

Titan Riders

By Danny Cove

The cold wind tore across my face, and I shook beneath the heavy furs I wore. Snowflakes caught in my beard, not melting but turning my dark hair a pale gray, matching the blank skies around us. I looked back at the rest of my village and walked unsteadily toward them, the ground beneath me shifting and warping as I moved, reminding me of the creature below.

I reached the outer perimeter of the place where the villagers gathered, where they huddled together for warmth. I circled like a guard, patrolling to make sure no one wandered too far over to where the ground grew steep and slick. Whoever went far enough to tumble off the edge would have a long fall, and if that didn't kill them, the intense cold would. This was a world so bright for so long, and so dark for so much longer it seemed, a place of ice and frost, a border world no living man had ever crossed. As I walked, I saw the sight of Critias up ahead, the Greek immigrant who had arrived shortly before the beast itself. He slowed down when I caught up to him, but kept a distant gaze. "Are we still moving?" he asked.

"The wind still tears at our beards," I told him.

"The wind is always moving," he replied. "That's no guarantee that *we* are."

"I see the horizon change," I went on. He stayed silent for a moment, seeming to accept that claim. After a moment, I asked him, "Why did you leave your home for ours?"

"I was seeking what I've now found," he said cryptically. "Back in Athens, I knew human power, and I wielded it like a tyrant. But my countrymen now think me dead by their own hands, and so I chose to seek out true power, and to that end, I found the beast on which we

ride.” As he spoke the last words, the ground rumbled slightly beneath us and a great, low hum echoed out into oblivion.

He had been with us for less than a single moon before the great rumble from beyond our village had drawn us to the great beast, the leviathan which dwarfed the our mountain. With Critias’ help, we had healed the creature, then tamed it, and when the frost killed our crops before harvest time, Critias had convinced us to ride the creature to a fabled land he called Hyperborea, a paradise which he claimed existed beyond the deadly tundra. At first, the elders had refused, claiming that the giants would kill anyone who dared to venture there. “But this creature you’ve found is unstoppable!” he had cried out to the assembly. “No giant can stand before it!”

So now my whole village rode on the great plain which was the creature’s back. It had no wings and yet it glided like a bird above the ice. We had abandoned our village and now there was no turning back. The unstoppable creature would bring us to a great new world of opportunity.

“So what do you think it is?” I asked Critias while we wandered around the huddle of my people.

“It’s a titan,” he told me. “Once conquered by the Olympian gods and chained in the deep abyss of Tartarus for all eternity. Somehow, I believe this one escaped.”

“By my belief, such creatures will eventually kill the gods,” I replied to the Greek. “Odin will fall to the great wolf and Thor will be poisoned by the snake which even now chews at the roots of the world. I think that maybe your gods are arrogant in thinking they can chain such beings for eternity.”

“Perhaps this beast is only the first of his kind to free itself from its chains,” Critias remarked. “Perhaps the old war is about to begin anew.”

“We call it Ragnarok,” I told him. “And if that is so, then I am glad we’re crossing the ice. I’ll thank you if we make it to this new place.”

“We will,” he said. “This titan is unstoppable.”

Suddenly, there arose a great roar from off to our right, something inhuman roaring out into an abyss. We backed closer to our people but could see very little in the swirling mist. A boy came running from far ahead, shouting as loudly as he could. “Dead ahead, dead ahead!” he screamed with all his strength.

“What is dead ahead?” I asked him.

He spoke only one word: Jotun.

Suddenly, the ground shook violently as if it had been struck, and another great moan echoed around. The mist to our right began to swirl, faster than wind, and then a form arose from the blank white clouds: it was a great pillar of fragmented ice. As we neared it, it began to move and rotate, and we realized too late that it was a gargantuan arm swinging toward the creature beneath us. We couldn’t hear or see the wound, but the shaking below us confirmed the hit. Within moments, the icy limb vanished back into the mists as the creature tilted forward, rapidly falling down. We broke through the cloud which had briefly surrounded us and saw a mountain range ahead, a range I had never seen.

“We must jump off when we reach it,” Critias said. “It is the Carpathian Mountains, and beyond it is only the frozen sea, which will end us all.”

I didn’t hesitate as the mountain range drew near. With a violent quake, our ride crashed through the top of the mountain, and I leapt to the right, sliding down a steeply descending grade

until there was nothing below me. I tumbled through the air and finally landed in a bank of snow. I scrambled to my feet as I heard the soft thuds of my fellow villagers falling around me, all landing safely in more banks of snow.

Ahead, only hundreds of feet away, I saw the great beast finally stop as it crashed through what looked like a sea of ice. The ice shattered and it began to sink, and the shadows atop it confirmed the doom that now swallowed up most of my village. The few of us who'd leapt onto the Carpathian Mountains were the only survivors, the only ones saved from the frozen abyss beyond this refuge.

I found Critias nearby and the two of us moved in silence, joined steadily by those of us who had escaped. As we walked, my mind reeling from the disaster and the decimation of my people, I couldn't help but wonder at the gods, who could conquer enormous titans but fall at the swipe of a Jotun. As I thought on this, I began to wonder if there was something else out there, some power which had formed all three races, something which had made both man to till on Earth and winged Valkyrie to serve above.

Ahead, a small building appeared from out of the clouds and snow. It was a strange building, small and dark, and with an odd symbol clinging to the pinnacle of its roof: it was the symbol of a cross.