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CHEIRON'S PROMISE

by

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Warning and Advisory!

Adult Content!

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CHAPTER 1: EUREKA

“Eureka!”

Jacob jumped from the desk, clapping his hands like a child delighted with a new toy. He bumped the chair, tipping it over. It scuffed across the floor, the legs sounding like a centaur passing a mighty wind. The man tried to grab an arm to pull it upright, but the chair slipped through his fingertips, landing with a loud thud.

“What’s that racket?” said Hope, descending the stairs, a rucksack in one hand, and a walking stick in the other. She was dressed in her denim hiking clothes and sandals, with her travelling cloak draped within the crook of her arm. The hiking outfit did little to hide the gentle outward bow of her belly. She was just starting her second trimester.

Jacob smiled in spite of himself. *I wish she would be more careful, and have at least one hand on the stair rail. She could trip and fall! It won’t be long until there are three of us, maybe even more, may the gods will it!*

He pranced joyfully around the desk. Jacob caught Hope in his arms as she descended onto the landing and whirled her about. He began to dance with her, leading her about the parlor. The rucksack, walking stick, and cloak were soon strewn about the hardwood floor.

Hope laughed. “Oh, stop being so silly!”

“I can’t help it,” said Jacob, halting his step. “I’ve found it! I’ve found it!”

“You deciphered the *Golden Fleece*?”

“Yes,” Jacob said. The triumphant twinkle in his eyes quickly faded. He felt as if doused with icy water, with the heavy iron bucket conking him upon the crown for good measure. Yes, he had managed to decrypt that damnable sheet of frustrating woe. There had been times when he wanted to tear his hair out and sit in sackcloth and ashes. But now he knew of its troubling contents, and it dawned on him that he would have to reveal all he knew to the centaurs. Such was the joy—and grief—of being a steward.

“Then stop dawdling!” Hope said. “You must tell Charon straight away.”

He held her a little closer. “I know, my dearest, but there are still passages in it that puzzle me.”

“Which passages?”

“Here, I’ll show you,” said Jacob, taking Hope by the hand and leading her to his desk. He shuffled through his notes and then tapped a section that he had marked *Peas*. “Ah! Here it is!”

It took Hope a moment to unscramble Jacob’s shaky handwriting. She read Cheiron’s mysterious declaration: “*“Centaur, why be deceived? You ignore the truth! You may think humans are like peas, small and insignificant, but they are worth nurturing just the same. Do not forget that peas express the divine ratio.”*”

“What do you make of that, doctor?” Jacob asked. “Why are the centaurs so interested in peas? Do you recall the pea plants I told you about at Science Station 404? Also, it seems that

Lady Ianthe is fond of peas, and Charon was certainly pleased when I told him that I would plant peas in my garden.”

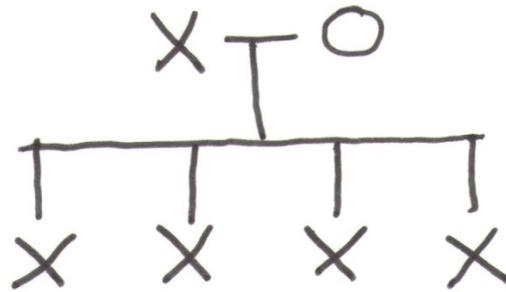
Hope arched an intrigued brow. “There is an experiment conducted in basic biology courses that involves peas. It’s used to demonstrate recessive and dominant traits and the basic mechanism of inheritance.”

“Inheritance?”

“Yes,” said Hope with a patient nod. “Let’s say I have a pair of plants that will serve as the parent generation. One plant produces green peas while the other yellow peas. Now let’s say I cross-pollinate the parents...”

She slid a sheet of stray paper before her and dipped a quill with fresh ink. “The cross-marks represent the plants that produce the yellow peas, while the circles are plants that produce green peas.”

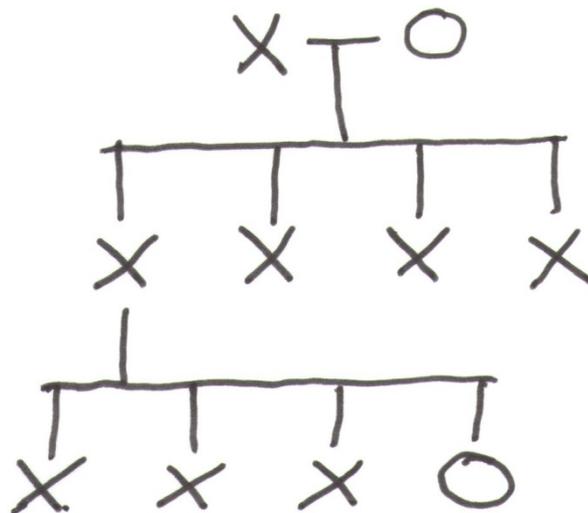
She drew:



“What do you make of that?”

“It seems that the yellow peas are dominant, but the green peas have completely vanished.”

Hope smiled as she deftly appended her sketch. “Yes, but if we take a child plant and allow it to self-pollinate...”



“...the recessive trait reappears.”

“Fascinating,” Jacob said. “Does this 3:1 ratio occur in subsequent generations?”

“Yes, without fail,” Hope said. “In all cases of self-pollination, the ratio remains constant. Once it was believed that if a trait became recessive it never reappeared, but the experiment proves otherwise.”

Jacob heaved a frustrated sigh. “This 3:1 ratio raises more questions than it answers.”

“Oh?”

“I’m just tired of centaurs and their riddles. It’s as if they’re incapable of saying what they mean and meaning what they say.”

Hope frowned in disapproval. “Maybe Cheiron had his reasons for comparing humans to peas? He seems to be paying humans a compliment, thinking that we’re worthy of our inheritance, whatever it may be.”

“Yes, now if only we could—.” Jacob’s ears pricked to the beat of approaching hoof steps and he snapped to attention. He stepped quietly to the frosted window and subtly parted the curtain. His eyes narrowed in concern when he saw Pholos escorting a stranger towards the house. The mysterious visitor was a chestnut dun, with a fine mane and a tail the color of wood ash. He wore a woolen cloak dyed a deep purple that draped all the way from his shoulders and spilled over his rump, but this did little to hide the fact that he had been stripped of his stones. Jacob knew that Charon had lost his precious jewels due to a bout with cancer, and rather late in life, thereby preserving most of his masculine stature. Centaur stallions, if they were gelded just at the end of puberty, tended to be smooth and dandy about the face and chest thereafter. Jacob felt a sympathetic pang. It was very possible that this centaur had gotten into some serious trouble as a youth and that his herd decided it was best to castrate him. Jacob reproached himself: *Do not be quick to judge, lest you jump to the wrong conclusions.*

He stiffened when he saw the disgusted scowl that marred the already craggy face of Pholos; the centaur quartermaster did not care for the company of this particular gelding.

Hope felt Jacob’s radiating tension. “Trouble?”

“Maybe,” Jacob whispered. “Quickly, stash your walking stick and rucksack out of sight, and put on your cloak. You usually leave for the clinic at this time, and it’s a chilly morning. You can’t be blamed for dressing warmly.”

By the gods, but he thinks fast on his feet! Hope retrieved her walking stick, rucksack, and cloak. The walking stick she stowed in a dark corner beside the fireplace mantle, and she tossed the rucksack into the crook of the armrest of the overstuffed green couch. She camouflaged it with some mauve pillows and white goose down comforter. It would not look out of place, as it was well known that Jacob would on occasion doze on the couch. She wrapped her cloak casually about her shoulders. She drew through her hair the beautiful carved nacre comb that Jacob had given her when she had broken the good news: *“We’re pregnant!”*

There came the expected knock on the door as Jacob righted the chair behind his desk. He did not bother to cover his notes nor the *Golden Fleece*, as any attempt to conceal his work would prove futile. He was sure that Adramelech, the Lord of Lamioi, knew that he possessed and had probably decoded the ancient document.

“One moment, please!” He smiled as he turned to Hope. “Just stand there as if nothing

has happened.” Hope returned the smile and nodded.

Jacob stood adjacent to the door for a moment and took a calming breath. Everything had to seem normal and utterly boring. *Nothing special here! Nothing to see here!*

He flipped the latch and opened the door. “Hah! Good morning, Master Sargent Pholos!” Jacob regarded the young gelding with a respectful nod. “I see you’ve brought a friend—.”

“This creature is no friend,” Pholos growled. “He’s a Lamioi and a sworn enemy.”

“Pardon?” said Jacob, feigning ignorance. “Are you telling me that they—whomever *they* may be—decided to have a war and didn’t bother to tell me about it? Well, before the battle begins, why don’t you come in and have some hot wine to dull the sharp chill.” He stepped back, opening the door wider. Pholos and the dun gelding trotted into the parlor.

Jacob gave Hope and affectionate wave. “You probably know my betrothed, Dr. Hope Bentham.”

“Welcome to our home,” Hope said. She pulled her cloak a little tighter to ward off the fresh draft. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name.”

“Orthaon,” said the gelding with a respectful nod. “I serve Lord Adramelech as his stable master.”

Pholos fixed a hard, narrow stare onto Orthaon. “You’re nothing but a cheap, dirty eunuch, quick to lift your tail to satisfy your master’s aberrant cravings. Now, get on with it and stop wasting Teacher Jacob’s time! Can’t you see he’s a busy man?”

Jacob frowned. “Pholos, at ease! I realize that this isn’t a social call, but a centaur is a centaur, and a human is a human. The war ended long ago. This is a house of peace, and I’ll have harmony in my home!”

“It’s all right, Teacher Jacob,” Orthaon said. “I’m Lamioi, and—.”

“No, it’s not all right,” began Jacob tersely. “You’re a guest in my home and are to be treated with respect. Just because we might be enemies doesn’t mean we can’t be civil to each other.”

“Speaking of civility,” said Hope, “may I get you a drink? Perhaps the hot wine that Jacob suggested?”

“Thank you, but no,” Orthaon said.

Jacob renewed his smile “So... what can I do for you, Master Orthaon?”

The gelding pushed his cloak back over his left shoulder, revealing his smooth and naked chest. Jacob made every effort to keep a straight face upon spotting the peacock feather tattooed about the purple, erect nipple. Such crude indecency! Had the Lamioi no shame? Could not the gelding at least wear a shirt to mask such an obscene and provoking figure?

Orthaon reached into his utility satchel and withdrew a small, tightly wound parchment. He held it out, and Jacob carefully plucked it from the gelding’s outstretched hand. “What’s this?”

“An open invitation,” Orthaon said. “Lord Adramelech invites you to dine with him at your convenience. Please don’t misplace it, as it guarantees your safe passage through Lamioi

territory.”

“An open invitation, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jacob unfurled the scroll, and read aloud:

“To Mr. Jacob Walden:

We fear, Teacher Jacob, that upon our last meeting, we stumbled upon a rocky trail. Since we are undertaking a long, arduous journey, we propose that it is in the best interests of all parties involved if we redouble our efforts to smooth the path.

We have therefore sent this invitation in the sincerest belief that you will accept our humble request for your presence at dinner.

We shall at that time, agree upon a resolution that is acceptable to all.

Your friend,

A—.”

Jacob retreated to his desk, opened the top drawer, and retrieved his copy of the official *Royal Protectorate Almanac*. He thumbed through the pages of the pamphlet until he found the calendar extracts. “Please tell Lord Adramelech that I’ll gladly dine with him after the *Spring Thaw*, when the new moon enters its first visible crescent. That is, of course, if he finds it convenient.” *It goes against my better judgment, accepting this invitation, but I must admit that I’m just as curious about Adramelech as he is about me.*

Hope cleared her throat. “Ahem! Jacob, aren’t you forgetting something?”

“And what would that be, my dearest?”

“Shouldn’t you ask Lord Charon first and get his permission?”

“But sweetheart, Master Orthaon wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t first seen Lord Charon. Besides, I’m not one to turn down dinner, and I’m sure Lord Adramelech presents a fine spread.”

“Interesting,” Orthaon said.

“Sorry, but what’s interesting?”

“I did see Lord Charon. At first I thought I was running a fool’s errand, believing he’d forbid you from traveling to our lands, but he said that he’d leave the decision up to you.”

Jacob chuckled. “Ah! Proof that Charon knows me better than I know myself!”

Hope’s jaw dropped. “Jacob, you can’t be serious!”

“Please, my dear,” said Jacob, “let’s not argue in front of the centaurs. It tends to upset them.” He turned to Orthaon and smiled. “Is there anything else?”

Orthaon grinned. “No, nothing else. I shall inform Lord Adramelech of your plans and

make arrangements for your safe conduct.”

“Then I bid you a good day and a safe journey home.”

Orthaon gave Jacob a respectful nod and turned to leave, but Pholos got to the door first and hastily swung it aside. He began to follow Orthaon outside, but stopped in his tracks to gaze back over his shoulder at Jacob. He gave the man a scowl before slamming the door shut.

Hope joined Jacob at his desk and stood upon the opposite side. She leaned forward and gave him a cold stare. “You’re not going and that’s final!”

Jacob calmly went about securing his notes and the *Golden Fleece* within the hidden compartments of the desk. “Hope, how many times must I remind you to never let the centaurs know what you’re thinking?”

“But, Jacob—.”

“No!” said Jacob, an angry visage twisting his otherwise tranquil demeanor. “Do you honestly believe that Orthaon won’t report all that he has seen and heard to Adramelech? Your little outburst may have jeopardized the entire mission! You’ve given Adramelech the advantage. He’ll use your love against you—and me!”

“Goddamn it, can’t you see that it’s a trap!”

Jacob heaved a thoughtful sigh. He had to admit that that there was a high probability that Hope was right. Her intuition rarely failed her, and he would be wise to take heed. It could very well be a trap, designed to misguide him onto a twisted path. He reached across the desk and enfolded her hands within his, giving her soft fingers a delicate squeeze. “Listen, I’ll tell you what. Let me go and speak to Charon. Should he express the slightest misgiving over the matter, I’ll cancel my dinner with the deviant. I’ll grant you that it could be a trap, but I don’t think it’s an ambush. This could prove to be a great opportunity. Let’s not blow it.”

“*Opportunity?*”

“Do you have an inkling of what Adramelech might have done to Orthaon had he failed to secure the invitation? Adramelech probably would’ve humiliated—perhaps even killed him—in the worse possible way imaginable, and I won’t have that on my conscience. In my opinion, that gelding has suffered enough. Whether Orthaon returns the favor is another matter. If anything, the gelding doesn’t strike me as being arrogant.”

“I just don’t want to wind up a widow,” said Hope, placing Jacob’s hands on her belly, “or our child, an orphan.” *And I fervently pray in the name of all that is holy that Charon changes his mind.*

Jacob grinned. “I promise that I’ll stay out of trouble until you return.”

* * *

“So, what is your diagnosis, doctor?”

Boreas trembled slightly, and he massaged his forehead just above his right brow to steady his nerves. By the gods, how he hated to be the bearer of such bad news! *Physician, heal thyself! Charon is your best friend, but he needs to know the truth.* “From the symptoms you describe, and given your past medical history, I’m afraid you’ve suffered a relapse. It seems the cancer is slowly spreading.”

“Can’t you operate?”

“You’d end up looking like a side of shredded beef, and in your weakened condition, any extensive surgery would kill you.” Boreas heaved a sad sigh. “Now, I can give you something for the pain—.”

“And when the pain becomes too much?”

“May the gods have mercy on you,” Boreas said. “You might lose consciousness, and fall into a coma—.”

Charon nodded grimly. “It seems like a bad death.”

“I can...,” Boreas whispered, “...prepare a...fatal overdose. If the pain becomes too much...well, at least you can...choose...when to end your suffering.”

“Thank you, my friend, for telling me the truth,” Charon said. He gave Boreas’ ropey forearm a squeeze. “Now, go make your rendezvous with Dr. Hope.”

* * *

Jacob halted mid-step after he turned the corner approaching Charon’s stable. Lady Ianthe and Boreas were stationed just outside the entrance, engaged in a subdued and solemn conversation. Ianthe gave Boreas a grateful nod and the Logos stallion secured his winter cloak about his shoulders before trotting off. She then spotted Jacob waiting patiently and smiled, and then gave him a beckoning wave.

The man bowed slightly just before stopping before the centauress. Ianthe had proven a valuable and most generous ally over the winter months. She had held nothing back, teaching him everything that she knew. He had found her *music lessons* to be very therapeutic, thus preserving his sanity. Jacob, in turn, had sworn to take the secrets that the centaurs held dear to his grave.

“Good morning, Lady Ianthe.”

“Greetings, Jacob,” Ianthe said. To his surprise, the mare kissed Jacob upon his forehead. “How’s my favorite student?”

“I’m well,” Jacob said. He unbuttoned his pea coat, tucked in his shirt, and nervously straightened his trousers. “How’s...how’s Charon doing?”

“I’m afraid the rumors you may have heard are indeed true. I take it you’ve deciphered the *Golden Fleece*?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I’ll want a full report, but please try not to upset Charon. Try not to be too shocked when you see him. You can take comfort in knowing that he’s eager to see you.”

“I’ll try not to be tiresome.” Jacob cocked his head and gave Ianthe an inquisitive gaze. “You’re not coming in?”

“No,” said Ianthe with a calming smile. “I have my orders and must make arrangements. I’ll see you later.”

Jacob nodded. “Thank you, my lady.”

The mare smiled once more before turning and trotting away. Jacob walked quietly into Charon's stable. He stood in the courtyard, wondering whether he should clap thrice to announce his presence, but halted when he heard a most jubilant plea: "In here, Jacob!"

The entreaty had come from the symposium. Jacob braced himself before parting the double curtain. He cautiously poked his head inside. He did not like what he saw. He hesitated but for a moment in the jamb and then silently damned himself for it.

Charon sat beside the fireplace, warming his hands before the roaring fire. He did seem much older now, but not any wiser. His mane, hide, and tail reminded Jacob of the dull shade of lead, rather than of the bright sheen of silver. The skin, once having the translucent quality of moonlight on golden snow, was now sickly pale, as if Charon had been drained of blood. The lines of the centaur's face were drawn more deeply, but did not obscure the reassuring smile. But there was still that mischievous, triumphant glint in the albino's eyes that instilled courage in Jacob's heart.

"It looks a lot worse than it is," said Charon, pointing to a throw cushion opposite him. "Now be a good man and sit with me for a little while. Perhaps you can leave some of the happiness you bring."

Jacob shed his coat and folded it within his lap as he sat. "I've decoded the *Golden Fleece*."

Charon laughed. "Excellent!"

"It's not exactly Cheiron's last will and testament. It reads more like an epistle. It's beautifully written, very clear and concise. He extends his greetings and respects to centaurs and humans alike, and reminds every one of their duty. To this, he adds a sympathetic corollary in regards to the mares and fillies, telling them that if indeed they have done their duty, and have subdued the Earth with centaur kind, then the stallions must bow to them. They need not submit to the stallions if that is their choice."

Charon grinned. "Cheiron always did have a soft spot in his heart for the ladies."

"There are troubling passages."

"Then you have questions?"

Jacob heaved a long sigh. "I formulated four questions after consulting Lady Ianthe, just now outside your stable."

"Ask," said Charon with an encouraging nod.

"First, Cheiron makes reference to humans expressing the divine ratio. Hope told me about the experiments with pea plants that demonstrated inherited traits."

"That would be a reference to the *First Born*. We're not exactly sure of how or why it happens, but it's known that certain stallions carry what we call the *Ancient Seed*. Before you know it—like a miraculous bolt from the blue—a human strikes the Earth. How distressing it was for centaurs to learn that the *First Born* could subdue the Earth with their numbers, and their children, capable of sustaining the human race." He cocked his head and gave the man an inquisitive stare. "You seem to be taking this all in stride."

Jacob smiled. "You know me to be a rational man. I've had time to think long and hard

about what you said to me when we visited *Cheiron's Tomb*. To deny the facts is illogical—and dangerous.”

“Very good,” said Charon. “Please continue.”

“*Beware the chimera, for it is a terrible beast and cannot be tamed.*”

“That, I’m afraid, is a warning. Now, before the coming of Cheiron, in the bad old days, centaurs and humans would often indulge in their bestial urges and—well...legend has it that the *Ipotanes* were the unholy offspring of these unions. They were violent abominations of our making, so we destroyed them.”

“*Beware the strutting peacock, for unlike the Phoenix, the peacock brings strange fire that is all heat and no light. But if the peacock folds his plumage as to not fan the flames of hate, then like the Phoenix he will arise from the ashes.*”

“Cheiron always regretted having ostracized the Lamioi. They’ve lived now as a sovereign nation for nearly three thousand years. To think that I almost—almost—managed to coax them back into the greater fold is frustrating. I had known Iapetus since we were colts—he was Adramelech’s sire—a noble stallion and skilled warrior. Iapetus was sympathetic to my cause... he too wanted to end the *schism* and...reunify the herds. If only he hadn’t died, then maybe this entire mess could’ve been avoided.”

“I see.” *But perhaps it’s better that the centaurs don’t undergo reunification, as I’m sure that would endanger my people. What use would the centaurs have for humans then? They might decide that humans are ‘violent abominations’....*

Charon coughed and cleared his throat. “Now, I have a mission for you. There’s been trouble at your old cooperative.”

“What? Farming Cooperative 3762? I’d thought I’d never see that place again.”

“Report to Tereus and he’ll brief you. You’ll depart on the late evening tide.”

“Hope won’t like that,” said Jacob, worriedly massaging his nape. “I promised her that I’d stay out of trouble until she returned.”

“I’ll speak to her,” Charon said. “I’ll try to smooth the path.”

Jacob smiled. “Thanks.” He rose and began for the door.

“Jacob?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“You had four questions, but you’ve only posed three so far.”

How Jacob wished he could shed his emotions as if checking a moth-eaten cloak at the door. He sighed, and prayed that his voice would not crack as a clay pot when dropped. “Is...is there anything I can do for you?”

Charon smiled. “Perhaps....”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever heard, *The Warrior’s Creed*?”

“Pardon?”

“I guess not,” said Charon with a shrug, “since you’re human, it’s probably never been told to you.”

“Then let me hear it.”

“Once, long ago, during the Cheiron’s rule, there lived a mighty warrior. He fought skillfully and bravely, but bragged not of his many victories; he gave all the glory to the divine spirit.

“But as the years passed, he became aged and sick. So, he went before Cheiron and saluted him. Cheiron greeted the warrior warmly and asked him what he wanted.

“The warrior lamented: ‘My lord, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I beg my lord and master for one last favor.’

“And Cheiron said unto him, ‘Ask your favor, and I will gladly grant it.’

The warrior made one final plea: ‘If it pleases you, let me lead the next charge into battle, so that I may die with dignity.’

“And Cheiron’s heart went out to the old warrior, and he said, ‘So be it. Lead the charge; die with dignity—and the honor—you so richly deserve.’”

Charon managed a weak grin. “Do you understand now?”

* * *

Jacob bowed to Semele. “My greetings and respects to the lady. How are you?”

“I’m well,” said the mare, smiling in return.

Tereus gave Jacob a dour side-glance. “Teacher Jacob, this isn’t a social call. Come into my office at once. You’re wasting precious time!”

“I see you’re as cheerful as ever,” drawled Jacob as he followed the security governor into his office.

Tereus waved an impatient hand toward two sheets of parchment that lay on a nearby podium. “Look at those. The reports are allegedly from the same *Watcher*.”

Jacob glanced at the parchments. He did not bother to read them, as both were scrambled in code to thwart prying eyes. “Are you saying that *Argus Paraskos* wrote both of these?” Jacob had not forgotten the kindness and bravery of his friend. Argus had done more than just watch him during his tenure at the cooperative. He had risked his life, and now that Argus was in some kind of trouble. *Indeed, serious trouble.*

Jacob frowned. “These look as if they were written by two different hands,” he said, rubbing his chin. “The handwriting doesn’t match at all, and it doesn’t look like any attempt was made to disguise the forgery.”

“Exactly,” Tereus said. He pointed to the parchment on the left. “This one we received a fortnight ago. We’ve verified that Paraskos wrote that one. We compared it to a known sample of his writing.”

“Is Argus watching anyone at the moment?”

“His new orders were to keep a close eye on Koprillia.”

Jacob felt a cold hallow spreading within his chest. *Trouble! Nothing but trouble!* He tapped the parchment on the right. “And when did you receive this?”

“Three days ago,” Tereus said. “I haven’t been able to match it yet.”

Jacob ran an index finger below a line of code. “The script has a feminine touch, as if drafted by a woman or mare.”

“Once there, you’ll make contact with Chief Phoebe. She’ll rendezvous with you at the guest stable behind the inn.” The security governor cocked a curt brow. “I trust you know where that is?”

“I do know my way around,” Jacob said. “I only lived there for seven years, but then of course, you already knew that, didn’t you, governor?”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Do we have any other leads?”

“Centaur intelligence does function in your absence, *Troubleshooter*. You’re authorized to observe—and only observe—and nothing else.”

“But—.”

“You’re to take no action whatsoever,” said Tereus with a fresh glare. “You’ll want to inform Paraskos that someone is intercepting his dispatches. He’s our best *Watcher* in that region.”

“I take it then that Argus wouldn’t have breached the security protocols?”

“It’s likely that the switch was made on the sly. You’re mission is to discover *who, how, and why*. Is that clear?”

“And if Koprillia is involved?”

“If the archon is compromised, we don’t want to spook him. We want him to suspect nothing.”

* * *

Deucalion groaned painfully as Orithyia’s sacred amphora undulated around his member. “By the gods—*please release me!* You’ve squeezed every last drop from the fruit of my loins!”

Orithyia smiled. “Did I not tell you, my love, that I’d make you suffer? Did you honestly believe that there would be no price to pay?”

Three distinct handclaps echoed from the courtyard of the stable. Orithyia heaved an impatient sigh. Who could it be now, spoiling her fun?

“Who is it?” said Orithyia sourly.

“It is I,” Myrrha snapped. “You’ll have respect for thy *Dam*, my daughter!”

Orithyia shivered as the blood ran cold in her veins. “Just a moment, I’ll be right out.” She contracted her intimate vessel once more.

Deucalion moaned as his climax plowed through his loins. The young stallion slid off and collapsed to his knees. He gazed upward, his eyes pleading—*have mercy!*

Orithyia grinned impishly. "I'm not through with you yet, my love. Wait here!" She tentatively parted the curtain to see the Lady Myrrha brooding in the center of the stable courtyard. Orithyia nodded in respect as she approached her dam. "A thousand pardons my mother—*my Dam!* I hold you in the highest regard. I meant no disrespect. I only dishonor myself."

"Forgiven and forgotten," said Myrrha with an odd, tight grin. She clasped forearms with Orithyia and planted a tender kiss upon her cheek. "I regret interrupting your intimate liaison, but I must speak with you."

Orithyia stepped back and nodded. "Yes, mother?"

"Let's go to the garden out back. There are too many ears in this stable."

"As you wish," Orithyia said. She trotted out of the courtyard with Myrrha close on her heels. The younger mare halted in the middle of the garden and executed a pirouette to face her mother. Myrrha fixed a frosty gaze on her daughter that made her shiver anew.

"Yes, my dam?" Orithyia asked.

"It's about Deucalion," Myrrha whispered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't play games with me, my daughter. I can't ignore the rumors any longer, and neither can you."

"What rumors?"

"Don't you find it odd that Deucalion successfully turned all your filly friends into mares? Yet, you remain—."

Orithyia's face knitted in anger. "Perhaps his seed too slow to take root. I assure you that it's not for a lack of trying."

"Young lady," said Myrrha darkly, "you are in trouble. I know that you've broken the law. I know you have—*the implant*. You can't go on playing Deucalion for a fool. He'll realize—."

"Deucalion already knows."

Myrrha drew back in shock. "What?"

"You heard me," Orithyia said. "Deucalion feared that Adramelech might attempt to rape me, so he agreed to—."

"You'll have it extracted at once!"

"No."

The elder mare regrouped. *She would try another tactic.* "There's still the matter of your dear brother."

"Arcas? What has he—?"

"No, not Arcas," said Myrrha with a smirk. "I speak of Jacob! Lord Adramelech has him within his sights and is ready to strike! Stop this foolishness now or you won't be able to protect him."

“Mother!” Orithyia struggled to choke back her tears. “How could you—betray your own son?”

Myrrha slapped the younger mare across the cheek, making her reel. “That half-finished monster is no son of mine!” She instantly regretted the assault, but was not about to tolerate such insolence from her daughter. “Now see what you’ve made me do! Stop this foolishness at once and submit to your rightful lord and master!”

Orithyia soothed her stinging cheek. “It seems I have no other choice.”

“Yes,” said Myrrha, beaming with triumph. “Now, go and pack. We’re leaving!”

CHAPTER 2: NIGHT OF THE ARCHON

Argus twitched his mustache. “I can't imagine what's keeping your father. It's almost time for curfew.”

Nicky stopped sweeping and leaned against the broom. “Papa told me that there's been trouble on the farm. Just yesterday, he found the west fence wrecked—again. There were centaur tracks everywhere.”

“Centaur tracks? Are you sure? Usually the centaurs like fences. It makes for good neighbors, or so they say.”

“Whatever makes them happy, I guess.” Nicky flicked the last of the dirt into a dustpan. “The centaurs will probably teach me a lot of things that make them happy after I head off to *Teaching Academy 101*.” He started for the kitchen. “I think I'll wipe down the griddle and clean out the grease trap.”

“Good boy,” said Argus with a smile. *Although he's hardly a boy now. Nicky's almost fifteen. I'm glad he's finally getting away from this forsaken shithole of a cooperative—*. The barkeep sighed and returned to wiping the barstools clean.

The slamming of the front door startled Nicky and he dropped the sponge onto the griddle. *Who could it be at this hour?* He drew a deep breath to calm his fluttering heart and wedged himself into a corner. He strained his ears to eavesdrop.

“Archon Koprillia!” Argus said. “Sir, I was just about to lock up, and—.”

“Bring ale, barkeep!” Koprillia growled. He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. “My friends are thirsty and so am I! So much to do...so little time....”

Argus blinked at the two bulky and shaggy men that stood behind Koprillia. The long hair and scraggly beards did little to hide the dumb, empty-eyed slabs that served as faces. Their long coats and baggy pants were rumpled and poorly fitted, as if an inept tailor had slashed the cloth with a dull pair of scissors. The barkeep's nose wrinkled from the pungent odor! They smelled like a flock of sheep drenched in rain. Didn't these men believe in bathing?

Koprillia scowled. “What are you staring at?”

Argus cleared his throat. “Sorry, it's late and my brain blew a fart. I'll go get some clean mugs now.” He turned on his heel and scurried into the kitchen.

“Very well,” said Koprillia. He turned to his companions. “Come, gents, the rear parlor awaits our business.”

Argus spied Nicky straight away. “Koprillia—,” he breathed.

“I know!” Nicky whispered. “What do I do now?”

“Koprillia will have a shit fit if he finds you here.” Argus gathered mugs, set them upon a serving tray and poured fresh ale. “Give me a few minutes, and then slip quietly out the back door. Be careful, as I'm sure the inn is being watched from all sides.”

“Watched by whom?” Nicky asked.

“That’s a good question,” Argus said. “There were two strangers...I’m not even sure if...there may be more of them.” He stopped in the jamb and gave Nicky a tight glare. “Whatever you do, don’t head for home. Hide in the woods until morning.”

“Barkeep, where’s that ale!”

Argus rolled his eyes. “Coming, Archon Koprillia!”

Nicky eyed the back door. Could there be someone—or something—on the other side? If so, how could he just slip by them? He eyed the greasy sponge he had dropped on the griddle and then the grease trap along the back edge. His lips parted into a clever smile as the insight lit up his mind. *He had slipped on some spilled grease a few days ago and had nearly broken his neck, but had thankfully only bruised his pride!* He ran his thumbs along his fingertips and then grabbed the sponge. He quickly smeared his arms, the front of his shirt, and the tops of his shoulders. Nicky then crept about the kitchen, extinguishing the lamps until engulfed within the safety in darkness.

Argus set the drinks before Koprillia and his guests. “Pardon me, archon, but would you mind letting yourself out? I’d really like to hit the sack.”

Koprillia’s eyes narrowed. “But I have one last question, my good barkeep.”

It took every remaining shred of his patience for Argus not to heave an irritated sigh. “Yes, Archon Koprillia?”

“Who watches the... *Watcher?*”

“I beg your pardon?” Argus feigned a puzzled scowl to hide the anxious churning of his stomach. How could Koprillia know? He knew then that he had been betrayed and his cover blown. But who?

Koprillia smirked. “Why don’t you sit down and join us.”

Argus broke into a sweat as he reluctantly sat in the chair opposite Koprillia. The hirsute trolls stood and hovered behind him.

Koprillia smirked as he drew a pistol and pointed it at the hapless Argus. “Game over.” He gave a curt nod to the brutes. “Go get the boy.”

Nicky heard heavy, lumbering footsteps, and he hurried to sprinkle the last of the olive oil over the slate floor. He retreated for the door and nudged it outward. The creaking of the iron hinges set his teeth on edge. He cursed his stupidity. *Why hadn’t he thought of oiling the—*

He gasped as he saw dark forms race into the kitchen! Nicky pivoted and kicked the door open with all of his might. There was an angry roar as the doorframe smashed squarely into the face of a third prowler lying in wait outside, knocking him flat on his back. The thugs behind the boy slipped and tumbled over themselves. Nicky could not help but grin as he sprinted into the murky forest.

But the triumphant grin quickly faded from Nicky’s face. *Where to hide? Where to go?* He dashed into the depths of the forest.

* * *

The first mate nodded upwards. “You’ll find Captain Psaras in the wheelhouse.” The barrel-chested sailor pointed toward the stern of the barge. “Go up the starboard ladder and

through the door. Mind you, the captain's busy at the moment, as we're about to set sail."

"Very good," Jacob said. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, sir." The sailor turned about to bark orders. "Secure the gangway! Prepare to cast off!"

Jacob slung his rucksack over his shoulder and darted through the labyrinth of stacked crates, barrels, neatly coiled lines, and cranes stowed on the deck. It was a moonless night but there was no danger of fog. The crew hurried to lash any loose cargo to the deck, and Jacob was careful to stay out of their way. It was one of the newer coastal barges, powered by steam, and had a shallow draft to maneuver close to shore. Plumes of black smoke gently puffed from the stack that was behind the wheelhouse. He quickly ascended the sturdy wooden stairway and opened the door.

He froze and blinked when he saw the captain. Jacob smiled instantly when he saw the familiar windswept and tanned face. "You're the sailor I met in Argus' inn that night. You offered me your hard earned drachmas—."

The captain turned and smiled. "Welcome aboard the *Andromeda*. Thaddeus Psaras, at your service. You'll have to excuse me for just a moment." He shifted the brass switches forward on a copper engine telegraph to *Ahead Slow* on the dial before taking hold of the oaken wheel. "We can talk after Mr. Theodekles relieves me on watch."

Jacob leaned against the bulkhead and watched in utter fascination as Psaras skillfully maneuvered the ship away from the dock and towards the open channel. The first mate entered the wheelhouse about an hour after the barge slipped by the harbor breakwater and took over the wheel. Psaras glanced at his charts and then double-checked the compass to ensure that the ship was indeed on course. He telegraphed *Ahead Full* and Jacob felt the deck slide forward beneath his feet as the ship gained speed.

Theodekles entered the wheelhouse and relieved Psaras, grasping the spokes of the oak wheel. "Captain, the deck is secured."

"Very good, Mr. Theodekles," Psaras said. "Steady as she goes. Wait until we're no longer in land's sight and pass the word. Douse the ship's lamps and station eagle-eyed lookouts on the bow. We're running dark until four bells of the morning watch."

"Aye aye, captain," said Theodekles with a nod.

Psaras turned to Jacob. "Okay, we can talk now." He parted a heavy grey curtain near the corner of the bulkhead and stepped into an adjoining cabin. Jacob followed him inside and drew the curtain back. The captain's quarters were tight and efficient, with only a locker, bunk, washbasin, and small desk. A sea chest served as a chair. Two open portholes with polished brass fittings facing aft graced the rear of the bulkhead. The two men sat on the bunk, smiled and shook hands.

"You're looking very well, Teacher Jacob."

"Thank you," Jacob said. "You seem to be doing well too. You were an able seaman when I last saw you, and now you're a licensed master."

"I was working undercover," said Psaras with a wry grin. "I too am a *Watcher*. All *Watchers* know each other on sight as a security measure. We got word that Koprillia was

planning to assassinate you on orders from Lord Adramelech. I infiltrated the crew and bided my time. If necessary, I was to lead a mutiny and arrest the captain and first mate. As a last resort, I was to rescue you and jump that damned ship.” He heaved a relieved sigh. “It might have been your last voyage.”

Jacob nodded. “What happened to them, the captain and first mate? What about the rest of the crew?”

“The entire crew were arrested and later interrogated by Governor Tereus. I’m sure that proved to be rough sailing. Still, they got off easy. They were all under duress. Adramelech had threatened their families with a series of unfortunate accidents if they didn’t oblige him. A lot of bilge water if you ask me.”

Jacob chuckled. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Adramelech was filled with bilge water.” The smile faded as he recalled his first encounter with the centaur lord. “I’ve met that four-legged asshole. He’s a nasty piece of work.”

“You needn’t worry about this crew,” Psaras said. “They’ve all been vetted, as has this barge. It makes regular coastwise trade as not to attract attention.”

“When should we arrive?” Jacob asked.

“If the currents hold steady, we should arrive by late afternoon tomorrow.”

“I’ll admit it’s a great cover, but how can I get off the ship without being spotted? Half the cooperative will be on the dock to help unload. Koprillia will be there as well.”

Psaras smiled. “Let’s just say that you’re a special delivery.”

* * *

Nicky shivered in the dark. He realized that he could not stay hidden in the bushes much longer without eventually freezing to death. His empty stomach growled painfully, and visions of hot soup, fresh baked bread, followed by a cozy bed, tormented him.

He wanted to go home. He always felt safe at home. His parents had always told him that if there was trouble he should come home. But Argus had told him not to. *Why? What was so bad about going home?* His heart was beating hard—what about mama and papa? Were they okay? Nicky felt his skin turn gooseflesh, but not from the ruthless chill. He poked his head from the bushes and gazed wide-eyed around him. Seeing nothing, he bolted from his hiding place and ran as fast as he could—towards home.

* * *

“Boys, turn your hands steady!” Psaras said. “Can’t you read? It’s painted in big red letters: **FRAGILE! HANDLE WITH CARE!** You’re not handling flotsam, you know!” The sailors redoubled their effort to ease the crate into a corner of the warehouse.

Quartermaster Adara sniffed in disdain and her bright blue eyes narrowed at the sight of the crate. “What in Tartarus is that?”

Captain Psaras stared at the bill of lading. “It says here that it’s school supplies. Pens, ink, and such...there’s also a microscope and telescope...for some science projects, I guess—.”

“Can’t you deliver it to the schoolhouse instead of dropping it off here? I should’ve

closed the warehouse an hour ago.”

Psaras frowned in dismay. “I’m not about to have my men stumble around in the dark with a hefty crate like that. Besides, we’re tired and could use a break.” He turned to his crewmates and grinned. “Let’s go to the inn. I’m buying!”

“You can’t!” Adara said.

“Oh?” said Psaras with a baffled nod. “Why?”

She shrank into a timid stance. “It’s...closed...for repairs.”

“That’s rather odd—.”

“I’m telling you it’s closed!”

“Very well,” said Psaras, waving a hand in mock defeat. “We’ll return to the barge. Come, boys! I’ll break out my emergency stash of ouzo!” The captain’s declaration made the remaining sailors break out in a cheer.

Jacob had to strain his ears, as the sheathing muffled every noise exterior to the crate. Finally, he heard what he thought was retreating footsteps and the bang of a slamming door. Was Quartermaster Adara really gone? He waited a full minute before sliding his fingers up along the sheathing to the top frame and spreading his arms to the inner corners. He pushed his thumbs against the grain as hard as he could to release the hidden latches. The false front glided down, revealing the darkened warehouse. Jacob climbed out the crate, pulling a candle and matches out of the pocket of his pea coat as he did so. The match flared with a loud hiss when he struck it against the edge of the crate, jolting his already strained nerves.

Get a grip, Jacob! Keep a steady head on your shoulders or you’ll be caught! He drew a deep breath to calm his thumping heart. Still, his hand trembled when he lit the candle. Jacob slowly made for the warehouse office tucked into the opposite corner of the storeroom, using his free hand to guide him along the shelves. It was not utterly dark, but the dirty windows diffused what little ambient light shone from the torches lining the wharf outside.

* * *

Adara was halfway to the public baths when she halted in her tracks. She cursed under her breath. In her hurry to get out of the warehouse, she had forgotten to lock the office door! *Shit!* She turned on her heel and stomped hard to return. She could not let it go until morning: Koprillia would have one his depraved fits if he ever found out. He had nearly chewed her head off when she asked about the files he wanted kept under lock and key. She blinked as a drop of stinging sweat fell into her eye. She fumbled the keys out of her pocket as she approached the entrance to the warehouse.

Jacob grew more frustrated by the second as he rifled through the filing cabinet. *Where were the goddamned reports that Argus passes onto Chief Phoebe? They must be here somewhere!* He just about jumped out of his skin when he heard the sharp clack of the outer door. He instantly blew out the candle, and the ribbon of acrid smoke made his eyes water. Someone was approaching the office!

But was it someone he could trust?

He decided that it was worth the risk. Jacob turned a chair towards the open office door

and sat. He lit a small lantern on the corner of the desk, and then flipped the collar of his pea coat upward to hide the lower half of his face. The moment he did so, he saw the shrouded but feminine form halt mid-step. *Yes, I'm here. Come to me.* He kept a steady gaze on the quartermaster as she continued to approach.

She reached in her coat pocket upon reaching the jamb, and pulled a petite, but undeniably fatal, single-shot pistol. She aimed it directly at Jacob's heart.

"Don't move!" she snapped. "Keep your hands where I can see them!"

Jacob smiled. "Good evening, Miss Kouklakis."

She trembled. "Teacher Jacob!"

A reproving glare spread on Jacob's face. "It would be foolish of you to shoot me, Adara. Young lady, you're in deep trouble. If you suspected a burglar, why didn't you run to the constabulary and fetch Officers Ballios and Soukis?"

"Shut up!"

"Please, I want to help you. I got your message. Give me the gun and turn yourself over to Chief Phoebe before it's too late."

"I ...can't—."

"Yes, you can," Jacob whispered. "Tell me, how did Koprillia learn of the reports that Argus was making to Lord Charon?"

Tears flooded onto Adara's cheeks. "I don't know! He managed to steal the reports from under the barkeeper's nose. He'd break the seal, tell me to make a copy, and then I'd return the original to him. I knew something was wrong, so I resealed the copy and slipped it to him."

"Clever," said Jacob with a nod, "and Koprillia never suspected?"

"By the gods, what'll happen to me?"

"I won't honey coat it for you. Naturally, I'll tell Chief Phoebe of your cooperation, but you'll be punished for your involvement. You'll be reduced in rank and lose your residency points, but I'll see to it that you don't disappear."

Adara lowered the pistol and wiped away her tears. "I can't believe that I once loved that—."

A loud bang and the tinkling of shattering glass assaulted Jacob's ears. He grabbed the lantern as he dove for the floor and smothered it beneath him. The hot lantern burned his fingertips, making him yelp, but the alternative was another gunshot. Adara fell in a sprawl on top of him. He pried the pistol out of her clenched fingers and rolled out from underneath her. He crouched over her lifeless body and gazed at her blood-spattered face. A small wound between her eyes oozed gore.

Jacob heaved a defeated sigh. "I'm sorry, Adara." He slipped the pistol into his coat pocket.

He slowly got to his feet and spotted the face of Koprillia framed within the broken windowpane. The archon snarled and raised his pistol, pointing it through the shards. Jacob scowled in return, his eyes aflame with loathing.

There was another shot, but this time it came from outside the warehouse. “Hey, you there—halt!” Koprillia turned and ran headlong into the night.

Psaras and half the crew of the *Andromeda* crashed through the front door. They hurriedly filed through the crates and intercepted Jacob in the office. Only the captain was armed with an old, obsolete arquebus; the sailors had to make due with sabers and knives.

“We heard the shot,” Psaras said. “What happened?”

“Nasty business, this,” said Jacob, pointing to Adara’s body. “Captain Psaras?”

“Yes?”

“I need a favor. Could you send some of your crew to the constabulary? They need to bring—.”

Psaras nodded. “Not a problem.”

“Thanks,” Jacob said. “I must find Chief Phoebe and quick before Koprillia makes his escape.”

* * *

Nicky leaned against the roughhewn fence and tried to catch his breath. He had run for what seemed like forever. The sweat clung to him like a pile of rumped old clothing and his ankles and shins felt as if they were on fire. He spied his home that sat in the middle of the newly plowed barley field. The single lantern burned steadily on the handrail of the steps leading up to the front porch.

His father’s instructions rang within Nicky’s head: “My son, if you see one lamp, then it’s safe for you to come home.”

“But if you see two lamps,” said mother, “or no lamps at all, then there is danger. Stay away from the house!”

But it was too quiet and still. Nicky could not discern any movement within the home. He circled about the house and approached from the rear. He winced as he slowly turned the brass knob on the back door leading into the kitchen. The clack rang like a thunderclap within his ears. The door creaked as he pulled it open. His eyes went wide when he saw his parents sprawled on the kitchen floor.

“Momma! Papa!”

Nicky dropped to the floor and began to sob quietly. He desperately crawled between them, and shook them, trying to revive them. They were as cold as the icy night outside, their eyes locked into the stare of death. Their necks were broken.

He cradled his father in his arms, pulled him close, and wept bitter tears. “Oh, papa! I’m...so...sorry...so sorry!”

What seemed like blinding fresh light and heavy steps entered the kitchen. Nicky jerked his sight upward. He screamed when he beheld the smirking face of Koprillia standing in the doorway. The archon smirked maliciously as he raised the stolen lantern.

“*Assassin!*” Nicky jumped to his feet, intending to rush and tackle the malevolent archon. “*Murderer! I’ll kill—.*”

Koprillia smacked Nicky with a powerful backhand upside his head, sending the boy into a dazed spiral. He threw the lantern under the dining table, causing it to sputter into open flames. The fire was like a hungry animal, feeding voraciously on the surrounding woodwork. He grabbed the boy by the collar and dragged him from the house.

“You’re coming with me, boy! You’re my ticket out of here!”

* * *

The guest stable behind the inn was dark. Jacob had wanted to find Argus first before contacting Chief Phoebe, but he had found the front door of the inn locked tight and the back door ajar, the frame bashed into splinters, as if struck by a battering ram. *Trouble! Nothing but trouble!* His cover was blown and he had lost the element of surprise. For all he knew, Koprillia could be hiding inside, waiting to ambush him. He pressed against the sliding door of the stable, grasped the iron handle, and using it as a shield, yanked it open. He crouched and peered around the edge of the frame.

Jacob saw the faint outline of Chief Phoebe in the corner opposite the door, her hands tied behind her back and her legs hobbled, a gag stuffed in her mouth. “*By the gods!*”

He instantly ran to the mare’s side, knelt beside her, pulled his standard issue sailor’s rescue knife from its sheath, and began sawing at the rope binding her hands. Phoebe’s eyes went wide with alarm and she resisted the man’s attempt to free her.

“What?” asked Jacob, utterly puzzled by the mare’s sudden panic. He yanked the gag out of her mouth.

“*Behind you!*”

Jacob turned to see a lumbering shadow rushing toward him. It grabbed him by the lapels of his pea coat and threw him across the room, and his vision blurred as he tumbled up against the wall. He shook his head to clear his dizziness. A massive fist covered with wiry hair threatened to bash him to oblivion. Jacob ducked and the paw smashed a gaping hole in the wooden panel. Jacob fought back the best way he knew how. He fought dirty. He kicked his foe in the crotch as hard as he could.

The beast clamped its hands over its groin and howled in agony. Jacob grabbed a forelock of greasy hair and yanked the head upward, exposing the repugnant, twisted face. He fumbled the pistol out of his coat pocket and brandished it before the eyes of his adversary. Jacob shoved the barrel into a nostril of the squat nose. He pulled the trigger. There was a muffled bang. Blood poured from the creature’s mouth and ears as it fell to the floor with a thud. There was a massive spasm and then the body lay still.

Jacob hunched over the fiend and fell to his knees, exhausted by the melee. The battle had lasted but a few seconds, but he felt as if he had been fighting for hours. He made a careful scrutiny of the body, starting from the head and ending to the toes—what hath the fires of Tartarus wrought? What was this abomination? It did not have feet—*it had hooves! Cloven hooves!* Jacob ripped the baggy pants from about its waist and legs. He beheld a formation starting from the waist downward that belonged to a centaur and not a human.

“By the gods!” Jacob gasped. “It’s...it’s a *Silenus!*” His face wrinkled in disgust. “Someone’s been jumping the fence!”

Phoebe gave Jacob an irritated stare. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

He gazed stupidly at the mare for a moment and realized that she was still bound like a bale of hay. “Sorry,” Jacob said. He scurried over to Phoebe and quietly resumed the task of untying her. She stood the instant Jacob freed her legs.

“Are you okay?” Jacob asked.

“It’s a good thing you came along when you did. Koprillia told that...that... beast to rape me to death after killing you.” She turned and spat upon the corpse.

“I was lucky this time. He’s big and bulky and I was just a little quicker.” Alarm flashed onto the Jacob’s face. “Where’s Argus?”

“Argus wasn’t so lucky.” Phoebe gulped hard and tears stained her cheeks. “He’s dead. I found him in the back parlor, his head nearly wrung off his shoulders. Koprillia was waiting for me. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” said Jacob with a pained sigh. “Koprillia knew I was coming. He baited the hook using those bogus reports, and then reeled me into the net. He murdered Adara to cover his tracks.”

“But he can’t possibly escape,” said Phoebe, wiping her tears away. “I have my warriors stationed along all the trails and roads—.”

“What about the harbor?”

Phoebe’s eyes went wide. “By the gods, I didn’t think of that! Koprillia plans to escape by sea!”

“Exactly,” said Jacob, turning on his heel. “I’ll bet that he’s taken Nicky hostage—”.

The mare clamped a firm hand on the man’s shoulder. “Jacob, there’s something you must know!”

“Yes?”

“Nicky—he’s...he’s my *First Born!*”

* * *

A shot rang out as they approached the constabulary, and Jacob and Phoebe broke into a run. Captain Psaras and his crew spilled out into the street soon afterward, the early morning light revealing their grim faces. The sailors doffed their caps and held them over their hearts out respect to Chief Phoebe.

“What happened?” Jacob asked.

“I’ve bad news,” said Psaras, cradling the still smoking harquebus. “Officers Ballios and Soukis are dead. I got off a lucky shot and killed that—that fiend that murdered them.”

“What about their service revolvers?” Jacob asked. “We could use the extra firepower.”

“Stolen,” said Psaras grimly.

“Koprillia miscalculated Jacob’s course of action,” Phoebe said. “No doubt he expected him to seek help at the constabulary.”

“But where could he be?” Jacob asked. “The beach stretches for thousands of stadia on each side of the harbor. It’d be impossible to cover every square pace of it.”

Paras nodded. “I know the shoreline. It’s shallow and filled with craggy boulders and reefs. Koprillia couldn’t launch even a small boat without the surf smashing him to bits.”

“We’re running out of time,” Phoebe said. “Sunrise begins in half an hour and the ebb tide will provide Koprillia with an easy getaway.”

Jacob scowled. “It’ll take hours to search the entire wharf and all the warehouses—.” His jaw dropped and his eyes went wide with an awful insight. He made a quick head count of all the assembled sailors, and then fixed an anxious stare on Psaras. “Captain, where’s the rest of your crew?”

“Why, on the barge, of course,” Psaras said. “Mind you, it’s a skeleton watch; Mr. Theodekles and two of my best able seamen.”

“Are they armed?” Jacob asked. “Can they defend the ship?”

“By the gods!” Phoebe said. “Koprillia—.”

Jacob swore under his breath and led the desperate sprint of the rescue party for the loading dock. They spotted Theodekles standing at the end of the pier. The first mate waved his arms frantically for them to stop.

“What happened?” Psaras demanded.

“Captain,” panted Theodekles, “Nisos and Leodes are dead. Koprillia ambushed us and threatened to kill the lad unless I helped him lower the life boat and—may Poseidon forgive me, I broke and ran—I’m so ashamed!”

“It’s not your fault,” said Phoebe calmly. “Where’s Koprillia now?”

“Port side amidships,” said the first mate, catching his breath, “trying to set sail, but he’s a rank landlubber if I ever saw one. He’s fumbling with the rigging now, trying to raise the mast.”

“And where’s Nicky?” Jacob asked.

“The boy’s in the lifeboat,” Theodekles said. “He’s sitting in the stern. His hands are bound behind his back, with his legs bound to a sounding weight.”

“That’s all I need to know,” said Jacob as he started for the barge.

Phoebe narrowed her eyes. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Let me deal with Koprillia. He’s one of my kind, a—*First Born*. I know how he thinks.” Jacob gazed steadily at Psaras. “Give me ten minutes and then rush the barge. If we’re to save the boy, then we must knock Koprillia off balance.”

“Aye aye!” Psaras said. The captain turned to his crew. “All hands, standby!” The sailors brandished their knives, cutlasses, and marlinspikes. Psaras began to reload the harquebus with fresh black powder and a lead ball.

Jacob approached the barge as quietly as he could. Upon reaching the gangway, he kicked off his sandals and stripped off his pea coat. The frosty morning air made him shiver, and he felt gooseflesh crawl onto his arms. He slid his sailor’s knife behind him out of sight beneath

his leather belt, being careful not to slice his backside. *Should he take the single-shot pistol? No, it was useless. Koprillia would call his bluff at the very sight of it—and kill Nicky.* He ascended the gangway and began to tiptoe across the deck. Jacob winced when a loose plank creaked beneath his toes. He might have just as well blown a foghorn at full blast.

“I know you’re there,” echoed Koprillia. “I can hear you thumping over the deck like a thrashing fish. Now, put your hands on top of your head and interlace your fingers. You’ll follow every jot of my instructions or I’ll turn the boy into an anchor, understand?”

Jacob clasped his hands upon the crown of his head. “I understand.”

CHAPTER 3: COLD DEBRIEFING

Philomela groaned and broke into a sweat. The contractions became stronger. She squirmed against Boreas' flank, and it was all the stallion could do to hold her steady. The protracted labor wore hard on them all.

"Remember, deep breaths," Hope said. She shifted on her knees as she kept a steady watch on the mare's hindquarters. The vulva began to distend and the amniotic sac was on the verge of breaking. "I can see the baby's head. The shoulders are nearly clear."

Hope tried to keep a straight face, but her mind knitted in worry. The sac should have burst by now! *And what could be keeping Dr. Hylonome?* She was Philomela's midwife and should have been here ages ago. Hope thought she would only be observing and not delivering!

She reached into the surgical tray and withdrew a pair of scissors. She carefully pierced the membrane near the baby's shoulder and snipped once. A pinkish stream instantly stained her surgical gown. She peeled the sac back over the foal's head and shoulders: *The umbilical cord was entangled about the neck!*

"Hold on," Hope said. "Stop pushing."

"Problem?" Boreas asked.

"Nothing serious," Hope said. "Nuchal Cord, Type A." She deftly pinched the ends of the loop between her thumbs and forefingers and flipped the cord over the foal's head. "The baby's color is good. One more big push should do it. On the count of three, then? Very good! One...two...three—."

Philomela grunted loudly and pushed. The foal burst forth into the world, kicking his hind legs as if he were ready run wild and free. Hope gasped. Such an entrance! The miracle of childbirth never ceased to amaze her, but she quickly reverted to her training. She observed that the colt's physical development was nearly equal to that of a toddler, rather than a human infant. She could not guess the mental equivalence, but already the colt was alert and attentive. She grabbed a fresh towel from the stack next to her and began to wipe away the excess amniotic fluid from the foal's nose and mouth.

"Congratulations," Hope said. "It's a colt."

Boreas grinned broadly. "Thank you, doctor."

Anxious hoof steps echoed outside in the passageway and a buckskin mare, much disheveled, appeared in the doorway. She pulled a fresh gown from her rucksack, donned it, and then immediately went to a nearby basin. She washed her face, hands, and arms with hot, soapy water. Dr. Hylonome's eyes were bloodshot with anger and her cheeks wet with tears. "I see I missed the main event," she choked.

"What happened?" Philomela asked.

"I was detained," Hylonome said. "While ascending the sacred mountain I was intercepted by a patrol of Lamioi. They wanted to know if any humans had dared—."

Boreas growled. "I'll make them pay for that. The Lamioi grow bolder each day. They know that harassing or harming medical personnel—centaur or human—is considered a war

crime.”

Hope kept a straight face. “Do you need any help, doctor?”

Hylonome regained her composure. “No. You look exhausted, Dr. Hope. I’ll be fine.” She drew a deep, calming sigh. “I’ll take it from here. I’ll clamp off the umbilical and check the vital signs of both the mother and newborn.”

Hope nodded. She stripped off her soiled gown as she stood and threw it into a hamper as she tiptoed from Philomela’s quarters. She made her way to the main cavern and sat near the fire. She felt an icy chill envelop her. *What had those Lamioi done to Hylonome?* She had only known the mare a few months, but they got on together so well at the clinic, and she now considered the mare a friend. Had they—*raped her?*

She watched as the early morning sun rose above the tree line, flooding the cavern with light. She heaved a sigh. If only her thoughts could be as bright and cheery. Boreas emerged from Philomela’s room and poured a large cup of orange juice. The Logos chief pressed it into her hand and Hope drank it all with relish.

“Thanks,” said Hope, looking over her cup. “Have you chosen a name yet?”

“Since he blew like the *South Wind* from his mother’s womb, I will name him *Notus*. Would you like some more juice?”

Hope returned the cup. “What I’d really like is some sleep.”

“Sorry,” said Boreas with a sheepish grin, “but I’ve one more patient for you to see. It’s rather urgent.”

Hope managed a weak smile. She wondered how Jacob was doing. *He’s probably basking in the glow of a warm fire, enjoying a big tankard of ale, and swapping racy tales with Charon or Pholos!*

* * *

“Move towards the rail, slowly—and lean over the edge!”

Jacob peered over the rail, expecting Koprillia to shoot him between the eyes. To his dismay he saw that Koprillia had managed to slip the mast upright in the cylindrical step and was trying to thread the sheets through the tackle blocks of the boom vang. All that was necessary for him to escape was to raise the sail, grab the tiller, and catch the wind. Nicky sat huddled in the stern, shivering against the transom. The boy was gagged with a dirty rag stuffed his mouth. He twisted his arms and wrists, trying to free himself, but the ropes held fast.

“Come on, Koprillia! The game’s up. Let Nicky go. It’s me that you want to kill.”

Koprillia smirked. “As much as I’d like to kill you, I’ve new orders from my master. He wants you to come out and play.”

“And just who would that be?”

“Play stupid games,” growled Koprillia, “and you’ll win stupid prizes.”

Jacob shrugged. “I see that stalling for time is a waste of time.” He decided to try a different course. What did the archon want the most? “That rigging is turning into a tough chore. If I help you escape, will you let the boy go?”

“You freeze and don’t twitch a muscle!”

Koprillia turned to the mast, grasped the halyard, and began to hoist the sail. There was a shot and a hail of splinters burst from the mast. The archon let loose an awful bellow as he clawed at the wooden shards jutting from his cheek and ear. Blood trickled down his face and leaked through his fingers.

Jacob could hear Captain Psaras cursing at gale force over his near miss. “Hold your fire!” *Goddamn it, I need Koprillia alive! He knows—*

“So...,” Koprillia rasped, “that’s the way you want to play it, eh?” He lifted the lead sound off the deck and balanced it on the edge of the transom. He shoved Nicky overboard and dropped the sound after him.

Jacob sprang over the rail and dove into the icy water. He swam frantically downward after the boy. A chill started to gnaw at the core of his bones, and he knew that if he didn’t get Nicky out of the water soon, they would both die from the icy shock and drown. The salt water stung his eyes fiercely and he had to force his lids open to keep Nicky’s blurry figure within sight.

The sound hit the sea floor and Nicky stopped sinking. Jacob silently damned himself for being a *First Born*, rather than half frog or half dolphin. The cold water relentlessly soaked his strength like a dry sponge. *By the gods, how he wished the tales of the ancient Merfolk were true! He could use their help now!* His arms and legs felt like the gnarled, dying branches of a tree.

Everything was now becoming a murky haze and Jacob had to fight hard to think. His rationale yielded to instinct. He was unsure how he reached Nicky and sliced through the ropes. The boy was comatose and his face ashen. He did not remember grabbing him under the arms, nor could he recall swimming upward and breaking the surface.

Psaras frowned. “You don’t remember anything after that?”

“No,” said Jacob, sipping his hot brandy. He pulled the woolen blanket tighter about him. “I’ve a bad habit of feinting when under duress.”

“We almost lost you,” Psaras said. “You pushed Nicky against the gunwale of the rowboat and we hauled him aboard. It’s a good thing that he was gagged—it probably stopped him from inhaling any water. You started to slip below the surface, but I managed to grab ahold of your wrist.”

“Thanks,” said Jacob with a grateful nod.

Psaras smiled. “Not a problem.”

“So where’s the boy now?”

“Nicky and Phoebe are saying their final goodbyes. The lad knows he can’t stay, and his—well, Phoebe knows she can’t protect him.”

The curtain parted, and Theodekles poked his head into the cabin. “Captain Psaras, we’re ready to set sail.”

* * *

Hope jerked on the hand pump, filling the stainless steel basin in the sink with fresh water. *By the gods! How long had it been since Charon had brought her and Jacob to this quaint*

little cabin? It feels like an eternity. She dipped her hands into the chilly water and splashed it over her face. She felt instantly refreshed. She then set about the task of neatly folding her spare surgical gown and cap. She heard hoof beats behind her and turned as she packed the garments into her rucksack. Orithyia cradled a small oak strongbox with brass fittings within her hands.

She arched a concerned brow. “Lady Orithyia, you should rest after—.”

“No,” Orithyia said. “There isn’t time.” She pressed the strongbox into Hope’s waiting hands.

Hope made a careful examination of strongbox. It was secured with a disc tumbler lock, making it nearly impossible to pick, even by a skilled locksmith. “Where’s the key?”

“Father has the key,” Orithyia said. “Please give it only to Charon. He’ll know what to do with it.”

Hope nodded. “I understand.”

The mare cracked the door open and peered outside. When she was satisfied that no one was lurking nearby, she swung the door fully open. Hope began to follow Orithyia out of the cabin, but the mare raised a hand in warning, stopping the good doctor in her tracks.

“But, my lady—.”

“I thank you for your service, doctor, but no. Stay out of sight until I close the door, and bolt it after me. Chief Boreas will return in thirty minutes. Wait until you hear the secret knock. Only then should you open the door, understand?” Orithyia then stepped out of the cabin and quietly shut the door. She waited until she heard the metallic clang of the inner bolt.

Orithyia trotted in the direction of the cursed temple where Hope and Jacob had nearly been murdered. *By the gods, how it reminds me of the bad old days! How I wish that temple of depravity had crumbed to dust before the humans found it! But father knew Jacob and Hope had to see it. They had to know what danger they faced! The extinction of humanity meant the centaurs were doomed!*

She meandered into the center of the ruins. Orithyia’s nose twitched as she sniffed the air. Her face wrinkled in disgust at the heady odor of beeswax, honey and sweat. It was pure decadence, wild desire and nature at its worst. Where was the duty and true devotion? Where was the—*love?*

“I am here,” Orithyia said.

A platoon of Lamioi stallions and mares emerged from the woods. They soon outflanked and surrounded her. A Tobiano stallion stepped forward and bowed. “I’m Captain Typhon, captain of Lord Adramelech’s personal guard. I’m charged with escorting my lady—.”

“Spare me your pleasantries,” Orithyia said. She gave the stallion a disdainful sniff. “Swear to me that you won’t harm the woman or her child!”

Typhon smirked. “I swear it.”

“Good,” Orithyia said. “Because if I ever hear that Hope or her child has come to harm, I’ll have you gelded!” Now it was her turn to smirk as she saw the alarmed reaction spread over Typhon’s face. The stallion knew it was not an empty threat. “Now let’s go!”

* * *

Tereus flapped the report under Jacob's nose. "By the gods," he said with a stomp of a hind hoof, "how could you bungle such a simple mission?"

Jacob gently pushed the sheaf of parchment away. "I'm sorry you don't like my report. Perhaps next time I can use smaller words."

"You were caught!"

"An occupational hazard," said Jacob with a shrug.

Tereus growled and his eyes narrowed. "You were to vacate the warehouse and contact Chief Phoebe at the earliest possible opportunity. That was the plan, remember? You weren't supposed to linger! Worse yet, it seems Koprillia knew that you were coming. There's a serious leak and I have to find and plug it."

"I trust you'll round up the usual suspects?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you damn well knew the identity of the spy that was in our midst, but you were unwilling to arrest such a powerful and influential mare."

The security governor kept a straight face. "What were you looking for in that office?"

"Evidence," Jacob said.

"Evidence of what?"

"Koprillia's connection with Adramelech." Jacob massaged his forehead and temple. He still had a raging headache. "Chief Phoebe is still searching the cooperative, but I doubt she'll find anything. Koprillia covered his tracks well."

"You're an idiot, *Troubleshooter*. *Adara Kouklakis was Koprillia's connection!* Now she's dead and I can't interrogate her. Worse yet, you took it upon yourself to bring that boy here, adding to Lord Charon's woes."

Jacob's eyes narrowed. "And what would you have me do? Let Nicky die? I had to do some fast talking to stay Chief Phoebe's angry hand. Had I not rescued Nicky, the entire cooperative would've been wiped from the face of the Earth!"

"Where's the boy now?"

"He's staying with Lady Ianthe."

"Why?"

"Because she can help him," said Jacob with a curt nod, "the same way she helped me. I found her sessions to be very therapeutic. Now I rarely suffer those horrific nightmares that threatened my sanity. As it turns out, I was suffering from *Survivor's Guilt*. I could never understand why I survived while my parents—*my foster parents*—died. Worse yet, I blamed all centaurs for inflicting those wounds that never fully heal. Nicky too must understand that wasn't his fault, lest he suffer my fate."

"Do faded scars still hurt?" Tereus asked.

Jacob blew a long sigh. "If I were you, I would pray, Tereus. Pray that Nicky comes to realize that there are more good centaurs than bad, and that he won't, in his sorrow, blame all

centaurs for the injustice inflicted upon him.”

“So, am I one of the good guys or one of the bad?”

“Please excuse me,” said Jacob, turning on his heel, “I must interview a certain master blacksmith.”

Tereus frowned anew. “Amycus?”

“It seems my father has much to answer for.”

* * *

Charon grinned as he gave the slight bulge under Hope’s arm a discreet nod. “What have you there, my good doctor?” He pulled the blanket around his shoulders. He found it difficult to ward off the chill that he knew was not there.

“I’m sorry to disturb your rest,” said Hope, trembling slightly, “but I was told to give you—*this*.” She parted her cloak, revealing the strongbox tucked in the crook of her arm. She approached with deft footsteps as she held the strongbox out to him.

He retrieved the gift and smiled again. “A favor, if you please, my dear? My bones are as stiff as rusty iron hinges. Please go to that wardrobe in the corner and bring me the key you’ll find on the edge of the top shelf.”

Hope went to the wardrobe. The double doors creaked open. She had to stand tiptoe as she ran her nimble fingers along the edge of the shelf. She felt a cold metallic pinch between her thumb and forefinger. She stared momentarily at the notched, hemi-cylindrical key before returning to Charon. She sat cross-legged before the centaur and held the key out to him.

Charon gently plucked the key from her hand and then cocked an amused brow. His eyes gleamed with a friendly impishness, as if he were a naughty boy caught with his hand in a filbert jar. “Curious, doctor?”

“Would you prefer that I leave?”

“No, stay,” Charon said. “I have need of your services, as the drug should be dispensed under a doctor’s care.” He twisted the key in the lock and opened the strongbox. He turned it around as he lifted the lid, allowing Hope to see inside. “What do you think?”

Her eyes narrowed as she inspected the contents. There were twelve hermetically sealed vials, each about the thickness and length of her pinky, filled with a white, viscous fluid. Hope cocked a skeptical brow. “What makes you think it’s not poison?”

“Oh, my good doctor,” said Charon softly, “Adramelech would never stoop to such crude methods! It’s simply not his style! No, he wants me to live awhile longer.”

“Is that...a...cure for—?”

“No, the substance contained within the vials is merely a treatment. It will retard the spread of the cancer, but it won’t stop it.”

“But, why?”

The centaur shut the strongbox and locked it tight once more. “Lord Adramelech likes to play dark and dirty games. He wants me to live just long enough to witness Jacob’s destruction and my total defeat.”

A hard stare spread over Hope's face. "I don't like the idea of you using Jacob this way. Damn it, Charon, I love him! I don't want to lose him!"

"Hope, I beg of you," said Charon, "do not speak of this to Jacob."

"But, Charon—"

"*Hope, please!* Chew his ears off if you must, but reveal nothing of your encounter with Orithyia, lest you jeopardize his life."

"What—?"

"Adramelech throws yet another distraction in Jacob's path, and Jacob must not deviate from the trail. He's toying with Jacob's mind, and Jacob's psyche is already like a broken mirror. It is fractured." A coughing fit seized Charon and shook him, but the centaur regained his breath. "It can be repaired, but the image shall always be—*warped.*"

* * *

Adramelech's icy blue eyes were like waving daggers. "You shouldn't have come here." The stallion gripped the hilt of his *makhaira* until his knuckles turned white. "Tell me, why shouldn't I kill you?"

Koprillia gulped hard. "Because I'm a *First Born* and can think just like your enemy."

"Don't remind me."

The wound beneath the gauze bandage covering Koprillia's cheek began to itch fiercely, and he had to resist scratching it. He had spent most of his escape plucking out the splinters and silently cursed Teacher Jacob. *Troubleshooter indeed! Maybe I'll kill him anyway. I'm sure I could make it look like an accident.* "Nevertheless, my lord, you can use me to your advantage."

Adramelech released his grip from the nasty blade. "I think I'll send you out into the field. That should be punishment enough. You're to infiltrate the Royal Gardens and Administrative District and keep close watch on Teacher Jacob. I want you to track him, no matter where he goes. I want to know his movements and plans. Is that clear?"

"Clear as crystal, my lord and master."

Adramelech smirked. "Good. Now, go to Orthaon's stable. He'll outfit you with everything that you need. He'll also issue you a new weapon—a six-shooter—but should you fail me, you can eat the last bullet. Don't ever show your face to me again, for if you do, I'll lift your louse ridden head from your shoulders!" The stallion blew a disgusted snort. "Get out!"

"Yes, my master," said Koprillia with a bow. He turned on his heel and made a hasty retreat, heaving a sigh of relief. *That was too close!*

* * *

Jacob's eyes went wide and he halted mid-stride in the courtyard of the smithy. Amycus had converted his stable with remarkable efficiency into a fully equipped shop that for a blacksmith was a dream that came true. There were two large single bick anvils and third smaller double bick anvil mounted on angle iron stands. A coal-fired forge dominated the center of the shop, and Jacob felt its heat radiate upon his face. A bench ran nearly the length of the entire west wall, stopping short of an entryway, a dozen steel leg and parallel jaw vices attached along its edge, and tool racks holding all sizes of hammers, tongs, chisels, and dozens of other tools

that the man could scarcely identify. The floor was solid concrete and freshly swept. A place for everything and everything in its place. Everything neat as a pin. It reflected a centaur blacksmith's notion of *perfect harmony*.

"Amycus?"

"Don't bother me," echoed Amycus brusquely. "I'm eating!"

Jacob crossed the courtyard toward the kitchen, dodging the forge and anvils. He parted the curtain and peered inside. Amycus sat at a round knee table, his lunch spread before him on silver plates and bowls. The stallion was slicing a block of feta cheese into neat cubes, and had already quartered a half-dozen roasted onions. Two loaves of black rye bread, pickled eggs, and yogurt were set out as side dishes. A large wooden tankard filled to the brim with dark ale sat ready to quench his thirst.

"We need to talk," said Jacob, sidestepping into the kitchen. He was careful to keep his approach slow and steady, as there was nothing worse than a stallion grouchy with the pangs of hunger. He sat opposite the *wild man* and kept his face straight. He undid the buttons of his coat and then reached into his pocket. He withdrew the single-shot pistol and slid it across the table towards the master blacksmith. "I'm sorry to spoil your lunch, but there's been trouble."

Amycus regarded the pistol with alarm. "Where did you find—"

"I showed that to Lady Ianthe upon my return. She confirmed that it's your handiwork." Jacob tapped the firearm with an impatient index finger. "I need your help. I need something that'll place me on equal footing. I was lucky this time. Next time—"

Amycus growled. "There's not going to be a next time!" His eyes narrowed and purple veins stood out on his neck and forehead. "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!"

"So it's true then," said Jacob, arching a brow. "You are my father."

"Don't call me that," said Amycus morosely. "*It's true that I sired you, but to my eternal shame, I've never been a father to you. I never acknowledged you as one of my own.*" The veins receded as the stallion calmed. "I'm trying to protect you. There are forces at work here that you can neither fight nor defeat." He reached over the table gently patted Jacob's shoulder. "Have I risked my life time and again to save you, only to see you destroyed? *No! May it never be!*"

"So—how did I get here?" Jacob gave Amycus's forearm an affectionate squeeze. "I'm ashamed because I denied my true heritage. I always knew that I was different, but—"

"Before Myrrha ran with Charon—*she ran with me*. I tried to warn thy dam, Myrrha, that I carried the *Ancient Seed*, but she wouldn't listen. She was so desperate to have another child that she denied the possible aftermath. I'm one of the last of the *wild centaurs*. I know of only one other, and *she* dwells in the northern isles—"

"Wait. Did you say 'she'?"

Amycus chuckled. "Did you think there were only *wild men*? There are *wild women* too. *She is close by...I can feel her*. There are centaurs—the *tame ones*—that carry the *Ancient Seed* too, but they're few in number. They deny their children—*First Born and Kentauroi alike*—their rightful inheritance. They've forgotten their true nature and act more like beasts than beings. They burn with *Strange Fire*. They're all heat but no light. They try to conceal their dark secret

and harbor deadly malice toward their children. They resort to rape and murder. Beware of them, my son!”

Jacob nodded. “That would explain many things. I must’ve been a terrible disappointment, having only two legs and all.”

“You’ve no idea.”

“Please, no more riddles,” Jacob said. “We’ve had nearly three thousand years of peace—oh sure, the path has been bumpy at times—but then Adramelech comes along and threatens to destroy it all. Why?”

Amycus blew a disgusted snort. “He seduced the Lamioi with promises of glory and victory. It all started after his sire and dam breathed their last breaths. Adramelech started to act very strangely—he made the entire Lamioi nation swear personal allegiance to him—not just the herd, mind you—but him alone! I naturally objected to such utter madness and Adramelech...he didn’t take...it...well.”

“Is that why you were banished?” Jacob tried to hide his shock, but his mind reeled from the revelation. He placed a hand over his eyes to stop the rapid blinking. *By the gods, how could the centaurs, regardless of nation, be so stupid? The Lamioi swore personal allegiance to Lord Adramelech, and now they’re bound by duty and law to him. They’re stuck with him. Such a nightmare!*

“No, I chose to flee. I knew that if Adramelech were to catch me, he would geld me, and then kill me. Fortunately, Charon adopted me into the *Daimones Agathoi* for my own protection. I owe him my life.”

“What is this power that Adramelech holds over the Lamioi?”

“I’m not sure,” Amycus said. “It’s goes beyond mere charisma. There’s some other wicked influence at work here. It’s like the entire world suffers from a debilitating sickness, really.”

Jacob frowned. “Charon once told me never to dismiss an enemy as insane, but it’s apparent to me that whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.”