

MECH

AGE OF STEEL



EDITED BY
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JEFFREY J. MARIOTTE · MARSHEILA ROCKWELL · JAMES SWALLOW AND MORE...

WITH A FOREWORD BY MATT FORBECK

— A RAGNAROK PUBLICATIONS ANTHOLOGY —

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**TIM MARQUITZ +
MELANIE R. MEADORS**

RAGNAROK
PUBLICATIONS

MECH

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MECH: Age of Steel

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*“When I, who is called a weapon or a monster, fight a
REAL monster, I can fully realize that I am just a human.”*

—Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*

“Gigantor, the space-age ROBOT!

He is at your command.

Gigantor, the space-age ROBOT!

His power is in your hand!

Bigger than big, taller than tall,

Quicker than quick, stronger than strong.

Ready to fight for right against wrong!

Gigantor! Gigantor! Gigaaaaa-a-an-torrrrrrr...”

—Mid-sixties animated *Gigantor* cartoon based on
Mitsuteru Yokoyama’s “Ironman 28”

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FOREWORD

MELANIE R. MEADORS

Growing up, I had three passions: monsters, machines, and princesses. And if there was any way to combine them together, all the better. At age three, every weekend I was glued to the television to watch Creature Double Feature, where a local station would show two monster movies back to back. Godzilla, Rodan, Ghidorah, Gorgo, Gamora, Mothra, King Kong. I could not get enough of them.

Then when I was just a little older, I discovered Voltron. And no day was complete for me unless I got my fix. I'd run home from school and obsessively watch five mechanical lions combine to become one super mech, the defender of the universe. One of the pilots was even a princess. There was an evil prince, a snarky pilot named Lance (yeah, I've always gone for the snarky one, even back then), and aliens. Everything a girl could want!

After that came multiple Robotech series, and the various Gundam series, and Neon Genesis Evangelion. I devoured Transformers, Jet Jaguar, Mechagodzilla, and countless other robot/mechasuit shows

and movies. When *Pacific Rim* came out (monsters AND mech!), I was in heaven, because suddenly all these things were back in style and weren't so hard to find. My house is full of models of giant robots and mechs I've bought, built, and collected since childhood and continue to enjoy to this day.

Humans are fragile, and the world out there is big. There are creatures in reality that are so much larger than us, that have so much more brute strength and sharp teeth and claws, against which, physically, we stand no chance. If these monsters from our imaginations came to reality, we'd be crushed.

That, however, is where our intelligence and our spirit of endeavor comes in.

Where humans lack in size, we more than make up for it in determination and our will to survive. We have big brains and we aren't afraid to use them. Mech tales champion science and technology. Instead of musclebound heroes, these stories have heroes who are makers, tinkerers, and thinkers. It's a chance for nerds to shine in fiction.

No one can make a giant robot completely on their own, however. Mech tech symbolizes not only our best human qualities as individuals, they also bring forward our sense of community, our willingness to put differences aside to fight together to save our planet and ourselves from an outside threat. It takes more than a village to design, engineer, machine, build, test, weaponize, and pilot giant robotic armored suits. While often there is just one person in the cockpit of these machines, it takes a world of working together to make the mission possible. I think that's something as relevant today as it was when Jet Jaguar first appeared on the big screen.

When Ragnarok Publisher Joe Martin and Editor Tim Marquitz invited me to co-edit this anthology, I was absolutely over the moon. What project could better encompass what I was all about than an anthology about people piloting giant mobile suits duking

it out with monsters and other threats in order to save the world? Not only that, but with so many awesome authors involved with the project, I could barely take time away from my Godzilla roar of excitement to say yes.

Mech: Age of Steel picks up where its predecessor *Kaiju Rising: Age of Monsters* left off. In these pages, there is heart-pounding action, thrilling adventure, and nail-biting suspense. You'll find stories of hope, of taking chances, of fighting when the odds of success are slim. But behind all the steel, the gears, the pistons and hydraulics, these stories are ultimately stories of humanity.

So suit up, Mech-Heads!

INTRODUCTION

MATT FORBECK

The first published novel I wrote, which came out way back in 2002, was actually a mech story. It was a tie-in novel based on *C.A.V.* (i.e., Combat Assault Vehicle), a tabletop game published by Reaper Miniatures. In the game (and the book and in most other mech-related things), you pilot a giant machine of war that walks on legs and has gigantic weapons for arms.

That's the basic appeal of all mech stories right there, the ones you might have seen in things like *Robotech*, *BattleTech*, *Pacific Rim*, *Alien*, *Avatar*, *Robot Jox*, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. They represent humanity's ability to build technology monstrosities that enhance an individual or team's power to ludicrous levels. If they were nothing more than adolescent power fantasies, though, there wouldn't be much to them, and they certainly wouldn't have the staying power they've shown since being introduced to the world back in the 1950s. They'd simply be relegated to cool model kits you could build based on their novel designs.

There's more to mechs than their technological power though, and that feature (not a bug) sits in the pilot's seat.

Mechs are *not* giant robots. As much technology comprises them, they're still not operated by computers or AIs—although they're sometimes enhanced by such things. They're driven by real people, just like you and me, and so have all of our same flaws despite having orders of magnitude more physical and destructive power.

As the tech-support acronym PEBKAC (Problem Exists Between Keyboard And Chair) implies, the issue with most technology doesn't spring from the technology itself. It arises from the hands into which that technology is placed.

Similarly to borrow from the National Rifle Association, mechs don't kill people. People kill people. This is true in the fact that mechs (which often feature massive arrays of various kinds of guns) don't destroy anything of their own volition. That requires action on the part of their pilots.

But that's not all there is to the story. It might be ordinary people pulling the triggers on those weapons, but those same weapons help those people do a massive amount of damage they couldn't come close to managing on their own. They become faster, more powerful, and far more lethal. In this way, the weapons magnify the issues of their operators, both in terms of problems made and solutions offered.

Of course, the kinds of problems that weapons like mechs get into are, by their nature, much larger and more violent than the sort you might run into with a pistol or your personal computer. That's what makes mech stories so much more dramatic, entertaining, and—honestly—fun. They're problems not just writ large but writ stamping across the blasted horizon in steel symbols that can reach hundreds of feet tall.

That's also the job of fiction, of course: to amplify conflicts. Fiction manages that by putting a spotlight on a situation and explaining the context so you can know exactly what's at stake in

such clashes and why. It lets you get inside the heads of the characters so you can figure out not just what they're doing but, far more importantly, why.

Mech fiction, as you might imagine, does that brilliantly by amplifying both the stakes and the action to apocalyptic levels. It puts you not only inside the minds of people piloting gigantic machines of war but also inside the cockpits of those same machines. It turns everything up to eleven—and then breaks off the knob, stomps on the gas, and spins the rotary cannons up to speed.

Hold on tight. You're in for some wild rides.



PROJEKT: MARIA

PETER CLINES

Professor of History and Folklore Ken Kraft flinched as the airman yanked the door open. “Are we sure this is the best way?”

“Positive,” said the airman. “After the massacre taking the island, the Heinies wouldn’t expect anyone to do the same thing.”

“With good reason,” Kraft shouted over the engine.

On the other side of the airman, Dar Carter smirked. “If you’re having second thoughts,” he called out, “you should’ve mentioned them sooner.”

“I *did* mention them sooner. I’ve been mentioning them for six days now.”

Carter’s grin got even wider.

“Once you two are gone,” yelled the airman, “we’re going to make some noise, convince the Jerries this is a nuisance bombing run. Should buy you an hour or so.”

Carter nodded.

“I’m still not feeling very confident about this,” Kraft shouted.

“Relax,” Carter stepped forward and set his hands on the professor’s shoulders. “You’re going to be fine. Take a deep breath and hold it.”

Kraft sucked in air until his chest swelled against the harness.

“Let it out. Take another one.”



He held the second breath until his lungs burned. It trailed out between his lips and his shoulders sagged.

Carter gave him a punch on the arm. “Feel better?” he asked, reaching up to grab one of the dangling straps.

“Yes. Yes, thank you.”

“Good,” Carter said. “See you on the ground.”

His foot came up and kicked Kraft out the plane’s open door.



Kraft had been surprised when the car appeared with the summons to the Pentagon. After the Raider X affair with the Argo and the Sisters, Kraft had assumed his II-A status—important to the war effort—was given to him by the War Department as a small reward for his service. An assurance he wouldn’t be sent off to the South Pacific or worse.

It hadn’t occurred to him they might be serious about it.

He’d been escorted to a small conference room, where Commander Finch stood. Finch always looked like the model for a Navy recruiting poster. Narrow hips, broad shoulders, square jaw, perfect hair. His tan uniform actively repelled lint and wrinkles.

Across the table from him, leaning in a chair and sipping from a flask, sat Dar Carter. Carter, sometimes known as “The Roman,” looked like Johnny Weissmuller’s older brother. A tougher, more ragged brother. A single scar marred his good looks, a thin line starting at the top of his high cheekbone, just by his left eye, and running down his neck and beneath his collar. Kraft had never asked how he’d gotten it.

In certain circles, Kraft’s peers and contemporaries referred to Carter as an aggressively active historian. In less polite circles, they just called him a mercenary treasure hunter. Regardless, the man knew Europe, Asia, and a large part of Africa better than Kraft knew his faculty library.

Trapped in a room with the two of them always made the professor self-conscious about his academic build and eyeglasses. He was Clark Kent bookended by a pair of Supermen.

“Kraft, you bastard,” Carter called across the room. “Good to see you.”

“How’ve you been, Carter?”

“Surviving,” he said. He took another swig from the flask, then capped it and tucked it back into his coat.

“Thank you for joining us, Professor,” said the commander, sticking his arm out.

“Anything to help,” said Kraft. The commander’s handshake was firm. Solid. Precise.

Finch, done with pleasantries, opened his files. “The Nazis took Crete last May. Bloody as hell. Over six thousand dead, all told, and they’ve had a few mass executions since then. Two months ago, the resistance there got word to us of a big construction project going on, just east of Rethymnon and two miles inland. If our English friends have the chatter right, the Germans are calling it Project Maria.”

Kraft furrowed his brow. “Maria like...a woman?”

Finch nodded. “No idea who, though. There are a few German chemists and mathematicians with the name, but no one we know of involved in engineering or weapon design. Might be a reference to a family member, but we still don’t know most of the players behind the project. We sent some men in to meet up with a resistance cell. Last week they got these to us.”

Finch spun one of the photos, then another. They showed distant crisscrosses that Kraft recognized as some sort of superstructure. He’d seen newsreels of planes being built, with shots of them before the plates went over everything. In the second picture, he could see a welder working on one of the intersections.

“There are three of them so far,” said Finch. “Getting underway on a fourth when these were taken. Our people give them a diameter

of seventeen feet and a length of thirty-five.”

Carter tapped his chin. “Are those exact numbers?”

“Best estimates, going off the welder’s equipment.” Finch tapped the man in the photo.

“That’s... an odd size, isn’t it?” Carter turned the photo to get a better angle on it. “Too big for a fighter, too short for a bomber.”

Finch nodded. “It doesn’t match up with anything we’ve seen from the Germans before.”

“Maybe it’s not complete? The pieces might join together.”

“Bad construction method, if that’s the case.”

“Something new then?”

“Perhaps,” said Finch, “but if it’s a plane, why go all the way to Crete? Hitler’s got dozens of factories in Germany churning out planes and tanks.”

“Maybe it’s not a plane,” mused Carter. “Some kind of ship?”

Finch shook his head. “Two miles inland? And as far as we can tell, the Germans haven’t been bringing in engines or fuel.”

Carter shrugged and pulled a flask from inside his coat. “Maybe they’re manufacturing it all there?”

“I’m sorry,” said Kraft. “I don’t mean to interrupt...”

Finch’s gaze locked onto the professor like a targeting system. “Yes?”

“Well, why am I here? I’m willing to help in any way I can, of course, but I don’t see how any of this would involve me.”

Finch nodded. “Going off some of the preliminary work they’ve done, our current theory is that the Nazis might be using resources there on Crete. They’ve looted museums across Europe, and some of our boys thought they might just be pulling what they need for raw materials from archeological sites. And Carter here thought you might be able to give us some insights in that area.”

“Ahhh,” said Kraft. “Well, then, to be honest, that doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

The commander's jaw shifted. "Why not, Professor?"

Kraft gestured at the map. "There are dozens of archeological sites across Crete. Maybe hundreds, depending," he added, glancing at the Roman. "But even if you ignored proper techniques and just ripped everything out of the ground as fast as you could find it, there just wouldn't be that much. Not compared to what you need for a plane or a ship."

Finch's brow furrowed. It always did when the professor shot down his theories. "Are you sure of that?"

Kraft nodded. "Absolutely," he said. "It wouldn't even be steel. It would all be bronze and some iron..."

Carter glanced up from the photos. "Kraft?"

The professor frowned. "I think I might know why they're building this on Crete." He looked at Finch. "None of your intelligence people are film buffs, I take it?"



Kraft crouched on his hands and knees and let his head hang limp. The ground of Crete felt warm to his wind-frozen fingers. The hot air he sucked in just added to the nausea that churned his stomach. At least he hadn't eaten in the past six or seven hours. His stomach had nothing to throw up.

He retched anyway, spraying yellowish stomach acid between his hands.

Then he retched a second time, just to be safe.

He straightened up and fumbled with the straps of his harness. Get loose, hide his chute. Bury it if possible. They'd drilled that into him.

He got himself free, gathered up armfuls of dark blue silk and cord, and shoved it between two sprawling bushes. A few rocks weighted it down. A few dozen handfuls of dirt and leaves made it vanish. Kraft had no idea how effective the camouflage would



be come daybreak but, by then, he hoped to be many miles away.

Something scuffed the ground behind him. He spun and crouched at the same time. After a beat, he fumbled with the holster on his hip and tried to get the strap loose.

“Easy, Kraft,” murmured a low voice. “It’s me.” The big man stepped out of the shadows and into a dim shaft of moonlight.

“Thank God,” said the professor. “How’d you find me so fast?”

“I watched you on the way down. I landed about half a mile that way.”

“Yes,” said Kraft, “about that.”

Carter batted the fist away before it got close to his jaw. His expression didn’t change. “Feel better?”

“A bit.”

“You need to throw any more punches?”

“No.”

“Good. Next time, don’t put your thumb inside when you make a fist. Would’ve hurt you more than me.” He pointed at a dark ridge. “The plain’s about ten clicks that way, on the other side of the hills. We should be able to make it in two hours.”

“Wasn’t there supposed to be a resistance team meeting us?”

“Yeah. You want to wait around for them or get this done?”

Kraft snorted. “I want to be back in my office grading papers.”

Carter’s teeth gleamed in the night. “Let’s get moving.”

They made their way across wide fields and small groves of trees. Twice, Carter stopped them as a patrol of German soldiers wandered by. The second group, four men, paused to share cigarettes and mutter amongst themselves. Kraft and Carter stayed flat against the ground a dozen yards away, hidden among what looked like short, stubby orange trees. After fifteen minutes, the Germans crushed the cigarettes under their boots and moved on.

Kraft counted to twenty and let out a slow breath.

Carter sat up. “Well,” he murmured, “that bit into our schedule.”

“How long until sunrise?”

“It’s going to start getting light in about three hours. We want to be in our best position by then.”

They headed across the field, weaving between orange trees that grew larger and larger. Carter double checked his compass, pointed, and they made their way through the grove, over a low wall, and across a barren plot to where twisted trees grew more or less in a row.

“I still don’t understand why I had to come along,” Kraft said, pitching his voice low.

Carter glanced back. “You’re the expert.”

“A research expert. There’s no reason for me to be here.”

The Roman raised his hand for silence. They stood in the shadow of an olive tree for a moment while he cocked his head and listened. Then he gestured them on, adding, in a low voice, “I asked for you to be here.”

“Why?”

“Because, Ken, you’ve got the brains,” Carter said. “And I trust you over anyone Finch would’ve sent along.”

“They’re U.S. Marines. They’re completely loyal.”

“It’s not their loyalty I’m worried about,” said Carter. “I’ve seen some of the bravest, most loyal men crack when they’re confronted with the unknown. With something their minds just aren’t able to accept. You saw it happen on Paxos, and again on the *Sea Ghost* when we were heading home.”

“I recall,” Kraft murmured with a shiver. He’d never forget the Sisters they’d found beneath the island of Paxos. Or the things that had found them on their voyage back to England.

“Well, it didn’t happen to you,” said Carter. “Twice in a row you’ve faced the impossible, and you didn’t blink.”

“I blinked,” muttered Kraft. “I’m not ashamed to admit I pissed myself a bit when Scylla woke up.”

Carter snorted. “Didn’t say you weren’t scared. Everyone gets

scared. You didn't snap."

"Sergeant Thater didn't snap, either."

"And if he wasn't dead, I'd've asked for him, too. Face it, Kraft. You're smart, you're strong, and you're a survivor. And if you're right about what's here...well, that's who I need with me. Because if things go bad—"

Carter's leg snaked out even as his arm shot up at the shadow's throat. The figure spun in the air and crashed down to the ground with a grunt. The Roman dropped a knee on the man's chest and a knife to his throat. "Talk quiet, talk fast."

"Constantine Zaimis," wheezed the rail-thin man. He had dark hair streaked with white, a thick mustache, and a stubby beard. His voice strained as his chest tried to rise. "I'm your resistance contact."

Carter's knee didn't move. He tipped his head to the bulging sack laying in the shadows. "What's in the bag?"

"Iron rations. Thirty meals worth."

"Because?"

Zaimis managed a sad smile. "Resistance members wandering around at night can get a bullet in the head." He slid his arm along the ground to point at the bag. "With this, I'm just a low-end thief and black market smuggler who deserves a good beating."

"Pleasant," muttered Kraft.

"We all do what we must," Zaimis said. "May I get up now?"

Carter tapped the edge of his knife thrice against the man's Adam's apple. Then he heaved himself upright and extended his free hand down. "Sorry for the body slam."

Zaimis gathered up the sack and threw it over his shoulder. "As I said, we all do what we must."

"Why weren't you at the drop site?"

"I was delayed," said the resistance fighter. "Patrols have doubled over the past week since they got close to finishing their machine."

"Close to *finishing*?" echoed Kraft.

“Yes. A ship came in yesterday with more workers. They have almost two thousand here now. Prisoners they’ve enslaved.”

“Two thousand? Are you sure?”

Zaimis nodded.

Carter pointed up at the ridge. “Can we still get to the plain where they’re assembling it?”

The resistance fighter shook his head again. “Not that way. They dropped an observation team right on the spot I had planned to take you. We’ll have to go to the far side.” He swung his arm and pointed at a steeper hill to the west.

“Can we make it by sunrise?”

“Maybe. It’s rougher terrain.”

“Well, then,” said Kraft. “Let’s get moving.”

Zaimis led them out of the olive trees and toward the rocky hills. He guided them across a field, then down a dirt road for half a mile. They hid in a ditch when a truck drove by.

“You know what they’re building?” asked Zaimis as they continued down the road.

Kraft and Carter exchanged a look. “We have a good idea,” said the professor

“What is it?”

“I think they’re not so much building as reassembling,” said Kraft. “And reinforcing.”

Zaimis glanced up at the sky. “Something crashed here during the invasion?”

The professor shook his head. “No, it’s been here longer than that.”

The resistance fighter furrowed his brow and gestured them off the road onto a path. “The Great War?”

“Much earlier,” Kraft said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Tell me about these workers,” said Carter, changing the subject. “You’re sure they’re prisoners? Slaves?”

Zaimis nodded. “They all wear thin, gray uniforms. Most of them are chained together at the ankle so they can’t walk.” He shuffled along the path for a few feet with short, halting steps.

Kraft could see Carter’s frown in the dim light. “Is that a problem? I mean, aside from the obvious?”

“You don’t put slaves in chains that short,” said Carter. “Not if you’re expecting them to work.”

Zaimis snorted. “Have a lot of experience with slaves, do you?”

“Enough to be ashamed of it,” Carter said without looking at the man. “So, if they’re not a workforce, what are they doing here?”

They hid behind some bushes as another patrol walked by. Five soldiers again. Much more disciplined than the ones Kraft and Carter had encountered earlier. One of them passed within a few feet of them, and Kraft found himself aware of the nervous sweat that had dried in his clothes.

The soldiers continued their route.

“This is the riskiest part,” Zaimis murmured to them. “After this patrol is out of sight, we’ll have fifteen minutes to make it up to those boulders before the next one comes by.” He pointed at a line of slab-like rocks up along the ridge line. “Once we’re there, we’re good. But the way up is open country, no cover, and the sky will be bright when we’re near the top.”

The soldiers vanished around a bend and the trio launched themselves at the slope. Zaimis moved with the casual grace of familiarity. Carter marched up, not so much climbing the hill as attacking it with non-stop downward kicks. Kraft trailed them, huffing out breath but somewhat proud that he didn’t lag too far behind.

Zaimis led them into a shadowy split in the hillside. The crevasse went almost thirty feet down into the hill, although it looked like centuries had filled the bottom ten feet with enough stones and dirt to make a crude floor. “Keep your voices low,” he murmured. He gestured at the stone walls on either side of them. “We’re distant

and they're making noise, but expect this to double the volume of anything we say or do.”

He guided them through the dark crevasse. Kraft could see a wedge of less-dark up ahead, growing brighter even as they got closer. They slowed as they reached the opening.

The plain spread out three hundred feet below them, twice the size of an athletic field. The whole area had been scoured down to bare soil and leveled out, like a construction site waiting to break ground. With the surrounding hills, it could've been an amphitheater. At this distance, most of the figures that moved back and forth were an inch tall.

They settled into position, using the boulders and scrub in the crevasse for cover.

At the center of the field, the construction stretched out. A few canopies and temporary walls shielded it from the elements and blocked their view. A hundred feet long. Forty across at the broadest point. At least fifteen feet high. The long superstructures jutted out from the center. Chains ran from the construction, over a series of A-frame structures, to a quartet of bulldozers.

A row of huge tents stretched along the far side of the plain. Towers carrying floodlights rose around the monochrome circus, each one with a two-wheeled generator at its base. A larger, block-like generator stretched most of its tentacles into the tents themselves. Its chugging, asthmatic growl rode up into the sky on fumes of oil and gasoline, lifting the scent of burnt ozone alongside it.

Carter pulled a small cylinder from his coat, extended it into a tarnished brass telescope, and gazed down at the field. “Something’s wrong here,” he muttered.

Kraft leaned to the left and tried to see past one of the canopies. “Wrong how?”

“Not sure,” Carter said. “At least a hundred guards. As many engineers and technicians.”

“What do you believe that thing is?” asked Zaimis. “Are those hulls or—”

“They’re not hulls,” said Carter. “They’re limbs. It’s a robot.”

“A robot?” The resistance fighter looked down at the huge form just as the sun hit it. Fresh steel gleamed across the various parts of the structure. Beneath it, lustrous bronze seemed to glow in the sunlight. “Some kind of mechanical man?”

“Project Maria,” said Kraft. “It’s a reference to a German futurist film from about ten years ago. Maria was a robot disguised as a human woman.”

Zaimis furrowed his brow. “But why build it here?”

“They aren’t building it,” Carter said. He didn’t take his eye from the telescope. “They’re unearthing it.”

“They’re just adding their own weaponry and armor over the original machinery,” Kraft explained. “That’s the disguise.”

“What?”

Kraft half-turned his head, his eyes still on the huge figure. “You know the mythology of your homeland, yes?”

Zaimis shrugged. “I was more interested in sports and girls when I was young.”

Carter snorted.

Kraft sighed. “You know Knossos?”

“Yes,” said Zaimis. “The old city.”

“City-state. It was the home of Europa, whom Zeus seduced in the guise of a bull.”

The resistance fighter nodded, although his expression slid toward puzzled. “The Minotaur story, yes? With the labyrinth.”

Kraft shook his head. “Different story, although she was the Minotaur’s grandmother. During their affair, Zeus presented Europa with three gifts. A javelin that hit whatever it was thrown at. A magical hunting dog. And a giant guardian to walk around Crete three times a day and protect it from invaders.” He turned his head

full back to the metal figure sprawled below. “Talos. The bronze automaton made by Hephaestus.”

Zaimis laughed into his fist. “Talos?” He glanced down at the camp. “They dug up some old statue and turned it into a robot?”

“Not a statue. A mechanical man. An invulnerable defender.”

“One I’d guess will end up circling Berlin instead of Crete,” said Carter. “Assuming they get it up and running again.” He passed the telescope to Kraft. “Look at the head.”

Kraft set the lens against his eye and tried to line up on his target. The canopies and temporary walls hid most of his view. A German officer in a black uniform filled the lens, arguing with a man in a gray suit.

“Looks like they cracked it open,” mused Carter. “Replaced all the gears and chains with some kind of...cockpit.”

The telescope found the prone giant’s head. Almost a third of it had been cut away, leaving the face and the back of the stylized helmet. From his angle, Kraft could just see the chair and harness, the sets of heavy levers, and a panel of switches and gauges. “It makes sense,” he said. “They wouldn’t want it to be autonomous.”

“You two are serious about this,” Zaimis said. “You think they found Talos and turned it into some sort of...war machine?”

“Well,” said Kraft, handing the telescope back to Carter, “it’s not the first time.”

“But how would they know such a thing is even possible? What would make them even consider this?”

“As I said, it’s not the first time.”

Carter pointed the telescope down at the figure again. “MG 151 autocannons. Looks like they’ve got four of them on the left arm. Can’t tell if they’re 15s or 20s. Nasty things, either way, and I’d guess those drums hold at least five hundred rounds each. Four of those will tear up a tank, a fighter jet—pretty much anything.” His head shifted. He readjusted the telescope. “Hang on. Looks like a

lot of activity starting up.”

Shouted orders echoed across the plain. Workers moved back and forth, dragging equipment away from the superstructure. Soldiers wheeled the walls away from the huge figure and pulled back the canopies. Two fuel trucks rolled forward, and new figures moved to connect hoses to the bronze giant’s armored shoulders. Shouts went back and forth, and the hoses began to tremble with flowing liquid.

The smell of wet rust drifted up to the crevasse.

“What is that?” whispered Kraft. “That smell?”

A grim shadow passed over Carter’s face. “It’s blood,” he muttered. “They’re pumping it full of blood.”

The resistance fighter’s face wavered between shock and disgust. “Why?”

“Talos runs on blood,” said Kraft. “According to most legends, it’s filled with ichor, the blood of the gods, but a few just say it’s filled with blood.”

“Those trucks have to have two or three thousand gallons each,” said Zaimis. “Where did they get that much blood?”

Carter lowered his telescope. “That’s what’s wrong with the camp,” he said.

Kraft glanced at him. “What?”

“There’s not enough tents,” said the Roman, “for all the prisoners they brought here to work. Not even a holding pen.”

Down below, the pumps on the fuel trucks chugged away. The hoses swelled and pulsed like Vulcanized arteries. One figure leaned inside the head-cockpit and reached for one of the controls.

Zaimis muttered something in Greek too low and fast for Kraft’s out-of-practice ears, but the rhythm sounded like a prayer.

One of the men at the trucks shouted out. The other one echoed him a moment later. The hoses were disconnected and dark red splashed across the ground.

A trio walked out of one of the tents. The two on the sides wore the black uniforms of the SS. The one in the middle had on a leather jacket and tight leather cap. The pilot pulled gloves onto his hands as they walked. They reached the giant's head and a group of technicians helped him into the chair.

Carter collapsed his telescope. "They're starting it now."

"But it looks like they haven't finished their conversion," Kraft said.

"I don't think they care."

Voices shouted back and forth. Men jogged toward the bulldozers. The reclining pilot gave a thumbs-up from inside his makeshift cockpit.

"Your plane," said Zaimis. "They must believe it was the precursor of a full-scale attack."

Craft nodded. "Makes sense. And now they'd rather have an incomplete defender than none at all. Good for us."

"How, exactly," asked Kraft, "is that good for us?"

The bulldozers coughed up smoke, growled, and began to pull on the chains. The A-frames quivered. The links rattled and formed a tight line to the giant's shoulders.

A squeal of strained metal echoed across the field. The inch-high figures covered their ears. The screech reached up to the crevasse and made them flinch.

The giant sat up.

The chains went slack. The bulldozers lurched ahead. A moment later the links were taut again.

Talos leaned forward, adjusted its legs, and rose.

As a graduate student, Kraft had seen the Colossi of Memnon and the massive statues of Rameses at Abu Simbel, and the bronze titan stood over all of them. The massive feet adjusted with the sound of a small earthquake. Talos stared out across the field, a blank expression on a not-quite human face. The chin was too round, the

nose too sharp, the lips too thin. Beneath the lines of its sculpted helmet, the over-large eyes had the vacant gaze of a lobotomy patient.

Steel plates had been welded across its chest and shoulders. Others had been added around its feet and shins. Bare beams and struts across its body showed where more would go.

A swastika on a red background decorated each shoulder plate.

Talos took three lurching steps, shaking the field with each one. The chains dropped away. Through the gaps in the head, Kraft could see the pilot pulling and pushing at the controls like a railroad engineer. The bronze and steel giant swayed like a drunk trying to find his center of gravity. Drivers jumped nervously from the bulldozers at its feet.

Then it took five confident steps, its arms at its sides, each one covering at least sixty feet. It turned around to face the camp. Applause and cheers came from the Germans below. Another groan of metal and gears echoed across the plain, and the giant raised its right arm with its thick fingers stretched out and flat. It earned more cheers and a few honks from the fuel truck drivers.

Zaimis muttered something. He shuffled toward the front of the crevasse to get a better view. A stone shifted under his boot, and then another. He tried to slide his foot away and set a hand down to steady the delicate array of rocks and dirt.

A trio of stones, each one no bigger than a golf ball, slipped free and bounced down the hillside. Then a football-sized one dropped away from the mouth of the crevasse and crashed downward. The noise echoed across the plain.

The giant's head snapped around. A smooth, quick movement. Its eyes looked warm and red in the dawn sunlight.

"Oh, no," whispered Kraft.

Talos raised its left arm. The four cannons around its left fist let out a *clack*. An instant of perfect silence followed.

Carter shoved Kraft, knocking him behind a boulder.

The cliffside shattered around them, a chaotic symphony of noise that drowned out all thoughts. Carter turned to tackle Zaimis and the resistance fighter vanished, replaced by a cloud of gristle and red mist that the furious winds tore away. The other side of the crevasse exploded, and the blast of rocks hurled Carter across the wedge-like space.

The boulder in front of Kraft shook like a terrified child. The floor trembled beneath him. The downpour of rounds stopped for a moment, then slammed into the hillside again before he had a chance to organize the few thoughts he had.

The quivering floor began to tilt. His protective boulder began to sink and lean. The gravel and stones composing the floor tried to slip away from the relentless hammering. It drifted, slid, and then threw itself out of the crevasse, taking the boulder and Kraft with it.

The boulder, a good four feet across, bounced down the hillside toward the Germans. Kraft slid down the slope into a bush a few yards below the crevasse. Dust and dirt and gravel from the small landslide pelted him, coated him, knocked him free of the bush, and spun him down to a second one. It tore free from the hillside but only went a few yards before crashing into a third—an old, gnarled thing closer to a tree in size and girth.

A rock the size of a baseball grazed his head, tore his heavy cap away, and made the world spin. He slumped forward against the small tree as the thunder above him stopped.

Kraft shook his head and ignored the sparks and fireworks it set off through his skull. He reached up and explored his scalp where the rock had hit. Wet, but still solid. And most of his hair still seemed to be there so it couldn't be a huge wound.

The ground trembled, setting off two tiny slides of dust and grit as Talos moved forward. Kraft had slid further than he'd thought, almost halfway down the hill, and now the bronze and steel giant loomed over him. Its burning eyes stared up at what was left of the

crevasse.

It wasn't a trick of the sunlight, he realized. The giant's eyes glowed like hot coals in a furnace. The air in front of them shimmered from the heat.

Kraft held his breath. Fought back the cough in his throat, the stinging itch of his wound. The ache of a twisted finger that might be broken. The dust and grit had half-covered him, the tree and uprooted bush hid the rest. If his camouflage held, if he didn't move, he had to believe the giant couldn't see him.

The air burned in his lungs, and he told himself it was no different than the faculty pool. He held the second-place record for time underwater. He had, anyway. The water had lost its appeal since he'd met Carter, and he hadn't been to the pool in months.

But he could still hold his breath for a hair over three minutes.

The giant's gaze swept back and forth across the hillside.

Down below, one of the black-clad German officers jogged to catch up with Talos. A soldier hobbled behind him, lugging a portable radio pack. The officer leaned his head back and shouted up at the pilot.

Talos stepped back from the base of the hill and turned in the officer's direction. The chin leaned down with a rattle and squeal. From his angle, Kraft could see the pilot lurching forward, yanking hard on the levers.

The officer leaped back to avoid the shifting feet, then yelled up at the cockpit again. He snatched the microphone from the radio pack and barked commands into it. He glared up at the giant.

The pilot pulled at levers. He yelled out, almost screamed, in desperation. His voice echoed inside the head.

The left arm swung down. The officer shouted another command into the microphone.

Orange light—furnace light—flared in the cockpit and ended the pilot's screams.

The cannons spoke as one, a single burst that reduced the Nazi

officer, the soldier, and the radio pack, to scraps in a smoking crater at the giant's feet.

Talos straightened its head and turned to look at the camp. A few wisps of smoke trailed from the gaps in its head. The gun arm rose back to a firing position and lined up on the closest group of soldiers. A few raised their weapons. Most of them ran.

The autocannons tore up the ground and the soldiers. One survivor shrieked until he vanished beneath a massive bronze foot. Talos took three more steps to the center of the camp.

Kraft let out his breath and watched as the bronze giant annihilated tents and trucks, soldiers and scientists. Chaos and confusion spread across the camp. Some of the men tried to fight back, but their rifles had no effect. One brave soldier threw a trio of grenades, one after another, but he only drew the automaton's attention. He vanished in a burst of exploding cannon shells.

Adrenaline shook his body, but Kraft managed to get his thoughts under control. There was more to Talos than just the gears in its head, apparently. If the Nazis had thought it through, they would've been more careful about re-activating a machine designed to destroy invaders.

The thought tickled his mind as Talos's heel came down on one of the generators, crushing it into the ground. Another burst from the cannons liquefied two technicians and a soldier running for a car. A few last survivors tried to flee. Talos stalked after them, shaking the earth with each stride until their screams ended one way or another.

Then the giant stood and surveyed the silent ruin of the plain. The cannons had gouged pits and craters across the ground. The remains of the tents burned, as did one of the bulldozers. The smell of gasoline almost hid the smell of blood.

Talos turned and marched.

Kraft watched it move east into the dawn. A mile away already

and he could still feel each impact of its heels on the ground. He pictured Crete in his head, from his own studies and the briefings. It had to be close to the ocean. If it kept the eastern bearing and followed the coast, at that speed it would end up at Heraklion in less than an hour.

“No,” he murmured. “Not Heraklion. Knossos.”

“What’s that?”

Kraft shoved himself away from the tree and fumbled with his holster.

The dusty figure put out its hands. “Easy, Kraft. It’s just me.”

The sleeve of Carter’s leather coat had been reduced to rags, along with the shirt beneath it. Streaks of blood painted the arm and the side of the Roman’s head. His eyes were still bright and alert.

“I thought you were dead,” said Kraft.

“Almost. Blast threw me out of the crevasse, and I slid all the way down the hill. The jacket and pack took the worst of it.” He touched his leg. “Going to have a lot of bruises tonight.”

Kraft glanced after Talos. The giant had vanished in the distance beyond a hill. “If we live to see tonight.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Talos. It’s killing everything.”

Carter smirked. “I noticed. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer bunch, believe me.”

Kraft shook his head. “It’s not going after the Nazis. I think it’s going after everyone.”

“What?” Carter’s thin smile vanished. “What makes you say that?”

“This thing’s out of time. It went to sleep almost four thousand years ago and woke up today in 1942.” Kraft pointed east, after the giant. “It’s heading back to Knossos. It’s going to find the city in ruins and assume the island was overrun. And then it’s going to do its job and kill every man, woman, and child on Crete—almost half a million people—because it’s not going to recognize any of them

as a citizen of Knossos. We're all invaders."

Carter stared after the giant. Distant footfalls still made the ground tremble. "You're basing this on what?"

"The first thing it did was kill Zaimis. A native." Grit and dirt drifted off Kraft as he stood up.

"When they were controlling it," Carter pointed out.

"Does it look like they ever had control of it?"

Carter dusted himself off. The rags of his sleeve flapped as he did. "Okay," he said. "It was stopped before, right? How did they stop it then?"

Kraft collected his thoughts. "The Argonauts. They landed here on Crete and Talos attacked. Jason's wife, Medea, convinced Talos to open its own vein and drain out all its blood. The ankle's its weak spot, where she got it to—"

"So, we've got to make it bleed?"

"Yes."

In the distance, the cannons of Talos let off two quick bursts that rang in the air, then a third.

Carter nodded. "Well, then. Good thing for us weapons have improved a bit since the Bronze Age."

"Probably why they were adding all the extra armor."

"I'm sure. Come on."

They made their way down the hill to the ruins of the camp. Carter limped, and Kraft saw that one heel of the man's boot had been torn away. He couldn't guess what state the foot was in.

They ran across the plain to the remains of the tents. "What are we looking for?" asked Kraft.

"Their armory." Carter dragged a panel of canvas aside and examined the wreckage under it. "I didn't see anything else explode past the cannon shells so I'm guessing it didn't get hit."

Kraft eyed the patches of flame around the camp. "Or they haven't gone off yet."

“Do you want to worry about that or do you want to stop your mechanical man?” He kicked the latches on one crate with his good boot. They snapped off and he threw the lid aside. “Medical supplies.”

The professor tried to ignore the dark spray of blood on the tent canvas as he dragged another panel away. “What are we looking for?”

“Anything. Explosives. Rockets. Maybe an anti-tank gun?” Carter marched to the next fallen tent and pulled the limp canvas aside. “Rifles and grenades,” he said. “I think this is it.”

Kraft helped him pull crates out of the fallen tent. Carter kicked at some more locks until Kraft found a crowbar. They snapped hinges and threw crates open.

Carter popped the latches on a smaller box and lifted out something that looked like a low, covered pot without a handle. “Ahhh,” he said. “Tellermine. This might be useful.”

“Did you say it’s a mine?”

The Roman nodded. “Anti-tank mine. One of the newer ones.” He glanced around and pointed across the plain. “See if you can get that car running.”

Kraft ran across the field. He saw a boot he felt sure wasn’t empty, some pieces of bloody meat he tried not to focus on, and stepped around several sprays of blood that hadn’t soaked into the ground yet. Near the car’s door sat a German helmet with strands of hair sticking out from beneath it. He opened the door and took a wide step over the helmet.

The car looked to be something local—an old roadster or town car the invading Germans had seized and decorated with a few small flags that had been torn to shreds in the assault. The vehicle’s leather top had been punched and torn as well, and overlapping webs of cracks decorated both windows on the driver side.

The keys hung in the ignition. The engine turned over on the first try. Kraft dropped the car into gear and brought it around in a

wide turn. Carter waved him over, and Kraft parked the car a few feet away.

“How much gas?” asked the Roman.

“Three-quarters of a tank.”

“Good.” He limped to the car with a mine in each hand.

Kraft stepped out and headed to the collection of explosives. “Are we going to try to set up a minefield ahead of him?”

“Not exactly.”

He lifted two more of the explosive pots and glanced back. Carter crouched at the front of the vehicle. He’d set one of the mines down. He held the other one flat against the car, trigger out, while he wired its handle to the grill. He finished, gave it a nudge to check, and then picked up the second one.

“You have to be joking,” said Kraft.

“We don’t have enough options to make jokes. Bring those over here.” Carter leaned back and looked at the grill. “I think we can get eight on the front.”

“And then what?”

“By then we’ll have figured out how to put the others on the hood.”

Ten minutes later they had nine of the Tellermines wired to the car’s grill. The other three had been fastened to the hood with yards of cloth tape Kraft found in the medical tent. Carter slid behind the wheel. Kraft jumped into the passenger seat. The engine coughed and chugged back to life.

The Germans had beaten down a dirt road that led them to a narrow highway. The strip of gray pavement had enough blind curves that Carter kept the speed under forty miles an hour, and even then the tires squealed on the turns. He squinted into the sun before reaching up and tugging down the sun visor. “It’d be very bad if we bumped into something right now,” he said, gripping the wheel with both hands again.

Another minute of driving and the ocean appeared from behind the hill. “A coastal route,” said Kraft. “Talos is probably following its old path around the island.”

Carter grunted and raised his chin to get more of the sun out of his eyes.

Kraft smelled smoke just as they went around the corner. The truck had been blown apart, and at least six bodies lay scattered across the road. They wore basic dungarees and coats. One had a dress. All of them lacked at least one limb. Two didn’t have heads.

“So,” he said, a mile later, “what’s our plan?”

Carter shrugged. “Ram it. Figure between the impact and the TNT in the mines, we’ll either break it or melt it. Either way, the blood comes out and Crete’s saved.”

Something shiny clung to the pavement up ahead. As they passed, Kraft recognized it as a motorcycle, crushed flat against the pavement, and a German uniform soaked with blood and gore. The morning sun highlighted the outline of a footprint around the wreckage.

Kraft turned his head and the remains of the motorcycle and its rider vanished around a curve. Cracks in the road beat out a low, steady thump against the tires. He scanned the hilltops for any sign of the bronze giant.

Their car swung back and forth along the coastal road for another three minutes before they caught a glimpse of Talos over the crest of one hill. The road dropped them down after that, but a minute later the bronze head and shoulders loomed ahead. The sound of a machine gun echoed through the air, followed by the thunder of cannons.

The bumps in the road started again, worse than before, and Kraft realized the bumps went in time with each massive step Talos took.

“Not long now,” said Carter.

They crested the hill. Talos loomed almost a mile away, but the road between them stretched ruler-straight. The smoking remains of a German checkpoint sprawled on one side of the road—broken bodies, burst sandbags, and a bent machine gun.

Carter downshifted and gunned the engine. “I think we can catch it before it makes it into the hills,” he said.

“And if we can’t?”

“Then we’ll have to follow it into the hills and get a lot closer before we bail out.”

“I’m glad to hear bailing out is part of the plan.”

The car roared down the strip of pavement, lurching as they passed over one of the dead soldiers. A rifle bounced up and smacked the tellermines. Both men cringed.

Five steps, each one covering dozens of yards, carried Talos to the top of the rise.

“Faster,” urged Kraft.

Carter snarled and shifted gears again. The car lurched forward. A tremor worked its way through the frame and floorboards.

Talos moved down past the hill. The earth shook in time with its steps. It turned to follow the road around a ridge.

Their old car reached the base of the hill and lost speed. The engine revved, the gears spun, and their ascent slowed. They stopped gaining on the bronze giant.

“Dammit,” said Carter.

Three more steps carried Talos around a slow curve.

They reached the top of the hill. Ahead of them, the road looped around an outcropping of rock and then vanished behind a steep slope. The same slope that already hid Talos from the thighs down.

The car started to pick up speed again. They swung around the curve and Talos came back into view. The bronze foot struck the pavement and their tires bounced off the road for an instant.

“Sorry to do this to you again, Kraft.”

“Do what?”

Carter swung his legs out from under the steering wheel, pulled them to his chest, and kicked Kraft hard in the side. It threw the professor against the door, and the latch popped open. He grabbed at Carter’s boots, at the door frame, at the air, and then crashed down in a patch of tall grass. A rock hit him right in the small of his back. His head struck the hard-packed ground.

Kraft ignored the pain, rolled over, and crawled toward the road. He forced his head up and saw the car closing in on its target. At the last moment, as if sensing the threat, Talos turned with a squeal of metal and a heavy clank of inner gearing. The fiery eyes looked down at the approaching vehicle.

He saw the flash, almost a large spark, as the old roadster smashed into the giant’s right ankle, straight into one of the armored steel plates. Then the blast slammed into his eardrums, and the wind struck him in the chest. It pushed him off his feet, and he dropped just as something whipped through the air where his skull had been.

The explosion blotted out the sun. It rumbled through the earth and shook the hills. Stones rolled and bounced down every slope.

The wind died down, the clouds of oily smoke cleared, and Kraft froze, propped up on one elbow.

Talos still towered over the hills.

Flames whipped around it. Its gaze and cannon-arm pointed down at the burning crater where the car had been. All that remained of the vehicle were a few struts of metal and a dark block that might’ve been an engine once.

Nothing remained of Carter.

The fire settled down. Beneath a layer of soot, the giant’s legs and torso glowed with the heat of the explosion. Its head came up and swung side to side with the sound of squealing gears and rattling chains.

Kraft’s elbow trembled. Two of his ribs burned with pain. He

bit his lip and wished he'd pulled in more of a breath.

Talos turned back toward Knossos, took a step forward, and paused.

The rear foot—the foot Carter had struck with the car and the mines—hung on a twisted ankle, wrapped around itself like a wrung-out shirt. One of the armor plates had vanished. The other sagged low, its supports sinking into the soft, glowing bronze.

The titan seemed to weigh its choices, then swung its leg forward.

The foot dragged, rolling and deforming even as the ankle stretched thinner. The leg moved into the front. Talos shifted and staggered as the limb came down on the soft ankle. It mushroomed under the weight, forming blisters of metal that swelled as the giant continued to push down.

Metal groaned as Talos leaned back, but gravity had it.

It crashed face-first into the sloping ridge and slid down. Dirt and rocks and bushes all followed it, scraped free as it went by. One of the big arms swung up to stop the descent, and the hillside tore off two of the cannons with a screech of stressed metal. The giant's legs slid back across the road, crashed through the wooden guide rail, and dangled over the rocky ledge, above the ocean.

The twisted ankle moved like clay, a slow arc as it succumbed to gravity. Waves hit the ledge beneath it and droplets hissed and spit off the hot bronze. Then the remains of the foot hit the water and a roar of steam billowed into the sky.

The mechanical giant flailed at the ground like a child. It pushed itself up onto its hands and knees, snapping off another one of the cannons as it did. The whine of spinning gears increased within its torso.

The ground collapsed under its knees, dropping its legs and half the road down into the water. Another gust of steam burst out of its limbs. Talos slid down toward the ocean, then dug its thick

fingers into the ground and dragged itself back. Water sloshed up onto the pavement as the giant hauled its bulk out of the new crater.

Its leg had twisted even more, recast as a solid, bubbling mass of gleaming blisters. It reminded Kraft of clusters of mushrooms along a fallen branch. Talos would never walk again. Not on that leg.

He didn't see any blood.

Talos raised its head. Its gaze fell on Kraft. Its arms shifted, dragging the brass titan toward the professor.

Kraft's hand pawed at his hip even as his feet began to move. The conscious plan appeared in his mind a moment later. His holster gave up the Colt semi-automatic pistol they'd issued him.

He ran toward the wooden guide rail, trying to keep the ruined leg in view even as Talos turned itself to crawl at him. His pistol came up and he aimed as best he could on the move. The bullets pinged and sparked off the bronze, the closest thing he had to tracers. He raised his aim and fired three more shots.

One round punctured the stretched-out, thin wall of one of the blisters with a noise like an over-sized drum. Kraft squeezed the trigger again and again. Another spark. Another echoing drum from another swollen bubble of bronze.

And one thick, solid thump.

Steaming blood sprayed out of the third blister. It coated the road like a firehose for a good twenty feet from the bronze giant. Puddles formed in seconds around the twisted leg.

Talos wrenched its head around with a groan of strained metal. Then it came back to focus its gaze on Kraft.

He turned and ran. His heels thudded on the road as he ran back up the hill. His pace felt slow. Painfully slow. Fatally slow.

Something smashed into the ground behind him. The air filled with the sound of bronze dragging across pavement. Another smash. More grating.

He glanced back. Talos had halved the distance between them,

pulling itself on its fifty foot arms. But its movements lagged, and the glow of its eyes dimmed even as he watched. A thick trail of blood stretched behind it, and the precious liquid still gushed from the hole in the giant's ankle.

Kraft slowed and turned to watch the titan's end.

Talos raised its arm in slow motion. The cannon arm, but the barrel-like magazine had been torn loose from the lone remaining weapon. The massive hand reached forward with a howl of gnashing gears...and stopped.

The whirl of gears and the rattle of chains faded to silence.

Kraft counted to ten.

Its eyes cooled to match its face. Talos had become a statue, the prone figure of a crawling, grasping man. Blood soaked the road behind it, and a last few gallons dribbled from the wound.

He took a step forward and the arm dropped. It crashed into the road like a thousand pounds of sheet metal and hardware. The armored plates with the Nazi emblem broke loose and fell face-down onto the pavement.

Kraft took another minute to compose himself. Several long, deep breaths. He flexed his fists a few times.

And then he ran toward the wooden guardrail.

Soaking wet and half-naked, Carter hauled himself up over the edge and collapsed next to the road. He wrenched himself up to his knees as Kraft ran up, then sagged when he saw who it was. He let himself fall on his hands and a good pint of seawater spilled out of his mouth onto the dirt.

"You lucky son of a bitch," gasped Kraft. He tugged off his own coat and wrapped it around the other man.

Carter bent to spit up more water, then coughed out a bit more. "No more luck left," he wheezed. Barely anything of his leather coat or shirt had survived. Charred holes spotted his pants. The man himself seemed miraculously untouched.

Kraft waved a hand at the charred remains of their car. “How’d you survive that?”

The Roman shrugged. “Bailed out at the last minute, as soon as the car was on a straightaway with that thing. Hit the road, then the blast knocked me out into the water.” He coughed again, then managed a smile. “Set me on fire, then it almost drowned me.”

“I thought you were dead.”

Carter managed a chuckle and waved a weak hand at Talos. “It’ll take more than that old thing to kill me.”

Kraft helped him up. “Now what?”

“Well,” said Carter, “it’s broad daylight and we’re in the middle of Nazi-occupied Crete. And I have to believe that, by this point, they’re looking for what happened to their latest super-weapon.”

“There is a plan for getting us back to England, yes?”

“I think Zaimis knew it.”

“Wonderful.”

Carter straightened his back and pounded his chest twice. “Buck up, Kraft,” he said. “After this, how hard will it be to get past a few thousand Nazis?”