

Chapter One: The Battle Begins

Smoke choked out the sun, turning the midday sky into a dark funerary shroud. A foreboding brown and orange cloak of despair hung over Gaea, the mother of all Earth. All and everything nearby was death, blood, and fire. This sight cluttered the landscape, rivalling only the depth of the fiery Underworld of Hades. Mud and blood caked their ornate golden and silver breastplates. Their glistening silver armour flashed of scorching flames reflected from the battle pyres that raged and danced in joyous mockery.

Bloody, deceased centaur warriors lay as brothers in a common cause. Chestnut, appaloosa, buckskin, bay, all painted in dried mud and gore, all strewn in a field of noble sacrifice. Several clans united for a single, unfortunate end, now swarmed by flies.

Falkar represented the only active soul that stirred and shuffled in the mass of death.

“Hello! Can anyone hear me?” Falkar, the chief clansman of the Ixion tribe, yelled out.

“Is any yet alive!” He lay in a pool of his own blood, flies swarming, undulating in and out of consciousness like the immense tidal waves of great god Poseidon. Gore from a glorious day of battle glued and dried to his red-brown braids, which swung from his beard. His long, rust-coloured hair blew wildly in the fiery, balmy breeze resembling flames themselves. It danced with the embers, fluttering about free and maverick as the clan leader himself.

“Yell out, and I’ll come to you!” he bellowed. Freckles and scars, wrinkles and splatters of blood smeared his tanned, weathered face down to his square, beard-covered jaw. More times than he could count, his nose had broken. He snarled at the suffocating, acrid black smoke that billowed forth from the funeral bonfires that surrounded him.

The young chieftain’s shoulders were broad and masculine. His biceps and forearms were thick, formidable and as wide as a cypress. His wide chest had the girth of an oak tree.

“Praise Zeus. The mighty father of the world will be proud of his clan this day.” Falkar prayed as his sire Alcarus, the previous clan leader, had constantly enlightened him. Since Falkar was a young foal, it taught him that birth was pain and pain was birth. Pain teaches one tolerance, limitations and provides an increased understanding. Thus, this with this newfound knowledge one is reborn.

He Laughed thunderously and with confidence. "I can't help but think of my rebirth this day," Falkar thought, "for I am genuinely in much pain."

During battle, a minotaur warrior sliced his rear left fetlock to the bone, carving tendons and muscle, causing his hoof to hang limp. It had also slashed his right palm wide open, and it too screamed excruciatingly if closed into a fist. The limp, dead body of his recent slaughter lay strewn across Falkar's lower body, pinning him firmly and heavily to the ground. His memory betrayed him regarding how he gained the many other gashes and cuts that mapped his body. However, he remembered clearly how he got the gaping gash in his palm. It was before the sun had set and was still high and bright in the afternoon sky. For a moment, Falkar escaped from his current situation to a glorious battle hours before.

"You are one ugly, smelly monstrosity," Falkar clanged and thrust, his broadsword in battle against one eminently worthy adversary. The minotaur was thickly muscled and equally thick-witted.

"You're strong, but you're slow and predictable." Falkar said as he smiled.

The minotaur's horns, on its enormous bovine head, must have spanned the distance of a grown centaur from head to tail.

It snorted, grunted and snotted. With its solid, bony skull, it smashed its forehead into Falkar's nose, shattering it excruciatingly.

"How did you learn to swing? Cutting wheat down with a scythe?" Falkar taunted as he spun to get more momentum and force but misjudged the arc of the minotaur's swing.

The minotaur drove its battleaxe down over Falkar's sword again and again until Falkar's blade shattered like glass. Falkar's nose poured blood and his eyes teared up. Struck across the fetlock by the enemy's blade, Falkar dropped to the ground, unable to stand upright.

The minotaur towered mightily above the fallen centaur taking its time with the final blow. It grinned, clearly revelling in this moment, mooing and bawling loudly in its victory. It raised its axe slowly but purposefully with both hands and snorted. Bulky muscles flexed with bull-like strength over its massive rusty-brown and white bovine head. It stood silhouetted by the war fires raging behind its monolithic form. The beast smirked with surety, showing its cud-chewing bottom teeth.

Rational thought dissolved. Falkar's heart was pounding. From blind instinct, Falkar twisted and snatched a piece of his shattered sword, leaned forward and thrust the blade deep into his foe's throat. With a loud battle cry, sharp steel sliced his own hand as he delivered the lethal blow. The minotaur bawled loudly, then gurgled and clicked, dancing backwards and forwards before plunging full across the centaur's mighty barrel, pinning Falkar below the enormous bullock.

Blinding pain scorched his vision, followed then by numbing and peaceful blackness that enveloped the chieftain as Falkar again shifted and plunged from consciousness.

"Zeus. You clearly have a sense of humour." Falkar couldn't help but laugh at his current predicament. Smoke thickly covered the skies. The sun glowed bright orange and brown in the hazy mist. The landscape resembled something from his worst nightmare, and familiar like a premonition of things to come. Falkar had to divert his sight away from the bodies of friends, family and strangers that believed in his cause. They smelled of death, all contorted in grizzly, muscle-flexed poses of horror and torture.

Scavenger birds screeched, ripped and devoured flesh from their bones. Despite all this, Falkar laughed. "Zeus. Your humour is twisted and rather demented."

He survived. Perhaps he was the only survivor, yet he lay pinned under the weight of a dull witted, smelly, flea-infested minotaur. Try as he did, Falkar couldn't get leverage to lift the beast off his hind end. Twisting his core body while only possessing one good hand made for a precarious angle for this action.

"Let's see if pushing you is manageable." Falkar spoke to the deceased minotaur, whose tongue hung low from its mouth. Falkar soon discovered that pushing was only slightly more effective. This proved to be tolerable pain. Worse was Falkar's slashed fetlock, that throbbed and pulsed. This agony went all the way up his hindquarters, up his back, and tingled up at his scalp. This would likely have caused him to pass out again and perhaps never regain consciousness. Falkar tried again.

He would gain nothing from inaction. The alternative would be death. He had the advantage now of knowing the extent of his pain, and could brace himself for it. He flexed his left elbow, shoulders, chest and abdomen fully. The savage agony ran up from the hoof to the nape of his neck, far worse than the first attempted push. A sharp crack, then snap, was audible and felt from his fetlock. Falkar's ankle hung broken. One humongous throb from his pastern to his hock. He closed his eyes.

“Focus on the pain,” he thought. It was a trick he had learned in younger years from his sire. Picture the pain as a physical object, then shrink the object in your mind. When the imaginary object was small enough and tolerable enough, focus on your heart rate and do the same. Slow the rapid heart rate to a calmer, slower rate. Next, he must focus on his breathing and, in the same way, slow it down. Repeat this over and over until the suffering could be more manageable.

After a few minutes, Falkar thought more clearly and devised a plan of action that might release him from this grim situation. To look beyond his immediate grasp at the decay and sorrow that surrounded him might have caused him to lose anchor. He would then retreat into negative, off centred and emotional lack of control. His sword, reduced to only a hilt and a finger length of a blade, hurled far out of reach during the most current fray. His adversary’s battleaxe, however, was almost within reach. Perhaps leverage could lift the massive monster from his cumbersome condition.

Falkar strained for the weapon, scratched deep furrows into the dirt, but to no service. Only a few finger length’s distance away. He stopped, paused, and cleared his mind to rethink. Again, he looked around his vicinity for any makeshift tool he could use to grip the much needed lever.

“Anything,” he thought. The belt that the minotaur used to strap down its battle-axe to its back was within purchase. Unstrapping the belt proved to be another challenge. Again, one-handed, and turned around. Finally, he created a loop, snagged the axe and carefully pulled it to himself.

“Got it!” he growled. In his good hand, Falkar wedged the handle into the ground and pried up. The minotaur’s body lifted, then fell right back down where it was.

“No.” Falkar yelled, with teeth clenched. “Zeus. This is getting less comical.” He repositioned the handle under the body and again hoisted up. It dropped right back down. Clearly, this action was pointless as well. Falkar lowered his head in resignation. The fires petered out across the field. The skies, previously brown and black with smoke, now submitted to a small patchwork of purple twilight. Still, the skies veiled now, however, by the carrion vultures that swooped and circled overhead.