

What It Means to Be a Hero

by /a/non

Prologue

A storm brewed atop Olympus. A young man stood before his father Zeus at the peak of the mountain, having labored many days in climbing it. His black hair glistened with the sweat of his task, but his heavy breathing now was of rage, not exhaustion.

“Father,” began the demigod, “this is not fair! I have climbed this precipice at the risk of life and limb and succeeded – I have earned my place by your side!” His face was red with rage at his father’s apparent disregard for his achievement.

“Enough, I said,” spake Zeus, whose very speech set the great mountain rumbling. The youth, though silenced, was still fuming. The god sat in his great throne, looking down on his son. His wife Hera looked upon the boy with contempt, for he was not her child but the child of a human woman with whom Zeus took a brief fancy.

Zeus continued after the thunder subsided. “My son you may be, and great may have been your effort, but I issued no such challenge to you.”

“But nevertheless I achieved it! Am I not great for that?” He stood with his arms outstretched, his naked body undamaged despite the perilous climb. “Do I not deserve your-”

“Be silent,” hissed Hera. “Zeus has spoken.” The man replied with a glare of daggers.

“No man or god is deserving of anything thanks only to his willful behaviors,” began the god Zeus again. “Tell me, who did you climb Olympus for?”

“For you, father!”

“Liar!” The sky shook once more, thunder’s peal ringing in the ears of all men of Greece and beyond. “Your true intention is obvious – your effort was merely self-indulgence.”

As if you’re one to talk, father, thought the youth to himself. His

father's "indulgences" were famous the world over – in fact they were responsible for his own birth. He clenched a fist and prepared to speak to his own defense, but the raised hand of Zeus kept him quiet.

"Now, I will hear no more of this. Begone, Markos. Return to your home."

"But—"

"You may take the winged sandals for your descent." His tone made clear that his decision was final, and so the young man took Perseus's old winged sandals from their pedestal and moved down the mountain ten times as quickly as he ascended, hot fire burning in his belly.

Once he landed the sandals, as if of their own accord, slipped off his feet and flew back up to Olympus's peak once more. He'd landed near the clothes he left behind at the foot of the mount and begrudgingly dressed again. The walk home went through the city, after all, and he wanted not to endure two humiliations this day.

Markos, after a long and angry walk, burst into his home to find his mother sitting alone at the kitchen table. She looked like she'd been waiting for him – no doubt Zeus sent a messenger to let her know what had happened.

"You could have told me where you were going, son," she said with a frown.

"I thought it best not to worry you."

"I'd have worried less than I have the last few days."

"Still, you'd have tried to persuade me not to go. That wouldn't have done."

She sighed. "Suit yourself. I'm just glad he or his wife didn't do you any real harm. You know that's rare luck." She stood then and hugged him. "Don't go running off like that again. Not without warning me."

"Fine, fine." He separated the hug and smiled at her. "But don't expect to stop me when I decide to go off on another adventure." She nodded and he made for his bedroom. There he

found a couple of suitcases and boxes, full of many of his things; clothes, books, and so on were neatly packed away.

“Did you think me dead and trash my things?” He called, half-joking. His voice rang through the small home loud as his father’s had atop Olympus, but without the accompanying peal of thunder and flash of lightning.

“Have you forgotten, Markos? We’re moving soon. I went ahead and packed your essentials.”

“Moving? Where?”

“You really did forget,” she said, shaking her head. “I have to move for work. Demigod though you may be, you still have to have a legal guardian. None of my family here can take you.”

“So I’m coming with, then. Where to?”

I

Arrival

*As an oak tree falls on the hillside
Crushing all that lies beneath
So Theseus, he presses out the life,
The brute's savage life, and now it lies dead.*

Namigawa Junko read the passage again and again, the too close to her face, gripped by the adventures of Theseus. With each word she moved the tome nearer to her nose, anxious to see what would befall the great hero next though it was a tale she'd read a dozen times.

Alas, her dream-world was wiped away like so much dust when her mother called her from downstairs. "Junko, you're going to be late for school if you don't get going!" Her distant voice sounded like it echoed from Minos's own labyrinth.

"Coming..." said Junko just loudly enough for her mom to hear, dragging herself out of bed and getting changed into her uniform. She absentmindedly got her books and things ready while her mind wandered back to the tale she was reading, then back to a few months ago...

"What are you going to do when I graduate, Namigawa-chan?" The memory of Harima-senpai asked, peeking over a heavy-looking book with *Ancient Myths* written on the front in English. "There won't be enough members for the mythology club to stay open." Her brown hair was tied up in a ponytail. The setting sun shone through the half-open curtain between the two girls.

"I'll think of something," she replied timidly, both back then and today, to herself.

"Well, whatever you decide—"

“Junko! Are you going to school or not?” Once again her mother pulled her out of her daydreaming, though this time she was thankful for the reprieve. Her cowardice and lack of resolve in the face of Harima-senpai, who worked tirelessly at the start of her third year to recruit for the mythology club, was a shameful memory.

“I’m coming,” replied Junko again, a bit louder. She put on her glasses and rushed down the stairs, nearly tripping over her long, navy skirt in the process.

“Here’s your lunch, sweetie,” said mom, who was waiting for her at the bottom with a wrapped bento. “Did you forget anything?”

“I have it all. Thanks, mom,” said Junko, her voice elevated a little thanks to the mixture of nerves – some about being late for school and some about the fate of the club for which she was now de facto president. “I’m going!” she called behind her as she made for the door.

“Your shoes, Junko.” Mom had the kind of smile only a parent could have for her child’s mistakes. “Or do you want to go barefoot?”

“Oh...right.” She stopped in her tracks, slipping a little on the wooden floor thanks to her socks. The nerves were starting to overwhelm her, and she fumbled with the straps on the shoes. Rushing only served to make her fidget and flounder more, and it took an embarrassing amount of time before she could finally stand, shod, and open the door.

“Have a nice day,” called mom behind her.

The walk to school was mostly uneventful, as usual. Junko lived a little out of the way of the main road, and she seldom if ever saw other students on her path. Once in a while a stray cat or old man would laze in the sun, but she spent most of her commutes in solitude. That was fine by her – usually those walks, while boring in reality, were full of adventure and peril in her head. Some days she was aboard Jason’s Argo, with the school playing the role of Colchis. Other days she walked along

with Heracles on his journeys, and still others she quested with Perseus or battled the Trojans with Achilles.

Today, she had no such daydreams. She was fraught with worry, in fact – what if no one joined the club with her? What if the club was disbanded? She'd be forced to join another club thanks to the school's policy, and she'd probably end up in the literature club where they talked about much less interesting stories than those of the Greeks.

But what can I do? I'm not like senpai... Junko thought. Harima-senpai put in a Herculean effort to advertise for the club after she was the last remaining member a year ago – she left posters all over the school, barged into classrooms to announce the club had openings...She even put on a play acting out part of the Odyssey by her lonesome. Junko lacked the charisma or confidence to do any of that and even with all the effort, only one person joined the club after checking it out – Junko herself. She didn't know a thing about mythology back then, but something about Harima-senpai's effort compelled her to at least give it a look. She walked past a couple of second-year boys on her way that said, "So you just talk about old stories? *Lame!*"

Junko thanked every god in the pantheon that she didn't listen to them and entered the room herself. What followed was a year of the most fun she'd ever had with the first friend she'd made at Akamori High. They play-acted the myths, debated the characters, laughed at the comedies...it wasn't so much a "mythology club" as it was "two friends hanging out together" half the time, but the school rules were lenient on the number of members required to be considered a 'club' with two.

The memories made way for the present as she stepped past the school gate – stepped off the Argo onto the coast – and made her way to the lockers. Despite her mother's anxieties about arriving on time she managed to make it; she was fumbling with her shoes once again when she overheard some conversation on the other side of the locker.

"Did you hear the second years are getting a new transfer student?"

“Which class?”

“2-2, I think.”

“Know anything about him?”

“Get this – he’s a foreigner! I don’t know which country he’s from, though.”

“It’s a guy, huh?” The boy sounded disappointed.

“Oh, like you’d have a chance if it wasn’t!” Their voices trailed off as Junko made her way to class, books in tow.

I wonder what he’s like, she thought as she moved toward her seat in the back of room 2-2. She sat in the center column of the second-to-last row, totally surrounded.

I hope he’s quiet...

She found out quickly that he wasn’t. In fact, “quiet” was the last word one might use to describe the transfer student. He threw the sliding door to the classroom open with a force that could only be described as “excessive” – an apt descriptor of the boy himself – and marched to the front of the room, the teacher shuffling in behind him with a look of apprehension. The boy was so much taller – bigger in general, really – than his teacher that it appeared as if their roles were reversed at first.

The boy’s face was full of impatience as the teacher awkwardly stepped through the now-silent room; the latter’s small footsteps scraped along the floor like a child trying to build up static electricity in his slippers. When the tension was at its highest, he spoke up: “Class, please quiet down,” he said to the silent, staring students. “You may have heard that we’re getting a transfer student in this class, and as you can see, he’s arrived today from Greece. This is Nephus Markos-san.” He sheepishly turned to the massive student, nearly shivering with apprehension. “Please introduce yourself to the class.”

Without missing a beat, the boy said in a booming voice that practically echoed through the entire school (and in surprisingly good Japanese), “My name is Markos, son of Zeus.” Junko perked up. “My hobbies include mountain-climbing and wrestling.” One could hear a pin drop in the room. “Pleased to meet you.” He bowed awkwardly, like he was unaccustomed to deference.

The students whispered among themselves as he went to his desk – an empty one near Junko – about his introduction.

“Son of Zeus? Like the god?”

“Maybe that’s just a religious thing for Greek people?”

“What a huge guy...”

“I bet we can get him to join the Judo club. That’s like wrestling, right?”

“I’m going to try to get his LINE.”

“No, but what does he mean son of Zeus?”

They talked away, abuzz about the new arrival who couldn’t seem less interested in what they were saying. Despite all their talking, though, none of the students had the courage to actually approach him. They watched him from their desks and whispered to each other behind their hands until the teacher quieted them down and began to teach.

I wonder what he means... thought Junko, ignoring the math lesson. She’d studied a fair bit about modern Greece with the intention of one day visiting, but never read anything about Greeks referring to themselves that way. The only ones who *did* were the ones in her stories...*but there’s no way, right?* She wrestled with her uncertainty all the way through lunch.

Classes went by uneventfully; by halfway through lunch no one had approached Markos. He ate a surprisingly Japanese affair of onigiri and other bento staples which looked clumsily prepared as if they were someone’s first attempt at the dishes. Then he stood, which once again brought the room to an awkward silence. One poor boy was in the middle of moving his desk; his arms were shaking the whole time everyone waited for Markos to make his move.

He simply left to go to the bathroom, and once the door closed – loudly – behind him everyone went back to their usual routines after a sigh of relief. Junko flipped through her book while Harima- senpai’s voice echoed in her head once again, both the guilt of failing to keep the club alive and the fear of being forced into a club with strangers suffocating her.

“What are you going to do?” asked Harima-senpai again. And again.

She remembered all the work that senpai put in to keeping the club alive after her own senpai graduated...remembered the posters and advertisements and the solo play...

I can at least ask one boy a question, right?

“What are you going to do?” she found herself asking. She didn’t even remember standing up, let alone walking over to Markos’s desk through the silent room after he returned.

“Do about what?” he asked in his baritone.

“Um,” she said, now acutely aware of all the eyes on her. An unusual feeling. “About clubs. We all have to join one.”

“I didn’t really think about it yet.” He looked up at her with half-closed eyes, barely interested.

She nearly turned around and walked back to her desk, before she remembered Harima-senpai’s smile. “Well, whatever you decide...”

“Well, whatever you decide,” she quoted senpai. “I think you should check out my club. You’re from Greece, right? My club is about the myths from there. I thought you might be interested, since you said you’re the son of Zeus.” She could nearly punch herself for how bad she was stuttering and making a total mess of this recruitment attempt. Any second now he’d turn her down.

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? I’ll come by.”

* * *

Markos still had some trouble navigating the labyrinthine halls of Akamori High School, but eventually he managed to find the room the girl in his class mentioned earlier, 3-C. He tried to pay no mind to all the eyes that fell on him as he walked through the unfamiliar territory, but it was hard to ignore the burning stares.

And that wasn’t the only thing he didn’t like about having moved to Japan. Things were too stuffy, for one. There were crowds everywhere and the people were so consumed by good manners that he could scarcely breathe without worry of of-

fense. The language was simple enough – a bit backward perhaps, but nothing complicated. Writing was another matter; there were too many characters that meant too many things and it was frustrating to keep track of.

The worst thing, of course, was the distance from his destined greatness. Sitting around all day in school was not conducive to becoming legend.

He popped open the door to 3-C and saw the girl from earlier nose-deep in a book labeled *Ancient Myths* in gold lettering. She didn't notice him enter, so he just shut the door behind himself and waited for her to finish.

And waited...

She wasn't going to finish any time soon, was she? "Excuse me." He said it like a command, rather than a request, out of habit.

The girl jump a foot. "Oh! You're here." She looked surprised to see him somehow.

"I said I would be," he retorted before taking a seat across from her by turning the chair in front of her desk around.

"Right," she stuttered back. "Well, welcome to the Mythology Club room. In here we mostly talk... about Ancient Greek mythology but we also sometimes talk about the myths from other countries..."

He wasn't sure how to respond. It was difficult to understand what she was even saying with all the stammering and pauses. Noticing his silence, she continued. "But, um. Sometimes we don't just talk about stuff. When senpai was still in the club last year, we would do things like re-enactments and debates and so on..." she trailed off.

"Alright, then." Markos cut her off before she could keep going and dig the hole she'd made for herself deeper. "Let's talk. What are you reading now?"

"It's about...Atalanta and the Calydonian boar hunt."

Markos recalled the tale. "A great deed was done that day by Atalanta and Meleager."

“You’ve read it?” Junko looked surprised, and happy. “I like the story, even though the ending is a little sad. Or maybe it’s because of the tragedy that I like it...”

Markos was surprised in turn at just how quickly she opened up when they spoke about this. They talked about Atalanta’s role as Artemis’s adoptive daughter and the confusing motives of Artemis, who herself sent the boar to ravage Calydon.

“Maybe Artemis just felt bad about it and changed her mind?”

“Not likely...the gods aren’t known to do that. Artemis herself is pretty stubborn, and mean.”

“In which story? I must not have read that one...she did change her mind about Agamemnon’s daughter and switched her with a deer,” Junko replied.

“Not in a story – though you’re right that she did free Iphigenia. This happened to me a few years or so ago. I was playing in the woods near my home when I came upon a funny-looking frog. I picked it up and poked at it for a bit; I was a boy after all. Well, Artemis didn’t take too kindly to the way I was teasing the poor thing, so she came to me and said, ‘Markos, for the torture you’ve visited upon this frog – rather than hunting mercifully – you’ll be turned into one yourself.’ Then she transformed me into the same kind of frog as the one I was messing with.”

“What?” Junko was shocked.

“Right? What a thing to do. Anyway, I was stuck as a frog for a week and it took my father to finally get her to relent, but even then only when it was agreed that I would hunt with her band for a year.” He leaned back in his seat. “That was tough...I was too young for it then, and they were harsh taskmasters.”

“No, wait, stop for a second.” He looked back at Junko’s face. “You’re telling me the goddess Artemis turned you into a frog?”

“Well, yeah. Is that so strange?”

“And your father...you mean Zeus, then?”

“I already said I was his son.” He wasn’t sure how to interpret her reaction.

“So then...you’re a demigod, right?”

“Obviously. Are you alright? Did you hit your head?”

“No, I’m fine, it’s just...I didn’t expect you to be so into this stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, coming up with your own myths and so on...you’re an even bigger fan than I am.”

“I’m not a fan of anything. It’s true!”

She stared at him in obvious disbelief.

“Watch, I’ll prove it. Uh...” he looked around the room. “Would a feat of strength do it?” Before she could react he was already walking over to the lockers. “If I can pick this up, will you believe me?”

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” she started, but he’d already squatted down and wrapped his arms around the box – about the only thing in the room that was taller than he was. “Heave, ho!” he shouted, so loud the whole school probably heard him. Junko gasped, afraid that he was going to accidentally drop it onto himself and get seriously injured...but then, with a grunt, he hoisted it over his head, balanced on a single hand. The locker’s contents rattled and banged. Something inside it broke.

“See?”

* * *

Junko could scarcely believe her eyes. Lifting it up off the ground was one thing...he was pretty strong- looking so she expected he’d manage to raise it a half-inch or so up before setting it back down with heavy breaths. To so effortlessly heave it off the ground and *keep it there with one hand*...he really was some kind of super-human.

“See?” he repeated. She realized she’d been stunned silent.

“Yes, I...that’s amazing!” Junko couldn’t hide her excitement. It was like a myth come to life!

He set it down gently. Something else in the locker broke anyway. “Believe me now?”

“I do!” She was practically shouting. “That’s incredible! You’re actually a son of Zeus? Brother of Heracles, and Perseus?” Her face hurt from smiling so much all at once.

“That I am.”

“Well...tell me another story, please!” she set down her book and closed it.

What followed was a thrilling account of Markos’s ascent of Mt. Olympus. He climbed the steep slope, he said, in the nude – the thought of which made her blush – and fought off the elements and the beasts that ran astride its peaks to appeal to his father, Zeus. But it was to no avail; Zeus would not accept this feat as great enough, and bade him return to the foot of the mountain in shame.

There wasn’t any other myth like it; not that she’d read anyway. To be rejected by his father, Zeus...it had an air of tragedy but it was still inspiring. “That’s so cool...” she said to herself.

“What?”

“Oh, uh, I said, ‘that’s so cruel!’ Of Zeus, I mean.”

Markos nodded.

“It’s kind of different from what one would expect, though. Usually the great task a hero undertakes isn’t for its own sake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s like...” she thought for a moment, poking at her bottom lip. “Like Achilles. He didn’t invade Troy just because he wanted to. You can argue about the validity of his reasons, but he had reasons beyond simply wanting to look cool or gain someone’s favor.” She was debating with senpai in her head about whether it was valid as she spoke; they’d had heated discussions on the topic several times. “Or Odysseus. His great journey wasn’t just for the purpose of going anywhere – he had to get home, you know? Or Heracles...sometimes he did great feats just to do them but, for example, the twelve labors were a punishment. He did a lot of that – making a mistake and making up for it I mean – since he was a pretty hot-headed guy.” It was like senpai was there with her – they had gotten into the habit of casually referring to the greatest heroes in all of history as “that

guy,” and it didn’t occur to her until after she said it in front of one of their siblings that it might be kind of rude.

Markos sat in silence, thinking.

“Oh, but...I’m not trying to say you’re wrong, either. It’s just different from what I’m used to reading.” She thought she might have offended him – if he was half as emotional as his half-brother, that could be trouble.

“I’m not angry.” He sounded it, though.

“Well...”

They sat in silence for a while. Junko fidgeted, peeking up from her lap at Markos every few seconds to see if his expression changed. He remained deadly serious. She wasn’t sure whether to start reading again or not so she just sat there with him, nerves on overdrive as the sun sank behind the horizon and the room went dark.

“Alright then.” He finally spoke, standing as he did. “This was good. I’ll come back.”

Huh? What? “Come back? Are you joining the club?”

“I am. You gave me much to think about. I hope you’ll do so again.” He started to leave.

“Wait, wait!” He stopped. “You have to sign this...” Junko sheepishly produced the club membership form, which she’d prepared just in case after class.

As they walked out of the room together, form in Markos’s massive paw, the judo club was walking back home from practice through the same hall.

“Nephos-san! I was looking for you after class.” A dyed-blond boy from their class, Tsujika Kenta, approached them. “I wanted to ask if you were interested in checking out the judo club. It’s a lot like wrestling, but...”

“Sorry,” Markos cut him off. “I’ve already joined a club.”

“Huh? Which one? Soccer or something? That’s too weak, you should be—”

“No, I joined the Mythology Club with Namigawa-san.” He gestured to Junko, who hid her face behind her bookbag. *Please don't ask me about it, please don't ask me about it.*

“What? Why? That's so lame!”

“You're way too strong for that!”

A chorus of complaints emerged from the group of five, still in judogi.

“Quiet.” Markos didn't yell, but his voice still dominated the others'. “I'll hear no such talk about my club.” Without another word he walked past them, pushing Tsujika out of the way.

Junko followed behind slowly, still hiding her face and bowing feverishly at every confused judoka they passed. *Is this going to be okay...?*

II

Departure

Junko pulled her bag up over her shoulder. "I'm going!" she called from the foyer.

"Be careful on the way," called her mom back to her. "You don't want to end up like those missing girls."

"I will," she replied as the door closed behind her.

Lately she'd been excited to go to school. Ever since Markos joined the club, Junko found herself looking forward to class and the time after that she got to spend talking about her favorite things. Markos's perspective and one-of-a-kind experience with the subjects of the stories were just as fascinating as the stories themselves; sometimes even more. Junko recalled on her walk the story Markos told about his wrestling match against a Cyclops.

According to the story, Markos was swifter than the monster but lacked the strength needed to pin it properly; the monster in turn was too slow to subdue Markos. They fought for three days without food or water, said Markos, and in the end the Cyclops surrendered due to exhaustion.

"We're still friends to this day, that Cyclops and I, though his brethren hate me as much as you might expect."

"And why did you wrestle him exactly?" asked Junko.

"I'd been forbidden from wrestling other mortal men, you see – too often I would hurt them by mistake, not knowing my own strength in my youth."

"You're in your youth now, aren't you?" she was a font of inquiry when he told his tales.

"Hardly – I'm 16 now. I was only 12 then, and naive." How he could talk so brazenly of naivete made her laugh to herself.

That laugh made her think of another she and Markos had shared – they play-acted the battle of Heracles against the Nemean Lion – she made a paper puppet of the lion in question and Markos had a hell of a time convincingly “strangling” it. Little did she realize, she laughed right as she crossed paths with Tsujika and his friends from the Judo club.

“What’s so funny, Namigawa?” she nearly jumped when she heard his voice.

One of his clubmates chimed in. “She’s probably laughing about her new boyfriend.”

The other boys laughed. “Yeah right! She’s more likely to get kidnapped by the Oni than date a guy like that,” chortled Tsujika.

“The Oni?” asked a third, out of the loop.

“The one that’s been kidnapping girls around here! Haven’t you watched the news?”

“I don’t really watch TV..”

Junko took the in-fighting as an opportunity to leave and soon she found herself at a comfortable distance from the rowdy lads. She wondered at the Oni story that had been going around. Some girls had gone missing, that much was true – one person saw a huge, red man snatching a girl off the street and fleeing with her into the mountains, but many (Junko included) wrote that off as a bid for attention from the one who “saw” it. Most agreed that the events were related but a suspect hadn’t been named. Oni weren’t real after all, and “photographic evidence” consisting of blurry, obviously edited photos wasn’t enough to convince her otherwise.

Then again, demigods weren’t supposed to be real either...

Tsujika and the others called out to her, but she couldn’t make out what they were saying at the distance she’d put between them. They were probably just trying to tease her anyway. They kept calling, though, louder and more frantic.

“Run!” As soon as she understood, the massive fist collided with her head, instantly knocking her out.

“She’s taking a while,” Markos thought to himself at the school gate, the skies graying overhead. “Hope she brought an umbrella...at this rate she’s going to get caught in it.” He checked his watch, and as he did one of the boys from the judo club bolted past him in a frenzy.

Sensing something was out of place, Markos snatched the boy up by the collar of his shirt before he could get away. “What’s the hurry?”

“I have to tell the teachers!” cried the boy. He had a look of sheer terror on his face complete with bloodshot eyes and a pale complexion. “Tsujika and Namigawa are in danger!”

“What’s going on? Why is Junko in trouble?” A grim countenance befell Markos, and the boy saw that nothing would convince him to let go, so he explained.

“Junko was attacked by an Oni on the way to school,” he panted, scarcely believing the words coming from his own lips. “It clubbed her over the head and snatched her up. Tsujika chased after him. Nomura went to the police and I came here to tell the teachers that other students might be in danger.” He said all this in a flurry, the words swirling together in the air before they reached Markos. But he got the gist – Junko was attacked by some kind of monster and Tsujika went off to help her.

“Where did they go?”

“You’re not thinking of—”

“Where did they go?” repeated Markos, sternly.

The boy explained the path the Oni appeared to be taking, and where the incident itself took place, but he wasn’t sure of the Oni’s destination. Markos dropped him. “Go warn the teachers. Tell them to shut the school gate.”

Without another word he was off toward the area in question. It didn’t take long to get there – the attack took place alarmingly close to the school – and there were signs of the commotion still laying on the sidewalk. Junko’s schoolbag must have come open

when she was struck; assorted notes and pens lay on the ground in a helpful trail. Tsujika's bag was left behind as well, probably so he could catch up to the monster.

No stranger to hunting and tracking, Markos followed the trail of stationery as quickly as his legs could take him, hoping for help of some kind from the goddess he'd offended in his youth. The trail wore thin as Junko's bag ran out of things to drop and soon enough he came to the last of the fallen utensils. It began to rain, then.

Just as he pondered his next move he heard a boy shouting in the distance over the descending droplets. It sounded like a cry of great pain and lingered in the air for long enough to make a normal man's spine tingle.

No normal man, Markos charged toward the source of the sound with a renewed speed and vigor, effortlessly vaulting over the rocks and stumps that littered the most direct path to the wailing, which rang out yet again on the way.

He arrived at a fearful sight – as Tsujika lay on the ground in a one-man heap, thunderous footsteps echoed from a nearby cave entrance, mixing with the thunder that fired off in the distance. Markos knelt down to the injured boy.

“Tsujika, pull yourself together! What happened?” He inspected the fallen judoka and found no blood was spilled, but many bones were broken.

“That monster...it's too strong...” groaned Tsujika. “I tried to fight it but I was no match...”

Markos smiled. “That was heroic of you. Rest here. I'll finish the job.” He hoisted the boy into the cave entrance and out of the falling rain.

Tsujika couldn't reply further; he was in pain too great to stay awake and fainted. Markos lay him down gently on the cave floor and followed the sound of the footsteps into the cave.

“Oni!” he called. “Return the girl!”

There was no reply. Cursing the lack of light, he stepped forward with caution. There was a distant voice speaking in a rhythm; Markos couldn't make out the lyrics over the rain but

he could tell that it didn't belong to a girl. Guessing the monster hadn't heard him, he called out again. "Monster! I'll spare you if you leave this place at once, and return the girl to me!"

"Fool!" Finally, a response – Markos moved toward the voice, ignoring the other paths in the winding cave. "I'll break you like I broke that boy that tried to stop me! The girls are mine!"

Girls...? Markos picked up his pace; now a faint light flickered against the stone walls, guiding him toward the Oni.

"Then I'll slay you in your home, beast," taunted the demigod, hoping the Oni would reply again. The path split, and there was light coming from both sides.

The monster took the bait. "Damn human! Your race is too weak to stand up to me!"

A labored grunt came next – the monster rose from his seat. Markos charged down the right-side corridor after tossing off his soaked gakuran, correctly pinpointing the location of the Oni's lair. Alas, there was only Junko, her ankle-length skirt torn at the bottom. The other girls must have been down the opposite path.

Seeing his friend sprawled on the ground as he marched inside lit a new fury in his heart. "I'm no mere human – you face Markos, son of Zeus!" Outside rang another peal of thunder. Markos threw his wet shirt onto the floor.

Without a word or a breath, the Oni lunged at him, two red arms the size of tree trunks and ending in long, sharp nails swiping at Markos's head. The demigod ducked and struck the beast's belly with a fierce uppercut.

The oni bellowed, staggering back. Markos held his ground, expecting a feint from the cunning monster. Its leopard-printed loincloth played with the firelight as it took a deep breath to collect itself. A pair of sharp horns stood tall on its forehead.

"Finally," it shouted, "a real fight!" It reached over to the cave wall where rested a fierce-looking weapon; a club of dark wood with spikes made of bone and stone covering it all over. "Come!"

Markos grinned. "That stick won't save you from my fury!"

The oni took a swing at his head with the kind of wild abandon reserved for a savage monster. Markos deftly ducked out of the way, then jumped forward and landed another great blow against the beast's belly.

But the monster was no weakling – it stood tall after taking the fearsome blow and retaliated with another swipe of its club, this one finding Markos's side and piercing his skin. Warm blood oozed slowly from the wound; crimson dripped from the club's spikes.

Thinking Markos would be crippled from the blow, the Oni laughed. Its taunting was cut short, though, by a punch to the throat that any mortal would have found deadly.

The two exchanged hits like this for minutes, neither giving any ground. Markos had endurance on his side, but the Oni's savage nature proved unpredictable – several times Markos found himself on the receiving end of that brutal weapon...

* * *

Junko stirred, finding her bed harder and much less comfortable than usual. Her head was throbbing; waves of pain emanating from a single spot on her skull wrapped her in agony. As her eyes fluttered open she found that she'd fallen asleep wearing her glasses. Through the lenses she witnessed something out of a dream or myth, or perhaps it was a fusion of the two.

A tall, dark-haired man stood face-to-face with a blood-red, horned demon wielding a vicious-looking club. Neither wore a shirt and the firelight – she was dreaming she was in a fire-lit cave – shone against their bodies, both soaked with rain and sweat. They were breathing heavy, as if exhausted; judging by the effort each movement exerted they had been at it for some time. Blood ran from both of them, trickling onto the floor.

The man moved in to attack just as Junko started coming to, throwing a straight punch into the toothy jaws of the monster. He was both swift and strong, as his physique suggested,

and a deadly fang launched out of the beast's maw and clattered against the floor.

With a roar of retort the oni charged forward, lowering its head. The man took the beast's neck with his arms as it lunged, falling into a sit but keeping firm hold. There was a fleshy crunch, then grunts of struggle as the man held his grip around the monster's throat in a guillotine choke. He strained with effort, the veins in his arms bulging. The monster slapped and scratched at him vainly, pushing with all its might against the force of the hero, but he was overpowered. Eventually, all fight left him, and soon after followed life.

Junko realized some time in the middle of the fight that this was no dream – memory of being struck in the head on the way to school returned to her. Shock gave way to panic as she saw blood flowing from Markos's torso; his breaths were labored and dry.

"Markos!" She ran to him as he forced the monster's corpse away, and it was then that she saw the blood-red horns of the oni had found a home in Markos's belly. "You need a doctor!" She got up to run, but he grabbed hold of her hand. Even in such a state, he was too strong for her to get away.

"It's too late," he coughed. "I won't make it more than a few more seconds."

"We have to try!" She could feel a lump welling up in her throat.

"Save it." He forced himself upright against the cave wall. "My lung is pierced. My tale ends today," he managed with a wheeze.

She relented, against her will, and watched as his breathing grew more and more haggard.

"Thank you," he said finally.

"What? I should be thanking you!"

"No," he began, hard, wheezing coughs interrupting his speech. "Were it not for you, I don't think I'd have really understood what was holding me back."

"What? I didn't do anything..."

He smiled. "You'll understand later...for now, there are others. In the cave next to this one. They need saving, too...and Tsujika. He's at the cave entrance."

"What about you? You can make it!"

"No...this wound is too much. Even if I live, I'll be a cripple. Pointless."

"But..." she choked on her sadness.

He took her hand in both of his. "Goodbye." His grip weakened and finally slipped. Junko wept, the desperate weeping of a woman who lost her love without knowing she loved him until it was too late.

Afterword

Sad, huh? Maybe not? I hope it had some kind of impact, anyway. It took me a long time and a lot of restarting to settle on this idea, and what you've read here is the product of just a couple of weeks of effort despite the rather large challenge window.

I wanted to use the bildungsroman theme to express a bit of what I believe in, and I tried that with several different stories about possible futures and the past, but in the end I couldn't get anything going that I was satisfied with. There was an effort to write a story about the future-cities described in the infamous "welcome to 2030" world economic forum article and I put quite a lot of words about a sci-fi retelling of the prehistoric Yamnaya invasion of Europe, but in the end I found those stories a little too difficult to condense into a short enough story that it would feel 'complete' by the end of this challenge. The latter might make for an interesting book, though...

Anyway, what we're left with is a condensed version of my most core belief about dying young, beautiful, and with purpose. I thought that would tie in nicely to the Greek god angle, and I kept it /a/ and /jp/ related by setting it in modern Japan. Even then, I wasn't sure how to kill Markos – my previous story about a god-like figure roaming through Japan was much more violent than this one and I thought that kind of thing wouldn't suit my purposes here – but I settled on an Oni as a fairly appropriate counterpart to the Minotaur.

I'd have liked to include much more of Markos and Junko's club activities, but I didn't have time to include it. Given another week I think I'd do that just to make the connection more genuine while still keeping it as fleeting as it is now. As for the ending, there's a world where this ends with Junko teaching mythology at a university, but I can't decide how to make that satisfying or to

keep it from taking some of the punch out of the ending. I decided not to include it since it would be clumsy.

Anyway, I hope you could enjoy my story. Thank you.

Anon.