

10,000 Dawns: Bonus Story #10 (Part 1)

The Mask of Apollo, Part 1
by James Wylder

Lametrius carefully brushed the dirt off of the golden mask. Behind her, J-14 continually scanned her excavation, while Kinan and Jenny played cards on a mostly-flat rock. John and Miranda Vice were watching something on a tablet, while a few other Dawn members bustled around the dig site.

“Is it all dug out yet?” Jenny said sullenly.

“Hush.” Kinan said, playing a card that brought a scowl to Jenny's face.

Lametrius had finally worked away the excess dirt, and pulled out her flashlight, sticking it inbetween her teeth. It was daytime, but she wanted to see it shine, and oh did it shine. Gently, she lifted the mask out of the soil, and ran her thumb across it.

“Its in such good shape... I can't believe its so intact.” Jenny slapped a card down and swept a pile of cards up off the rock.

“Its so intact cause we traveled back in time to get it.”

“I thought it would be more, you know, melted.” Kinan folded, and walked over to the dig site. She hopped down into the hole, and looked at the shining mask.

“Huh.” She said. Lametrius frowned.

“You see one of the most beautiful pieces of goldworking in history, and you say 'huh'?” Kinan shrugged. “This is the mask of a God!”

“This is the mask of a man who dressed up as a god. Not that there is much of a difference.”

“Oh not this again.” Jenny cut in. Lametrius carried the mask out of the hole, and held it up to the sun. It was an important mask after all, and this was its counterpart. It was only right the mask of Apollo see the sun. It's features were perfect: some Trojan craftsman had put all their knowledge into this mask, and even a strong oponent of religion could see how someone could be taken in by its majesty. Without any pomp or grandeur, Kinan lightly took the mask out of her hands, and placed it upon her face. Turning to the group, she held her arms out as though telling the sun to continue its journey through the sky.

“Well, how do I look?”

She'd hate the truth, because she looked utterly like some sort of demi-god. With her binder on under her shirt, and the boyish features of the Apollo mask, Kinan took on an androgynous beauty out of myth.

“I think,” Miranda said, “that you're going to play the part in your plan perfectly.”

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The halls of the Firmament's government were older than time. Not that that was a sentence that particularly made sense, but it was true, sort of, maybe. At the very least people liked to say it was. Today though, the Courier of Stagnation was wishing that perhaps someone could have updated the internal transportation system. Maybe they could at least key her soul to the elevator so she wouldn't have to run up the steps? She was here to see the Arbiter of Chronology, and that was never the most fun. At least the Arbiter of Causality or the Arbiter of Infinity had a sense of humor. The Arbiter of Chronology on the other hand may as well have written a book on not getting people's jokes. Actually, he might have actually done that. She wasn't particularly sure anymore. She got to his thick Oak doors, and knocked. Then she knocked again. Eventually a hooded figure cracked the door.

“Yes?”

“You know damn well why I'm here Lesser of Evils, and don't even try to pretend you're Greater of Good it still hasn't been funny since you started that last milenia.” The hooded figure awkwardly got out of her way as she barged into the Arbiter's office.

“Hey, Arbiter.” She said boldly. The Arbiter looked up, annoyed. “You do realize Dawn number 624 is having a massive, massive temporal disturbance right now?”

“I'm aware.” He droned. The room was coated in bookshelves-- and that wasn't an exaggeration.

Bookshelves lined every wall, they were on the ceiling, somehow held in place from falling on their heads, and they sat below their feet. The Arbiter's desk was made of wood, but it too was stacked with books.

“I'm very busy writing history you know. There is quite a lot of it, and the annoying thing about it is it keeps happening. I really have a lot to catch up on.” Stagnation rolled her eyes, and moved to sit down. Books flew up from the floor to make a chair for her. She straightened her black robes, and tried to make the single off-center yellow stripe on them straight.

“If we don't fix this, we're going to have a serious problem on our hands. There are massive chronological repercussions to this, it seems very likely most people we were planning on having be born in that universe's future, indeed counting on, will not be.” He looked up from his book, and placed his quill in a holder.

“Explain.”

“Its Dawn. They're changing things.”

“Dawn is always changing things. That's essentially their entire reason for existing. But usually they only manipulate later history, which is fairly innocuous.” She slammed her fist on a book on his desk dramatically, and he gave her a sour look. She pulled her hand back apologetically.

“Look, Arbiter, this is early history.”

“They wouldn't dare. They know what happened why they tried to change the result at old Nojpeten...” She leaned in.

“They dare. You want to know what they did?” He sighed.

“Sure.”

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Achilles walked in front of the Greek line, yelling his speech. He was talking them up, but also talking himself up. He hoped Patroclus was listening, after all, he was basically the cutest thing alive. He banged on his breastplate dramatically. Agamemnon and Menelaus were watching from the back. They were dressed in the best armor money could buy, but they knew who should go first. Looking up at the walls, Achilles had a momentary sense of doubt. Could they break these walls? Take Troy? He knew hypothetically they could... But in practice? He shook his head and beat his chest. He was a gorilla, or

a lion, or... He tried to tell himself he was a man and cast out the doubts of his young age.

"Tonight, my Myrmidons, we will strike the heart of Troy, and they shall fear us for eternity!" The troops cheered, pounding the pommels of their spears into the dirt and yelling and chanting. Achilles soaked it all in, he was glorious, he was a--

"Fool." A booming voice said from the walls of Troy. "Are you not aware this is my city?"

The gates opened, and the Myrmidons formed a shield wall, as a single figure walked out of the gates. The figure wore a long brown coat, and their face shone like the sun, molded of gold. In one hand they held a simple stool carved from a log, and in the other they held a harp. The figure faced the army, threw its stool down, sat on it, and began to strum out a refined melody on the harp. Everyone expected something to change but it just... Kept playing.

The soldiers looked at each other confused. Achilles was right there with them, but kept his calm.

Looking back to Agamemnon, he hoped for an order. Agamemnon gestured to an archer, who notched his bow and carefully aimed an arrow at the harpist. With a downward chopping motion, he gave the signal, and the arrow let fly!

The harpist's hand moved like a whiplash, and grabbed the arrow out of the air, lightly dropped it on the sandy soil, and returned to strumming their harp. That certainly hadn't been what Achilles or Agamemnon expected. Achilles ran back through the lines to consult with the Kings. Most of them looked shocked, Odysseus was laughing his head off, however.

"That was downright impossible." Agamemnon sputtered.

"We'll just wait them out, he'll have to get tired sometime." Menelaus muttered. Odysseus laughed again, rolling his eyes.

"Meneleus, do you really think a creature from heaven or earth with the skill to grab an arrow on the air doesn't know exactly what they are doing in standing in front of us?" He chided.

"He's goading us!" Agamemnon yelled.

"How are we so sure its a man?" Achilles asked. All turned to him. Agamemnon raised his arms in greeting.

"Ah, our finest soldier. What insights do you have?" Achilles thought for a moment, Odysseus watched him. They met eyes, and Odysseus nodded, as if very curious what the boy had to say.

"They're trying to confuse us. It doesn't matter what action we take here, regardless of how we respond our men now know that the enemy can drop us to a standstill." Odysseus smiled, and nodded to him. Agamemnon was a bit less calm, in that he began to throw a temper tantrum, yelling and kicking, and landing several blows on his cup bearer who crumpled over clutching his head, the wine he was carrying sinking into the ground.

"There's no need for that..." Odysseus said, with exasperation. They waited it out.

"Achilles!" He finally yelled, "Go kill that harpist." Achilles nodded, and without another word began

to walk through the lines to the harpist.

He reached the golden masked figure, and drew his sword. The music stopped, and the figure slowly raised its golden face to him. Beneath the mask, he could see pale blue eyes. Neither of them moved for a moment, Achilles' chest rose and fell, and he pointed his sword at the harpist.

“Arm yourself.” The harpist slowly tilted their head.

“Arm myself? What if I'm an army.” Achilles spat on the dirt.

“You're just a man with a boring sense of humor.”

“Am I?” It said back. “Someone really should have told me that before, I had no idea.” It began to play the harp again, and he thrust the sword under the man's mask.

“Fight me or die.”

“You can't kill a god, mortal. Didn't you hear what I said? This is my city.” Achilles felt his sword wobbling in his hands, and then it was pulled free! It flew spinning through the air, up to the top of the city walls. “Its time for you Greeks to go home.” Achilles was stunned, the troops were stunned, the kings were stunned. The figure resumed playing its harp.

“You can call me Apollo. I will go back in the city walls at sundown.” Achilles nodded, totally unsure of what he was suppose to say in reply to that. “Go, shoo. Tell your kings to go home.”

“They brought us here. Paris kidnapped Helen, Menelaus' wife and--” The god laughed.

“You really believe that? That the woman who taunts you every day from the city walls is here not of her own choice? You're being played for a fool Achilles. These men hold no love towards you aside from your skill with a sword. Do you really think they care for your life, or the life of your lover Patroclus?” Achilles blushed.

“We uh... Aren't lovers...”

“Achilles, don't lie to a god please its just embarrassing.”

“...Okay fine we're lovers.” Apollo threw his hands out.

“See? That wasn't so hard. Anyways everyone knows it. Well, aside from a few Historians who desperately want to ignore textual evidence who will say you're 'friends' but, they're the minority. You have a nice boyfriend. Don't die here with him.” Achilles took a step backwards, still facing Apollo, and then another, and then another.

He made his way all they way back to the lines of his men, bumping into one of their breastplates.

“Achilles, what did they say?” Agamemnon yelled, but Achilles didn't wait any longer. He pushed threw the soldiers, and made his way back to the camp. Finding his way to their tent, he pulled it open, and stepped inside, Patroclus sat up from the cot.

“Achilles, what...” But Achilles didn't say anything, he simply ran to his lover and kissed him.

“We're leaving.” He said, “This war is for fools.”

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“So do you see why we need to intervene?” Courier of Stagnation exclaimed. “They're ruining everything! That reality is going to be massively changed.” The Arbiter nodded, slowly.

“Well then, I suppose its time to take drastic action.” Courier smiled, good. “Its time for Dawn to face the night.”

Tune in soon for the dramatic conclusion! And make sure you visit jameswylder.com on March 3rd for the final chapters of the Serial 10,000 Dawns Adventure!