

Fengari Souvenir

When does a story begin? Does it begin right now, or did it begin once upon a time, when the Greek Gods did not even have the names we know them by now?

Aviation may have ended the belief that the Great Gods live on mountaintops or in the clouds. It may even have swept them away altogether. The Gods whose names were not to be mentioned on the island I am heading for; The great goddess mother, the divine twins, the goddess of the fireplace, the god of the underworld, the goddess of fertility and last but not least the messenger of the gods, the protector of travellers and thieves.

Will I be a traveller or a thief? Without luck I may return without the trophy I hope to find high in the mountains of Samothraki.

In the slight haze we seem to sail into nothingness. No trace of 'Fengari', the 1600 meter pinnacle of the island. I have to trust the ship knows its way in this endless world of blue and white.

After two more hours on a sea without horizon we disembark in a small harbour. The fog dissolves as quickly as my expectation of a Greek Island. No parasols on the beach. No skilful waiters with professional smiles. Mount Saos is overcast by grey cloud dragons. They rumble and spit fire repeatedly before a new load of waterdrops hits my bright orange Gore-tex coat that did cost a fortune but fails to keep me dry. Most of my restless days I spend waiting for the sky to clear while am forced to stay in the lower regions of the island. Lightning bolts on the slopes of mount Saos are warning me to give up my nefarious plan. When I explain to the villagers that I intend to climb the mountain, no one hesitates to remind me of my mortality. I should not attempt to do it in this weather, and most importantly never alone. The rain soaks me to my underwear most of the day. Maybe this is a sign I should not look for a rock when all the island offers me is water; Rivers, wells, waterfalls, sea all around, and even a fountain of thermal water.

A devilish smell rises up from a steaming hole in the ground. Two young faces, half hidden by a long neglected hairdo, are up to their necks submerged in grey water. Pieces of algae float on a pulpy surface. I awkwardly undress in front of these strangers while keeping my balance on the slimy rocks. They came from afar, they are vegan, and seek to be one with nature, so they tell me after I also descended in the hot smelly soup. They built up their tent right next to the Fonias waterfall, the only place on the island where it is strictly forbidden to camp.

Long time ago the island attracted a different type of traveller. Plato, Herodotus, Hadrian and many others have been here before me, to take part in the secret initiation rites of Samothraki's mystery religion. When I walk between the marble columns of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, I spot a big open wound where once the proud goddess of Victory spread her wings over the vast temple complex. Nike was brought to the Louvre by a French Ambassador. But making the memory of theft an enduring one, was an American company, who disconnected her from her roots, put her wings on a shoe and decided to pronounce her name as Nikee.

Then Hermes appears to me as Kerykeion, a ram's head on a stick. Would I be required to bring him an offering before he allows me safe passage to Fengari? I contemplate killing one of Samothraki's numerous goats on the sacred rock. But that would be a sacrifice for the animal instead of my own. Besides, the abundance of bones and skulls I observe everywhere on the island points out its capability of picking its own sacrifice.

On the seventh day I wake up before dawn. My wish to bring back the one special stone, is stronger than my fear to perish or get lost. I look at the thick fog meandering around the mountain slopes. 1611 Meters to climb. Will I make it? I am told to turn back if the cloud of smoke doesn't dissipate before I reach

the treeline. The extra food, water and warm clothes I brought make the straps of my backpack pull on my shoulders.

After a while the noise of farms and barking dogs fades away, and all I hear is the heavy sound of my own breath as I advance up a steep and narrow path. My tank top is soaked with sweat and morning mist despite the chill in the air. I stop for a drink of water. I have barely reached the 100 meter mark.

After endless zig-zagging on the rocky road amid the thickets of bushes and trees, the scenery changes into an oak forest. The road broadens, and for the first time I see a small plaque attached to a tree. 'E6' it reads, The route to Fengari!

I stop to eat. Only 300 meters up and I am already hungry and exhausted. My legs are not used to climb. The rest of the way up I will rely on determination instead of muscle power.

Am I alone in the forest? I hear a crackle behind me! Is that the noise of a big animal? A Snake? The fog restricts my view. The sounds continue to startle me. I am in an enchanted forest, on a mission to solve the riddle of a whimsical Greek God. I have to bring an object that is true and untrue at the same time. Ordinary yet special. Both a symbol and the real thing in one.

The temperature rises as the day progresses. Sweat trickles down my forehead. the salt burns my eyes. I still have a thousand meter of ascent ahead of me. Voices of worried locals now echo inside my head. 'you will get lost, You will trip, no-one will come to rescue you..'

The dog of Hades looms in the mist. It transforms into a tree trunk as I come nearer. My greatest enemy is time now.

700 meters, 800 meters, 900 meters, stone man to stone man. My legs hurt, my heartbeat resonates in my eardrums. All I have to do is to keep going.

Is this a stone man that fell over? Or a bunch of rocks half piled by coincidence? There have been no E6 markers for a while. I have to use my hands to climb the increasingly steep slope. The boulders I step on to are unstable. Rocks and gravel slide from under my feet, roll down and crash far below me. 'I told you so, you will lose your way after the spring!' says a little voice in my head. I look up, a clear sky unfolds above me. As long as I go up, I will reach the top sooner or later..

I leave the oak trees behind, than the shrubbery until I am surrounded by spiky grey rocks. Little hairs rise up in the back of my neck after a big rock I step on slides down and almost drags me along . Although the summit is calling me it doesn't reach me a hand. The stump I took for the mountaintop turns out to be a marker. The road stops here. Between the summit and me stretches a dizzying ledge. I hesitate, I am not a mountaineer, wouldn't it be wiser to turn back? Empty-handed but with my body intact?

Suddenly I hear the energetic voices of a man and a woman. Black curly hair tops a rucksack big enough to travel the world. It doesn't affect the man that carries it in the least. The woman's pony tail dances gracefully while she skips across the rocks. They pass me by as I stop to catch my breath. My shiny face, red as summer fruit contrasts the subtle blushes on their ivory cheeks. They must be Olympic Gods! They have come at the right time to show me the way. I can't believe my luck!

Suddenly another figure comes struggling up. A man with a grey goatee and a walking stick. His legs side by side form a O-shape. His knees won't stretch, so he tumbles from rock to rock. He must have made it up through sheer willpower!

I follow in the footsteps of the Olympians. I force myself to not look down. My hands grope for the next stable rock to hold on to. The prospect of making it to the top, fills me with excitement! The stiffness of my limbs is gone and I shout out despite my shortness of breath. 'Fengari is mine'. Soon I stand next to the marker of the absolute summit. A peculiar structure that closely resembles a broken tv-antenna.

Now I can do what I came for. I detect the highest piece of rock on the mountain top. It is an unsightly grey stone but that doesn't matter. I will take the summit of Mount Saos with me! I hold it up in the air and pose like a wingless victory of Samothraki.

We make our way down in procession. The goatee man is the last to follow. His painful gait slows him down and forces him to walk backwards. His face distorted in agony. Despite this suffering he acts cheerful, making satirical jokes about beer. I look forward to a well deserved cold beer. But by the time we arrive at the foot of the mountain it has become dark. I am too tired to eat or drink and fall into a long dreamless sleep as soon as I hit my bed.

When I wake up, Fengari is disguised by dark clouds again. Frightening thunderbolts are followed by showers all day long. Is this the wrath of the gods for stealing their mountaintop? Will I be struck by lightning as I show my face? The island shivers and rumbles. The rivers roar and overflow.

My last day on the island. I am at the estuary of the Fonias river. Ravaged trees and dead fish 3 meters above the riverbed are evidence of the previous day's major flood. Climbing my way upstream I notice dead goats entwined with tree branches. These unfortunate creatures must have been surprised by the seething flood, and dragged along until they got trapped under water.

Suddenly I spot a red plastic coat caught up in a tree. I think of the floating heads of the young people I met in the thermal bath, and for a moment I picture them struggling in the whirling water. I now understand the reason why it is forbidden to camp next to this river. I hope their wish to become one with nature was not fulfilled by their ultimate sacrifice..

Kim Dijkstra