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Opening extract from

Maze of the Minopaw

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THE OLYMPUSS GAMES

BOOK III: MAZE OF THE MINOPAW

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THE STORY SO FAR...

The OLYMPUSS GAMES series is set in ancient Rome where cats rule the world and people have never existed.

The first book in the series is called: SON OF SPARTAPUSS.

The SON OF SPARTAPUSS (or 'S.O.S.' for short) is a young ginger cat from the Land of the Kitons (Britain). He has just moved to Rome with his mother.

At the market he meets FURIA, a mysterious cat with orange eyes. S.O.S. buys FURIA at the auction, but she is far more expensive than he thinks. When S.O.S. can't pay, the seller calls the guards. S.O.S. is fined ten silver coins. An old cat called FATHER FELINIOUS offers to pay the fine if S.O.S. joins his gladiator school: THE SCHOOL FOR STRAYS. When he learns that FELINIOUS is FURIA's new owner, S.O.S. agrees to go. FURIA escapes from the school but gets caught. PUSSPERO MAXI, FURIA and S.O.S. fight their first gladiator battle together. Furia defeats a giant from Cattage.

The second book in the series is called: EYE OF THE CYCLAW.

Excitement spreads around the SCHOOL FOR STRAYS when an official arrives and asks the school to send athletes to MOUNT OLYMPUSS to take part in the famous GAMES.

SON OF SPARTAPUSS is excited. However, qualifying for the games is harder than it looks.

Meanwhile, we learn that the mysterious FURIA is on a quest to recover STRAYBOS (charms that are hidden in different places around the FELINE EMPIRE). One STRAYBO is hidden in the SCHOOL FOR STRAYS. After they find it, MAXI and the SON OF SPARTAPUSS decide to join FURIA on her quest to find the other missing charms. A clue suggests that one charm has been hidden near MOUNT OLYMPUSS, where the GAMES are going to be held. However, to qualify for the games, they must defeat the famous gladiator known as THE CYCLAW.

THE SECRET DIARY OF S.O.S.

MEWNONIUS X

June 10th

Dear mother, I am sorry about the terrible state of this diary. On the way to The Olympuss Games we were shipwrecked. As Squeak islands go, Knossos is not a good place to spend a two week break – unless you like blood sports. King Minos wasn't pleased to see us. He made me fight his top gladiator. Then he locked us all up in an evil maze and I had a nasty run in with a cat-eating monster.

By the way mother, have you got any good tips for getting monster blood off clothes? In case you are wondering how I survived, I have written it all down in this diary.

Your loving son,

S.O.S

P.S. I'm sorry for writing 'scratching post' on your back when we visited the market. I'm a more grown up cat now.

Goodbye To Rome

Finally the great day came – the day when I was going to leave Rome and sail off to take part in the Olympuss games. I can't remember being more excited on any day in my long life – and I am fourteen years old! Father Felinious (the owner of the School for Strays) led the way as we walked along the docks at Ostia.

"Is it that one?" I asked pointing at an enormous ship with black sails.

"That one?" laughed Maxi. "No way! That's a trireme."

"I knew that," I said.

"You've got no idea what a trireme is, have you Spartan?" he asked.

"No," I hissed. "But something tells me you're going to explain EVERYTHING about the Squeaks and their ships."

"Didn't you study sea battles at school?" he laughed. "I expect they don't have schools in Sparta."

I shot Maxi a hard stare.

"I'm not from Sparta," I muttered. "I'm from the Land of the Kitons."

Maxi thinks he knows everything about every subject under the stars. He took a deep breath and started to talk.

"A trireme is a fast warship with three rows of oars arranged in banks of twenty five rowers. It has two masts and a keel made of oak," he began.

"Stars of Andrasta! Spare us the details!" hissed a voice at our side. It was the first thing that Furia had said to us since we left the gladiator school that morning.

Crestfallen, Maxi stopped talking about ships. We passed boat after boat until we came to an ancient looking ship.

"For Peus sake! Not that one!" moaned Maxi. "I've seen shipwrecks in better condition than that!"

Maxi did have a point. Our ship looked as if it had sailed out of the pages of history. Its mast was as crooked as a squirrel's tail. Its sail was the colour of dirty dishwater. On the side I read the ship's name, which had been scratched into the grey wood.

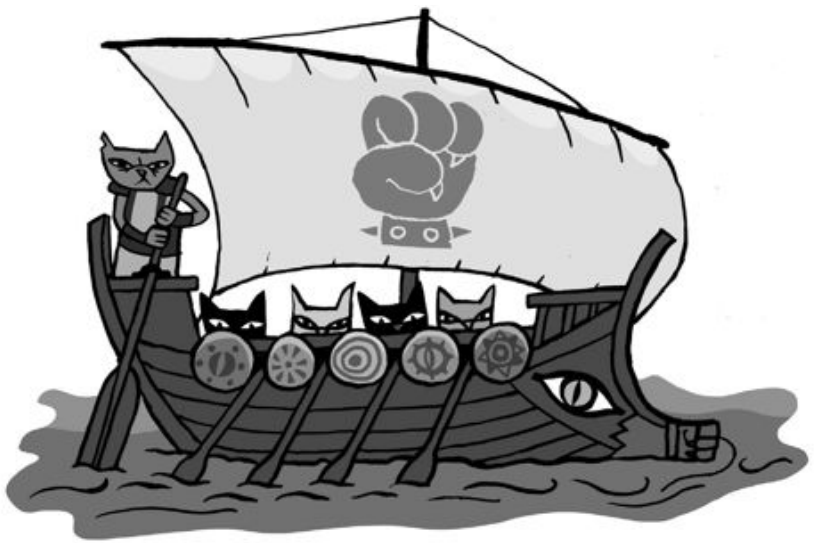
"The Paaaa?" I said. "What sort of name is that for a boat?"

"You ginger half wit! It's not called The Paaa! It's called *The Pawgo*," gushed Maxi

in excitement. “It’s got the same name as the famous ship used by Sprayson in the old tale.”

“Who’s he when he’s at home?” I sighed.

“Sprayson,” said Maxi in a wounded tone. “You know, Sprayson son of Aason. From the famous tale of Sprayson and The Pawgonauts... where they look for The Golden Fleas.”



“Aason?” I gasped. “What kind of a stupid name is Aason?”

“Aason is my grandfather’s name!” hissed the Captain.

“All aboard!” boomed a voice from the ship. Why do sailors insist on shouting

this? Maxi pushed in and sprang up the gangplank ahead of me.

“All aboard!” ordered the voice again.

“Stop saying that! We ARE all aboard,” muttered Father Felinious.

“Wait! Where’s Wulfren?” asked Maxi.

The Father did not answer. But we soon found out that he had left Wulfren in charge of his gladiator school. So there were only going to be four of us in the Olympuss team: myself, Maxi, Furia and the Father himself.

I admit that I would have felt a lot safer if Wulfren was coming along, (even though our head instructor has a passion for pain).

“Cast off!” called the Father. ‘Let’s go!”

“What? No wolfy?” moaned Maxi. “Aooowwoooo!” I cried, imitating a wolf.

Furia shot me a dark look and her tail began to flick restlessly. But I think she might have been secretly pleased that we had given Wulfren the slip.

If you read my last scroll, you’ll know that Furia had only agreed to come to the games because she was on a quest to find mysterious charms called straybos. She is collecting them and putting them on her

collar. I'm not sure why she wants to find them but her grandmother left instructions for her to follow, with clues about where to find the next straybo. I discovered the first one hidden in a training machine in the School for Strays. We are hoping to find the next one somewhere on Mount Olympuss. That's the only reason that Furia is coming to the games. She doesn't want to win for Rome. She hates Rome so much that she refused to fight when Felinious put on a gladiator battle between teams from Rome and Cattage.

Maxi said it was our duty to join her on her quest for these mysterious straybos. But as I stood there on the battered deck, gazing into her fiery amber eyes, I wondered if she needed our help.

Anyway, the captain was a black and white cat called Bustus with torn ears and face markings that made him look as if he was wearing a mask over his yellow eyes. He had matching yellow teeth too.

He padded towards the gangplank with a suspicious look on his mask-like face and fixed the Father with a glare.

"Are you sure about this?" he hissed.

"You've got my silver so I get your ship," said the Father impatiently.

"Take care of her," snapped the captain. "If you don't return her in good order, you'll have to pay for any damages."

And with that, the old sea captain padded slowly away down the gang plank, clutching Father Felinious' bag of silver in his paw.

"Stop!" I called. "Where in Paw's name do you think you're going?"

But old captain Bustus never looked back, he just walked off into the misty morning, counting his silver denari. Who can blame him? I expect he thought that Fortune had spun him a great one there on her wheel. What a great stroke of luck to find a buyer like the Father for a broken down old ship like *The Pawgo*. Eight out of ten cats wouldn't have bought it for firewood.



You might be wondering why the Father had dismissed the captain of *The Pawgo* and the crew as well. Well as it turns out he had a good reason, although he wasn't telling us at the time. So I will hold it back from you in order to add a little spice to my story.

As I stood by the docks on that misty morning in Ostia, I was a worried cat. I had never sailed a ship before. And for all of his facts about ships, Maxi didn't know one end of a rope from the other.

I have read quite a lot of books that talk about sea trips. They write about the 'loneliness of the ocean'. The hero is 'crossing the pea-green sea, under the slate grey sky with the endless white-capped waves rolling as far as the eye can see'. Not forgetting 'the haunting call of the seagulls as they float like Neptune's ghosts in the wild winds'.

I don't usually read these bits – I like to skip to the part where the hero's ship gets caught in a terrible storm, as they always do in stories.

"Help! I can't move!" screamed a worried voice. It was Maxi.

I shook myself awake and sprang from my hammock. At least I tried to spring out of my hammock but I couldn't move. Someone had tied me down.

"Help!" called Maxi again.

"Help! I can't move either!" I cried, joining in.

"Stop copying me, copycat!" he called.

A hammock is the most comfortable bed you can find on a ship. It does not move about when the sea gets rough. That's the idea anyway. But this hammock was shaking like an olive tree in a gale.

I tore at the hammock and tried to escape, but it was no use.

"It's no use," moaned Maxi. "Someone has sewn me into my hammock!"

I could hear him clawing at his hammock, but it was impossible, you'd need claws of iron to tear through the thick canvas.

"What sort of monster would do this?" I asked. "Tying us up like chickens on a pole."

"I would," said a low voice.

"Is that you Father Felinious?" I gasped.

"Why have you sewn us in?" asked Maxi. "Are you worried that we might escape?"

Before he could reply, the boat pitched, rocking our hammocks wildly.

"I sewed you in because I was worried that you might fall off the ship," explained Felinious.

"Why worry about that?" I asked.

"Because you've fallen off three times already," he hissed. "It's a good job that I had Furia to help me drag you back on board."

He was right. It would be hard to find a more useless pair of sailors than Maxi and me.

"Cut us out Father Felinious! For the love of Peus!" I cried.

"Silence!" snapped the Father. "We are in Pawsidon's realm now. He's angry enough as it is."

Sailors are a superstitious bunch and it seemed that Father Felinious was no exception.

I felt the canvas tearing as a long knife

cut away the rope. I tumbled out of the hammock. The boat rocked as it fell off the crest of the wave and crashed into a dip.

"Miaooowch!" I moaned. "That was a big one. It's a wonder that an old ship like this can take all of this punishment. Maybe my father was right? Perhaps they were better at building ships in the old days."

Before these words had left my mouth there was another terrible lurch followed by a grinding sound like giant teeth gnashing. The next thing I knew I was clinging onto the wall with my claws. A fountain of freezing water was spurting into my face.

"Paw's jaws!" I moaned. "What's happening?"

"We're sinking," yelled the Father.

"Sinking?" I moaned."We're sinking!"

Father Felinious's tail began to flick.

"What in Paws' name do we do now?" I wailed. I didn't want to drown.

"Plug it!!!" snapped Maxi.

"There's no need to be rude," I muttered.

"I mean plug that hole."

When I heard the hiss of the rushing water, I started to panic. I saw a hole in

the wall of the ship. It was as wide as a lion's jaws. The icy sea was bursting in and pooling under my shaking paws. A cold fear clawed at me.

We Kitons have a terrible fear of drowning. It is said that if you drown, they won't let you into Summerlands. The Mewids say Summerlands lies 'north of the sky, where the backwards birds fly'. Try finding that on a map! I wasn't sure I really believed in Summerlands, but now was not the time to find out if they were right.

Maxi sprang into action. He grabbed his hammock, rolled it up into a ball and stuffed it into the ragged gap like a cork in a bottle. He pushed against it, putting his full weight behind it. I followed Maxi's example, desperately grabbing blankets and sheets and anything I could lay my paws on to plug up the hole. A few minutes later, it was over. Although the hull was still a bit leaky, we seemed to have got away with it.

"You've done well Spartan!" laughed Maxi.

I like Maxi but I find it kind of annoying when he keeps congratulating me

whenever we don't die!

"What should we do now?" I asked.

"Let's get up on deck and find Furia and Felinious." Follow me!" he boomed.

I sprang up the wooden ladder and popped my nose out into a scene from Hades' nightmare.

Our ship was leaning at a terrible angle as we climbed up a mountain of water. The wind was bellowing like a wounded bull. The thin mast of *The Pawgo* was shaking like a prisoner on execution day.

"Pawsidon must be angry," said Maxi. "This storm is getting worse."

Suddenly, the rocking stopped and we seemed to hang in mid air for a moment. Fighting the sick feeling in my stomach, I clung on with my claws. Down we fell, down from the crest of the great wave and into a bottomless pit of water. The cold sea rushed over my eyes and hit me with an unstoppable force. The claws on my right paw were ripped from their sockets and I held on with one paw, screaming. A felt a paw on my collar, dragging me back from a watery grave. A lightning flash lit the sky. Furia let go of my collar. I wish I could say

that I thanked her for saving my life but I forget my manners when I am face to face with death.

"We're lost! We're lost!" I spluttered.

Lightning zigzagged across the sky, bursting the blackness. I looked down into the whirling waters, lit up by the flashes. I would not have been surprised if Hades himself was waiting there, ready to welcome us into the Underworld

But we were not dead yet. Somehow, *The Pawgo* struggled back out of the watery pit and ever so slowly, we began to crawl up the face of the next wave.

White fire flashed again and in front of me I could see another enormous wave, a great dark cliff of water.

The Pawgo began to inch its way up the face of this next monster.

"The ship can't take too much more of this!" cried Maxi, through the blasting wind.

"Hold on!" boomed Father Felinious.

"I can't" I moaned.

But somehow I held on.

This nightmare went on and on. Time after time we climbed the great cliffs of

water. Again and again we hung helpless at the top of each wave, staring death in its watery face before plunging down.

I remember thinking of my father's advice to look for the good in everything. He was a fluff brain! Where was the good in this? "At least things can't get any worse," I sighed to myself.

"Rocks!" called Maxi in a panic. When the next flash of lightning lit up the sky, I saw two dark towers of rock looming up in front of me.

"Tiller!" cried the Father. "Steer to the left."

I remember Maxi at the back of the boat, heaving the tiller – the long pole that we used to steer *The Pawgo*.

"I can't hold it!" he cried.

Then I knew we were lost.

I closed my eyes and let go of the rail, hoping to find Summerlands. Then something strange happened. The force of the great wave saved us. Somehow *The Pawgo* was lifted up as the wave broke. It was thrown right over the jagged towers of rock and into the shelter of a quiet cove.

Hope Floats

"*The Pawgo* is wrecked," said Maxi. "There's no way we can fix this."

He was right. We'd survived last night's storm but our ship hadn't been so lucky. Her mast was broken and her sail flapped in the wind like a tattered rag.

"Shouldn't we all start looking for food?" I asked, eyeing up a dead jellyfish that had been washed up on the beach.

I was starving: I hadn't had a decent meal since we'd left Rome.

"Felinious didn't say anything about food," said Maxi, pawing at a dead crab. "But Furia has gone to look for water."

"I wish Felinious had sent us instead of her," I moaned.

"He didn't send her," said Maxi. "She went of her own accord."

Maxi sniffed at the stinky crab but decided not to chance it.

"Why are we doing this?" I muttered, throwing another plank of driftwood on the pile.

"Who knows!" said Maxi. "Felinious wants us to pile up all of the wood that we

can find on the beach."

"I expect he wants us to get a fire going," I said. "I'm good with fires. Let's surprise him!"

Hope Burns

"Fool! Flea-brain! Ginger menace!" spat Felinious. I thought I saw tears in Felinious' green eyes as puffs of black smoke from the crackling fire blew into his face.

"We were only trying to help!" moaned Maxi. We thought you wanted the wood for a fire. We wanted to surprise you."

"Look around you!" roared Felinious, bristling with rage. "How many trees do you see on this island?"

"None," moaned Maxi. The island was rocky and barren. There wasn't a single tree as far as the eye could see.

"So where in the name of mighty Mewpiter did you think we were going to get wood to repair *The Pawgo*?" he continued. "You've burned our precious wood. All of it!"

It was too late to put the fire out. At first the wet wood had resisted, but now it was

giving itself willingly to the flames.

"What shall we do now?" I asked.

Felinious gazed out over the flat blue sea.

"Do what you like," he hissed, then he stalked off down the beach.

The Beam

The Father had stalked off to lick his wounds. Furia had still not returned. My hope was shrivelling like a dead jellyfish on the beach. How could I have been so stupid?

To make things worse, what was left of *The Pawgo* had been washed off the rocks by the rising tide and now it lay nearby, on a bank of sand. Maxi thought it would float free on the next tide. But without wood to repair our ship we were stuck. We'd swapped a watery grave for a prison of sand.

My mouth was dry and cracked. Furia still hadn't returned. I wondered if she'd found any water on her search.

Maxi and I decided to go and find some more wood and make up for our mistake.

"Let's look further up the beach," said

Maxi. "If there was any wood washed up by last night's storm we are sure to find it there."

One thing I like about Maxi is his unstoppable confidence. I nodded and followed him up the beach.

"Shells, shells, shells!" I said. "But not a single piece of wood."

"Keep looking," said Maxi in a commanding voice. "We are sure to find some wood soon, I know it!"

But he was wrong. We walked for a mile up the beach before deciding to turn back.

"Cheer up Spartan!" said Maxi. "I'll race you back."

"I'm not racing!" I replied. But before the words had left my mouth, Maxi was running. He shot off like an arrow from a bow. I chased him, desperately trying to catch up. I was gaining ground. We were nearly back when Maxi tripped and fell head over paws.

"Miaaowch!" he moaned.

"I won! I won! Maxipuss is defeated!" I laughed, crossing an imaginary finish line.

Maxi wasn't pleased.

"You'll pay for that Spartan!" he

boomed. “I was winning! But I tripped over this...”

He stopped in the middle of his sentence. I padded up to him and saw what had stopped him in his tracks. It was an old wooden beam, as brown as the stones on the beach. It was half buried under the golden sand.

“Wood!” I cried. “Let’s dig it out!”

With both of us digging it was easy to uncover. When one end of the beam was out, Maxi grabbed it with both paws and pulled hard.

“Lend a paw, Spartan!” said Maxi.

“Alright,” I said, trying to get a grip.

“Come on! I’m pulling harder than you!” he added.

He was probably right but it is most annoying when your friends keep pointing out that they are better than you at stuff.

I pulled twice as hard and nearly lost a claw, tearing at the old wood.

“For the love of Affleana!” moaned Maxi. “This thing is never going to move.”

Then something happened that is so strange that it sounds impossible when I write it down. As soon as these words

left Maxi’s mouth, I heard a strange voice calling over the sound of the waves. The voice sounded as old as the ragged rocks.

“Pull harder!” it said.

I dropped the wood, almost falling over in surprise.

Maxi heard it too, he sprang towards me with a look of amazement on his face.

“Dig me out!” demanded the strange voice. “I’m stuck!”

Maxi looked at the beam and turned towards me in amazement.

“You’re... not going to believe this Spartan. But... I think there’s someone trapped under that beam!”

Just then I heard a familiar voice:

“Students!” it called.

Looking up, I saw Father Felinious padding towards us. His voice crashing like one of Mewpiter’s thunderbolts.

“Students! What are you doing?” he shouted.

“Coming Felinious!” I cried. But the voice called out to me again.

“Where do you think you’re going?” it demanded. “Dig me out! I’m stuck down here!”

I looked at Maxi and he stared back at me, his eyes were wide with amazement. We grabbed hold of the plank again and gave it another massive pull. At last it came free. Maxi and I collapsed in a heap.

I blinked, wiping the sand from my coat. There before me was a thick beam of grey wood, about the same length as the wooden swords we use to practice.

The weather worn piece of wood was very old. When I got most of the sand and seaweed off, I saw that it was beautifully carved but the designs weren't Roman.



"Is that it?" sniffed Maxi, snatching the beam.

He wasn't impressed. I think he'd been hoping for a magical sword or a talking shield or a skeleton key. In fact, almost

anything would have been more interesting than an old bit of wood. You could hear the disappointment in his voice. He held the piece of wood up at eye level.

"Talk!" he demanded. "Say something, like you did before."

But the old beam didn't answer. There was only the cry of the seagulls and the rush of the empty wind. Our talking beam was as silent as the grave.

"Gladiators!!!" boomed a voice like thunder.

It was only Father Felinious. "Maxipuss! Son of Spartapuss! Get over here right now!"

Disappointed, Maxi threw the beam down and padded off down the beach towards Felinious. I was about to follow him but something made me pick up the ancient beam before I left.

"What have you two flea-bags been up to?" asked Felinious. "Some new mischief I expect. You look as guilty as a couple of wolves in a sheep shed."

Before we could answer, he went on.

"Listen!" he said. "I have important news. Where is Furia? She needs to hear

this too."

Maxi shrugged.

"She went to look for water. She's still not back," he said.

"We thought she was with you," I added. Felinious' tail began to flick in anger.

"Well you two may as well hear this anyway," he began. "We are not alone on this island. There is a port about half a day's walk along the beach. I've even met the locals."

"Thank Paws!" I cried. "We are saved!"

"Not quite," said Felinious. "They will not give us food or water. Not unless we can pay for it – which of course we can't."

"For Peus sake!" I moaned. "What kind of place is this?"

"This is the Island of Knossos," said the Father. As a rule, the Squeaks are famously kind and generous to strangers – but not on this island. The king here is famous for being the meanest cat in all of the Squeak Islands.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"King Minos," replied the Father.

"King *Meanos* is more like it," I moaned.

"Didn't you tell them we are Romans,

on our way to The Olympuss Games?" asked Maxi. "Everyone loves the games. That might have changed their minds?"

"That dog won't hunt," sighed Felinious. "I tried begging and explaining but they said they could not spare a single sardine or a sip of water. Their king is famous for his short paws and his long pockets."

Felinious turned and looked out to sea. The sun was melting into a burning teardrop as it dipped under the horizon. A band of purple and red filled the sky. It really was the most beautiful sunset I'd ever seen in my life. However, the only thing I could think about was my grumbling belly. I was so hungry that I wouldn't say no to a cold plate of dog food.

"Never give up hope," said Felinious. "Every mountain moves if you use the right lever."

"What in Paws' name is that supposed to mean?" hissed Maxi.

"It means that there is one thing that even mean King Minos will pay for," said Father Felinious. He patted Maxi on the back and smiled a sly smile. "There is

one thing that they are starved of on this lonely island. We have it. And they will pay for it in gold."

Let The Games Begin!

"Entertainment?" I asked, blinking in the sharp morning sunlight.

"What did Felinious mean when he said they were 'starved of entertainment'?"

"We are the entertainment!" said Maxi. "If I know Father Felinious he'll have some kind of competition in mind. The Squeaks love the sports of boxing and wrestling. I expect he's planning on putting on a match."

After a freezing night on the hard beach, the only thing I wanted to wrestle with was a large breakfast. The cold had been bitter through the night, rising up through my paws and sinking deep into my bones. I had thought about burning the mysterious wooden beam but something stopped me. I decided that if it didn't speak again by nightfall, I'd definitely turn it into a campfire.

Just then, I spotted Father Felinious. He

was padding up the beach towards us, at the head of a proud group of cats. Behind Felinious came four cats in flowing robes carrying a golden chair. Sitting on the chair was a ginger and white cat who was as thin as a blade. He had angry eyes, not unlike a cobra that has just been poked with a sharp stick. On his head he wore a golden crown made from laurel leaves.

"Look!" said Maxi. "That must be mean King Minos."

His haggard face said it all. King Minos looked like the sort of cat who wouldn't save his own grandmother from a burning building unless she agreed to pay the water bill in advance.

The four servants who carried the royal chair were big and ugly.

"Wrestling eh?" I said to Maxi. "I don't fancy my chances against that lot."

"Don't fret Spartan," said Maxi. "The bigger they come the faster they'll run when the mighty Maxipuss steps into the arena."

My friend flexed his claws confidently. I was impressed with his spirit, but would it be enough to beat King Minos' minions?

As the royal party came closer, I listened carefully. Felinious was talking to the King. A long time ago my father gave me some advice about speaking truthfully to the powerful. "They might look like you and me, but kings are trouble. Keep your mouth shut," he told me. "If you want to have a tongue that can still lick."

Felinious grinned like an eel on a fish seller's slab. He was trying to sweet talk King Minos. It wasn't working but he carried on anyway.

"Have I seen your face before, Roman?" asked King Minos, sipping cream from a silver bowl (but not offering it around).

"I've got one of those familiar faces your greatness," said Felinious. "Pull ten Romans out of the Furum at random and you'll find five that look just like me."

The King glared at Felinious.

"Roman!" he hissed. "Where are these great fighters that you've been chattering about?"

"King Minos," said the Father. "Let me introduce you to the pride of Rome. The fighter they call Maxipuss the Magnificent."

Maxi raised his paw and waved an imaginary sword in the air. It was annoying but I had to admit that he looked like a winner.

"What about that one?" said the King, pointing a royal paw in my direction.

"Maxipuss will put on a great show," continued Felinious.

But the King was having none of it.

"That one over there!" he hissed. "The ginger."

"The ginger?" sighed Felinious. He obviously didn't think I could win "That's the one they call 'The Spartan'."

"That little rat?" laughed the King. "He hasn't got a drop of Spartan blood in him! He looks more like a dish licker than a killer."

I admit that I didn't look my best. The salty air was doing strange things to my fur. But I puffed up my tail and drew myself up to my fullest height. Then I put out my claws and fixed the King with a iron glare.

"Don't overdo it," hissed Felinious under his breath. "Maxi stands a better chance against this lot than you do."

"Let the contest begin!" ordered the

King impatiently.

"Wait!" said Felinious, holding a paw up before the King's slave hit the starting gong.

"First let us agree the rules. If Rome wins then the mighty King Minos will pay us a prize of one hundred silver coins..."

The King's green eyes flashed and he let out a low hiss.

"... which we will spend in the King's shops, buying food and repairing our ship."

The King nodded and smiled. He couldn't lose. Even if we won, he could charge as much as he wanted for the repairs.

"Pantheras!" called King Minos.

Up stepped a black cat with a long spear in his paw.

"Meet Pantheras," laughed the King, "He's my champion."

Every King needs a champion. In ancient times a king would fight every battle himself. The king would be the strongest warrior in his land. He defended his crown with his teeth and his claws. But that was no way to grow a country. The king would not rule for long. There would be many challengers, wanting to take the crown. So

it became the custom that the King would select a champion, to fight for him.

Pantheras looked at me like a snake eyeing up a baby bird that has fallen out of its nest.

"Let us have a fair fight!" said Felinious.

"Pantheras hates Romans," laughed King Minos.

"Are we fighting to the death my lord?" asked Pantheras, padding forward with his claws out.

"Take this Roman rat apart," laughed Minos. "Make him die, but take your time. I want value for money."

I looked at Felinious, fighting the urge to run.

"So be it!" said Felinious. "Your wish is my command."

King Minos rubbed his shabby paws together and let out a little mew of excitement. Did he enjoy watching strangers die? Or perhaps he was imagining how good my ginger fur would look as a rug on his bedroom floor. I expect that floor was cold, judging by the lack of firewood on the island.

I turned to Felinious in horror. But

before I could protest, he spoke again.

"Of course, a death match will cost you more money. Two hundred denari, win or lose. But it is a small price to pay for such fine sport."

"Two hundred Roman coins?" hissed King Minos. His thin tail beat the ground. I thought he was going to kill Felinious on the spot. But Felinious kept his cool.

"For a death match you must pay, even if we lose," explained Felinious.

The King looked like a fish farmer who has just spotted a hole in one of his nets.

"Trained gladiators cost money," explained Felinious.

We waited for the King's decision. My fate was hanging in the balance. The sun blazed yellow. The sky was the same blue as before. But everything had changed, now my life was on the line.

"Get on with it!" hissed King Minos. "Do I have to wait all day?"

But what had he decided? Was it going to be a fight to the death or not?

The beach fell silent. My tail flicked over the hot sand. I saw the thoughts in Felinious' head. He had already pushed

King Minos a long way. The wrong word to the King could get all of us killed. Felinious opened his mouth but the river of words had dried up.

One of the King's guards stepped forward. He was an ancient looking tabby with thick grey whiskers like dried reeds. He was carrying a beaten up gong. He banged it with a feeble blow. The gong didn't ring out proudly, it made the sort of clank that a metal dinner bowl makes when you drop it on a stone floor.

The King's guards had marked out a circle with white stones. The pebbles showed the edge of the ring. If you were thrown and landed outside the circle, you would lose. The guards stood ready to prevent escape.

My opponent padded towards me.

"Hey Spartan!" called a voice.

"What do you want Maxi?"I asked.

"If you die, I will avenge you!" said Maxi. "I swear it."

"Thanks," I said. "But I was hoping for some advice. Anything that could help me beat Pantheras."

Maxi thought for a moment but then he just smiled and shrugged.



Pantheras circled me, dancing the age old dance of the trained fighter. He was a big cat but he seemed to pour himself from move to move. There was a natural grace in his movements – the effortless flow that comes from years of practice.

Pantheras sprang towards me, his eyes flashing, striking at my face with his left paw. I dodged his claws, remembering to look out for an attack from the right. Seeing that I was ready to block his next

blow, Pantheras rocked back and waited, crouching like a hungry snake at a rat's front door. At last he darted forward. The blow connected with my shoulder and slammed me towards the very edge of the circle. I almost touched the white stones, but rolled back inside the circle just in time.

"Step out of the ring and you will be defeated," warned Felinious.

I didn't need reminding.

Pantheras let out a low growl and came at me again. He unsheathed his claws. I've seen shorter kitchen knives.

A tide of fear turned within me. Dark thoughts gathered in my mind. What was I doing here? Where was Furia? She should be fighting Pantheras, not me.

Another strike ripped against my face and it sent me spinning. In a panic I rolled away. Then I heard the clang of the clapped out gong and I looked down. One of my back paws was outside the circle.

"We win! We win!" cried King Minos.

Patheras gazed adoringly at his King.

King Minos threw him his own sword. Its polished silver blade caught the light.

"Finish the Roman!" he commanded.