

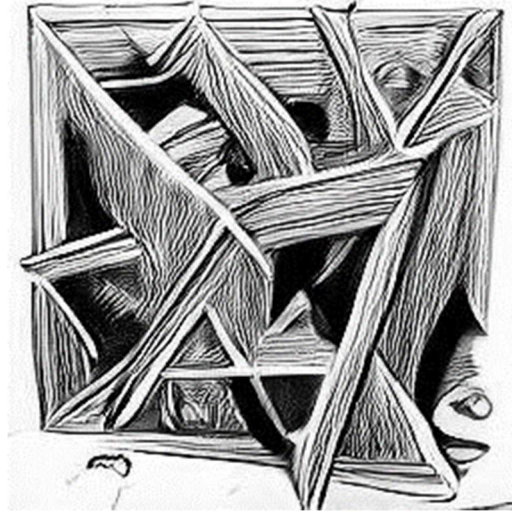
Requiem for a Prodigal

by Tim Novar

Prologue

*“Sing to me, O Muse, and through me tell my story,
and of the one gifted in all ways of conceiving;
the prodigal and the protector,
and our battle with our darker natures.”*

#

I

“Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you” has always been my favorite motto. So why did I leave the cushy paradise known as Mikonos with its libertine attitudes and where I passed virtually unnoticed by the seasonal partygoers, except for the occasional flirtatious glance? And more importantly, why am I now on a ferry headed back to my hometown of Iraklion, a place I had once sworn I would never return to? Would you believe me if I said it was because of a dream or, more appropriately, a series of nightmares?

After a long night working security at the *pandokeion*¹, I would crawl into bed, reeking of pipe smoke and stale wine, so tired that I didn’t even bother to rinse the stench off in my woefully undersized shower first. Within minutes I was probably snoring as the welcome respite of darkness engulfed my consciousness. Snippets of chaotic images passed through my mind, often relating to the routine events that had transpired the hours previous. Typically, when I

¹ A private inn for travelers to get drinks, food, and even a place to stay for the night.

awoke, I would barely remember my dreams, and by the time I was fully awake, crouched beneath the hot shower that began my day, most of the details were forever lost as the nonsensical subconscious ramblings that they were.

But for the past three nights, I was experiencing something far more intense and disturbing. It began with finding myself paralyzed, lying in bed, and struggling to breathe. I became acutely aware of each air exchange to my lungs, convinced that I would suffocate if I stopped concentrating. The only movement I could make was my eyes; thankfully, I was blessed with a broader range of peripheral vision than most. I glanced about my room as much as I was able. I wondered if I was drugged and an intruder was now lurking in the shadows for some nefarious purpose. My hearing was also enhanced, and while my labored breathing was the loudest sound, I could also make out the rhythmic dripping of the antique clepsydra keeping time on my nightstand. Then underneath this came the unmistakable sound of scratching from the south wall.

At first, I thought it might have been a rodent scurrying behind the walls or a colossal cockroach crawling along the surface. Continuing to listen intently, I soon concluded that it was neither of these things. Creating an intentional scraping designed to get my attention; the thing wanted me to know it was there, and I was at its mercy. I honed in on its origin from my left eye and observed a patch of darkness that seemed more hole than a shadow.

It was from the depths of this impossible abyss from which the thing emerged. It was as dark as the gap, and initially, I could not make out its outline, but once it detached itself from its entry point to fall at the foot of my bed, I had a better idea of its semblance. It was scrawny to the state of being skeletal, and if I had met it in normal circumstances, I could have quickly snapped

it in half, but since I could not convince my muscles to respond to my commands, I was exposed and impotent. Painstakingly slow, it began to claw its way along the covers toward me. I became convinced that its measured pace was meant to elicit maximal fear from me, and I'm somewhat ashamed to admit that it had the desired effect. All the while, I was trying to scream in vain, managing only the weakest of bellows.

Whatever it was or whatever its intentions, I had to break its hold on me. Once again, I strained against my immobility, convinced I could muster just enough movement to rouse the rest of my body in a cascade of neural rekindling. Since my bed was barely large enough to accommodate my broad frame, I knew that my right side was a mere fraction from the edge. If I could shift my weight in that direction, I might fall to the floor, hoping the abrupt impact would weaken my torpor. I looked away from the intruder, which had reached my thighs, focusing on willing my body to roll over the side. I could feel my center of gravity shift, and with herculean effort, I finally felt myself falling toward the floor.

I never hit the ground. Instead, I found that I had returned to my original place on the bed. I sighed, convinced that I was now awake. I started to get up, so I could shake loose the leftover strands of this nightmare from my mind, only to discover in horror that I was still paralyzed. The scurrying noise had returned to where it began, and the horrifying process restarted.

I cannot tell you exactly how many times I tried to fight off my nocturnal attacker. I know I must have escaped the confines of my bed at least seven times, alas, to no avail. Worn down and exhausted, at some point, I simply surrendered and accepted what was probably my demise and allowed the shadow fiend to reach my head. I could now hear its ragged panting and

smell its putrid breath that reeked of a meat locker in which the power had been turned off for too long. I did not see but sensed its sharp fangs about to plunge into my throat.

It was then I would genuinely wake, my heart pounding wildly in my chest to the point where I thought it would burst from my panicked state. Glancing at the clepsydra, I would see that I had only gone to bed a mere half-hour prior, but I knew I would not be getting any more rest for the remainder of the night.

I was used to having nightmares of the usual variety, episodes of frustration or entrapment, such as wandering a labyrinth of endless hallways, marked out by doors labeled with numbers in no particular order. In a way, poetically ironic considering what I chose to become, but obviously, the symptom of the ordinary life of feeling stuck in the usual rut of daily existence. However, I had never before experienced a recurring event of this magnitude, and after three nights of terror-fueled insomnia, I decided to consult a *chirurgon* at the local *asclepieia*².

The *chirurgon* was a young man, probably fresh from his internship, and possessed the stereotypical look one would expect, complete with a white lab coat, mostly decorative stethoscope, and unfashionable eyeglasses. He diagnosed me as probably having just a bout of sleep paralysis, uncommon but not unusual, most likely brought about by stress or sleep apnea. He prescribed me a mild nighttime sedative and suggested that I get fitted for a positive-airflow machine since guys of my size often had trouble breathing while sleeping as they grew older, my snoring being a prominent symptom. He also explained that the sleeping pill was just a short-

² A clinic or hospital.

term measure and that I should consult an oracle to deal with whatever psychological issue I was facing that was causing my anxiety.

Since I could not afford a true professional, I sought out one of the storefront oracles who had set up shop near Platys Gialos Beach, making drachmas off the summer tourists. Sure, they didn't have the fancy office nor the proper certification or credentials, and as they often stressed, they were '*for entertainment purposes only*,' but I have found that many of them actually possess keen therapeutic insight garnered over years of answering questions from a wide variety of people.

Now that it was the quieter winter season and I was obviously not an out-of-towner, I hoped to get honest advice instead of the typically vague and soothing platitudes. I was prepared to clarify my intentions if I felt I was being handed the usual psalm-and-*sirtaki*³. As it happened, I need not have worried.

While I am confident that the practice had evolved since the original Pythian Oracle set up shop at Delphi approximately three-and-a-half millennia ago, specific procedures were simply 'traditional' and expected to be followed. The storefront had been dressed up to echo the décor one might expect to find at one of the larger, more popular oracles but still betrayed its decidedly modern construction in the form of well-hidden light switches and electrical outlets. The light aroma of incense (sandalwood, if I was not mistaken) permeated the space, allegedly meant to promote calm feelings and remind me that all such places tended to smell alike.

³ A type of traditional folk dance characterized by its "dragging" movements.

In the front room, I was welcomed by the receptionist, who was undoubtedly related to the priestess inside. He was not overly handsome, as one might expect if the oracle had had a free choice in candidates, but his physical appearance was not unattractive either. His outfit was meant to imply an air of mystery, but he didn't seem comfortable projecting that demeanor. The room's overall smell nearly masked his personal scent, a not-unpleasing combination of woody spice and light musk. His smile seemed less polite artificiality and more genuine hospitality, and I wondered if we had ever met.

After collecting my payment upfront, he handed me a supplication card to fill in with my personal information and query. I was honest in answering trivial questions such as my name and address, but when describing the reason for my visit, I simply wrote, "skip the nonsense. I'm a local." I folded the card into quarters and handed it back to the receptionist.

He burned it in a small brazier designed for the purpose. The paper was scented to release a sweet-smelling aroma as it was consumed, although there was still a vent conveniently located right above it in the ceiling to whisk away the smoke, so it didn't cloud the room. While I didn't see the exact moment the switch occurred, I was convinced that the paper I had filled out was not the same card that had been ritually burned because it didn't take long before the oracle popped her head out from behind the door to the main chamber to see who had written the irreverent message.

"Asterius of Iraklion," she exclaimed as soon as she recognized me, for let's face it, there aren't many on the island who look anything like me.

"Cassandra of . . . well, wherever you hail from," since even though she was a regular at the *pandokeion* where I worked, I still knew little of her past.

“Get in before anyone else notices us,” she whispered, motioning me to join her inside. “You’re lucky it’s been slow this off-season, and no one else is here.”

She vanished behind the door, and I wasted no time following her. All four walls of her office were painted in a wrap-around mural depicting an underground cavern, which I suppose was the same as the chamber at Delphi. The smell here deviated from what I smelt in the front room; fleeting hints of methane wavered beneath typical conscious awareness. The traditional tripod from which she would utter her pronouncements stood in the middle of the room, but she dragged a chair from the corner and placed it opposite the seat meant for clients.

“To be honest, I despise sitting in that thing,” she grouched, referring to the tripod, “but it’s what the tourists want, and who am I to deny their desires? However, I refuse to pump ethylene into the room. That stuff is hazardous. I don’t care if the Delphi prophets swear by its capabilities.” She sat in the chair she had acquired and indicated that I should also have a seat.

“So, what brings my often-rescuer and protector to my humble workplace?”

I snorted. While I thought Cassandra was laying it on a little thick, I suppose it was also true that I had kept her safe from the predatory elements that would occasionally appear and imbibe more than they should. Like her receptionist, she possessed above-average looks, but an inebriated customer might convince themselves that she rivaled Pygmalion’s statue. She hung out at my particular *pandokeion* simply because it was far from Platys Gialos and away from any potential clients, but as such, it was also the sort of place that needed to hire a creature like me to maintain order and minimize problems. Thus, I felt my duty was to keep those needing it safe.

It was my turn to seek safety in the form of an explanation for the past three nights of hypnogogic torment. I described to Cassandra my plight. She listened carefully with the

occasional nod at crucial points of my recounting. When I had finished, she sat back in her chair, swept one side of her shoulder-length auburn hair behind her left ear, took a deep breath, and then offered me her interpretation.

“If you were a tourist, I would normally tell you not to worry. Everything you describe is unusual but not out of the ordinary.”

I interrupted, “that’s what the surgeon said.”

“And yet, clearly, you do not believe that, or you would not be here. So I’m going to tell you something you both want to hear and don’t want to hear: there is a supernatural explanation for what you’ve witnessed.”

I sighed, “I was hoping you would tell me that that is nonsense.”

“You don’t do what I do for a living by being a total skeptic, but you also shouldn’t be a shut-eye. These woo-woo trappings are here to put on a show, but I’ve been around long enough to know that some things can’t be explained due to faulty brain wiring. I’ve also seen the *empousa*.”

“*Empousa*? What is that?”

“You know how natural philosophers talk about their theories that there are more dimensions than the three or four we see? I believe there are entities in our reality that are projections from a higher dimension. Our forefathers used to refer to them as *daimons*, for example. Most *daimons* are shy and flee as soon as they are noticed, but if one is repeatedly attacking you, you can’t simply ignore it and hope it goes away. Then you’re dealing with an *empousa*, a particularly nasty type of *daimon* that slowly drains your life energy.”

“The physician recommended sleeping pills and a positive-airflow machine.”

“These would only increase your vulnerability. Most of the time, these things leave on their own, looking for new prey when their current victim becomes too weak to provide adequate sustenance. But I recommend you treat it as the omen it is and look for its source.”

“And how do I do that?”

“You said it came from your south wall, correct? So, what’s to the south?”

I visualized a map in my head, “Naxos?”

“True, but do you have any ties to the island of Naxos?”

I shook my head.

“Then think beyond Naxos; what lies further south?”

“Thera?”

“Again, any connection?”

I suppose I had been avoiding the obvious. It took me only a moment, and then everything made sense or seemed to. If I believed there was more to the recent visitations than mere respiratory issues, then I knew what to do.

I bid Cassandra farewell. I gave my notice at my job, and they reluctantly let me go. I sold or gave away most of my meager belongings, packed the essentials in a carry-on bag, and boarded a ferry to my own personal Hades.

II

After a ten-hour ferry ride, I disembarked in a foul and grumpy mood. I would have preferred to have acquired reserved first-class accommodations, but because of my size, I knew I would not fit comfortably in any of the seats, and the cost was twice as much as I was willing to spend. Figuring I needed to stretch my funds as far as possible, I reluctantly bought a ticket for the general seating on the deck space and did my best to find a place for me and my bag. I was lucky enough to obtain a hard bench; I was surrounded by those who had to sit on the floor, their bags piled on any available patch of space. The blend of human sweat and inconsistent hygienic practices was amplified by the mass of hushed despondency. No one paid my appearance much mind since others of my ilk often had to use the same means of travel. I managed to make a deal with the traveler next to me to save each other's seats when either needed to use the facilities. Despite living on an island known for its water activities and having previously served in the

*Nautikon*⁴, it had been a while since I last spent time on the open sea. Before the journey, I wisely popped an anti-nausea pill, so there was no sickness to contend with. By the time I reached my final port, I was sore, tired, and hungry.

Fortunately for me, I hadn't burned all my bridges when I last departed Iraklion, and once I was on solid land, I found a public *caduceus*⁵ to ring up an old friend. I was worried that Nessus may have moved away like I did, so I first checked the general directory for his contact information. To my relief, he was still listed locally, even though his number had changed. I entered the new code and waited in anticipation as the alert melody progressed through its tune.

“*Légete, parakaló*⁶.” Luckily, Nessus was at home, as I immediately recognized his voice.

“Remember me? It's your old *Nautikon* buddy.”

Nessus seemed genuinely pleased to hear my voice once again. “Of course I do! It's been ages. How are you liking the sunny beaches of Mikonos?”

“I'm not on Mikonos anymore. In fact, I'm here where you are, and I'm hoping you can do me a favor.”

There was a pause, and I was afraid that he would hang up, but instead, “. . . yes, of course, yes, yes! What happened to my manners? What do you want?”

“Just a place to stay until I get my footing. I won't inconvenience you for long, I swear.”

⁴ The naval force.

⁵ A device used for person-to-person communication over distance.

⁶ “Speak, please.”

“Um . . . ah . . . okay. I suppose you can surf my *kline*⁷ for a while.”

“Thanks, bud. I owe you. Do you still live . . .?”

He cut me off before I could finish asking the question, “No, since you last saw me, I’ve moved up in the world. I’ll give you the address and how to get there.”

I jotted his instructions down. “Thanks again. I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up and found the nearest omnibus stop, ignoring the suspicious and sometimes hostile stares passersby would give me. While on Mikonos, I was a harmless curiosity, just one more novelty on an island of wonders. On the ferry, I may have been unusual but not uncommon and thus passed unconcerned. But here, in Iraklion, I was a reminder of a horrifying past, an abomination to be ignored or treated with visible contempt. Despite the overt hostility, none dared attack me due to my physical size, so I was mostly left alone on my ride to my friend’s house. The resulting atmosphere on the omnibus was a greatly subdued variation of what I had just contended with on the ferry.

I had last seen Nessus when we had finished spending our years of mandatory military service in the *Nautikon*. Back then, I was still an ordinary twenty-five-year-old with no hint of what I was beneath the skin; I could still pass. Nessus and I had grown up in the same neighborhood, attended the same school, and naturally became best friends. I don’t think he ever knew or even suspected my secret. If he did, he chose to remain oblivious to it out of respect for our friendship. I did not know if he now knew, and he certainly had given me no hint during our

⁷ A rectangular couch or bed supported by four legs that typically had a headboard and sometimes an armrest.

caduceus conversation . . . or had he? I suppose I would find out soon enough as I stepped off the omnibus and made my way to his address.

He wasn't kidding when he said he had moved up in the world, as the neighborhood I was now walking through was much nicer than the one we grew up in. While I had been living in the moment on Mikonos from paycheck to paycheck, Nessus had clearly done something with himself in my absence. When I saw the *oikos*⁸ that had to be his, I gasped in surprise and awe. While not palatial, it was a far cry from the prefabricated government housing of our childhoods. The aroma of non-native cultivars rose from surrounding flowerbeds diligently manicured by what I suspected to be paid gardeners. I almost chose to turn away and not bother him, but desperation compelled me forward, and I rang the doorbell.

It was now his turn to let out a gasp of surprise as he opened the door and beheld the new me.

"You've . . . changed," he finally uttered as his eyes rose up to meet mine.

He hadn't known.

"I had, of course, heard rumors," he continued, "but . . ."

"But it's still me."

"Certainly." He dropped his head and shook it in embarrassment. "Why, yes, that's true. Come inside, why don't you?"

⁸ A family house laid out using a traditional floorplan.

All things considered, it went better than I had anticipated. While I wasn't expecting a hug between long-lost brothers, I feared that he could have simply told me never to darken his threshold again. Instead, he was showing me around his house.

"I wish I could let you use our guest bedroom, but it's not available anymore, not since the baby was born."

"Baby?"

"Yes, I am now married."

"Congratulations, although I admit I'm a bit surprised."

"As am I. Deianira is working at the stables, but she should be back soon. Don't worry, she's very open-minded and won't mind you being there. Heck, that's why I'm a stay-at-home dad, and she's the bread (or hay, if you get my meaning) winner."

He gave me a soft nudge with his elbow, and his smile returned. While he had grown a bit softer and heavier around his middle, and I could plainly see the first signs of thinning and greying hair, he was essentially the same *nautès*⁹ I remembered when we parted ways. He continued to sport a neatly trimmed ginger goatee, lightly glistening with mildly scented oil, and possessed working muscle still evident in his shoulder and arms. He motioned to the *kline* and bade me sit down.

"You might as well get used to it because until you find your own place, it will be yours."

He then sat down opposite me.

"Okay, I have to ask: Why did you choose to turn into a minotaur?"

⁹ A sailor.

#

You've heard the story many times before, so I won't bore you with the details. All my life, I always felt that I was different and had been born into the wrong body. For some, it's their gender, which is easy enough to alter with the latest advances in retroviral genetic modification. In my case, I felt I was born to the wrong species, and this is where the surgeons had to get creative with their craft, especially in the case of us *mýthoi*¹⁰.

Most transhumans simply wanted to become a different animal already in existence and were satisfied with growing fur and modifying the shape of their external features. Some animals were more straightforward to transform into than others, but in most cases, the surgeons could activate dormant genes, suppress others, and graft new strands to accomplish reasonable facsimiles. These transhumans called themselves *wers*, and most of society was beginning to accept them.

As modifications go, becoming a minotaur wasn't all that complicated; it was just a matter of finding the right balance of human and bovine genetic expression. However, some *mýthoi* were far more complex, and a few had yet to be achieved. As for mainstream society accepting us, that's where the real challenge still lies. *Wers* were at least familiar animals and could claim that they were natural, but *mýthoi* were often perceived as monsters. I mostly had it hard since I chose to be a minotaur in a city that used to be Knossos, the home of the legendary

¹⁰ A transhuman who chooses to take on the appearance of a creature considered to be mythological and no longer existing in the natural world.

bestial horror. That's why I left before I changed; I would be seen as a mockery of the past or a deluded imbecile.

But I could not resist nor deny my true nature. Somewhere along my *Keftiu*¹¹ bloodline, a minotaur's soul had been captured and had been biding its time until the day when technology would allow it to re-emerge. It had finally escaped its labyrinthine prison, only to find itself hounded by a dark force back to the place of its destruction. Would I be so lucky as to evade its original fate?

#

I told Nessus everything that had happened to me since we parted ways after serving together in the *Nautikon*. I had saved up during my enlistment to afford the procedure. I then traveled to *Athênai* to have it done. I legally changed my name and took the time to inform Nessus of my new moniker. He raised an eyebrow but quickly adapted and never mentioned my former *deadname* again.

The benefits of being altered made me the ideal security guard, and I had no problem finding work at any *pandokeion* I wished. I thought I had finally settled down on Mikonos, where tourists found me fascinating and sometimes desirable. The only thing I withheld from Nessus was why I had returned to Iraklion; he did not need to know about my nightmare, especially if the *empousa* was real. Fortunately, before I had to make up an explanation, we were interrupted by the arrival of Deianira.

¹¹ What the indigenous people living on the island containing the cities of Iraklion, Knossos, and Rethymnon refer to themselves as.

Deianira looked exactly as I suspected she would since I was already familiar with Nessus's type from our time carousing during shore leave. She wore her obsidian hair long, currently tied back in a ponytail, framing her olive features born from time spent outdoors in the sun. She smelled strongly of the stables, of both hay and horses, which was to be anticipated from Nessus's earlier comment. Her gray eyes were the only thing I wasn't expecting, and they granted her an air of coolness only offset by the warmth of her smile.

As Nessus had promised, she had no problem with what I was, nor had any problem with me being a temporary houseguest, even though her husband had made the offer without consulting her first. I suspect he had called her right after I hung up to explain an old friend's predicament and get her blessing. She wasted no time interrogating me about Nessus's childhood past, seizing the opportunity to discover more of his embarrassing secrets. I, of course, succumbed to her inquisitorial methods entirely voluntarily.

#

After being introduced to their daughter, Althaea, who showed no fear of my visage, I shared in their dinner. The hour grew late, and it was time for us to retire. They went to their respective bedrooms, and I went to my *kline* and freshly-laundered blankets. Would I be revisited by the *empousa* tonight? Would the nightmare be assuaged by my return to Iraklion? Or would its power intensify now that I was closer to its place of origin? Was it a figment born of physiological and psychological stress, as the physician claimed? Or was it indeed an extradimensional creature with sinister intent? Was I risking the lives of Nessus, Deianira, and Althaea just by being in their house?

I tried to stay awake as long as I could, but all the events of the day made me easy pickings for ministrations of Hypnos, the god of sleep.

III



Go to sleep, little baby
Avoid Phobetor's black dreams
Run from beasts of dark wood
And all that is not good
I am here to quiet your screams
Go to sleep, little baby
Let Phantasos grant you dreams
Of your wildest imagination
In worlds of hallucination
Where naught is as it seems
Go to sleep, little baby
And Morpheus will give you dreams
Of your loved ones holding you tightly

In the places that you visit nightly

'Til you wake in the morn's radiant beams

#

Deianira discovered me standing above Althaea's crib, doing my best to soothe her back to sleep with a lullaby. It seemed to have worked, for in no time, she was cooing softly as she grew drowsy, and by the time I returned her to her bed, she was fast asleep.

Deianira smiled at me, then, holding her finger to her lips, bade me join her back to the living room where my temporary bed was.

I explained in my softest tone, "I heard her fussing, and she didn't need a change, so I thought I would do my best to calm her before she woke you and Nessus up. I figured you could use the sleep."

"What is the source of the lullaby? Is it from your mother?"

"Nah, it's just something I made up. I've always had a talent for improvising songs. I'm not sure where it comes from."

"Well, it was lovely."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome." She paused, clearly debating whether to ask her next question, then decided to take a chance anyway, "You are free to stay as long as you need as my husband's childhood pal. But, if you don't mind, tell me why you're truly here."

"It's obvious that I'm not homesick, eh?"

"No, it's evident that you would never have returned here if it hadn't been for some compelling reason."

Should I be honest with her? Would her open invitation still stand if she knew the truth?

“Actually, I’m not really a hundred percent sure. I’ve had dreams compelling me to return, but I don’t know exactly why.”

“They must be powerful dreams driving you away from a paradise like Mikonos.”

“Mikonos is not quite the paradise that people imagine it to be. Sure, it’s fun if you’re young and have money to spend, but for us locals, the glamour begins to fade in just a few years, and you see it for what it really is behind the façade. It gets tired fast.”

“Iraklion seems to be an unusual decision for your mind to choose for you. We’re a conservative bunch, so things won’t be simple for you here.”

“I know. I hope to figure out why I’m here as soon as possible, so I can head back before too long.”

“I don’t believe I can help you with that, but I can assist you in other ways. You used to be a bouncer, didn’t you? I know of a site near Knossos where you may be able to get work. And, since it’s a tourist trap, your looks would be advantageous, as long as you don’t mind people staring at you.”

“At least it will beat the scowls from the locals here.”

“That is correct. Let me try to pluck a few strands. Meanwhile, let’s go back to sleep before Althaea wakes up for her morning meal.”

Thus, I found a position as a doorman at a sleazy watering hole known as Ariadne’s Alehouse, located just a few blocks from the Palace of Knossos. Overall, it reminded me of the *pandokeion* I had left behind at Mikonos, in sights, sounds, and even smells. The manager loved that he had a living, breathing minotaur working the door. The pay was low, but I made up for it

in tips given to me by partially inebriated sightseers who wanted their picture taken with me. It was not long before I could afford my own place. I moved out of Nessus and Deianira's home, thanking them for their hospitality, and into a dingy one-bedroom apartment similar to what I left behind on Mikonos. For the time being, the *empousa* had not returned. Perhaps it had moved on to fresher prey, as Cassandra had suggested it might. However, I worried that it was only a matter of time before it would return in all its terrifying glory if I didn't figure out why it attacked me in the first place. Fortunately, it didn't take too long before the reason literally walked in through the door, even if I didn't know it at the time.

It was early evening, so the Alehouse was still relatively empty. In the center, foreign tourists perused the menu to determine which entrees were the most "authentic" but not too challenging for their palates. In the dimly-lit far corner, two feline *wers*, also tourists, were furtively whispering among themselves. I couldn't tell if they were flirting with each other or perhaps talking about me. Ever since I was hired, the reputation of the Alehouse as being *wer*-friendly had quickly gotten out, and the manager had been all too happy for the increase in business. Nearer to the door, a regular was finishing a bowl of whatever our soup of the day was. Acalte, the manager's sister, was rinsing out mugs behind the bar, pausing only to pour drinks for customers.

Since it wasn't busy, I helped by bussing tables and taking the used glassware, dishes, and utensils back to the kitchen. I had just reemerged from the back when she walked through the door.

She clearly wasn't a tourist, and she didn't precisely dress like a local either. Her clothes were casual and dusty, and a wide-brimmed hat crowned her head. She removed her sunglasses,

and I noticed the fine wrinkles around her eyes resulting from premature aging due to too much solar exposure. Likewise, I could almost taste the distinct metallic tang of near-daily applications of sunblock. It didn't take me too long to put the pieces together and realize that she was most likely an archaeologist who had been working at the Palace site. While most of the Palace was excavated and, in some cases, inexpertly put back together for the sake of the tourists, I knew that there were also ongoing diggings occurring during the less busy offseason. Perhaps it was merely a matter that I hadn't been working here long enough, but this was the last place I would expect an educated professional to wander into. Maybe she was lost? I decided to intercept her.

“Can I help you out?” I politely inquired, doing my best to look less intimidating.

She looked me over, and then a broad smile took over the lower half of her face. “It is true! I thought my coworkers were trying to pull one over on me.”

So that was it. She was no better than the usual tourist, just supposedly much brighter than the average lot. A weary sigh involuntarily escaped my mouth as my disappointment fully registered, “would you like a picture?” I had vainly hoped she was somehow connected to the *empousa* that had lured me here.

“Oh, gosh, no . . . That was not what I intended. That came out completely incorrectly. There is a lot that the two of us ought to discuss. I take it you don't hail from these parts originally, do you?”

“Actually, I was born here. Sorry.”

“But if I'm not mistaken, you haven't always been in this city, have you?”

Now I was intrigued. “True; I just came back from Mikonos.” What was her angle?

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. We share a lot in common, or we will in the future. I have a feeling that I can figure out why you are here, and it’s all my fault. Oh, I’m sorry if I come across as insane. If you decided to kick me out right now, I wouldn’t hold it against you. If you had shown up at my place of employment acting the same way I am, I would have already contacted campus security.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You may not be the only crazy one here. You have my attention, but now is not the best time for this. The evening is just beginning, and I have a long shift ahead of me.”

“Of course you do! My deepest apologies. I apologize for disturbing you at work; however, after I heard, I felt compelled to verify the information for myself. After discovering that everything has been accurate, I can’t wait until the next time we can talk. Here, allow me to write down the various ways in which you can contact me while I am at the university. Please, I beg you, call upon me in some manner tomorrow. I’d really appreciate it. I solemnly swear that I will make every effort to make it worthwhile for you. When I have the opportunity to fully explain it to you, you will comprehend it. My name is Hypatia, and I am the head of the archaeology department at the University of *Keftiu*. I believe I am aware of the reason you have come back to this town.”

“I’m Asterius, and I would love to know what you think that is.”

“Asterius? That is the deciding factor. You are the person I’ve been looking for all along. I know you must think I’m crazy, but I really do believe that our paths were destined to cross.”

#

I had never set hoof on the grounds of an institute of higher learning before, so I wasn't sure what to expect. The campus was a maze of various buildings, and it took me repeatedly asking for directions and consulting several maps before I could locate the professor. What had initially confounded me was that there was no archaeology department on the Iraklion campus. As it turned out, Hypatia was visiting from the Rethymnon campus and had a temporary office in the biology department while working at the Knossos site.

Hypatia's office was a small room wherein each wall consisted of nothing more than shelves of books, emanating their characteristic vanilla odor, occasionally punctuated by what I assumed to be devices used for archaeological purposes. In the corner of the room was a simple desk with two chairs. Hypatia was seated when I entered; she faced the door, and her desk was between us. She indicated that I should sit in the remaining chair. At first, I was worried that the proffered chair was far too flimsy to support my bulk. I cautiously lowered myself into it and was relieved that it didn't collapse, although it still wobbled whenever I shifted my weight, which was often since I had difficulty getting comfortable.

"Even though it's against the rules to have alcohol on campus, I have a sneaking suspicion that I'm not the only faculty member who has some hidden away. I believe that by the time we are finished, we will have a need for it."

Hypatia opened a bottom drawer of her desk and produced a bottle of ouzo and two beat-up metal cups. She poured a generous amount into each and passed me one. I wasn't quite ready to drink, but I took a sip to be polite.

After the fumes had finished their job of clearing my sinuses, I began, "tell me, why am I here?"

“I know you won’t believe me, but I really don’t have any other options at this point. My working life is probably over, but if my hunch is correct, you might be able to assist me, and in exchange, I might be able to assist you. If we have any luck at all, I’ll be able to keep my job, and you won’t have to worry about finding another job ever again.”

I simply stared at her. I didn’t know what to say, so I waited for her to continue. She took a long sip and explained further.

“Ampelos, it’s because of my son who did this. I had a sneaking suspicion that something was off about him from the beginning, but I chalked it up to the fact that he was a *wer* and accepted it as a given. No offense intended.”

“None taken.”

“Admittedly, he is not technically related to me, but I took him in as my own. However, to the best of my knowledge, he has never been subjected to the operation. He is an authentic second-generation *wer* because he was born that way.”

“Wait, what? That can’t happen. When we transform, they render us sterile. It’s the price we pay; they don’t want us passing along our modified genes to any offspring.”

“That is the information that they give you. As a point of fact, the alterations typically render the possibility of fertility impossible on their own. It’s the same as crossing a horse with a donkey to get a mule out of the offspring. They cut you anyway, just to be on the safe side, even though, in most cases, it’s not necessary.”

“Then how is a second-generation even possible?”

“Why are some mules able to produce offspring? Even though it does not happen very often, it is not unheard of. Also, not all vasectomies are successful, which is something that any

man who has found out the hard way that he is a father can attest to. Because of this, the fact that Ampelos' biological mother placed him for adoption should not come as much of a surprise to anyone. She erroneously believed that because she was dating a *wer*, she was protected from danger. Not only was it likely that she did not want a child, but she also had no idea how to raise a creature that was not human."

"But you did?"

"No, neither did I; however, given the circumstances, I didn't have a lot of choices to choose from. I don't have any children of my own, and I'm well past the age when most adoption agencies consider it safe to place a child with a foster family. After taking care of this peculiar child for a while, they came to the conclusion that there weren't many people who would want him, which means that I got lucky."

"What kind of *wer* is he?"

"A *lykos*¹²."

I whistled through my teeth. In my experience, those who chose to become *lykos* were known troublemakers. Their trickster natures went hand-in-hand with wanting to become half-wolf. If such nature was genetic, then a *lykos* pup would be just as mischievous. I can only imagine what sort of trouble a child such as Ampelos could get into. He would be quite the handful for anyone, much less a single college professor.

"What did your son do? And how am I a part of this picture?"

¹² A *wer* who has taken on the characteristic appearance associated with a wolf.

“Ampelos has been by my side on all of my excavations from the time he was a young pup, and ever since he reached his teenage years, he has been an invaluable resource for my work. It was almost uncanny how well he could find important artifacts using his innate sense of intuition. Perhaps the fact that he was born with altered senses and grew up with them enabled his brain to process sensory input in ways that were unavailable to normal humans. I owe a significant portion of my professional success to his abilities. He is now nineteen years old, and his abilities have continued to flourish exponentially over the course of his life. I have no idea if he will ever find the limit to his level of ability.”

Hypatia pointed to some of the items on her shelves.

“Of course, each and every one of those is a copy. Even though the originals are on display in museums, they only account for a small portion of Ampelos’s discoveries. It goes without saying that we were both thrilled when we were given the opportunity to work at the Knossos site. It is the oldest civilization on the continent of Europa that we are aware of, and its layers conceal a great deal more than we currently know about them. The earliest artifacts discovered there date back to the Late Bronze Age, but we have a strong suspicion that people have lived there at least since the Neolithic period.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. What have you found so far?”

“The site contains the typical assortment of shattered pottery, stone tools, and the occasional mural; however, it is obvious that Ampelos discovered something that caused him to leave the site, as well as me, and depart the island.”

“Clearly? You know this how?”

“Because he wrote in his journal that he felt this way.” Hypatia reached into another drawer of her desk and produced a leather-bound book wrapped in a cord. “Despite the fact that he is now a young adult, he continues to refer to me as his *Manoula*.”

Mommy, I thought to myself. How sweet.

“You are free to take this with you and read it in its entirety if you so choose; however, I have annotated what I believe to be the most important passages. You’ll also find out why I’ve reached out to you because, as you’ll see, I believe there is specific mention of you in it as well.”

I still wasn’t sure what part I had to play in this family drama, but I was certainly intrigued. I drained what was left in my cup and promised Hypatia that I would be in contact once I had finished my reading assignment.

#

First Tercet



*I was driven from paradise chased by a terror nocturnal,
and back home to reunite with an old friend, now paternal,
to begin a journey discovered in the pages of a journal.*