

FIGHT

THE

GODS



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FOR FRANK FRAZETTA, WHO MADE IT HAPPEN



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was in second grade, I read a great, little book called *Greek Myths* by Olivia E. Coolidge, thereby sealing my fate as a devoted student of things mythological. I've read many other books on mythology, but none had the same magical effect as *Greek Myths*. Mrs. Coolidge, by the way, enjoyed a prestigious career as an author and educator, lived to be 98, and had seventeen great-grandchildren at the time of her death. Good for her. I owe her big time.

A little more recently (at the age of 46), I met Wayne Baker—the father of one of my younger son's friends—who played single-wall handball. "I used to play handball when I was a teen-ager," I told him. "We should play," he said, his eyes lighting up at the prospect of running me into the ground. At first, he did just that. Then I got better.

We're still playing, mostly as doubles partners, in which role we routinely enlighten hubristic teen-agers as to their limitations. I always thank Wayne for returning me to handball, but really I can't thank him enough, and as you read the first chapter of this book you'll see why.

I'm not a cop, I've never been a cop, and at this stage in my

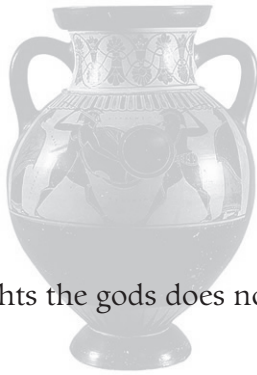
life it's unlikely I'll ever be a cop. This made it difficult to write as if I were a former cop, like my protagonist. Sergeant Michael Beck of the U.S. Park Police made the job a heck of a lot easier. Whatever I got right about the police life is his fault. Whatever I got wrong is mine.

Some time ago, at a science fiction convention outside Baltimore, a guy named Bob Jones offered me tickets to an Orioles game. I barely knew him. I know him a lot better now, not just as an interesting person and a sweetheart of a guy, but also as a terrific writer who found his muse late in life. When I needed somebody to read *Fight The Gods* and tell me if there was a shred of hope for the darn thing, I gave it to Bob. He spent his birthday giving me comments.

I would also like to say something about my colleagues in Crazy 8 Press: Peter David, Robert Greenberger, Glenn Hauman, Aaron Rosenberg, and Howard Weinstein. The fact that you're reading this is a testament to their talents, their professionalism, and their selflessness. Make sure you look for their books as well on the Crazy 8 Press website. You won't regret having done so.

Mike Friedman

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The man who fights the gods does not live long.

—Homer, *The Iliad*



CHAPTER ONE

I was surprised to hear from the ghost so early in the morning.

The sun was just sneaking between the pale, square factory buildings of Long Island City, scouring them with light, as I drove to the oldest high school in the neighborhood. At that hour, even the doughnut shops weren't open yet. And yet the ghost seemed wide awake.

I had never heard from him before noon, as far back as I could recall. In that regard he was a lot like my ex-partner, Bernie O'Neill. Bernie never liked to get up early either, not if he had even the slightest choice in the matter.

I need to speak with you, said the ghost, as usual audible only to me.

The note of urgency in his voice was pretty hard to miss. Unfortunately, I couldn't talk with him just then. I had business to take care of, business it had taken me a lot of time and energy to set up.

Important business.

"Not now," I told him.

For some reason, I couldn't ever just *think* my response to him. I had to say it out loud, even if it was just sotto voce.

The high school, a stately, red-brick edifice that had been built there long before the factories, was just up ahead. I made a left at the corner and slipped into a primo parking space not far from the entrance to the school yard.

What do you mean not now? he pressed.

Ghosts can be annoyingly insistent. And the more ancient they are, the more insistent they can be. As if their advanced age gives them a legal license to prey on the sanity of the living.

"It's a bad time," I said, turning off my car and pulling the key out of the ignition.

I peered through a chain-link fence at the asphalt expanse of the yard, which sported a faded baseball diamond and a half-dozen basketball courts. But I didn't care about those at the moment. I was looking for something else.

It stood in the far corner of the yard, a sixteen-foot-high wall of precast cement tinged with the long, bloody onslaught of a particularly spectacular August sun-up. On either side of the wall was a rectangular cement apron that stretched out exactly thirty-four feet. And surrounding the whole deal was a chain link fence just like the one that hugged the rest of the school yard.

A single-wall handball court. The kind you only find in New York, like candy stores that sell the Sunday Times on Saturday night and real half-sour pickles.

At this hour on a Sunday, there was nobody around. Not the students who attended the high school, not the people who worked in the printing plant or the stained glass shop or the paint wholesaler across the street, not even a cop on the

beat—which was the whole point.

The place smelled like rusted fence-iron and last night's cheap wine, smothered in air that was already too hot to breathe. The power line above me was full of crows, their feathers shining like oil slicks. They were lined up like spectators, quiet, focused, as if they knew something big was going down and didn't want to miss any of it.

Taking along my keys, the cold bottle of water on the seat beside me, and a business-sized envelope packed full of hundred-dollar bills—the last item safely tucked into a pocket of my cargo shorts—I left the car and made my way across the yard.

When I got to the court I sat down and put my back against the fence. Then I waited. I didn't have to wait long.

Junior and his boys came sauntering across the yard like they owned it, their shadows stretched out ahead of them like an advance guard. Junior was unmistakable—six-four, maybe six-five, with a long, painfully lean body. His hair was a bright red comb like a rooster's, his nose was cruelly hooked, and his eyes were so protuberant they seemed to jump out of their orbits. If he'd ever had a name besides Junior, he didn't use it anymore.

His entourage consisted of three guys, all wearing black sweatpants and muscle tees as if it were some kind of uniform. Two of them were white, though not nearly as white as Junior, with the thick necks and muscular arms associated with professional football players. The third one, a light skinned Latino, was even more massive than the others.

I knew they were packing hardware. Not that this was the worst neighborhood in New York's five boroughs, not even close. But Junior wasn't going to carry ten thousand dollars in cash without taking a few modest measures to protect it. Besides, in the game they were playing, one *always* carried hardware.

No doubt, they were a little surprised I had come alone. At five-foot-eight I wasn't exactly an imposing figure, even if I was in pretty good shape. My age probably surprised them as well. Most of Junior's challengers were in their twenties, and I was clearly a bit older than that.

But from their standpoint, ten thousand dollars was ten thousand dollars.

I had watched Junior play here and there around the city, some on West Fourth Street behind the basketball cage and some in Hunts Point. Always at odd times of day, and never for more than an hour. Someone told me he used to play Coney Island too, but he didn't do that anymore. It had gotten too *political* for him in Coney Island.

Junior ducked his head to get through the entrance to the court, already starting to strip off his tee shirt. He flung it against the fence, then pulled a blue rubber ball out of his purple satin sweatpants and began bouncing it on the cement surface.

His body was so pale and angular it might have been carved from ivory. No tattoos or body piercings, which was unusual for somebody in his position. The sound of his bouncing ball rang out like a bell, echoing.

Without a word I got up and pulled off my own tee shirt, exposing the half-dozen old scars I wore on my back and shoulders, and tossed it next to Junior's. Then I took a swig from my water bottle and put it near the fence as well.

Junior's bull-necked compadres watched me the whole time, making sure I didn't do anything *unsportsmanlike*.

"Got the money?" asked Junior, in a high, almost girlish voice, still intent on the bounce of the ball.

"Right here," I said, patting the envelope in my pocket.

One of the white guys turned me around, put my hands against the fence, and frisked me. He didn't find anything except the wad of hundreds—a fact he communicated to Junior with an upturned thumb.

"Outstanding," Junior said matter-of-factly, as if such details were beneath him.

He had an edge to him, a haughtiness, that even the inconvenient pitch of his voice couldn't dispel. I could see why people followed him, why he had become what he was.

This is an outrage, said the ghost, apparently not yet done with me.

He meant the way I was treating *him*, not the way Junior's bodyguard was treating *me*. "Let it go," I breathed.

Junior looked up at me, his eyes narrowing. "You say something?"

I smiled. "Just talkin' to myself."

"Yeah," said Junior, returning his attention to the ball. He tossed it into the air. "I get that a lot. But it's usually *after* they play me."

Laughter erupted from his compadres. Mocking laughter. The kind that was supposed to have me beaten a little before I started.

Junior, meanwhile, let the ball bounce lower and lower until it was only an inch or so off the ground. Then, in a long, graceful motion that belied the force behind it, he pulled back his open hand and whacked the ball in the direction of the wall. The ball struck hard and low, so low that when it came back, it didn't bounce—it rolled.

Then Junior picked up the ball and did it again. And again.

I wasn't impressed. I had played this game since before Junior pooped his first diaper, and I had seen it all. Every velocity, every angle, every spin, every attempt at misdirection. I wasn't expecting any surprises.

On the other hand, Junior was supposed to be the best. The best *ever*, a sportswriter had said a couple of years earlier in the *Daily News*, even though handball had been played in New York for more than a hundred years. And some of the people he quoted had the credentials to know what they were talking about.

About handball, at least.

Which was one of the reasons I had agreed to get up so early in this oven of an August morning to make the trip to Long Island City with ten thousand dollars in my pocket. For a long time now, Junior had only played for money. And the more his reputation as a player had grown on courts around the city, the more money he played for.

Again, the ghost tickled my mind. *This is no trivial matter.*

"It can wait," I whispered.

"You sure do a lot of talking to yourself," observed Junior. "You think this is *doubles*?"

His entourage shared another belly laugh. It was a good line, good enough to draw most other guys into an exchange of trash talk. But that wasn't my style. *You talk, you walk*, I had heard someone say once, a long time ago. I had made it my mantra. You shoot your mouth off, you leave the court with your tail between your loser legs.

"Can I see the ball?" I asked Junior. He flipped it to me, putting a spin on it so it seemed to jump away before it angled back to me. It was the way things were done on handball courts around the city. Nothing was as simple as it looked.

Not even me.

I squeezed the ball, getting a sense of how much it would compress when it hit the wall, and therefore how fast it would come back at me. It was new, and good quality, and warm to the touch from Junior's pounding. It would be a fast game.

My kind of game.

But it was also Junior's kind of game, and from what I had seen of him he played it well. I hit the ball off the wall a few times, alternating between my right hand and my left. I didn't try to hit especially low or especially hard. I just wanted to get the feel of it.

Each time the ball hit the concrete, it made a resounding *thwok*. Over the years, I had grown to love that sound. It brought back flashes of other times, other games, other opponents. But none of them as tough as this one.

“Game to twenty-one,” said Junior. “Volley for serve.”

“My pleasure,” I said.

Suit yourself, the ghost told me.

Which meant I wouldn’t be able to get in touch with him until after he cooled off, and that could involve days or even weeks. I regretted that, especially since the ghost had gotten me out of more jams than I cared to remember. But I couldn’t conduct a conversation and a handball game at the same time, could I?

Throwing the ball in a high, lazy arc at the wall, I put it in play. Then I spread my feet with my weight forward and my knees bent, and braced myself for Junior’s return.

It was a rocket shot to my left, not quite low enough to be a stone-cold killer. Diving for the ball, I plunked it off the heel of my left hand, creating a little backspin. The ball kissed the wall ever so lightly and bounced maybe an inch off the ground.

Against most opponents, it would have been enough. But not against Junior. Pelting in from the backcourt, he got his left hand on the ball and swatted it to the right side of the court, where I would have a hard time reaching it—especially considering I was still getting back on my feet.

But *I* wasn’t just any opponent either. Digging hard to my right, I caught up with the ball and pulled it back over my shoulder. To Junior’s credit, he hadn’t counted his chicken before it was hatched. He was in perfect position to take the soft bounce off the wall and shoot it low to his left, well beyond my reach.

“My serve,” he said, the slightest note of disdain in his voice.

Then he went on to score the next three points, all on

closely contested volleys. It was frustrating, to say the least. Junior wasn't murdering me the way I had seen him murder most of his other opponents. In fact, the way I saw it, he was outplaying me by only the narrowest of margins.

Still, it was enough.

I had to change the tune. On Junior's next serve, I lobbed the ball high off the wall, dropping it down in the rear left-hand corner of the court.

He drifted back after it, looking completely unflustered. But when he returned the shot, his timing was off a little, and the ball hit the wall a little too high. I was able to flick it to my right, where it proved to be just out of Junior's reach.

"Lucky shot," said Junior in that crazy high voice of his.

Not really, I thought.

It was my serve for the first time, and I was determined not to waste the opportunity. As long as I could remember, I had always had the ability to turn my game up a notch. It was just a matter of concentrating a little harder.

I caught Junior by surprise. He seemed tentative, off-balance under the force of my attack. Three serves later the score was tied at three, and I had some momentum going for me.

"That's all you get," Junior told me.

Sez you, I thought.

It was a long way to twenty-one, but I was about to take control of the game. I could feel it, just like I could feel the warm touch of the sun on my back.

Then something happened. Just as I had found a higher gear, Junior seemed to find one too. Suddenly he was moving

faster, hitting harder, sending me diving around the court like a dolphin at SeaWorld.

It occurred to me that he had been toying with me all along, making me think I was in the game when I wasn't. There were guys who liked to do that. But I was pretty sure Junior wasn't one of them. In the games I had watched him play, he had been all business, all lethal intent.

Somehow I hung in against him, but just barely. He started scoring points again, one after the other. A lucky break got me the serve back, but I lost it again just as fast.

"Going nowhere," said Junior, underlining the obvious.

I couldn't figure it out. The way he was playing, he wasn't just great. He was superhuman. Like one of those aliens you see in the movies. Any minute, I expected his teeth to slide out of his mouth and take a chunk out of me.

Before I knew it, the score was 6-3. Then 10-3. I was taking a beating, no way around it.

Something else was bothering me too—a pressure in my ears that had started a few minutes earlier and gotten progressively worse. It made me feel like I was on a plane going in for a long, torturous landing, and me without a stick of chewing gum.

I couldn't see any reason for it. No change in the weather, nothing. But there it was.

I worked my jaw around, but it didn't help. If anything, it got worse. As if from a great distance I could hear a ringing, a million little bells chiming in unison. Hell of a thing. Like I needed a distraction on top of everything else.

Still, I wasn't giving up. I mean, I might never have a chance

to play someone like Junior again in my life.

With a dig that took some skin off my knuckles, I regained the serve. Pounding the ball with all the torque I could muster, I put Junior back on his heels and won the next couple of points. I almost added a third one as well, but my killer was just out of bounds on the wall.

That gave Junior the chance to rack up two more points of his own. The score was 12-6. I was still in striking distance but I was fading. Another run on Junior's part and he would have too big a lead for me to overcome.

He knew it, too. He didn't say it, but he had this shit-eating grin that told me he knew it.

We had been playing for an hour or more—an eternity for a game of singles. I had probably done better than Junior expected. Maybe better than anyone he had played before. At least I wanted to think so.

But if the game stayed this course, it was over. *Over.*

And that was a bitter thought. More bitter than the tang of spilled wine and fence-rust. More bitter than bile.

At the side of the court, Junior's wingmen shared a joke. They were enjoying this. I shut out their laughter, shut out *everything*, and focused on the task at hand.

With a little glance at me over his shoulder, Junior wound up for another serve. Like the last few it was a rocket, but this one had a little English on it, squeezing me so I couldn't put a decent swing on the ball. Even so, I managed to slam it hard to Junior's right, keeping it just inside the line.

He stretched for it, but missed it by a few inches. Somewhere

above us, a seagull squawked.

My serve, I thought. Let me make it a great one. Let me make them *all* great ones from here on in.

It was then that I caught sight of the cars out of the corner of my eye. They were moving in slowly from both ends of the street, converging on the entrance to the schoolyard. One white, one dark blue, and both of them chock full of cops.

Crap, I thought, not now. Not *yet*.

While I was thinking it, Junior won the volley and got back the serve.

I understood why my friends in the cars couldn't have waited any longer. The game had to end prematurely—that had been the plan all along. But I had wanted to be ahead of Junior when it happened, not trailing by a half dozen points.

It galled me to think that he had dominated me that way.

And there wasn't going to be any rematch. At least, not while Junior was still in his prime. He was going away, and for a long time.

None of Junior's bodyguards seemed to catch on to what was happening. They were too busy snickering to one another, enjoying the spectacle.

But Junior himself was a different story. As he pulled his hand back to serve, he stopped cold—and lifted his head like a buck deer that had suddenly caught the scent of a predator. His eyes, filled with something uncomfortably like amusement, found me and fixed on me—but only for a fraction of a second. Then he whirled and took off, headed for the ten-foot-high section of fence to his right.

I saw what he had in mind. Beyond the fence was the street, a narrow one lined with factory buildings. But as Junior leaped high onto the fence, grasping it with his long, white fingers, a couple of cars screeched into view to block his way.

That should have been that. Junior and his entourage had been caught like fish in a barrel, exactly the way we had drawn it up.

But something happened. There was a big, white flash that blinded me for a moment. And it didn't *just* blind me—it popped my ears, relieving the pressure I had felt while the game was on.

By the time I could see again, even a little, Junior was heaving himself over the top of the ten-foot-high fence. It wouldn't have been such a big deal except the cops in the cars on the other side appeared to have been blinded too, and they hadn't recovered yet.

As I realized that, I realized also that Junior's men weren't surrendering, despite the fact that they were thoroughly surrounded. The crack of gunfire stretched across the yard as Junior's bodyguards opened fire on the cops advancing from the entrance.

Fortunately for me, they seemed to have forgotten I was there. Obviously, they hadn't put two and two together yet and realized I was part of the sting.

I could have tried to take one of them out, which would certainly have helped my brothers across the yard. But Junior was the big fish, the one we had set the bait for. If he escaped, it was all for nothing.

So, spots still dancing in front of my eyes, I started scaling the fence one fistful of chain-link after another. As I watched, Junior hit the walk on the other side and started making tracks. A few seconds later, I hit the walk myself.

He was maybe two hundred feet ahead of me. I took off after him.

I had always been fast. In my sixteen years on the force, I had run down more perps than I could count—high school track stars, running backs, point guards, it didn't much matter.

But I hadn't taken ten strides before I knew Junior was too much for me. I was going all out, all elbows and knees, and instead of closing the gap I was watching him widen it.

I kept at it, arms churning like pistons, pumping air in and out of my lungs. Sometimes, I reminded myself, even the fastest guys gave out over the long haul. But I had a bad feeling Junior wasn't going to be one of them.

Fortunately, I had an ace in the hole. Or rather, in the sky. Even as I thought of it, it swung into view between the rooftops: a sleek, black police helicopter that had been surveilling the handball game from afar, waiting for the cops on the ground to get the party started.

The chop of its blades drowned out every other sound. Its dark flank gleamed wildly, struck by spears of sunlight, its downwash sending scraps of paper and debris and dry leaves whirling in the street ahead of me.

I saw Junior glance up at the chopper as he ran. He had to know that wherever he went it would hound him, communicating his whereabouts to units on the street. Sooner

or later, one of them would head him off.

But I wanted to get to him first.

Gritting my teeth, I plunged down the street in the thick summer air. Come on, I thought, make a mistake. Turn down a dead end. Twist an ankle on a pile of dog poop.

Junior didn't do any of those things. He just kept on pulling away from me, a little more with every stride. I felt my heart slam my ribs like it wanted to get out, but it didn't help. I was losing the battle, and not for the first time that day.

Suddenly, something went wrong with the helicopter. One moment it was cruising along, no problem. The next moment it was twirling like a top, desperately out of control. As I watched, horrified, it spun even faster, as if caught in the grip of an invisible force.

Then it slid to my right, past a rooftop and out of sight.

My god, I thought, thinking of the men inside the chopper.

I had barely completed the thought when I felt myself buffeted sideways, propelled by a gust of wind that came out of nowhere—a gust so strong and insistent that it felt like a giant hand. Not from the copter, I had time to think, because it wasn't there anymore.

Then I saw a metal trash can looming in front of me. For a heartbeat I fought and twisted to avoid it. Then I felt myself leave my feet and go barreling right into it.

The impact made my head swim. Forcing myself to look up, I saw that Junior was still going strong. If the wind had slowed him down, he gave no sign of it.

I tried to think: Was it the wind that had shoved aside the

chopper? Where had it come from? The morning had been so still, so devoid of anything even resembling a breeze . . .

As it was *again*, I realized.

There were a few scraps of paper still floating back to earth, but there was no longer any wind to keep them aloft. After the way I'd been thrown around, the tranquility felt positively eerie.

It was a mystery I had no time to solve—not with Junior making his getaway. Gathering my feet beneath me, I took off after him again, trying to ignore the beating I'd taken from the trash can. I was starting to appreciate how many body parts I'd managed to smash—a forehead, a knee, even a couple of ribs—as I sprinted past a cross street.

That's when I saw something on my right, and discovered what had happened to the chopper. It was one intersection over, slowly spinning around on its side like a gigantic insect who'd had one of its wings pulled off. What was left of its rotors were snapping off before my eyes, viciously hurling themselves in every direction.

It didn't look real. And yet, there it was.

Pretty soon, the chopper's fuel would catch fire. In fact, I was surprised it hadn't done so already. When it did, the cops inside would be burned to death.

Goddamn, I thought.

I hated the idea of letting Junior get away, but there were units in the area that might still take him down. No one but me was close enough to save the guys in the chopper.

By the time I got to it, it wasn't spinning so much anymore. I jumped up onto its shiny black carcass, made my way to the

passenger-side door, and yanked at it. It swung open so fast I almost lost my footing, probably because the guy inside had already unlocked it. He was in a bad way, bloody and battered in places, but at least he was alive.

It was more than I could say for the pilot, whose forehead had been caved in.

As carefully as I could, I hauled the cop on the shotgun side out of the copter. There was a guy in a business suit—a good Samaritan—waiting for me on the ground. He took the injured cop's legs while I hung onto his upper body, and we shuffled him away as fast as we could.

Maybe a minute after I climbed off the copter, it blew up in a ball of fire and thick, black smoke.

I could feel the heat of the explosion on my face, like someone slapped it good and hard. Fortunately, no one was close enough to be hurt by it, though bystanders had begun to come out of the woodwork. That'll happen when a police helicopter goes down on your average city street.

An unmarked, navy-blue Impala arrived a couple of minutes later. I could see the female officer inside it peering at me from behind her dash as she called in the chopper wreck on her radio. Then she got out and ran over to where I was hunkered down beside the injured officer.

She was beautiful, one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Long, curly black hair, full, expressive lips, the kind of eyes that could make sapphires weep with jealousy.

Her name was Tomi Pappas. She was a detective—one of several who had spent the last six months hot on Junior's

case. She was also my girlfriend.

Kneeling beside me, she put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed a little, letting me know she was glad I was still in one piece. Then she whispered into my ear, "You're an idiot, you know that?"

I knew.

But not for the reasons she thought. I had pissed off the ghost, lost a steel cage death match with a trash can, and let Junior get away scot-free.

A fiasco all around.