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I, CHEIRON

By James Charles Rau

[Smashwords Edition](#)

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ISBN: 978-0-9840372-3-0

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1: APOSTATE](#)

[CHAPTER 2: APOSTLE](#)

[CHAPTER 3: HONOR BEFORE REASON](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Author's Notes](#)

[Contact](#)

[THE ARCHON TRILOGY](#)

[SHOW, DON'T TELL](#)

[ISSAC AND NOTUS](#)

CHAPTER 1: APOSTATE

Jacob laid the dozen red roses upon the tomb of Amycus, his sire—*his father*. He blew a regretful sigh between pursed lips. *I still have so many questions and now I'll never know the answers. Why, my dearest father, did you have to die and take all your secrets to your grave? I do cherish what time we had together, but still so many unanswered questions plague my fevered mind.*

Could his mother answer any of his questions? *No! Myrrha has tried to destroy me since the day I was born! The fact that her blood runs through my veins is the cause of my unrequited malaise. I could forgive her for everything, but—.*

She tried to murder my beloved Hope and our unborn child!

He scanned the dark and overcast sky of rolling grey clouds. Jacob could not remember the last time he enjoyed the radiating warmth of bright sunlight. He could only vaguely recall the time he and Hope had stood on the beach, holding hands, watching in joyous awe as the sun rose over the calm sea.

It did happen, didn't it? It seems like an old...fading...dream?

A pang of guilt washed away the momentary happiness. Hope was sick. Their son, Isaac, was sick. It was a strange and debilitating sickness that would crest, then wane, only to flood the body once more, sapping the strength from its victims and the reason from their minds. It made his stomach churn; *it was not an isolated case*. Reports from all corners of the protectorate told of the epidemic.

But—why is it that this malady, this pestilence, is only striking the First Born of humans and centaurs alike?

A cold breeze arose, and Jacob wrapped his pea jacket tightly about him. The wind brushed strings of brown hair across his face. The shirt and trousers of his uniform caused itching along his waist and crotch, and his leather boots pinched his toes. He began to walk toward the white marble and red granite arch that formed the entrance to the Royal Necropolis.

Why had the centaurs rejected his resignation? He no longer wanted to serve as Tetrarch! Goddamn everything to the eternal burning flames of Tartarus! How he wanted to shuck all his duties and just get back home to Hope and Isaac! What was so hard for the centaurs to understand?

Through the swirling mist, Jacob saw Nicky approach him using springy, nervous steps. The lad usually wore a beaming, happy visage, but this time his face squinted with an anxiety that was dark as his new uniform. The insignia on the purple sash of the royal courier bore not a pair of silver winged sandals, but instead a peacock's tail feather fashioned of gold; it made Jacob scowl in puzzlement. *Did the centaurs—and humans—now salute the hated emblem of Adramelech and the Lamioi?*

“Teacher Jacob, I’m sorry to disturb you, but—.”

“What’s wrong, Nicky?”

“Master Arcas and Lady Orithyia command you to appear before them. You’re expected at Lady Orithyia’s stable within the hour.”

Jacob cocked an objecting brow. “Command? Odd, indeed. Usually, it’s a request at my convenience.”

“Sorry, and no, before you ask, I don’t know the why or what of the matter.”

“I’d best hurry then,” said Jacob, quickening his pace. “By the way, Nicky, never apologize for doing your job.”

Nicky locked into step with Jacob. “I’ve a favor to ask.”

“Yes?”

“May I borrow your guitar? Once again Lord Samael is restless. He complains of sleepless nights and troubling dreams. He wants simple, sweet melodies and chords to sooth his spirit.”

Jacob kept a straight face despite the bewildering dispatch. *Lord Samael? By the gods. I thought I had crowned Arcas with the diadem and robed him with the purple? No, wasn’t Orithyia I crowned? Am I insane or has something gone terribly askew?*

What else might Nicky know?

I must find out.

“My guitar is in the bedroom closet on the third floor. You’re welcome to it.”

“Thank you, Teacher Jacob.”

“You’re welcome,” Jacob said. He scratched his chin as a delaying tactic, trying to buy more time so that he could formulate more questions for Nicky. “Speaking of Lord Samael, what troubles you? You become as taut as a drawn bowstring at the mere mention of his name.”

Nicky heaved a regretful sigh. “You read my report?”

Jacob felt a sharp twinge on his right side, just under his ribs. He tried not to wince. “Nicky, are you trying to tell me something?”

“Yes,” said Nicky, gulping hard, “I—.”

“Nicky, it’s not wise to keep secrets, especially those of a centaur.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to cause Lord Samael any trouble.”

“Wait,” said Jacob, stopping dead in his tracks. He placed a firm hand on Nicky’s shoulder but turned him gently until he faced him. “Nicky, what are you talking about? Didn’t you tell me that you and Marie rescued Lady Ianthe *before Adramelech*...”

Nicky gulped again, forcing the cold, hard lump down his throat. “I thought so too, Teacher Jacob, but—.”

* * *

Marie and Nicky froze in place when they spotted Adramelech emerge out of the darkness. They quickly ducked out of sight behind one of the outer wall buttresses of Lady Ianthe’s stable.

Marie shivered, but not from the cold. She grasped Nicky’s forearm. “What’s that four-legged asshole doing here?”

They had arrived too late to stop Myrrha and the Sileni from humiliating their beloved lady and were about to rush to her rescue when Adramelech appeared on the scene of the crime.

Nicky scowled hard in disgust. “Damn all the gods to Tartarus!” *We’re about to fail our rescue mission! No! No! No!*

Myrrha intercepted Adramelech in the courtyard and nodded. “My greetings and respects to my dearest brother, Lord Adramelech of the Lamioi.” She smiled maliciously as she waved the leather whipping crop in Ianthe’s direction. “As promised, I have delivered the sister of Charon into your hands.”

“Thank you, my dear sister,” Adramelech said. He smacked lips as he looked at the beaten Ianthe, as if he were eyeing a grand feast. An insane, hungry stare flared within his eyes.

Ianthe spat in their direction. “I swear that I’ll have my revenge!”

Adramelech ignored her outburst, smiled dumbly, and turned to Myrrha. “You may go, my dear sister. Your escape route is safe and secure.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Myrrha as she cantered about and departed through the gate.

Adramelech was upon Ianthe in a split second. He ran his hands roughly over the mare’s breasts, and Ianthe moaned in pain as his fingernails scraped over the welts on her breasts. His lips upturned into a menacing grin. *By the gods, to inflict agony was far more pleasurable than running with some silly young filly!* “I see that Myrrha was far too gentle in her ministrations. I would’ve drawn blood.” He smiled again. “You never suspected Myrrha, did you?”

Ianthe spit in Adramelech’s eyes; the bloody gob of slobber hit above his brow. The stallion slowly wiped the spittle from his face. He grabbed the mare by her delicate throat and growled but was careful not to choke her. He wanted her alive. He wanted her to be fully aware.

He wanted her to suffer.

“And now, my dear lady,” growled Adramelech frostily, “it’s time for your lesson. It wasn’t so much your message that offended me, but how that devoted, little two-legged servant of yours—Teacher Jacob—delivered it. I’ll now compose a fitting riposte.”

Ianthe screamed as Adramelech reared behind her.

Ianthe screamed as Adramelech mounted her.

Ianthe screamed as Adramelech drove his member deep into her.

Ianthe screamed as Adramelech fell into an excruciatingly painful rhythm.

Adramelech grunted loudly and involuntarily farted when he achieved release. His seed jump roped from the head of his member as the stallion slipped off the ravaged mare, and he laughed as he trotted out of the courtyard and into the adjoining street.

Nicky peered through the darkness and watched Adramelech fade into the mist. *Finally! That’s right, you four-legged monster! I pray that you die slowly!*

He wondered why Marie was not moving. Shouldn’t she be leaping from their hiding place, dragging him behind her? She was a maiden of action, not words! Instead, she just sat there, her mouth agape, a foolish stare marring her otherwise fine, comely face.

“Marie! Come on! We must hurry!”

* * *

“It was terrible,” whispered Nicky. “Marie and I could do nothing—nothing—except cringe in misery and wait until Adramelech—that monster—departed Lady Ianthe’s stable. The rape lasted for what seemed like eternity.”

Jacob could only nod dumbly at Nicky’s miserable account. *How is it possible? First, only Myrrha tormented Ianthe—oh, my poor lady centaur—was there, but then Myrrha and Adramelech were there together? What happened to darkly alter the course of events?*

“What has this to do with Samael?”

Nicky gulped hard as he gazed at Jacob. “Samael caught me just before I could slip through the secret door, but he didn’t lay hands on me, nor did he call the soldiers that were with him. Instead, he just...”

“Yes?”

“He smiled and then—.”

“And then what?”

“Samael winked at me as if we were sharing some kind of sick joke.”

Jacob muttered a curse. *Even in death, Adramelech casts a dark shadow that cannot be dispelled with the light of truth.* “I can understand why Samael betrayed his sire, but still, the Lamioi—and most centaurs—would condemn such treason. He’d be branded a traitor, then gelded and banished.”

Nicky wiped a tear from his cheek. “I’m sorry, Teacher Jacob. I should’ve never...but for the sake of Lady Ianthe, I just couldn’t...now what do I do?”

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No. Marie knows about it, of course, because she too was there. She went...I don’t know...*catatonic*? It was if she were reliving it. Her eyes held that thousand-yard stare, do you know what I mean? I had to shake her hard to break her mind free. Only then did we manage to free Lady Ianthe and her sons. We beat those Sileni, but only just barely.”

“Has Samael ever threatened you?”

“No,” said Nicky with a sniffle, “but sometimes he gives me that—*wink*—whenever I’m in his presence. It freezes the blood in my veins.”

“Interesting,” Jacob said. “I’ve never known Samael to try to intimidate anyone.” *Many centaurs have tried to bully me, but none has succeeded except—for one.* A singular image flashed through his mind like a streak of lightning in a moonless, night sky. He had been eye-to-eye with that damned statue of Cheiron, the crystal face gazing at him from across time itself. *Those crystalline lips curling into a wry smile.*

Stop laughing at me! You four-legged bastard! What cosmic joke are you pulling on me? You’ve been dead for more than three thousand years! What’s the goddamn punchline?

Jacob sighed. It was time to think like a centaur again. “Nicky, you must not allow the mask to slip. While I’m glad to have helped you lift what must have felt like the weight of an iron cloak from your shoulders, you must uphold the charade until I can fix things, understand?”

“And what should I do if Samael should ask me if I’ve kept his secret?”

Jacob gave Nicky a comfortable pat on his shoulder. “You’d best tell Samael the truth, lest he believe that you’re trying to dishonor him. If he thinks that you’re trying to make a fool out of him, he’ll have no choice but to slay you to maintain his so-called honor.”

Nicky mustered a disarming smile and winked. “Thank you, Teacher Jacob.”

Jacob grinned and returned the wink. “You’re welcome—.” His jaw dropped mid-thought as if intuition had slapped him upside his head. *What Nicky needs is a better strategy. He can’t challenge Samael with a frontal assault, but perhaps for once Nicky could outflank the centaur. Could a friendly gesture serve as a preemptive strike? It could serve to remind the centaurs that bullied humans make for poor servants.*

Nicky nudged Jacob’s shoulder to interrupt his reverie. “Is there something wrong?”

Jacob smiled. “Nicky, you’re brilliant!”

Nicky’s face wrinkled in puzzlement. “Sorry?”

“The next time you find yourself in the company of Samael, and he winks at you, you flash that same innocuous, enchanting smile and *return that wink, understand?*”

* * *

Jacob goose-stepped into the courtyard. He halted smartly before Orithyia and Arcas. He clicked his heels and snapped to attention. “Sir! Ma’am! Master Teacher Jacob Walden reporting as ordered. Serial number—.”

“Knock it off, Jacob!” said Orithyia with an annoyed swish of her tail.

Arcas scowled and stomped a fore hoof. “Why do you show us such disrespect?”

Jacob relaxed and stood at ease. “I could ask the same of you. Do I have your permission to speak freely?”

“Yes,” said Orithyia with a curt nod.

“Perhaps I’ve become spoiled and overly familiar, but you must know that all you had to do was ask nicely, and I would’ve gladly come without a jot of contempt. Why do you order me about as if I were a shiftless knave? I’ve always obeyed your orders to the best of my ability. I’ve remained silent and not offered any opinion on matters pertaining to the state. When questioned, I only say—*no comment.*”

Orithyia rolled her eyes. “But it’s *how* you say it that causes us grief!”

“Indeed,” Arcas said. “You imply that you’re being—and by extension, all humans—ill-treated. Your popularity amongst humans and centaurs alike makes us uncomfortable.”

Jacob smiled wryly and spread his hands in supplication. “Maybe you should be kept on all four of your toes. By the gods, you’ve kept me on all ten of mine since we first met. You haven’t made it easy for me, you know.”

“Enough!” growled Arcas. “Don’t try our patience. Don’t think for even a second that just because you’re our elder brother—.”

“I know my place!” Jacob snapped. “Your centaurs and I’m just another human that should obey without question. Welcome to the real world. Welcome to my world. You’re nothing special. You’re not entitled. There are rules, and you can either play by the rules or suffer the penalty.”

“I must leave now and tend to my beloved Hope and Isaac. Have you no sympathy?” Jacob turned hard on his heel and began to retreat from the courtyard. “I’ve noted your concern and I see no point in arguing with you any further.”

Orithyia trotted before Jacob and blocked his path. “There’s one last item.”

Jacob tensely drew himself to attention. *By the gods! Here comes the guilt trip.* “Yes, my lady?”

“Dear brother,” said Orithyia sweetly, taking his hands into hers, “won’t you please reconsider and allow our mother, Myrrha, to—.”

Jacob jerked his hands out of Orithyia’s grip. “Myrrha was never a mother to me! She stained her hands with innocent blood! She is guilty of sexual assault and murder. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: *She crossed the line.*”

“But Jacob...”

“But! But! But!” sputtered Jacob. “She’s a traitor. Did it ever occur to you that if she had chosen to trust Charon, and follow *Cheiron’s Promise*, that the war might have never happened? Amycus, my father, might still be alive. And don’t even get me started with Demeter; she still wants Myrrha’s head on a platter.”

“Oh please,” said Orithyia with a pout. “That mare has you wrapped around her little finger.”

Jacob threw up a warning hand. “It is unwise, my little sister, to speak ill of an elder mare and *wild woman*. I’ve as much influence over Demeter as I do with you. I can’t say that I blame her for bearing a grudge. Be thankful she’s satisfied with Myrrha’s banishment.”

The man took a stiff step backward and glared: “Be thankful neither she nor I know of her exact whereabouts. Demeter wanted to track Myrrha down and slay her! I barely managed to convince her otherwise.”

Jacob heard a heavy triplet clop of hoof steps behind him and turned. Samael cantered into the courtyard and made a beeline for Jacob, but suddenly broke to the left within a single beat. He stiffly began to encircle the trio as if he were surveying a battlefield; the maneuver reminded Jacob of a shark encircling a hapless school of mackerel.

By the gods! What happened to you, Samael? Jacob noted the absence of the tranquility that once shined in the hazel eyes. The diadem that crowned his head only served to tame the tangled mane that fell long about his shoulders. The black pelt that had once glimmered with streaks of gold was now dull. His complexion, while clear, was faintly pale, as if a storm had dusted his face with dirty snow.

Samael halted in his tracks, glared at Jacob, and pointed a reproving finger. “What is this man doing here?”

Orithyia cleared her throat. “My lord, it’s not Jacob’s fault.”

“Indeed,” said Arcas. “We were just explaining the situation to our wayward brother.”

Jacob cocked a disapproving brow. “Wayward?” *You dare suggest that I’m a troublemaker? Why you arrogant, snot-nosed, little four-legged—if it weren’t for my intervention, you’d be a gelding by now!*

“Yes, wayward,” said Samael, frowning. “You’re guilty of a serious transgression. You did kill a centaur—and not just any centaur—but a centaur lord. Adramelech.”

Jacob snorted. “Adramelech was a monster. What would you have me do? Stand idly by and watch him murder a *wild woman*? Demeter is the last of her kind! It would’ve been like killing a goddess.

“Centaur claim that four legs are better than two. Why is it then, if centaurs have four perfectly good legs, they have never learned to walk forward?”

“We know of our father’s crimes; however, your curse may be our blessing. We have restored peace—and most importantly, *order*—within the protectorate. We have passed laws curtailing human involvement in centaur affairs. We have strengthened the containment and segregation laws.”

Jacob felt a chill radiate in his stomach. *I’m not sure I like the sound of that! Have the Lamioi reneged on their pledge to keep Cheiron’s Promise, or is this their interpretation of that promise? I must tread carefully if I’m to discover the truth.*

“Even the strongest wall,” drawled Jacob, “built on a weak foundation will crumble. I’d much rather build a home on a solid footing that will shelter humans and centaurs alike. Fear is a poor substitute for loyalty.”

Samael snorted. “And then there’s the matter of Master Musician Carystus. Why we granted that favor still troubles us to this day.”

“Perhaps my lord answered the call of his better nature? I’ve already stated my reasons. Chief Phoebe knows Carystus and is a better judge of his musical skills. I’m a good teacher and passable mathematician, but my guitar playing reeks like a dung heap. Why should I foist my poor technique upon young Nicky? The boy deserves better. He needs a proper teacher. Lady Ianthe is preoccupied with more important matters.”

“The problem, my dear Teacher Jacob, is that I don’t believe you’re telling me the whole truth.”

“If my lord believes me to be a liar, then dismiss me and relieve me of my duties.”

“Oh no, Teacher Jacob,” said Samael with a spiteful grin, “you shan’t escape me that easily! It’s our desire to keep an eagle’s eye on you. You’re too dangerous to be allowed to roam free. You know too much.”

Orithyia joined Jacob by his side and stared hard at Samael. “I’d remind my lord that even you are not above *The Law*. You cannot confine anyone—centaur or human—without first proving just cause. Should you make false accusations—.”

“Or bear false witness,” added Arcas tersely, “you may find yourself deposed, gelded, and banished.”

Jacob kept his face straight. *Well, it seems my centaur siblings do have a little courage after all!* “May I ask why Lord Samael distrusts my judgement?” *Adramelech once chastised you as a loathsome peacemaker. Why do you make war upon me now?*

Samael blew a disdainful snort. “You’ve become obsessed with finding this...this...what’s his name again? Koprillia?”

I must try a more tactful approach. Jacob nodded agreeably. “Tyrone Koprillia is guilty of war crimes. He is the troublemaker of troublemakers. He must be brought to justice for the sake of humans and centaurs everywhere. There is no end to his malicious mischief while he’s free.”

“Nevertheless, we have a new mission for you.”

“Yes?”

“We want you to find Deucalion.”

Jacob’s face wrinkled with a confusion. “Deucalion is missing?”

“No!” growled Samael. “He’s in hiding! Have you been living under a rock? Surely you must’ve heard the charges by now.”

Hiding? Jacob quelled the gasp arising in his throat. *That doesn’t sound like the Deucalion I know!* “I can’t imagine Deucalion turning outlaw.”

Samael stomped an impatient forehoof. “I regret to inform you that your favorite student is guilty of cowardice. I had to banish Governor Tereus and Lady Semele because they obstructed our swift justice. That action offended the entire Thessalioi nation. Now they want my family jewels on a platter.”

“Cowardice?” Jacob said. “Impossible! Deucalion may be an impulsive hothead, but a centaur would rather commit suicide than be branded a coward. If he’s in hiding—if he’s still alive—then it’s because he’s evading a dangerous enemy, rather than trying to elude capture. He that fights and runs away may live again to fight another day.”

Orithyia’s eyes welled with tears. “Jacob, I’m sorry to tell you that there is strong evidence of Deucalion’s guilt.”

Jacob smiled and gave Orithyia a reassuring nod. “I’d prefer to presume that he’s innocent until proven guilty. If I find him, then perhaps I’ll also find exculpatory evidence that exonerates him.” He heaved a frustrated sigh and glared at Samael. “And what do you expect me to do when I do find him? I can’t arrest a centaur.”

Samael grinned impishly. “You’re to deliver this message to Deucalion: We wish to be merciful. If he will appear before us, confess, and utterly surrender to our dominance, we will make him our gelding. He will live out the remainder of his natural life with no stain upon his honor.”

Jacob casually turned his back to the centaurs and feigned allure with a fresco upon a nearby wall that depicted a stallion chasing a mare over rolling, green fields of tall grass. He prayed that they would not detect the attempted deception, but he could not help but roll his eyes in disbelief. *Good luck with that offer.*

“Deucalion is smart enough to know that it was you that sent me.”

“He trusts you!” Samael said.

Jacob angrily whirled about. “And you expect me to betray that trust?”

“We expect you to follow orders!”

“And if Deucalion is dead?”

“Then show us his body! We shall castrate the empty carcass and thus deny Deucalion the right to be buried as a warrior and stallion!”

* * *

Myrrha stood on the terrace that overlooked the harbor of her cursed, forsaken little island. The humans that had settled it hundreds of years ago called it home, but a prison was still a prison, regardless of how beautiful the view. She crossed her arms and sniffed in disdain. She had tried to bribe her way to the mainland, promising the simple folk of the fishing village new boats, nets, and hooks, but they always apologetically refused.

“We’re so sorry,” the humans would always say, “we know the Lady Myrrha is unhappy, but we have our orders. You must stay on pain of death. Let us take care of you. Let us watch over...”

The humans reminded her of minnows. They were only good for bait, and she had bigger fish to fry.

She heard the steady beat of hoof steps behind her and cantered about to see Typhon. The tobiano stallion struggled to cradle within his arms a heavy object wrapped in a gray and stained woolen bag.

Typhon grunted. “Where do you want me to drop this?”

“Don’t drop it!” said Myrrha in alarm. She pointed a tense forefinger at a spot next to the stallion. “Just leave it there.”

The stallion slowly relaxed his arms, his biceps flexing in protest. The knuckles of his hands went white as he strained to lean forward and to lower the woolen bag to the ground. The object within made a metallic, muffled clang through the fabric upon its landing. “You’ve no idea what I went through to get this. I was nearly caught! It was hidden where you said it would be, behind the false door of—.”

“Who has taken over my stable?”

“Lord Samael,” growled Typhon. “Be thankful the son of Adramelech goes elsewhere to conduct his duties; otherwise, I would’ve slain that impetuous little traitor! He should be gelded for his treachery. I was able to steal it during broad daylight and didn’t have to sneak like a thief in the night.”

“You have done well.”

Typhon snorted. “Is that all you have to say? You promised to release me from my vow when—.”

“I have one more mission for you,” Myrrha said. “Follow me.”

He executed a tense sidestep to allow the dark mare to pass, only Myrrha was not so dark anymore. Typhon noted that her mane, pelt, and tail were now sprinkled with streaks of grey.

Her gait, which had at one time been as steady and graceful, was now faltering and stiff. It was if her time in exile had drained the potent beauty from her. She was not aging well at all!

He followed her through the small courtyard of the stable to the doors leading to her bedroom. Myrrha grasped the dual bronze handles and flung open the heavy oaken doors inward without breaking her stride.

Myrrha scooped up a scroll, sealed with red wax, from a sideboard. She cantered about sharply, and then pointed the tightly rolled parchment at Typhon. “Deliver this to Chief Niobe with my compliments.”

Typhon crossed his arms as annoyance spread on his face. “I’m getting tired of being your errand boy.”

She gave him a cold stare. “Do you want to take your vengeance, yes or no?”

“Yes,” said Typhon at last. He reluctantly plucked the scroll out of her hand. “Do you know what they’ll do to me if I’m caught? I’ll be gelded and then passed around to every lonely stallion in Pelion!”

The mare pointed to a small olive jewelry box sitting on the sideboard. “Open it.”

He trotted to the sideboard and cautiously cracked the lid. He spotted a glass vial with a sickly green liquid nestled in the folds of the purple velvet lining. He pinched the vial carefully between his thumb and forefinger before lifting it from the jewelry box.

“What is this?”

“Poison drafted from the very fires of Tartarus,” said Myrrha with a serene grin. “You can die with honor after you’ve taken your revenge. Find and destroy the boy named Nicholas Demetrious—*Nicky, they call him!* I want to remind that troublesome meddler that he cannot protect those closest to him. You’ll also be doing Lord Samael a favor, and he’ll allow you to die as you have lived—by the sword. It is in this way you may avenge Adramelech, your Lord and—*my brother.*”

“Adramelech...was...*your brother?*” Typhon found the implications of her assertion disturbing. Was there truth to the rumor that Adramelech had raped his own sister? Worse yet, that Myrrha had willingly committed incest? If true, then they had fallen to the depths of such depravity that not even he could fathom.

“When you say ‘brother,’ I take it that you mean Adramelech was *your spiritual brother*, and not—.”

“No,” Myrrha rasped. “He was my blood brother.”

“You and Adramelech were lovers?”

“Watch your tongue, or I’ll castrate you where you stand. It’s not what you think. Pull your head out from underneath your tail. I didn’t share his love willingly. My brother could never love anyone but himself. Adramelech was driven mad by a lust so twisted that it defiles everything that is holy. Be thankful that he didn’t take a fancy to you as he did to poor Orthaoon: You would know pain and humiliation!”

Typhon gulped hard. “I beg forgiveness.”

“You’re forgiven—now go!”

* * *

“Was that Typhon I saw boarding a ship bound for Pelion?”

Myrrha spun about in the bath, sending a massive wave of steaming water splashing over the edge of the wooden tub. She growled upon seeing Koprillia standing just inside the doorway, hot mist swirling about him.

She let go an angry scream: “*How dare you!*”

Koprillia smirked. “Because I can, my lady. I’ve no interest in what’s under your tail.”

“Get out!”

“Presently, I will,” said Koprillia, “but my question still stands: Where have you sent Typhon?”

“It’s none of your concern!” Myrrha jumped out of the bath, galloped to a sword rack, and grabbed a *xiphos*. She pivoted and began to advance on Koprillia. “I’ll turn you into shredded beef!”

A severe, scorching pain filled her head. Myrrha howled in agony as she dropped the sword and clutched her head. A terrible, burning crush seized her temples, as if a hot vise gripped her skull between its jaws, and the sight of a vile creature filled her vision. It looked like a centaur stallion, but a horribly deformed sinuous neck sprouted from its withers, terminating with a triangular, black-scaled head. Its eyes burned a sickly green and acrid smoke poured from its large, flared nostrils. It stomped a cloven fore hoof before mounting her and thrusting its member into her sacred vessel.

A mocking echo of Koprillia’s voice filled her head: “If you thought Adramelech was a brute, you haven’t an inkling of what I can do to you while in this form!”

“Enough!” Myrrha said. “*The Tree of Life* is in the courtyard.” Slowly, the blistering force subsided, and the monster ceased its rape, vanishing from her sight. “What was...that...that thing?”

An oily chuckle echoed from Koprillia. “On some worlds it’s known as a horse—a vicious creature indeed—it has but one instinct and that is to breed naughty little mares like you. Now, my question still stands. Where did you send Typhon?”

Her face knitted in puzzlement. *What is a horse? What do you mean, other worlds? There is no other world than this one. You’re insane, Koprillia!* Myrrha finally caught her breath and composure. “I sent him to Pelion.”

“I see.” *Why you cursed, foolish filly! Time is of the essence, and you just cut my time in half! Are you really that stupid?* Koprillia’s eyes flared red, and he huffed in exasperation. “Do you realize that if Typhon is caught, that troublesome, two-legged son of yours will come looking for you?”

“I’m counting on it,” Myrrha said. “You needn’t worry. I’ll destroy Jacob when he arrives on what shall be his final mission.” She cast a cold glare upon Koprillia. “Now, I suggest you go and complete your mission. We had a deal, remember?”

“I can promise you, my lady, that my mission will be successful, and all will be as it was before. All will tremble with fear in your presence. Your glorious position will be restored to you.”

“And what of the humans?”

“Humans?” said Koprillia with a spiteful chortle, “what humans?”

The musing brought a tranquil smile to her face. *Finally, my dream will come true! A world without those two-legged, half-finished monsters!*

“But be warned, my lady,” said Koprillia. “Should you ever behold the face of Cheiron—.”

“You fool! Cheiron has been dead for nearly three thousand years!”

“—you’ll never leave this forsaken, barren rock. You’ll die here on this island alone and forgotten.”

“I. SAID. GET. OUT!”

CHAPTER 2: APOSTLE

Carystus beamed with fond reminiscence. “My greetings and respects to you, Chief Phoebe. I haven’t forgotten the kindness you showed me so many years ago. I’m glad they sent you, rather than strangers, to meet me.”

The mare clasped arms with the stallion, drew herself close, and kissed him on his cheek. *By the gods! He’s as handsome as ever!* His physique was foursquare and sleek. His mane and tail were the color of freshly mined coal, and his pelt a smooth, soft blue roan that was like the color of the sea during summertime. The sun had forged a strong bronze face clear in its complexion, complimented by a hawkish nose, and fine lips that were quick to smile.

And his eyes! How could she ever forget his eyes? Deep brown and clear with a strong dash of cheerful feistiness. *Still—those eyes held the reflection of a troubled soul, of someone that had witnessed much tragedy.*

“I too, remember your strong, yet gentle embrace.”

Carystus executed a flawless pivot and cantered next to her side. He offered a ropey muscled arm. “Shall we depart this rickety wharf, my lady?”

Phoebe gladly slipped her arm within his. Carystus hoisted his pack onto his shoulder, being careful not to upset the long-necked pandura strapped across his back. They walked casually past the row of warehouses and into Pelion.

“Have you eaten?” Phoebe whispered. “Poor thing, you must be starving after such a long trip, eating nothing but hardtack and dried beef. I know how bad the rations can be aboard some of these ships!”

“The food wasn’t that bad,” Carystus said. “The crew took good care of me. Besides, I’d first like to stop at a bathhouse. I haven’t properly bathed or groomed for nearly three days.” The stallion massaged his chin and cheeks; the stubble was like emery beneath his fingers. He could have sanded oak with his face. “I also need a shave. I don’t want to look like a barbarian when I perform before Lord Samael.”

Phoebe leaned inward and gave him a delicate sniff. She had to resist the urge to pinch her nose; the stallion smelled like soggy blankets tangled with mildew. “Let’s continue to the Royal Gardens and get you settled in the guest stables.”

They had to rely on sporadic detours through the narrow utility alleys to bypass the main streets that were closed either to construction, or outright reconstruction due to the ruin of war. There were rumors of land mines that littered the heart of the city. Phoebe could sense the unease that radiated from Carystus whenever the path became narrow and confining. She too preferred the cool shelter of the forest or the warm, vast steppes of the country.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said. “I’d hoped to take you on a more scenic tour.”

Carystus heaved a gloomy sigh. “It’s not the way I remember it. So much as changed, and not for the better. It seems like ages ago...since I was last here. I’m glad to see the humans

turning their hands. Poor humans! They work so hard to build something great, only to have it swept away by centaurs.”

She nodded in sympathy. “Pelion is their home too. Many humans refused to leave during *The Little War* and tried to defend their homes.”

“I should have been here,” said Carystus glumly.

“The war ended almost as quickly as it started. How could you possibly be everywhere at once?”

“I know,” said Carystus, wiping fresh beads of sweat from his brow, “but it still isn’t fair. No one—the humans included—should’ve been forced to choose sides. If only Cheiron had at least given the humans the power to mediate disputes between the centaur herds, then perhaps all of this could’ve been avoided.”

“Did Cheiron ever give that idea serious consideration?”

“No. It was his greatest failure.”

* * *

Perseus and Theseus galloped out of Ianthe’s stable and drew their swords. Jacob froze in his tracks. By the gods, he had never seen the twins this angry! Blazing hatred burned upon their faces! He could not believe that he was their target. Jacob quickly shot a glance over his shoulder. Certainly, the real enemy had to be behind him.

But—no one was behind him. A hot choking lump formed in his throat and Jacob gulped hard. Instinctively the remainder of his body swiveled about, and he began to run as fast as his legs would carry him. Jacob knew the sprint would offer little to no advantage against a pair of enraged stallions at full gallop. The centaur twins would soon outflank him. He had to get out of their reach. He dodged to the right into the dark service alley alongside the stable, praying that the porters had promptly delivered the supplies and rations that morning.

A burst of joyous relief surged through Jacob when he spotted the neatly stacked barrels and crates. He bounded through the alley and leapt upon the first row of kegs. He gasped as he felt the half-barrels start to collapse beneath his feet, and fortunately, his forward momentum threw the remainder of his body in the right direction. He gratefully acknowledged the mathematics behind kinetic energy. Jacob landed hard, face down onto a crate; the wooden top splintered with a loud crackling snap as it knocked the wind from his lungs.

Come on, old man! Get to your feet! Stay on your feet, lest you lose your head! Jacob drew a deep breath, tucked his knees beneath him and jumped upward onto the eave. His hands caught hold of the clay tiles and his arms felt as if they were about to burst through his coat sleeves. He swung his legs upward just in time, barely avoiding the path of waving swords. His knuckles went white as his hands gripped the tiles and the forceps and biceps of his arms felt as if they would explode. He managed to scramble halfway up the roof before daring to stop and glance over his shoulder to see Perseus and Theseus sheath their swords; the twins still scorched with fierce vexation.

Jacob stood and gave the twins a perplexed gaze. “Perseus? Theseus? By the gods, what’s wrong? Don’t you know me? I’m both your teacher and your student!” His hand slipped inside his coat, and he withdrew a sealed paper carton. He tore the top off and poured a handful of

bang-snaps into his palm. Jacob knew he was not to make such toys, but he did find such improvised items useful for creating diversions. *The centaurs cannot expect me to behave all the time. As Lady Ianthe taught me, sometimes you must be bad to be good.*

Jacob considered his immediate problem. *Maybe I can bluff my way out of this predicament.* “Sons of Ianthe and Leonidas, I don’t want to hurt you, but I will, if necessary—.” He held out the bang-snaps in the cup of his hand to ensure that the twins could see that he was armed.

The twins laughed heartily, and for a moment, Jacob thought he had them back on his side. His face fell into a disappointed stare as they reached behind them, flipped their bows into attack position and drew arrows from their side quivers.

“Okay—so what’s the problem?” Jacob asked.

“Where were you?” growled Perseus as he knocked an arrow.

“You useless two legs!” said Theseus. “It’s because of you that our mother was raped!”

The twins drew their arrows taut against the bowstrings.

“Warriors, I salute you!” Jacob wound his arm back, and then hurled the bang-snaps with all his might down onto the centaurs. A good measure fell onto the croups and docks, just behind the loins of the twins. The brothers reared, bucked, and flinched wildly, kicking their forelegs outward as the bang-snaps stung their hindquarters.

They shouted the vilest of curses, and for a moment Jacob felt his ears reel in disgust, unsure if he had ever before heard such foul language. Perseus and Theseus retreated, and Jacob came to the painful conclusion that the twins would soon regroup at a safe distance, thereby rendering any further counterattacks on his behalf useless. He could not escape over the ridge in time! He thrust his hand into a pants pocket, withdrew a small paper-wrapped cylinder, and prayed that the smoke bomb would provide him with enough cover to dodge the looming onslaught of arrows.

Jacob started to lean over to strike the fuse end of the smoke bomb against a clay tile. A loud bang pierced his ears. Startled, he slipped, lost his balance, fell onto his stomach, and slid down the roof. He went over the eave and fell backwards into an open crate. Fortunately, he fell flat on his back into a heavy but soft layer of wood wool—and from the pleasant aroma of it—of pinewood shavings.

Dazed and shaky, Jacob slowly arose and then cautiously peered over the edge of the crate. He blew a relieved sigh when he saw Leonidas standing between him and his sons, fresh smoke oozing from the barrels and breech of his blunderbuss. Perseus and Theseus could only exchange dumbfounded stares with each other, their mouths agape and their eyes wide. Why was their father and sire shooting at them? Leonidas had fired off a warning shot over their heads, rather than aiming directly at their swishing tails. Jacob climbed out of the crate, and once he felt solid earth beneath his boots, brushed the shavings off the front of his coat and trousers.

Leonidas looked back over his shoulder. “Jacob, are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Stay where you are until I assume command!”

Jacob was not about to argue with common sense. “Yes, sir!”

Leonidas fixed a stern frown onto his stunned sons. He stomped a fore hoof. “Perseus! Theseus! Snap out of it! Why are you trying to kill Teacher Jacob? You’re warriors! Guardians! You’re centaurs, not barbarians.”

“I...don’t know—.” Perseus whispered.

Theseus shook his head. “No! It can’t be! We—I don’t remember.”

“I want you to apologize to your teacher this instant!”

“Pardon me,” said Jacob, “but no apology is necessary. General Leonidas, can’t you see that your sons are genuinely confounded? I can’t explain it, but it’s obvious that they’re not responsible for their actions.”

Leonidas retreated a few steps and considered Jacob’s observation. “I agree. I want the two of you to report to the barracks—.”

“But father—!” they protested.

“This is not a debate! I may be your father—and I love you dearly—but I’m also your commanding officer! Now, I’ve given an order and I expect you to obey, efficiently and cheerfully! Now, go to the barracks and stay there, lest I have you court martialed for insubordination!”

Theseus and Perseus snapped to attention, saluted, and then retreated from the alley. Jacob watched until they vanished around the corner. He could almost feel their dejection and remorse.

Leonidas cantered about and joined Jacob. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Jacob nodded. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Come with me. There’s someone that Ianthe wants you to meet.”

They walked into Ianthe’s stable, and Leonidas led Jacob into the kitchen. Jacob took the opportunity to wash his hands and face, while Leonidas diced cheese and poured red wine into crystal goblets.

Jacob pulled a comb from a pocket. “Perseus and Theseus seemed to know that I was coming,” he said, running the comb through his hair, taming the wild locks into civilized strands, “but were angry with me. They were under the impression that I was responsible for a rape—.”

“They’ve been acting strange lately,” said Leonidas. The stallion busily arranged the cheese and crackers on a wooden serving tray. “I’ve tried to keep close watch on them. We were in the kitchen preparing refreshments...I turned my tail for a few seconds...and they trotted out.”

“When did you first notice these outbursts of rage?”

“Just recently...maybe it started...a week ago? I don’t know what’s wrong with them. I’ve heard other disturbing reports of younger stallions—even mares—bursting into unprovoked anger. It seems the younger the centaur, the greater the propensity for falling victim to these bursts of madness.”

“I see,” Jacob said. A troubled scowl crawled over his face like a spider in its web. “What about the humans? Any problems with the youths and maidens?”

“No,” Leonidas said. “The humans seem unaffected. It’s just a hunch, but perhaps your kind is...immune to...it?”

“I must investigate this matter.”

Leonidas gave Jacob a sober nod. “As a precaution, I’ll call in some favors and have the older soldiers in the ranks posted on regular patrols. They’ll keep watch on the younger generation.”

“Thanks,” Jacob said. “You walk in first and start pouring the wine and I’ll present the cheese and crackers.”

They departed the kitchen and began to cross the courtyard. Jacob’s face wrinkled anew with puzzlement as he approached Lady Ianthe’s office. Something was missing. A certain pedestal now stood empty. Was there not at one time a bronze sculpture atop it? Jacob struggled to remember...it had been a favorite...

* * *

“It’s very old,” Ianthe said. “It’s a mystery now, but it’s believed to be a biological symbol. We call it The Tree of Life.”

His eyes narrowed as he inspected the double helix once more. “An odd tree to be sure.”

“It’s said that whoever discovers its true meaning will find the key to life itself.”

* * *

Yes! Now I remember! The Tree of Life! How could I forget?

Leonidas chuckled as he sidestepped in the doorway to allow Jacob to join him at his side. “Look who I found!”

Jacob found himself stunned by the beauty of the mare that stood next to Ianthe; it was if he were beholding the feminine incarnation of Samael! Her pelt was like a field of coal with shimmering streaks of molten gold, and her curly mane framed a triangular, pointed face with fine features. Her large and bright hazel eyes met his.

Ianthe smiled and waved a respectful hand towards the mare. “Jacob, this is Niobe, chief-elect of the Lamioi.”

Jacob drew a deep breath to recover his composure. “Lady Niobe, my greetings and respects to you.” He set the serving tray onto a nearby sideboard before turning to the mare to offer a bow. “I offer my congratulations.”

“What happened?” Niobe asked. “We heard—.”

“It was nothing,” said Jacob with a nonchalant shrug. “It was just a misunderstanding, that’s all.”

Leonidas rolled his eyes heavenward as he poured the wine. “You have a gift for understatement, Teacher Jacob.” He pressed the brimming goblets into the waiting hands of the mares before handing Jacob his share.

Ianthe smiled. “Chief Niobe is a longtime friend of mine. She’s also my counselor.”

“I understand,” Jacob said. “I may have need for a counselor. Do you...evaluate...humans as well?”

“Not on a regular basis,” said Niobe, puzzled. “Why do you ask?”

“Let’s just say I’m having problems with my memory.” Jacob kept his face straight. “Adramelech is dead?”

“Very dead,” Niobe said. “I had him cremated and his remains scattered at sea. He was guilty of rape and didn’t deserve a funeral befitting his status as a centaur lord and sire. I also wanted to prevent any of his followers venerating his tomb as if it were a holy shrine. I wasn’t about to scatter his ashes on the holy slopes of Mount Pelion!”

Jacob drew a shuddering breath. “Lady Ianthe...I’m so sorry...I—.”

Ianthe struck a commanding demeanor. “Jacob, you’ve nothing to be sorry about. Adramelech’s evil died with him. It could’ve been worse.”

“I don’t see how—.”

“He could’ve impregnated me!” Ianthe drew a deep, calming breath. “Thankfully, I had the *implant* at the time.” A darkness washed over her face. “Had I become pregnant...well, I really don’t want to think about it. A terrible decision, to be sure.”

Jacob nervously slurped his drink. *Lady Ianthe! Say it isn’t true! You seriously considered destroying the fruit of your womb, or worse yet, committing the mortal sin of infanticide. You’re much darker than I realized. But then again, perhaps I’ve no right to judge you. Had Hope been raped by a centaur and given birth to a Silenus, I would’ve instantly destroyed such a monster without the slightest hesitation.*

“How did I manage to survive then? What stopped Myrrha...”

“Philomela is a licensed midwife. She’s trained to observe the imminent birth of a *First Born*. Myrrha was clueless and believed that she would drop a centaur foal. Philomela slipped a mild sedative to Myrrha when the pangs of childbirth started. She had Amycus standing by to whisk you away and there was nothing Myrrha could do to stop him. You should know that Amycus wanted to claim you but couldn’t, not openly, at least.”

“I owe Dr. Philomela a favor then.”

Ianthe pointed to the ground mat with a determined forefinger. “We need to talk. Sit.”

Niobe and Ianthe sat, enfolding their legs beneath them. Jacob and Leonidas followed suit, sitting across from the two mares. There was a long and awkward moment of silence as Niobe kept staring at Jacob with pleading eyes.

Jacob gave the mare a respectful nod. “So, what troubles you, Chief Niobe?”

Niobe brought the brim of the goblet to her lips, her hand trembling, and tried to take a sip. She instead burst into tears. “Samael is my son!”

“Easy,” said Ianthe, gently patting Niobe on the withers. “Take a deep breath.”

“I gathered that, my lady. Pray tell me, what’s the problem?”

“Are you blind?” asked Niobe frostily. “How could you robe Samael in the purple and place the diadem of power upon his head? Do you not see the corruption that begins to creep upon him? Samael should be at home, with me, studying his music, writing his poetry, turning fillies into mares, but instead...”

“Hey!” said Leonidas sternly. “It wasn’t Jacob’s fault that the Lamioi Elders broke their word. They were all for his proposal when it suited them! They should’ve kept *Cheiron’s Promise...*”

* * *

“I would instead ask a favor. I’ve been tasked to solve a serious problem. As senior judges, you know The Law. Are you capable of rendering an impartial verdict that would serve the greater good and be of benefit to all?”

“Yes,” said Hecate, “as the alternative would only serve evil.”

Jacob nodded. “There can be no peace without justice. Many humans were displaced during the war. Many are afraid to return to Pelion, or their cooperatives, because the centaurs that were supposed to protect them from harm proved themselves cowards. They were derelict in their duty. In my opinion, these centaurs have proven themselves unworthy guardians.

“Let the Lamioi prove that they are superior. I ask that you fulfill your true role as guardians. I ask that you answer to your better natures. Allow my people to settle amongst the Lamioi. I ask that you fulfill Cheiron’s Promise.”

* * *

Ianthe glared at Leonidas. “That’s enough!”

Jacob raised a calming hand. “My I resume my interview?” *Just who is interrogating whom? I must watch my step. It’s possible that I could be charged with treason.*

“Please do,” Ianthe said.

“Thank you,” Jacob said. “To answer your question, I’ve witnessed this malevolent influence firsthand. Praise be to all that’s holy that Leonidas came to my rescue when he did!”

Niobe wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I can’t do this anymore!”

“What can’t you do anymore, ma’am?”

“Show him,” whispered Ianthe firmly. “Jacob needs to know.”

Niobe set down her drink and then reached into her utility pouch. She withdrew a neatly folded letter of crinkled parchment and handed it to Jacob. The wax seal bearing the royal mark had been broken. He warily unfolded the letter, knowing that he would not like the contents:

My dearest Arcas and Orithyia,

Have you sent that worthless, two-legged freak on a useless and hopeless assignment yet? I cannot return until that unfinished monster is gone for good!

Remember that I am more than just your mother: I am your dam. As much as you might love and respect the Lady Ianthe, your Aunt, her claim as regent is invalid and illegal. I plead for justice and that I am restored to my proper place beside you as an equal. I make this claim as rightful heir.

I will assist you in the destruction of his reputation. The two of you must swear that your depraved mentor made improper advances to the both of you: Especially you, Orithyia, his sister!

*Your loving mother,
Myrrha, Senior Mare of the Lamioi and Basilissa*

“Oh, how charming!” Jacob drawled. He hissed a long and disappointed sigh before refolding the parchment and returning it to Niobe. He gulped the remaining portion of his wine, longing for a much stronger brew in the vain yearning that it would wash the sorrow from his heart. *Now I know the real reason why my brother and sister want me out of the way. I must be careful, for I’m positive my loyalty is being tested.*

“How did you come by this letter?”

“Typhon delivered it to me.”

Jacob cocked a worried brow. “Typhon is in Pelion?”

“Yes,” said Niobe tersely. “He’s on a mission, but I don’t know the details. I knew something was terribly wrong when he told me I’d have to find other means to deliver my response to Myrrha, so I took that to mean that he’d accepted a suicide mission. I broke the seal, read the letter, and decided I couldn’t be a party to such a betrayal. I’ll be honest with you, Teacher Jacob; I don’t care much for humans, but even I have my standards.”

“Thank you,” Jacob said. “It’s important that we capture Typhon with all speed. That’s one gold vein that we need to mine.”

“Agreed,” said Leonidas. “Perseus and Theseus are expert trackers, so I’ll make it clear to them that Typhon must be taken alive.” The centaur general cleared his throat. “What do we do about the letter? It borders on treason.”

A broad, roguish grin spread on Jacob’s face. “Why, we deliver it, of course. The reply should prove most interesting.”

Ianthe snorted in disgust. “Arcas and Orithyia shouldn’t be corresponding with Myrrha at all. They are breaking *The Law*. Still, I’ll reseal the letter and have Niobe deliver it.”

Jacob nodded. “Lady Ianthe, I beg you to be patient. Please allow me to try to discover the underlying truth of this matter. Not is all that it seems. Something is wrong here. What, I do not know yet.”

“Please be careful,” Ianthe said. “I smell a trap.”

At that moment, *The Tree of Life* flashed through Jacob’s mind. He wondered why such a trivial musing should scatter through his thoughts, and nearly dismissed it, but perhaps the thought was not his own? Could the mere absence of *The Tree of Life* be a clue within itself?

Jacob stood and smoothed the wrinkles from his coat. “A question for you, my dear Lady Ianthe?”

“Yes?”

He jerked a thumb in the direction of the now absent sculpture. “What happened to that wonderful little bronze—*The Tree of Life*—as you described it?”

“I don’t know. It was there the night I was rescued but went missing after I returned to my stable.” The mare frowned in disappointment. “I know you liked it. I was planning on gifting it to you. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure. It just strikes me as odd, that’s all. For what purpose would someone steal such a rare but easily traceable work of art?”

* * *

Luke smiled broadly after he spotted Jacob walk into the courtyard, and the youngest stallion of the Duncan clan approached the man with an enthusiastic, animated trot. “Welcome home, Uncle Jacob. I’ve good news for you. Hope and baby Isaac are on the mend!”

Jacob heaved a relieved sigh and smiled. *Finally! Some good news!* The joy he now felt made him want to dance a jig, but he restrained himself. “Well, by the gods! Lead on nephew! Lead on!”

Luke placed a warm but firm hand under Jacob’s elbow and started to drag him across the courtyard. “Easy there, young warrior! I only have two legs!”

“Sorry about that, Uncle Jacob,” said Luke, slowing his pace.

Jacob was delayed once again, as he encountered Duncan and his remaining sons, John, Mark, and Matthew. Each of them just had to embrace him. Again, a wave of relief washed over Jacob like a cool but fast running mountain stream. It was good to know that his centaur kin were happy to see him.

It must make for some interesting family reunions. An astonishing portrait, to be sure. Imagine having centaur brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins—you name it—in in your family tree! Maybe someday...someday...it will be considered honorable instead of...shameful?

Jacob turned to Duncan. “Where’s Demeter?”

Duncan smiled. “She’s tending to Hope. Please don’t let us keep you.” He cleared his throat as if to bark an order, but instead whispered, “Come now, you impetuous colts! You’ll break him in half in you’re not careful. Let the man through now.”

Jacob continued down the hallway, parted the gray curtain hung in the jamb, and peered into the room. Such a wonderful vision! Hope was sitting up in bed! She was sitting up in bed, sipping a hot tisane from a mug, no doubt one of Demeter’s herbal potions. While she was still a little pale, the color had returned to her cheeks and the dark bags under her brilliant green eyes had ebbed. The nightgown that had once reminded Jacob of a shroud wrapping a corpse now perfectly draped her bantam figure. He heaved a relieved sigh and smiled broadly.

Demeter stood at the foot of the bed, cradling baby Isaac. She smiled upon seeing Jacob. “Come and see your son.”

He bounded happily across the room and placed an affectionate kiss on the mare’s cheek. “My greetings, respects and love to the greatest of mares.”

She kissed Jacob on the forehead. “Isaac is much better too.”

Jacob gazed down upon his son. For a moment he thought his heart would burst from his chest like a fusillade from a line of cannons. He soothed the baby’s cheek and forehead with the

back of his hand. “My son...Isaac...,” he whispered, “...you make me so proud. I love you so much...so very much.”

Demeter nodded and grinned. “He’s going to break so many hearts when he grows up.”

Jacob raised an expectant brow. “The fever has broken?”

“Not quite,” said Demeter, “but it’s much abated.” She gently took Isaac from Jacob’s arms and lowered the baby into his cradle. She neatly tucked a blanket around him; the infant swiftly drifted into slumber. “The fever is a stubborn bastard.”

Hope delicately sniffed. “Hey, what about me?”

Jacob was instantly by her side. He leaned over and kissed her. He tasted honey—and bitterness. He sat on the floor next to the edge of the bed and smiled at Hope once again. “What’s that you’re drinking?”

“Centaury,” Demeter said.

“Of course,” Jacob said. “The healing herb favored by Cheiron. I could use a tonic to rid the nasty bile that wells inside me now.”

“Where have you been?” Hope pouted. “What do those four-legged blue-bloods roaming the Royal Gardens want with you now?”

“Conducting business, my dear,” he said. Jacob shot a glance of innocence toward Demeter, and the mare winked on the sly.

Hope rolled her eyes. “You’re going on yet another mission?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Goddamn it, Jacob,” said Hope. “I want our son to know his father.”

Now it was Jacob’s turn to roll his eyes in frustration. “It’s not like I’m going on a suicide mission. I just have to find someone, that’s all.”

Hope sunk back into the pillows, heaving a defeated sigh. “Oh, sure...a nice job...easy job...but then you decide that you have to right some wrong or deconstruct some wacky conspiracy theory, and...”

“Please, my dear daughter,” said Demeter, stroking Hope’s forearm, “Jacob has his orders and must obey. No one is exempt from the rules, not even me.”

Hope kneaded her brows and defiantly crossed her arms. “Goddamn the rules to the eternal fires of Tartarus.”

“Please look at me,” Demeter said. “Hope, I would remind you that it’s unwise to upset *the balance*.”

Hope swiveled a shocked gaze onto her mother. She blinked, and tears fell onto her cheeks. “Even...” she sniffed, “if it’s *the centaurs upsetting the balance*? Mother, please! Why can’t Jacob and I have a life? We were meant for each other.”

“Darling,” said Jacob, “I don’t want you or Isaac to suffer a relapse.”

“Why are you taking her side?”

Jacob mustered the gentlest smile that he could. "I'm not about to argue with your mother, a *wild woman*."

"We're wrong when we..." said Demeter with a calming nod, "...fail to answer to our better natures." The mare smiled and stroked Hope's cheek. "Now, it's time for you to sleep."

"Mother, don't you dare—."

"Sleep...sleep...my dearest daughter. Sleep and have pleasant dreams."

"No...it's...not fair," mumbled Hope. A powerful drowsiness overcame her, and she drifted off into calm, peaceful slumber.

Jacob regarded Demeter with wide eyes and slack-jawed awe. "By the gods! That's one way to win an argument."

"I've found the more frustrated and angrier the victim, the greater the chance of a relapse. It's better that she sleeps now." Demeter rose from the floor in a singular, sublime movement and stood. "Jacob, come with me."

Jacob stumbled as he hurried to stand. "But of course."

He followed her out to the courtyard. Demeter slowly walked towards the kitchen, her hoof beats steady and her tail swishing harshly. She looked back over her shoulder, her face stern. "Duncan, I need to speak to Jacob—*alone*. We're not to be disturbed."

Duncan nodded. "Yes, Demeter!"

Demeter turned to her sons: "John, Mark and Matthew! Form a guard and patrol the perimeter of the stable. Luke, please bring me the oak box you'll find on the top shelf in the wardrobe. You'll then stand watch over your sister."

Luke snapped to attention and saluted. "Yes, mother! He abruptly turned and trotted into a room at the opposite end of the stable.

Demeter placed a copper kettle on an iron stove in the corner of the kitchen. "Do you still want the centaury, or would you prefer something stronger?"

"I'll have the tisane," Jacob said. "I want to keep my head clear."

"A wise choice," said Demeter agreeably. She plucked some cups and dried herbs from a shelf. She measured a teaspoon of the dried centaury into each cup, and then slipped a thick, woolen oven mitt over her hand before retrieving the kettle and pouring the boiling water. She gave each drink a meticulous stir.

The mare turned to serve the tisane, and the sunlight from a nearby window streamed over Demeter's face. Jacob could swear that she had aged at least ten years before his eyes.

What happened, Demeter? Why are wrinkles upon your face a little deeper? Why are there now flecks of gray in what was once a magnificent flaming mane of red?

She slipped a mug into his hand. "It's not nice to stare."

Jacob blinked to break his rude observation. "I just realized that you've paid a high price for your interference. Please don't think me an ungrateful fool...I'll take all the help I can get, but..."

“What true mother wouldn’t die to save her children?”

“How I wish that indeed I were your son, and that I could show you all the love and respect a son should have for his mother. I confess that I’m relieved that Hope and Isaac are doing so much better.”

Demeter’s face beamed with joy. “That’s because he is here.”

“He?” said Jacob, clearly puzzled. “Who are you talking about?”

“Cheiron,” Demeter said. “Cheiron is here at last, and you’ll need his help. I can tell you that much without breaking the rules. Whether he’ll help you I cannot say.”

The whirlwind of questions only spun thoughts of confusion in Jacob’s mind. *Cheiron died some three thousand years ago! How could he be walking amongst us now? What did Demeter really mean? By the gods! Must centaurs always answer a question with a riddle?*

Demeter’s lips curled into an enigmatic smile. “You’ll understand.”

“Then I pray that I learn my lesson quickly and well.”

“Whether you choose to believe is up to you.”

Luke appeared in the doorway, cradling in his arms an oak jewelry case, the top intricately carved with a winged dove holding an olive branch within its beak. “Mother, where should I—.”

She pointed to a butcher block near the entrance. “Over there, please.”

Luke deftly placed the case on the block and then gave Demeter a solemn nod. “By your leave, my mother and dam,” he said as he retreated from the kitchen.

Demeter waited until Luke’s hoof steps faded, and then gave Jacob an encouraging nod. “Go ahead and open it.”

Jacob set his drink on the butcher block and flipped the brass latch on the case. He lifted the lid. Inside, nestled within molded purple velvet, was a snub-nosed revolver. Jacob recognized it as belonging to the constable class of handguns, double action, made especially for shooting within close quarters. The barrel was the length of Jacob’s thumb, so at best its effective range was some five, maybe ten, centaur paces. There were six copper cartridges of the latest centerfire design, but the actual bullets were—*silver?*

“Your father, Amycus, made that for you at the behest of Lord Charon. He couldn’t give it to you directly. Rules are rules, you know.” Demeter took a long sip of her drink. “It’s the reason Amycus had to pay with his life. He couldn’t give it to you while he still lived. He gave it to me for safekeeping until you needed it.”

“I see,” Jacob whispered. He felt an overwhelming surge of anger. He slammed the lid shut and abruptly flipped the latch, nearly catching his thumb within the mechanism. He sighed deeply, regaining his temper. “Sorry. It’s just that I’m disgusted by this entire situation. It’s like I...” Jacob shook his head in frustration.

“What?”

“It’s like I’m...in the wrong place...at the wrong time...”

His face suddenly creased into a severe wince, and he doubled over, clutching his side. Hot but dull knives stabbed incessantly at what like seemed his very soul. *The sting had never been*

this bad! Jacob clamped his eyes shut and tears erupted onto his cheeks. “*By the gods! The pain!*”

Demeter clamped her hands onto his temples and forced his head upwards. “Jacob, look at me!”

He forced his eyes open, but he gasped for air, his lungs feeling like shredded bellows that could not stoke the fire in a blacksmith’s forge. Jacob choked as if he were drowning in boiling water. “I...can’t,” he huffed through clenched teeth, “...catch...my breath!”

“Find your center!” Demeter commanded. “Take a deep breath and hold it! Someone is breaking the rules! Fight them! I’ll make them pay for their insolence!”

Jacob drew what seemed like sweet perfume into his lungs and held it for as long as he could. The pain subsided.

“Look into my eyes.”

He did so without hesitation, knowing what was good for the goose was also good for the gander. He had often witnessed Demeter entrancing Hope to restore her poise. Lady Ianthe had also employed hypnotic suggestion to help Jacob recall certain details of his missions. He had to trust somebody. The awful choking faded, and he found that he could breathe again.

“Listen to me: The pain is not real.”

“The pain is not real,” repeated Jacob weakly.

“The pain is a lie. It has neither substance nor quantity. It is but a specter...from the...past.”

“It is a lie...a...specter...from the past.”

CHAPTER 3: HONOR BEFORE REASON

Phoebe recognized the three young and pretty fillies: Clio, Erato, and Thalia were all members of her herd. They pranced in the courtyard, blushing and bosoms exposed, pouring out all their charms for Carystus. She caught a side glance of his face; the stallion rolled his eyes in annoyance, and she instantly perceived the irritated clue. *By the gods! This must happen to Carystus all the time!*

“Sorry, ladies,” said Phoebe tersely, “but Master Carystus is mine tonight.” Her declaration made all of them exhaust a disappointed sigh.

“Enough, you silly fillies!” She added an icy stare as she pointed to the bathroom. “Now, he needs a bath. Go and draw hot water. You may help him bathe, but that’s all, understand? Phoebe turned to Carystus and gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s okay. Give me your pack and pandura. Go and refresh yourself.”

Carystus resisted the urge to snap to attention, but the mare had made it clear that she was in charge. “Yes, ma’am,” he whispered. He delicately slipped off his pack and guitar and handed them to Phoebe. Clio, Erato, and Thalia quickly surrounded him and escorted him into the bath.

Phoebe smiled and shook her head in mild delight as she turned and trotted into her quarters. She carefully steadied the pandura in a corner next to the fireplace and then opened the pack. Her nose wrinkled in protest at the stale odor of sweat stained fabric. The stallion travelled light. *Has he spent his entire life wandering from place to place? Has he ever thought about settling down? Why this constant restlessness? Doesn’t he ever get lonely? Well...he won’t be lonely tonight!* The thought brought a lustful smile to her face.

He only had three shirts made of green tow cloth, two brown woolen tunics and a linen cloak with a hood and mantle. There was also a shaving kit wrapped in a soft leather folding case, a survival knife, spare blanket, compass and a standard first aid kit. Five bronze drachmas, ten copper obols and a handcrafted guitar slide fashioned from a spare bit of copper tubing littered the bottom of the pack. Phoebe pulled a linen handkerchief from a dresser and wrapped the spare change within before tossing it back into the pack.

There was a distinctive clink, and curious, she peered into the pack once more. A metallic glint from a dark corner caught her eye. What is that? Phoebe probed the dim niche and her thumb and forefinger soon pinched cold metal. She beheld a warped ball bearing fashioned from iron. She frowned and her brow knitted in puzzlement. *What is this? Is this a—bullet?* She gasped in shock when she realized that it was indeed—a *bullet!* She gulped hard as she dropped the nasty hydra’s tooth into the gloomy sack.

I don’t think I’ll mention my finding that in his pack!

She stuffed his dirty garments into a burlap laundry sack, and then unbuttoned and slipped off her blouse. She would keep those impudent fillies busy indeed, but not with Carystus! She arranged her mane to fall casually over her bosom. She would give those fillies a lesson in modesty and decorum!

She smiled as a pleasant memory caressed her breasts anew. Carystus had been so gentle. His hands had been so firm. How she wanted to feel that touch again. His embrace had been so fierce yet so loving. His kisses had been sweet as honey upon her lips. How they had relished their time as they ran together.

Phoebe blushed at the spreading warmth she felt beneath her tail. *Stop acting like a silly filly! You know what Carystus likes.* The mare picked up his shaving kit and dropped the laundry outside the entrance before cantering lightly across the courtyard and into the bath.

“Hey!” gasped Carystus. “Watch the hands!”

Clio’s jaw dropped into an amazed gape. “By the gods! Look how big he is!”

“Come now,” said Erato. “You’re such a handsome stud. Don’t be shy!”

“I want to be first,” Thalia said.

Erato pouted: “No, I want to be first!”

Phoebe could only roll her eyes. She felt conflicted, part of her understood why the fillies wanted him, but a bolt of selfishness wanted him for her exclusive pleasure. The fillies had managed to outmaneuver the stallion. Carystus stood in the middle of the bath, his head and face nearly obscured by a huge froth of soap, effectively blinding him. He did not dare move, lest he inadvertently bump into one or all the fillies. They kept teasing him, stroking the insides of his thighs, and playfully running their fingers along the length of his throbbing shaft.

He felt delicate fingers alight on his precious stones, followed by a deep caress. Carystus bellowed in pain as the entirety of his hindquarters shuddered. His tail flagged as his blood pumped hard and hot. A massive spasm deep in his loins made his seed cascade from the tip of his member and into the steaming water beneath him; the fillies shrank away, horrified by the agony they had inflicted upon him.

Phoebe angrily growled, and the fillies snapped to attention. “I told you to bathe him, not torture him!” She began to bear down on them with heavy, deliberate steps. “If you want something to wash, his laundry is outside the door. *Now get out!*”

Clio, Erato, and Thalia beat a hasty retreat, their tails between their hind legs, knowing that their chief would punish them severely for violating the stallion’s pride and joy. She grabbed a bucket and scooped water as she ran down the ramp into the bathing pool. She dumped it over his head, and Carystus emerged from the shower as if he were drowning. He gasped for air a few times, but soon regained his dignity and senses.

“Sorry,” he said with an apologetic nod, “I didn’t mean to...”

Phoebe grabbed him by his biceps and pulled herself close until they were nose to nose. She closed her eyes and kissed him long and softly. Carystus found her kiss to be just as invigorating and soothing as it had been the last time.

She smiled, retreated a step, and stroked his chest. “Feel better?”

He smiled as he opened his eyes. How could he have forgotten those loving caresses of her lips? “Yes. Thanks. I needed that.”

“When was the last time you enjoyed release?”

“The last time that we were together.”

Phoebe blinked in disbelief. “Are you telling me that you haven’t been with another mare in the past fifteen, nearly sixteen, years?”

“There was another,” whispered Carystus pensively. “Her name was...*Chariclo*. I ran happily with her. The gods had blessed our pairing. She was as kind as she was beautiful. She bore me three lovely daughters and a brave son. She was more than a mare to me. I felt rather guilty after our encounter, as if I were being unfaithful to her. She was my...*soulmate*.”

“She sounds extraordinary,” Phoebe said. She suppressed the sympathetic choke arising in her throat. *So, he has been alone all this time!* “I believe myself a poor surrogate for your beloved Chariclo, but if she were here now, I don’t think she would deny your seeking a little company.” She held out the shaving kit. “Come, let’s finish bathing. You can shave and look your best for supper.”

They spent the better part of an hour enjoying the lather of olive oil soap and rinsing and grooming the remote yet delicate extents of their bodies. Carystus finally opened his shaving kit and flipped open the straight razor. He conquered the invading stubble while Phoebe combed the tangles out of her mane.

“Well?” asked Carystus, turning to Phoebe and showing his freshly shaven chin and cheeks to her, “do I look civilized?”

Phoebe smiled as she picked up a washcloth and gently dabbed away an errant spot of shaving cream. “You’re as handsome as ever.”

“Thanks.” He offered her his arm. “Shall we go to supper, my lady?”

She gladly slipped her arm into his. “Yes. If you don’t mind, I’ve arranged for us to dine in my quarters.”

Carystus parted the privacy curtain for Phoebe. He raised a curious eyebrow when he saw a young maiden, rather comely for a human female, with hair the color of wheat and large blue eyes set within a soft, oval face. A tailored pink chef’s uniform outlined her figure as the girl efficiently arranged silverware, plates, and bowls onto the circular knee table. She looked at Carystus and smiled when Phoebe joined him by his side.

“Hello,” said Carystus with a bemused smile. “Who are you?”

“Marie Ritter,” said the girl with a slight bow. “Master Carystus, I presume? My greetings and respects to you, sir.”

Phoebe smiled. “Hello Marie.” She embraced the girl and kissed her on the cheek. “My compliments to the chef.”

“Thank you,” said Marie, “but you should really thank Lady Ianthe.”

Phoebe glanced over her shoulder at Carystus and nearly laughed when she saw his bewildered face. “Miss Marie usually cooks for Lady Ianthe and her staff, but tonight she’s on special assignment.”

Carystus flared his nostrils and his face brightened with elation when the wonderful aroma reached his nose. *Finally! A real home cooked meal!* “It certainly smells delicious. I’ll have to thank Lady Ianthe in person. What’s for dinner?”

Marie smiled. “Fried chicken, bread straight from the oven and butter fresh from the churn. There’s also a medley of pearl onions, carrots, and peas. For dessert, honey cakes. The wine is on the sideboard, but I haven’t had a chance to open it yet.”

“I’ll take care of the wine,” Phoebe said.

“Peas?” Carystus said. “There’s something about peas...”

“What?” Phoebe asked.

“Oh...it’s nothing.”

“I must be going,” Marie said. “Don’t worry about the mess. I’ll return in the morning to clean up.” She timidly straightened the jacket of her uniform. “I’ll just leave you to get acquainted.” *Or perhaps, re-acquainted, as the case may be?*

Carystus nodded in appreciation. “You’re a remarkable young lady. May all that is holy keep and protect you.”

Marie blushed as she curtsied. “Thank you, sir.” She half covered her face with a hand to hide the blush as she departed.

Phoebe smiled but waited until the maiden was out of earshot. “Marie is remarkable, isn’t she? She’s one of Lady Ianthe’s brightest students.” She made her way over to the sideboard, opened a bottle of white wine, and poured generous servings into silver goblets. She pressed a drink into the waiting hand of Carystus.

The stallion cocked his head bashfully. “It’s I who should be serving you, gentle lady.”

Her face lit up with lusty anticipation. “Oh, believe me, you’ll be servicing...I mean...serving me tonight.”

Carystus failed to suppress a nervous chuckle, but suddenly became quiet and pensive. *She needs to know. She has the right to know.* “There’s something I must tell you before you consent.”

“Yes?”

“It has to do with my bloodline...I do, on occasion, sire...a *First Born*.”

“I know,” said Phoebe with a calm nod. “I have born you a son.”

His jaw dropped. “A son? Well, where is he? I should claim him! What’s his name?”

She drew a light sigh and fought the urge to roll her eyes. *Patience, Phoebe, patience. Carystus may be a talented musician, but he couldn’t calculate a quotient to save his life.* “Nickolas Demetrious, but everyone calls him Nicky.”

Bemusement spread on the stallion’s face. “That’s an odd name for a colt. Two names, both prime and surname? Why didn’t you try to find and tell me?”

“It...it would’ve...endangered...the...boy.”

Carystus became a cavalcade of bewilderment. “Wait! What? *A boy*? Do mean ‘boy’ as in a *human youth*?”

“Yes,” Phoebe whispered.

Carystus retained the smile upon his face and kept a steady but sympathetic gaze upon Phoebe. “Does he know about me? Does he know about—*us*?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Carystus. “I should’ve told you...before we...Nicky isn’t the only *First Born* I’ve sired. My other son...the one I told you about...he too was a *First Born*.” He choked: “It must’ve broken your heart, having to give him away like that. What about his foster parents?”

Phoebe gasped upon recollection of their miserable fate. She blinked and tears splashed onto her cheeks. “They were murdered by a man by the name of Tyrone Koprillia. Jacob exposed him as a monster.”

“Jacob? You mean Jacob Walden, the teacher?”

“Yes.” The mare sniffed and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Yes, Teacher Jacob. He faithfully serves Lady Ianthe. He saved Nicky’s life. He trying to stop yet another war. He’s trying to find Koprillia and bring him to justice but has been foiled at every turn by some malevolent force.”

“Then perhaps,” said Carystus with a solemn nod, “I can help him. By trying to harm my son, Koprillia has made me his enemy.”

* * *

“Hey, Marie!” Nicky said. “Wait up!” He quickened his pace to a jog until he caught and joined her at her side.

“You’re out rather late,” said Marie blandly. She noted the wrinkles in his otherwise immaculate messenger’s uniform. “Busy with lots of letters?”

“Yes, lots of deliveries today.” Nicky stopped huffing, caught his breath, and smiled broadly. “It’s always nice to see you, Marie.”

“And it’s always nice to be with you.”

Nicky nervously cleared his throat. “So...speaking of deliveries...it looks like you just delivered a delicious supper.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And...what’s he like?”

A mischievous glint played in her eyes. “Who are you talking about?”

“Come on, Marie,” whined Nicky. “Don’t tease.”

Marie smiled. “Oh, you mean Carystus? He’s nice.”

* * *

Jacob knocked hard on the gate to be heard over the constant beating of a singular hammer against nails and wood. He thought it odd that Tereus and Semele would keep the entrance closed. Usually, centaurs kept the gate to the foyer open as a courtesy to any possible visitors. *Xenia*, sacred hospitality, was indeed sacred! Closing a door to any potential visitor seeking shelter was considered a grave sin. But then again, the security governor was not known for his

hospitality, but rather his hostility, towards humans. Tereus and Semele knew that he was coming to question them about Deucalion, so perhaps a shuttered door was a snub directed at him and him alone.

Semele opened the gate, somber and cheerless. She managed a weak smile. “Come in, Jacob.”

“Thank you, Lady Semele.”

He followed the mare into the stable. Wooden planks, framing, and half-finished crates were strewn about the courtyard. Tereus stopped hammering when he spotted Jacob and lowered the hammer gingerly on the top of a crate. Inwardly, Jacob sighed in relief at the realization that the stallion was not about to throw what could be an otherwise deadly missile at him. Semele returned to her careful packing of their belongings.

Jacob threw furtive glances at a few of the half-filled crates. There was no evidence that either Tereus or Semele had packed anything belonging to Deucalion. “This entire situation is most unfortunate, isn’t it?”

Tereus snorted. “I see you haven’t lost your keen powers of observation.”

Semele shivered as if caught in a cold draft. “We’ve been declared hostile to the regime. We’ve been ordered to leave.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jacob said. “I believe that I should give you fair warning. I know that I’m being followed, but by whom I don’t know. In accordance with *The Law*, I must caution you. Be careful what you say, for everything I hear or see I must report to Lord Samael. I know, Lady Semele, that Lady Ianthe is a friend of yours, but I don’t believe that she can protect you.”

“Understood,” said Tereus with a smirk. “It must make you happy, seeing—.”

“No! It does not make me happy!” Jacob felt an angry rush of hot blood through his veins. *Can you please stop hating me for just one second?* “Goddamn it, Tereus, do you honestly believe that I wanted this? I’m not a troublemaker, but a *troubleshooter*!”

“I’m here to solve—not create—problems. I just can’t shake the feeling that I could solve everything and make things right if—.” He caught himself: *Stop it, Jacob! You’re ranting will only make things worse.* He exhausted a calming breath. *What’s wrong with me? Tereus and Semele are allies, not enemies.*

“If what?” Semele asked.

“My apologies,” said Jacob. “I don’t handle frustration well, but as usual, family is involved, and Arcas, Orithyia and possibly Deucalion, are engaging in subterfuge and misdirection. I don’t need to be told everything, nor do I want to know everything. As far as I’m concerned, you centaurs can keep your secrets, but I would appreciate, on occasion, your help and cooperation.”

Tereus snorted again. “So, what do you want?”

“I need access to the restricted archives.”

“Impossible! I can’t give a human access to—.”

“I’m running blind here! I can’t ask Lady Ianthe for permission.”

“Why not?” Semele said.

“She needs...*plausible deniability*. She’s in a difficult position and really can’t sanction my investigation. She must be able to deny any knowledge of my actions. It would sully her reputation, but you’re leaving and can’t be touched. You can deny any involvement. You can even claim that yes, you gave me permission, but had no idea that I would abuse the privilege.”

Semele nodded. “So, you’re willing to risk your reputation...your life...”

“Yes,” Jacob said. “Deucalion is my Telemachus and I, his Mentor. Some of the responsibility for his current predicament falls upon my shoulders. It’s my belief that there are important clues that could help me solve this puzzle. I believe my parents placed clues, or clues were placed, in their respective files.”

Tereus scowled anew. “I can’t allow you to read the personnel records of centaurs, especially those of Amycus and—.”

“Do. Not. Speak. Her. Name.” said Jacob frostily. “She doesn’t deserve my loving remembrance. I’m talking about my foster parents. I really don’t know that much about them. All I know is that they loved me like a son and kept me safe.”

Tereus folded his arms over his chest and gave the man a severe glare. “So, you’re going to stand there and lie to me?”

Jacob smiled and a mischievous twinkle flashed in his eyes. “Governor Tereus, hypothetically speaking, isn’t it in your best interest if I neither confirm nor deny your brilliant observation?”

The security governor chuckled. He lowered his head and tapped a forehoof, considering Jacob’s request. “Okay, I know when I’ve been bested. Let me grab a quill and some official letterhead.” Tereus retreated from the courtyard and disappeared into a room along the rear quarter.

Semele went after him. “I’d best sign that too. I’d like to jot a personal message to Hylonome on it.”

They emerged from the back room few minutes later and cantered up to Jacob. Tereus held a neatly folded letter in his hand. Jacob plucked the letter into his hand and smiled. “Thank you, Governor Tereus.” He gave Semele an appreciative nod. “Thank you, Lady Semele.” He briefly turned the letter over to ensure that it was sealed before deftly slipping it within a breast pocket.

“Jacob?” Semele said.

“Yes, my lady?”

“When you arrive at the archives, make sure you show that letter only to Dr. Hylonome, the chief archivist. She’s a friend of mine. Make sure she burns the letter before your eyes prior to giving you access.”

Jacob cocked a puzzled brow. “*Dr. Hylonome*? When did she become an archivist and librarian? I thought she was a physician and healer.” His assertion made Tereus and Semele exchange bemused glances.

“I think you’re confused,” said Tereus with a fresh smirk, “which seems to be your normal state of mind.”

Touché, my dear Tereus, but I could use a break from your outright contempt. Have you forgotten that we're both working for the same side? No matter...no matter...I shall take your weakness and make it my strength. "Perhaps," Jacob said. "I'm probably mistaking her for another mare I met after the war. 'Hylonome' is a common name amongst centaur mares." *By the gods! I remember Hylonome serving as midwife to both Philomela and Hope. She delivered both Notus and Isaac!*

"I don't know what you mean," Semele said. "Hylonome has always been the chief archivist for as long as I can remember."

Jacob smiled in sympathy. *I understand the need to cover not only your tracks, but also your tail.* "Yes, my lady. Thank you both very much." The hard thinking and ambiguous memory gave him a headache. "I would ask one last favor."

"Yes?" Tereus said.

"Upon your return, do you think you can persuade the Thessalioi herds not to go to war while I conduct my investigation? I know that I'm asking too much, but I don't need any serious complications that will hinder me. It could place Deucalion in great jeopardy. It would make it harder for me to prove his innocence."

"I don't know," said Tereus, scratching his chin. "The entire honor of the Thessalioi nation is at stake."

* * *

Tereus galloped from the square. His tail flagged and anus puckered. The stallion dropped a trail of road apples onto the cobblestones. The gross insult was not lost on Jacob: Gather this mess, two-legs!

"So—," began Charon with a chuckle, "a good stallion makes an excellent gelding, eh?"

"A thousand pardons, my lord," Jacob said. "Present company excluded."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Charon said. "Tereus may be bullheaded, but there's no questioning his loyalty. I've known him since we were colts. He's only trying to protect me. It's his duty."

* * *

Jacob recovered from his reverie. How glad he felt to remember that little conversation and chastisement. *Let me try a different tact.* "Tereus, I know that Lord Charon thought highly of you. When I questioned your loyalty, Charon was quick to correct me and rightfully so. He told me that you were only trying to protect him and that you knew your duty. Search your feelings. Verily, I say unto you that this is not what he would've wanted."

"I see," said Tereus. "Now you're going to abandon your logic and reason to make an emotional appeal to my feelings of loyalty to Charon?"

"Hardly," drawled Jacob. "Humans choose reason over honor because it's the only way to keep the peace, but in this instance, I must choose honor over reason because it's the right thing to do."

* * *

Hylonome smiled as she read the permission slip. “It seems that Lady Semele thinks you can help me.”

Jacob watched pensively as Hylonome crumple the note. She then threw it into the firebox of the potbellied stove, and the burning coals devoured the slip in a flash before the mare had the chance to close the iron gate. *She’s the same mare Hope told me about! She’s the same mare I met after the war! Damn it, I know I did! By the gods, why do I remember things differently?*

The comely face with fine pointed features was the same, as was the dorsal stripe that was a striking contrast to her otherwise reddish-brown pelt, mane, and tail. *Have I gone insane? Hylonome acts as if we’ve never met. There’s no sparkle of surprised recognition in those big soulful brown eyes of hers.*

He forced a smile and prayed that it would hide his confusion. “I’m sure you’re aware of my reputation and I’ll try to help you if I can. My heart has always held a sympathetic beat for the centaur ladies.” Jacob nearly heaved a relieved sigh when Hylonome plucked her utility pouch off a peg and slung it over her shoulder.

She returned a reassuring smile. “Please follow me.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hylonome.”

“Oh, you can just call me Hylonome,” she said. “I’ve never been a pedant for titles.” She cocked an inquisitive brow. “You do realize that I would’ve let you access the archives without that stupid permission slip, right?”

“Only a barbarian would question the altruism shown by a centaur to a human. Whether you’re practicing virtue or perhaps have an ulterior goal I cannot say, but it would be dishonorable of me to question your motives. However, it would be best if you made no further disclosures, lest you be held liable before a court martial.”

“Understood,” said Hylonome with a somber nod. “It does seem that justice nowadays is as scarce as feathers on a fish.”

Jacob followed her out of the office and down a dimly lit, carpeted corridor that muffled both her hoof beats and his footsteps. They were in a restricted adjunct of the Royal Archive, so noise abatement—or outright silence—was the order of the day and would prevent the intrusion of prying ears. If one said nothing, then no one could eavesdrop on cloistered discourse.

They finally reached a heavy oak door, framed with iron strapping, secured with three heavy duty ward locks. Hylonome flipped open her utility pouch and pulled three keys from it. She slid the keys into the locks, and gripped the top and middle keys, but did not turn them.

Their eyes met, and Jacob could see the sympathy painted on Hylonome’s face. “As a security measure, it takes at least three hands to open one interlock.”

He prayed that the gaze he returned was just as respectful. “I understand, ma’am.” Jacob grasped the bottom key with his left hand and grabbed the wrought iron handle with his right.

“On the count of three,” Hylonome said. “One...two...three!”

They threw the keys to the right. There was a loud, singular grinding of tumblers and a metallic clack! It took all their might to pull the door open. The man almost started through the jamb, but the mare placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. Jacob froze as Hylonome went

through the doorway first and made a sharp pivot to the right. She threw three knife switches mounted on a wooden panel: A triangular flood of light filled a far-right corner of the immense chamber.

Hylonome stared at Jacob, doe-eyed, as if she had just spotted a large pack of wolves. She radiated tension as if she had come to a dark realization. “Three hands,” she whispered. “Three locks...three switches...three lights—how strange!”

* * *

“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.”

* * *

“A repeating ratio of 3:1,” said Jacob, stroking his chin. “I’ve had to speak to three centaurs to get to this one point and that it took three hands to open one door...”

“There’s something else,” Hylonome said.

“Yes, dear lady?”

“I can go no further...I can’t show you anymore.” She shook her head as if trying to ward off a buzzing gnat, and for a moment Jacob thought she might swoon before his very eyes. Fortunately, the mare regained her composure. “It’s like I’m not supposed to be here...doing this...I’m sorry...I should be a...healer? Delivering...babies?”

“You’re not insane,” said Jacob calmly, “and neither am I. I too have been beset by strange memories...false memories. I’m still Jacob Walden. I’m still a teacher and tetrarch, charged with an important mission, but it’s as if events changed while I was away on a twisted holiday. If it’s of any comfort to you, I too have felt as if I were in the wrong place, and if I may dare add, the wrong time.”

Hylonome abruptly pointed to the pyramid of light. “I must go before I am missed. There’s a one-way door, far back in the opposite corner, which leads to the outside.” She swallowed hard. “My superior officer will arrive in three hours to relieve me. She’s Lamioi and I’ll have to report that you’re here. Sorry, but I’m Thessalioi and have sworn to obey.”

“I understand,” said Jacob with a conciliatory nod. *How I wish my most gracious Dr. Hylonome that I could thank you for the warning, but then I would realize that you’ve led me into a trap.* “Thank you for your help. I won’t make any promises, but perhaps I can reverse your situation.”

About the Author

James Charles Rau was born in Long Beach, California, and was captivated by science fiction and fantasy at an early age. He is currently a technical writer for a computer systems development company. He currently lives in Costa Mesa, California.

Author's Notes

First, dear reader, my apologies. By the gods! It's been nearly five years since I published the second story in the Archon Series, *Cheiron's Promise*. As everyone's favorite djinn would say, "It's about frakkin' time!" What I thought would only take me at most two years to write became a daunting task indeed. *Real Life* is like that, you know. Just when you've figured it out—well, stark reality can be a bitch.

You don't necessarily have to buy the second story to enjoy the third (although I would appreciate it if you did), I had to refine the world building while at the same time trying to maintain consistency between all three stories.

I, Cheiron, however, is not an independent, self-contained story, and relies heavily on the events that unfolded in *The Children of Cheiron* and *Cheiron's Promise* to continue this odd little narrative of the centaurs *and the humans that dwell in their world*. What's a proud warrior race to do when confronted by a bunch of pacifists that nevertheless refuse to surrender and use subtle forms of civil disobedience to undermine their centaur masters?

It was never my intention to write a "war story" (I hate "war novels"), but I came to realize that tensions between the centaurs and humans would soon reach the breaking point.

Contact

E-Mail: Please drop me a line at jrau@cc.rr.com. I would appreciate any feedback. What did you like? Didn't like? You need not write a book report, but I would like to know your overall impression. I'm more than happy to try to answer any questions that you might have.

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Thanks,



James Charles Rau

THE ARCHON TRILOGY

I did not originally plan to create a trilogy. I originally imagined *The Children of Cheiron* as a stand-alone story, but then realized that I had created a world requiring greater exposition and exploration. There were so many questions that went unanswered in the first story, so along came *Cheiron's Promise*, and finally, *I, Cheiron*.

It struck me that the overall story arc would be seriously lacking if there were a glaring absence of that most superlative of centaurs, Cheiron (a.k.a. "Chiron" or "Kheiron"), so I became obsessed with rectifying that oversight.

What If?

"What if?" is the ultimate question and there is joy to be found in the search for an answer. What if, for example, centaurs were real? Not aliens, but real Earth people? Perhaps even an evolved race?

I leave you with one last question: What if humans were descended from centaurs?

The Children of Cheiron

The Centaurs: Generous benefactors or ruthless tyrants? They have ruled humanity for thousands of years. The centaurs brought peace and prosperity, but also death and destruction. Jacob Walden, a teacher, learns a dark secret that could plunge humans and centaurs into war. Can Jacob protect humanity from the wrath of the centaurs? Can he teach peace to a race of warriors, or is humanity doomed to extinction?

Cheiron's Promise

The centaurs are at war, the sword of tragedy hangs over the heads of humanity, and only Jacob Walden can serve as a shield. Jacob's worst nightmare has come true. The war he tried to stop now rages and threatens centaurs and humans alike. He's been forced to choose sides and for all he knows his choice could curse his people with never-ending blame! He must do the unthinkable and deliver his people into the hands of his worst enemy to restore *the balance*. Can he convince the centaurs to keep *Cheiron's Promise*?

I, Cheiron

War is too easy to make and trying to keep the peace is hard. Teacher Jacob, the scion of the centaurs, believed that the war was finally over, and that humans and centaurs could once again know peace and harmony. Crimes and horrors that he cannot recall torment him and he knows that a malevolent force threatens to end civilization. He now faces the impossible task of preventing a murder that occurred three thousand years ago. Must Jacob sacrifice humanity to save the centaurs from themselves?

SHOW, DON'T TELL

By James Charles Rau

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Beginning writers are often taught to “show, don’t tell” in their stories. Showing, rather than telling, is the foundation of engaging literature. But—what does “show, don’t tell” really mean? Unlike other forms of storytelling, such as art (comics, graphic novels, painting, etc.) film (live-action movies, animation, etc.) and theater (stage plays, opera, musicals, et al), creative writing requires the use of exact and metaphorical language, character development, prose, and narrative technique to engage the reader.

Humans are visual creatures and rely on eyesight to experience either the real world or fantasy worlds. Therefore, creative writing requires the use of exact and metaphorical language, character development, prose and most importantly, narrative technique.

Showing a Character’s Emotional State

For example, if I write:

Jacob was angry. “That’s not fair!”

Then, I’m *telling* you, (the reader) the character’s emotional state, *rather than showing it*. Notice that that verb *was* (the past first and third singular of the indicative *be*) appears in the sentence, serving as an important clue that I’m telling, rather than showing.

Okay, so how to show, rather than tell? In the example, the character is angry. Such a strong emotion *will manifest a physical reaction*. There will be a change in both the facial expression and body language. You do remember the last time you felt anger, right?

Let’s start with a facial expression first and move downward to body language. I recommend starting with the *face*, because the other characters (and the reader) will be judging the angry character’s response by the facial expression alone:

Jacob’s eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a tight frown. His nostrils flared with a disgusted sniff.

The *body language* can also convey the emotional state of the character:

Jacob’s eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a tight frown. His nostrils flared with a disgusted sniff. **His hands balled into tight fists as he took a single, tense step forward.**

Finally, I will add the *dialog* that drives the narrative forward:

Jacob’s eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a tight frown. His nostrils flared with a disgusted sniff. His hands balled into tight fists as he took a single, tense step forward. **“That’s not fair!”**

Since this is the first draft, I’ll want to rewrite and try to tighten the prose to heighten the sense of anger the character is feeling and the overall tension of the scene:

Jacob’s eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a tight frown. His nostrils flared with a disgusted sniff. His hands balled into tight fists as he took an anxious step forward. “Hey, that’s not fair!”

See how easy that is?

Showing Time and Place using the Senses

Okay! Okay! I know it's not easy. I know that I'm oversimplifying the technique. It does take some practice. For instance, using the senses of touch, smell, sight, and sound adds an important dimension to the narrative.

For example, when Jacob finally tours Pelion with Arcas, Orithyia and Deucalion (*The Children of Cheiron, Chapter 13: Beware the Peacock*), the readers experience Jacob's impression of the city:

His students proved worthy guides. They enjoyed their walk through the wide streets paved with octagonal slabs of lava. Merchants, with their shops and stands nestled along the marble colonnades, eagerly bought, sold, and traded with centaurs and humans alike. Teams of centaurs drew wagons heavily loaded with grain and beer. There were public baths and monumental temples. He lost count of the number of wells and fountains. Strange smells, both sweet and sour, filled his nostrils. But there was also much noise, and Jacob could not understand how people could talk so much and say so little. There were arguments petty and profound.

Also, the reader instinctively knows, just as Jacob instinctively knows, that trouble is brewing around the corner (*I, Cheiron, Chapter 5: The Fool Rushes In*):

It was neither his eyes nor ears that alerted him, but his nose. *By the gods! What's that smell?* His face wrinkled in disgust. He realized that by shifting direction that his pursuers were no longer downwind, but upwind of his position. The rank odor was a miasma of dung and rotten eggs. It kept getting stronger with each step he took, but he could not alter his path without alerting his trackers.

However, Lord Adramelech has a much darker opinion of the humans living in Pelion (*The Children of Cheiron, Chapter 6: The Lord of Fire*):

Adramelech, Lord of the Lamioi, stood upon the balcony of his fortress. He surveyed his domain. A chilly wind blew through his black mane and over his pelt of iron gray, but he barely felt its icy caress. He folded his arms over his lanky chest and frowned as he stared at the city in the distance. It appeared peaceful, nestled at the foot of the mountain, a baby enfolded against its mother's breast. Yet there were humans, scurrying like rats through a maze, which dared to live amongst the centaurs. How could his noble race have fallen from such a splendid height? Had they no pride? No shame?

Showing using Internal Monologue

You may have noticed, dear reader, that I often use *internal monologue* (as denoted using *italic text*) to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of my characters. An *internal monologue*, also known as *self-talk*, *inner speech*, *inner discourse*, or *internal discourse*, is the *inner voice* that provides a running verbal monologue; the character is in a conscious or awakened state, and in a sense, is talking to himself, trying to resolve a serious conflict. A writer uses *internal monologue* when the character viewpoint must change to move the narrative forward.

In the following example, Jacob's *internal monologue* is used to express his self-doubt and the fear he is being once again tested by the centaurs:

“Oh, how charming!” Jacob drawled. He hissed a long and disappointed sigh before refolding the parchment and returning it to Niobe. He gulped the remaining portion of his wine, longing for a much stronger brew in the vain yearning that it would wash the sorrow from his heart. *Now I know the real reason why my brother and sister want me out of the way. I must be careful, for I'm positive my loyalty is being tested.*

ISSAC AND NOTUS

By James Charles Rau

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I thought about adding this pretty scene between Jacob, Isaac and Notus at the end of *I, Cheiron*, but struck it from the final story, so you can think of this as a deleted scene. It has already been well established in the Archon Universe that *centaurs consider themselves the natural leaders and the natural order of things demands that humans must follow without question*, so this would have been redundant. Still, I like the way I constructed this scene and wanted to outline it here for your amusement.

“Isaac, I know that you and Notus are good friends, and that he considers you to be his equal, but remember, Notus is a centaur. He is in command. You are to obey his orders without question or hesitation. If he tells you to run, you run. If he tells you to hide, you hide. If he must sacrifice his life to save yours, then he dies. Is that clear?”

“Clear as crystal, my father.”

“Swear it,” Jacob said.

“I swear,” said Isaac with a solemn nod, “by all that is divine and righteous, that I will obey.”

“Good.” Jacob fixed a gentle gaze on the young stallion. “Notus, I know that I can trust you not to lead Isaac into danger. I know you to be a true warrior and guardian. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

“I wouldn’t insult you by reminding you of your duty, but I do know that there are times that humans can prove a frustrating enigma that tries your patience. Still, there will be times when you will require guidance.

“Seek out Isaac, for I have taught him well. If you find his advice reasonable, logical, and sound, then do take it. And remember, above all else, Isaac can go places that you cannot.”

Thank you, dear reader, for your patience.

