoved it away from his reach.

Then she stood up, whirled around, extended her leg into the air and kicked the other agent's firearm out of his hand before he even seemed to notice what was happening. Then she smiled at him, too, and he slowly sat down on the floor. "Well done", she said. "And now you will leave this room, return to your unit and report that Mr Voss has safely reached his hotel." Obediently, the bodyguard stood up and left the room, together with his colleague.

With an open mouth, Norbert stared at the woman; she had seemed to be absolutely self controlled, her motions unnaturally fast. There was no other explanation: she was not a normal human being, but really a Goddess. Or a demon you wouldn't want to cross.

She put her left hand on Voss's sweaty forehead. Immediately, he felt better, refreshed and revived, and the thought that she could mean harm seemed completely absurd. "Sleep now, Norbert Voss, sleep. And when you wake up tomorrow morning, you'll know exactly what you have to do. Good night."

Norbert wanted to answer, but a pleasant tiredness overwhelmed him. He sank back onto the bed and barely noticed that his head touched the mattress, and that someone took the ouzo glass out of his hand, lifted his legs and turned him slightly until his whole body was lying on the bed.

He was a six-year-old boy. On a dusty road, he was playing football with a few children from next door. From time to time, a car passed by; the drivers smiled, waved and carefully drove around the children.

Suddenly, there was a droning sound, becoming louder and louder. The next thing he noticed wasn't a regular car. Five or six olive green pickups came speeding along; the drivers did not look out for the children who jumped aside, screaming, and ran away. The Wehrmacht! His parents and the teacher had spoken about them. The boy's heart was racing.

He cowered behind a stack of planks at the side of the road. From the loading ramps of the trucks, men with steel helmets and olive green uniforms jumped to the ground, machine guns at the ready. Other men with additional decorations on their uniform jackets, probably officers, barked orders in a cold, hard language that the boy could not understand—and yet, somehow, he could. "Forward! Disperse! Leave no one alive!"

The men swarmed out and marched towards the houses that spread around the village square. They opened the doors or kicked them in if they couldn't be opened. Shorter and longer machine gun fusillades could be heard. Some time later, the men came back, climbed back onto their trucks, reversed, and sped back into the direction whence they had come. Some of the houses were burning; black smoke was rising from them.

For a long time, the little boy did not dare to leave his hideout. Eventually, he did get up. Frightened and with tears in his eyes, he stumbled towards his parents' house. The door had been kicked in, and he climbed through. In the living room, his father was lying on the floor with a blood-stained shirt, and another thin trail of blood was running from his mouth. With glassy, unmoving eyes, he was staring at the ceiling. He found his mother in the kitchen. She had sunk down on a chair with her head on the kitchen table, and she, too, was covered all over with blood.

The boy dropped to the kitchen floor and screamed with might and main. He screamed and screamed and he was unable to stop.

He woke up soaked with sweat and with a throbbing heart. He started up and looked around, bewildered and disorientated. He wasn't a six-year-old boy any more. He was... he was... Norbert, yes! Norbert Voss, Deputy State Secretary for the European Commission. He had grown up in a boring suburb of Stuttgart, had never seen a war, and his parents were still alive.

Slowly, he started to calm down – but the dream that had felt so real stayed with him. Outside, morning began to break and birds were already singing. Aphrodite seemed to have left, but Norbert knew exactly what to do.

II. Friday

Even as early as 9 a.m., huge crowds of people were walking across Omonia Square. Whenever they walked in different directions, they interlocked and they were released again. Most people sidestepped, sometimes at the last possible moment; hardly did they ever touch each other, let alone collide. Athena was watching the whole ado morosely. Her uncle Poseidon would like it, she knew, because it would remind him of the ever-undulant sea. She herself wasn't very much into mortals either; their business seemed like a beehive's to her.

She had been one of those who had voted against the intervention in the Council of the Gods. At least in this, she had shared Poseidon's opinion – he simply wasn't interested in things that happened outside the seas. Her sister Artemis didn't want to have anything to do with human affairs any more either. But eventually, her father Zeus had come out on top as even his wife, Hera, who usually never shared his opinion as a matter of principle, had agreed with him this one time.

A Council Meeting of these proportions hadn't happened in centuries. Zeus had not only invited everyone living on Olympus, but also all of the Gods, Goddesses, Demigods and Demigoddesses who lived in remote places. The huge Council Hall was filled to the rafters, and many were sitting on the floor or leaning against the gold-decorated walls. Servants hurried through the ranks to hand out ambrosia and nectar. Everyone was talking at once until Zeus lifted his sceptre and hurled several lightning bolts. Only then did everyone turn their eyes to the old Father of the Gods who started to speak at once.

"First of all, I thank you all for coming", he shouted loud enough for everyone to hear him. "I wouldn't have gathered you if the situation weren't that serious. We are receiving more and more worrisome news from the country of those entrusted to us. People are groaning with the burden of debts they haven't made themselves, and foreign powers are asking sacrifice after sacrifice of them. The country has suffered horribly, but enough is enough. I ask you today to agree with our intervention."

He had barely finished the last sentence when everyone started to talk at once again, even more agitatedly than before. "Silence!" thundered Zeus. "We're going to do it like this: everyone who wishes to say something will stand in line and one after the other will be able to have their say."

And so there were more than a hundred contributions to the discussion from enthusiastic warriors like Ares who thought of the mission as a glorious battle—from compassionate aides like Hades or Atlas and from belligerent mockers like Eris and Hermes. And, of course, there were a couple of speeches by careful sceptics like Athena herself.

When it was finally her turn, she shouted: "Brothers and sisters! Who of you can remember the last time we intervened in the affairs of the mortals? I for one do remember it like it was yesterday. We watched and guided Odysseus on his travels. But as we could not agree whether we should support or destroy him, and as even those who wanted to help him had many different ideas about how to do so, we eventually prolonged his – as it is now rightfully called – odyssey".

Athena continued: "Do you think that intervening into an affair as large as the condition of a whole country would be less chaotic? I don't think so, and that's why I say: leave it to the humans. Their solutions might seem foolish and unfair to us; however, they eventually need to live with them. We can only comfort or punish them after they have left their earthly existence behind."

She had not accomplished anything with her speech. Not only had an overwhelming majority voted in favour of Zeus's proposal – Athena could have ignored that, just getting back to

enjoying her books and letting the others do what they thought was right. No, the worst part was that Zeus had chosen her to be part of the mission team.

Of course, she could have said no, but she was even less interested in a dispute with her father. There had always been disputes between the Gods, where one wrong word could cause decades of bloody wars. She herself had led armies in many of these battles and very often won. But at the moment she wasn't interested in fighting at all – so she deemed it better to accept this damned mission, to execute it, and then to go back to her books, the source of her wisdom and her joy.

Now she was standing in this crowded square, astonished while watching the coming and going of mortals, and waited. She wasn't one of the Goddesses who frequently intermingled with the mortals or even kept one or more of them as lovers. Of course, she had always stood by her chosen heroes of the battlefields, even joining in the battle with spear and sword. But ever since men rode into battle in metal chariots and fought each other with immense firepower, war wasn't fun to her any more. It was army versus army, woman against man and sword against spear. Yes, that was her thing. These modern fire games that made such an awful loud noise and affected too many uninvolved people were not.

She had a look at what the humans called a wristwatch. It showed 9:12 a.m., which meant that the target subject would be here soon. The watch belonged to her disguise – she had left her traditional robes behind, as well as her armour and weapons. She was wearing something that the sales person in the clothes shop had called a “business trouser suit” – trousers made of thin cloth and a matching jacket (a “blazer”, the young mortal woman had called it), both in a bluish grey, with a white blouse underneath.

On her feet, she was wearing very uncomfortable shoes with high heels that were “the dernier cri from Paris”, according to the woman, whatever she meant with that. Paris – he had been a beautiful youth, but foolish and easy to influence. Aphrodite had used a ruse to make him pick her as the most beautiful Goddess instead of Hera or herself: she had promised him the most beautiful woman on Earth as his wife. Immediately, the fool fell in love and kidnapped Helena who requited his love, and their actions started the greatest war for many generations.

The woman didn't seem to mean the Trojan prince though, but a city on Earth, almost two thousand miles northwest of Athens.

Athens—thinking of this city's name made Athena almost angry. *One grey concrete block next to the other*, she thought. *How dare the mortals name such an ugly city after me!* Of course, she knew that the city had carried its name for a very long time and that it had been very beautiful in its early days. But now, only some ruins told of the old times.

“Excuse me”, she suddenly heard a thin, shaky voice behind her. She turned around, and there was an old man in dirty, tattered clothes sitting on the floor, leaning his back against a house wall. He had unkempt and sparse grey hair and looked like someone who had lost his last battle. In front of him, there was a tiny cup with four small copper coins in it. Next to him, there was a pair of crutches lying on the pavement. “Could you perhaps help me out with some small change? I'm hungry and thirsty.”

“Unfortunately, I don't have money with me”, Athena said. She pulled a glittering flask from her bag (a “handbag”, the sales person had called it) and gave it to the beggar. “But drink this”, she said to him reassuringly. “It will do you good.”

The old man took the flask from her and tried to twist the lid. When this didn't seem to work, he pulled it up, hesitantly at first, and then with more force. Warily, he smelt the open flask. He obviously seemed to like the odour as he started to smile. Then he put the flask to his lips and poured the golden, glittering liquid into his mouth.

For a moment, nothing happened. But then, the old man's crooked back straightened, his facial features started to smooth, and his hair grew darker and fuller. The old man who had just been sitting there had vanished. Instead, there was a man who looked like he was about thirty,

with full, dark brown hair and a black stubble beard. He lifted his arms and looked at his hands incredulously as all wrinkles were gone. Astonished, he looked at Athena. "What kind of drink was that?" he asked, puzzled.

"We call it nectar", the Goddess answered. "It keeps us young, even grants us immortality. From a single dose, you won't become immortal, Giorgos, but you have just earned a second chance. Use it wisely."

"Use it wisely, use it wisely", the man mumbled sceptically. He looked at Athena and said: "Do you even know what's happening here? I used to be a simple worker, and I was fired four years ago, like so many of us. I definitely won't find a new job at my age." Then he hesitated and added: "I mean the age I had until a few moments ago. But what does it matter? Even my nephew won't find work, even though he's only twenty-seven and has finished studying. He will probably go abroad, like many of his generation."

"Don't worry, Giorgos – you're going to work for me", Athena explained.

"How do you even know my name?" the man who had been old asked confusedly.

Athena smiled at him and answered: "Your name is not the only thing I know about you, Giorgos Angelopoulos. I know your whole life; from the moment when you were born until the very recent moments before we met. I am Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, Mathematics, and the Artifice of War – and the woman this city was named after."

Giorgos got up, turned around and looked at his faint reflection in the dirty display window of an empty salesroom with "For Rent" signs. He straightened a bit more, smiled, and said to Athena: "I don't believe a word of what you're saying, but I'm ready. When will we ride into battle?"

"Just a moment", the Goddess put him off, "we're waiting for someone." She scanned the crowd that was bustling past them. She hoped that she hadn't missed the desired person while being distracted by Giorgos.

With screeching tyres, a yellow taxi, rusty and fit for the scrap yard, stopped at the corner of the pedestrian zone. A middle-aged woman with black grey-streaked hair in a tight bun stepped out, placed a trolley case on the floor and pulled out its handle. Athena saw her and said to Giorgos: "Come with me."

With long strides, Athena rushed towards the lady. "Wait, Angélique!" she called from afar, in French. Puzzled, the woman looked around. She noticed the Goddess and the young man in rags.

"What do you want? Are you with the press?" she asked. "I don't have any time; in half an hour, I'll have an important appointment."

"No worries, you shall be in time for your appointment, Angélique Dugard. But before that, we need to talk a little."

"How did you even get the idea of calling me by my first name?" Angélique asked. "Do we know each other?"

"I know you, and soon you will know me as well", Athena answered. "Look, there's a – how do you call it? – café. Let's sit down there; you are going to invite us for breakfast."

"Why would I?" Madame Dugard fussed. "I definitely won't buy breakfast for some random bitch and her torn hobo fri..."

She had to stop there because Athena took her hand and pulled poor, reluctant Angélique to the desired direction. Against the Goddess's power, she had no chance, so she could only tag along if she didn't want to be pulled to the ground.

They sat down in a pavement café, on two comfortable, cushioned benches facing each other with a slightly wobbly wooden table between them. Angélique sat on one of the benches

while Athena and Giorgos chose the one opposite to hers. The café was almost empty so that a hasty young waiter wearing a clean white shirt, but a somewhat dirty orange apron, approached them at once and greeted them: "Good morning, ladies and sir. Do you already know what you would like to order? Or would you prefer the menu first?"

"We will have a complete breakfast for each of us", Athena explained, "but hurry up – our friend here is going to have an important appointment soon."

"Coffee or tea?" the waiter asked.

"I've had tea before", the Goddess replied, "but no coffee, so we'll have that just to try its taste."

Puzzled, the young man lifted an eyebrow before he caught himself and said: "Very well". He scribbled something in a small notebook and vanished into the café's interior.

"Now, what exactly do you want from me?" asked Madame Dugard impatiently. "Do you want to threaten me? Blackmail me? The ECB cannot be blackmailed!"

"Calm down", Athena replied. "You are Angélique Dugard, deputy department head in the European Central Bank." She didn't ask this as much as state it. "In about twenty-five minutes, you will co-decide Greece's future in a conference. However, you will bring forward something completely different from what you intended."

"Why would you think that?" the banker chafed. "I will say what I came here to say – I represent the ECB and its position in the negotiations, and I won't have anyone instruct me how to act!"

"Should you intend to blackmail me: good luck. I am unmarried, I do not have children or siblings, both of my parents are already dead, and just a month ago, I showed my partner of ten years the door. Besides, I have enough money to make sure that I won't ever have to work again if necessary. So where would you start with your blackmail?"

"Now, now", Athena said calmly. "Who said anything about blackmail? That is such an ugly word. It is not necessary for me to blackmail you, I will persuade you instead."

The waiter came back, balancing a tray on each hand. He placed bread, cheese, olives, honey and jam on the table, as well as three mugs with an aromatic smelling, dark brown liquid. That had to be coffee. Athena took a sip; the drink was very hot and too bitter for her spoiled taste. It would not become her new favourite drink.

"Our friend will pay immediately", Athena said, "because she is in a hurry as I said before." She repeated the same words in French, as Angélique did not seem to understand Greek. Reluctantly, the lady fingered a few notes from her purse, handed them to the waiter, and said: "Thank you, keep the change".

When the waiter had left again, Athena said to Madame Dugard: "Talking will take too long; you only have" – she glanced at her wristwatch – "sixteen minutes left. So close your eyes, please."

Angélique closed her eyes, and the Goddess looked at her even more piercingly than before. In mere seconds, she transferred everything the ECB negotiator needed to know into her brain. Baffled, she opened her eyes again, blinked a few times, and said: "What was that? I've never looked at it that way. You – are right! I won't disappoint you."

"I didn't expect otherwise", Athena said with a smile. "And now enjoy your breakfast; you will need to be in the meeting room in fourteen minutes."

Meanwhile, Giorgos had finished his coffee and wolfed down some of the food; he really must have been very hungry. Athena and Angélique started to eat as well, and a few minutes later, the latter said: "Well, I have to leave now. As I said, I will worthily stand in for your cause."

"I'm convinced you will", Athena answered. "Good luck. We'll meet again later."

“Should we agree on a meeting point?” Madame Dugard asked.

“No, that is not necessary, I will find you.”

After Angélique had left, the Goddess turned to Giorgos: “Now it’s your turn. You desperately need a bath, a haircut and decent, clean clothes. Eat up if you like, and then follow me.”