

Cygnus

(Time – 5.01)

The great and terrible war between the Greeks and the people of Troy had just begun. A fleet of Greek ships had dropped anchor. Warriors armed to the teeth were wading ashore. The people of Troy knew this army had come to attack their city. The Trojan men sharpened their swords, they harnessed horses to chariots, they seized helmets and shields and strapped on breastplates. The bronze gates of their city were thrown open and the Trojan army poured across the plain with a whirring of wheels, a creaking of chariots, a neighing of horses, a shouting of men and a thundering of hooves and feet.

With a crash of bronze against bronze, the Trojans met the Greeks. And striding among the Trojan soldiers was a warrior called Cygnus. He stood head and shoulders above all other men. His skin was charmed against the striking of all weapons; sword, dagger, spear, arrow and battle axe. He was a son of Poseidon, the god of the sea. He was white skinned, white lipped, white tongued, as white as sea foam. He cut down Greeks with every stroke of his sword, with every thrust of his spear, while the Greeks' swords buckled against his skin and Greek spears glanced from him as if glancing from stone. He left a wake of dead behind himself as he fought.

Among the Greeks was their fiercest warrior: Achilles. As soon as his eyes fastened on Cygnus, he came bounding across the battlefield towards him, as though he was running through long grass. When he drew close to Cygnus, he lifted his spear. 'Know it was Achilles who killed you.' With all the strength of his arm, he hurled his spear. It struck Cygnus' throat and clattered down to the ground at his feet, as though it was a reed that had been thrown by a little boy. Cygnus lifted both his arms and laughed.

'Throw another one my little friend. I know who you are. You're Thetis' son. But I'm no more afraid of you than of a mosquito that I might smear across my arm. From head to foot, I am charmed against the striking of all weapons.' Achilles drew his bronze sword then and attacked Cygnus. He leapt and twisted, cutting and slashing with his sharp-edged blade, until Cygnus' armour hung from his body like a shattered egg-shell. But still the white skin was unscratched and still Cygnus laughed at Achilles. And then he lifted his own spear and he threw it. He threw it with such force that Achilles staggered backwards. The blade had penetrated the gold of his shield. It had penetrated nine layers of hardened ox-hide. But then Achilles caught his balance and smiled grimly, and it was as though in that moment he'd solved a riddle. He curled his lips back from his teeth and screamed. He leapt and smashed his shield into Cygnus' face. He ground the boss of his shield to the left and the right until Cygnus' nose was smeared across his cheek and his teeth were shattered.

Cygnus fell backwards and Achilles knelt on his shoulders. 'If weapons won't harm you, what will armour do?' He tore the helmet from Cygnus' head and wrapped the helmet straps around his throat. He tugged and twisted and tightened the tourniquet until Cygnus' head was half torn from his shoulders and every last shudder of life was gone from him. Splattered with blood and shrieking with laughter, Achilles leapt to his feet.

The Trojan army stood and stared at him, appalled. And then a strange thing happened. The twisted, broken neck of Cygnus began to stretch and to curve. His face narrowed. His mouth stretched and hardened into a beak. White feathers pushed through his white skin. His father Poseidon had taken pity on him and had transformed him into a swan. He beat his feathered arms against the air and the shattered eggshell armour fell from his body. He flew up and up and up into the sky, high above the battlefield. Every warrior stared up at him. There was no sound but the sighing and the souging of his wings. Three times he circled above both armies and then he flew over the white sands, over the masts of the ships, over the blue waves of the sea. And he was gone.