

AENIGMA

Allow me to introduce myself; my name is Erus Ludus. I was born many years ago in the region of Adria, in the Roman province of Tarvisium. However, a short time later, I moved to Rome where, after learning mathematics, astronomy, geometry, and music, I devoted myself to the entertainment of kings, emperors, lords, and beautiful women, with riddles that combined all the knowledge I had acquired.

May my long white beard, the lines on my face, and my weary step not confuse you. I am much, very much, older than what you might think... And sadly, I believe I will live many, many, more years.

As to why I have lived to such a long age, I do not have the answer. Perhaps history needs simple people like me to attest to the incidents that happen and to convey them in an impartial manner. In any case, the story that I am going to tell you happened such as I tell it, and it is important that you pay attention to all the details, since its fortuitous outcome will bring glory, riches, and unimaginable wonders to both your name and mine.

Erus Ludus

CHAPTER ONE

Winter, 87 B.C.

The young girl loosened the ties of her tunic, which gently slid from her virginal body until it reached the ground, displaying the splendor of her nudity. She walked slowly towards the circle of burning laurel leaves. Waves of thick smoke began to caress her body, purifying and preparing it to receive the prophecies from the God.

After she was draped in white vestments, one of the priests moved her towards the tripod that was on top of the Sacred Crevice in the center of the temple. There, as she breathed the gases that emanated from the aperture, she fell into a trance, just as thousands of other young women had done since the beginning of the oracle, when Apollo, *He Who Strikes from Afar*, killed the Great Serpent.

Her gaze became lost and distant. The images she was seeing were beyond the horizon. Suddenly, she closed her eyes and began to gasp. The gasps turned into cries that were deafening to the priests, who were sitting in a circle around the young woman. She stopped abruptly, opened her eyes, and in a serene voice she began to speak:

*The Seventh has revealed himself.
Prepare thyselfes! Hunger overwhelms the walled city
and the Red Commander will avenge the Vespers,
bringing desolation and grief to Pallas Athena.
Seven they shall be to save the Treasure:
Athlete without Laurels, Heiress of the Throne of Women,
Sailor of the Goddess, Princess of the City of Stone,
Priest of the Gods, Bearer of the Word,
and Discreet Stranger.
Miserable Traitor! You will appear from the circle of seven.
Only the Word will save them,
only the Seventh will know how to decipher it.*

After uttering these words, the Pythia fell into an unconscious state.

The priests remained for a long while without speaking, until Enos broke the silence.

“Hunger is defeating Athens. I do not know how much longer Aristion will be able to withstand the blockade by the Romans,” he said, addressing the other priests. “I have heard it said that the Athenians are soaking leather in water to eat it.”

“Mithridates should never have incited anger in Rome, and the Athenians made a grave mistake in becoming his allies,” Tesseros replied.

“They thought they would be just as fortunate as they were against Xerxes, but Sulla is a magnificent general, and he will not cease in his resolve until he feels avenged for the affront against his people,” Pentos said sadly.

“A general without money!” Exos grumbled. “We will be sacked once more in order to pay for the soldiers and the weapons. To finance the death of those who afforded us

honor.”

“I do not understand why they left us without protection!” Tryos interrupted. “If our riches are so apparent, how is it that no king has put his armies at our command?”

“The Amphictyonic League no longer exists to protect us. The Greek states are weak, and they are taking a position in favor of either Sulla or Mithridates,” Duos said. “But many know that, after this conflict, Rome will become the greatest empire ever seen by mankind, and nobody will dare to rebel against her.”

“Duos is right. The Pythia has said it; Sulla will be victorious and will come to sack us. We must save our treasures!” Enos said, and then, in a grave tone, he added, “This discussion among ourselves matters not; we will face reality and we will act swiftly.”

“On whose shoulders will this task lie?” Tesseros asked curiously.

The question remained hanging in the air for an interminable moment. As if guided by a strong attraction, all eyes turned towards the one man who had kept his lips sealed until right then. All eyes were fixed on the oldest of Apollo’s priests.

“I will take the responsibility of such a dignified task on my shoulders. May wisdom enlighten us in the path we must follow!” Heptos said solemnly.

Heptos arose from the circle formed by the priests. While his companions continued heatedly debating the significance of the prophecy, he felt the need to walk alone, to dispel from his mind the ominous predictions that he had just heard. He wanted to see one more time, with his own eyes, the shrine to which he had dedicated his life, and which he knew once his mission began, he would never see again.

A long time ago, Zeus, the supreme Lord of Olympus, wanted to determine the position of the center of the world. In order to achieve this end he released two eagles simultaneously, one from the extreme east of the world and the other from the extreme west. The birds, flying at the same speed, met in Delphi, at the foot of Mount Parnassus. There, the God placed a stone, to which he gave the name *Omophalos*, the navel of the earth. With the coming of time, his son Apollo killed Python, the serpent, taking possession of his wisdom and creating there what would become the most powerful religious center of antiquity, the Oracle of Delphi.

Kings, generals, and villagers alike came from all corners of the earth to consult the oracle and ask for advice. The responses tended to be offered in such an ambiguous manner that they could give way to different interpretations. Like when Croesus, King of Lydia, who before embarking on a war against the Persians consulted the oracle and received the reply: *if you cross the river Halys (which is the border between Lydia and Persia), you will destroy a great empire*. Croesus saw a positive response in the answer, but the empire that fell was his own.

Even Alexander the Great visited Delphi in search of a favorable oracle for his campaigns of invasion. To his surprise, the Pythia refused to receive him, and asked him to return another time. Alexander became furious and dragged her out of the temple by the hair. He stopped when the woman cried, “Let me go, you are invincible!” Alexander immediately released her and said, smiling, “Now I have my answer!”

Heptos thought that the oracle had been ambiguous once again. The other priests had concluded that the chosen ones would be seven, and they had designated him as the one

to be the *Priest of the Gods*, because of his greater hierarchy. But who would the others be? Would all of the chosen ones reach Delphi? It would soon be the seventh of *Bysios*, the most important day for the oracle, and perhaps Apollo would further clarify his own prophecy.

The words of the Pythia once again began to resonate in his mind. *Miserable traitor! You will appear from the circle of seven*, cited the prophecy. He would be the leader of a group that had foreseen a traitor ahead of time. Whom should he fear? Will Heptos have enough courage to expose the traitor and accomplish his task perfectly?

While these thoughts swarmed around in his mind, the priest walked along the Sacred Way, replicating the journey that many pilgrims, in devout faith, had made in centuries past. This avenue began in the extreme southeast of the *peribola*, the wall that surrounded the whole enclosure. At the same time as his weary feet staked out the steep stones of the path, his eyes fell one more time on the various *Treasures*, the small shrines bestowed by Hellenic city-states ever since ancient times, which could be found along the way.

Each of these shrines was filled with gold, silver, jewels, and the spoils of war. Treasures that provoked the greed of every new invader, treasures accumulated in a period of peace to finance times of war.

Delphi had been destroyed in the past, but like the Phoenix, it arose from its ruins. *But Sulla wants something more than gold, silver and jewels*, that he knew for sure. *Sulla was looking for the Treasure, the real Treasure. The Treasure that they had to save.* The time to act was now, just as the Pythia had foreseen; it was the moment to save the legacy for future generations.

With these thoughts in his mind, the aged priest finally arrived at the temple of Apollo. He sat down on a stone bench on the terrace that opened into the shrine, next to the magnificent golden statue of the God. His gaze settled once more on the effigy and, after careful contemplation, a doubt came to mind. *Will I be the traitor?*

At last, after having completed his long walk, Heptos arrived at the edifice where his sleeping quarters were situated. He went into his room, and said to the maidservant who took care of him, "Tell Cleantes to come here immediately." The maidservant left in haste; a short while after, a middle-aged man of slight, but sturdy build entered the quarters.

"How can I help you, my Lord?" he asked diligently.

"Cleantes, my loyal servant, the time has come," Heptos said. "I need you to carry a message with the utmost discretion. No one, absolutely no one, must know of your mission. We must alert those who need to be warned in good time, so that they are prepared. I will wait here for those who need to gather together," Heptos paused before continuing, "I trust your discretion and the loyalty that you have always afforded me."

"Lord, you know that you can trust in me," Cleantes said, with a slight bow. "I will give my life for you, because it is you to whom I owe it," and then he asked in a low voice, "Where is my destination?"

And letting out a breath, Heptos said, "Alexandria."

But, my dear friend, not all tales begin where you believe. Stories are not tapestries formed with stitches by chance, rather they are canvasses woven with pinpoint accuracy. Woven by whom? The Greeks believed that they were the Fates - three sisters, blind, deaf and dumb, who, in front of the loom, would weave the lives of wretched mortals, one thread at a time.

I, throughout all these years, believe that the universe is a loom that operates in another way. Gods or not, it is an undeniable fact that the interwoven functions with exquisite precision, and at times some isolated events are, in reality, threads of the same cloth that eventually reflect an exquisite pattern in the fabric.

When the Pythia launched her oracle, the spinning wheel was working tirelessly. Other events had taken place to give rise to her prophecy, and the same prophecy was one more thread that was woven in the loom.

CHAPTER TWO

Zoe walked cautiously along the narrow rocky paths, taking care not to slip and hurt herself on the sharp stones. It was not easy to reach Pontus Euxinus, the inland sea of dark and tranquil waters that formed the northern border of the country. Access from the interior of the continent to the coast was limited, owing to a precipitous range of mountains with narrow valleys that flowed laboriously to the waterline. The region was isolated due to these natural geographic conditions. It was precisely for this reason that her ancestors had chosen this area as their settlement.

The sun would still shine for a few more hours but the moon, its rival, had already appeared over the firmament. *Artemis, the Goddess of Hunting*. When she saw it, she remembered that within one lunar cycle the initiation ceremony would be performed, and she finally would become a true Amazon.

She had attended numerous ceremonies in her lifetime, and she knew exactly what to expect. They would amputate her right breast, which was considered a nuisance when using the bow, then, given her royal lineage, they would place the golden armor upon her, and she would be charged with sounding the Sacred Horn, thereupon leading the corps of female archers, one of the greatest honors that an Amazon could have. After, of course, being Queen. She ought to feel very proud; Hippolyta had high hopes for her. In the coming years, Zoe would be the favored candidate to become Queen.

While she was walking, a bitter feeling was taking shape in her heart. *I do not want to be an Amazon!* She did not want to dedicate her entire life to learning the bow, the axe and the art of combat; to grow old, to have to look after girls who were not her own, and train them in the same arts of war that she did not even enjoy. Furthermore, there was the thorny subject of detaching herself from her male children. Zoe had not yet been a mother, but the thought of separating from her offspring struck her as horrendous, even if the child was considered as belonging to the wrong sex.

A rebellious sensation overwhelmed her; this was not the life she wanted, she yearned for something else, but what other kind of life could the daughter of Hippolyta have?

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that it was not until she looked up that she saw the sea. It was a great blue expanse of calm waters, similar to those of a lake. Timid waves spat foam on the rocky coast. Light-footed, she went down the gentle slope that separated her from the shore, and when she reached flat ground she began to run on the sandy beach. When her feet touched water, she took off her sandals, her short leather skirt, and her *bustier*; she threw them behind her, and she immersed her naked body in the haven of peace that unfolded before her eyes.

She swam for some distance, wishing that the sea would wash away the thoughts that were pounding her mind. She took strong strokes, until she arrived at a valiant and solitary rock in the middle of the sea that defied the superficial flatness of the waters. When her arms began to ache from fatigue, she decided to return to the shore. She stretched out on the sand of that solitary beach and, as the sun dried her moist body, she fell into a deep sleep, induced by the physical exertion.

She was awoken by something warm and humid on her cheek. Her eyelids were too heavy, and so she opened her eyes slowly, but a brilliant light blinded her, and she had to close them again instantly. She kept her eyes closed for some time, while she

recuperated. Carefully opening them again, she could finally see what had awoken her.

It was a splendid horse. His coat was a very shiny white that resembled silver. His mane, long and golden, glistened in the sunlight. He was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

Every Amazon has a love of horses that runs through her veins and is branded on her skin. She stood up and began to caress the animal's head; all the while he stood very still, rubbing himself against her. Zoe was overwhelmed by an irresistible desire. In one leap, she mounted the horse, and of his own will the creature set off for the waterline.

It started out as a gentle trot, but little by little, it became a dizzying race; the horse was galloping at great speed, his silver hooves leaving trails of foam in his wake. Zoe oozed happiness from all pores. Never, in all of her years of training, had she mounted a beast so fast and strong. Upon his back, she felt like she were flying through the air; she forgot about the troubles that burdened her soul and for a moment she became part of the foam, of the afternoon, of her surroundings. For the first time she felt the joy of living, of being young and carefree, able to do what she really wanted.

Suddenly the gallop came to an end and she found herself in the same spot where she had found the horse, or, rather, where the horse had found her. She was lying on the sand with her clothes spread out next to her.

Still confused, she got dressed. *Had it been a dream?* She looked at the waterline. There were no hoof-prints in the sand. *How strange!* She thought. *It had been such a real experience!* Puzzling over her dream, with slow steps she began to head towards Themiscyra, to the palace, where no doubt her mother awaited her.

Pilomenes was spending time in the company of his wife, Queen Valia, and his eldest daughter, Toula. As he listened to the banal conversation of the two women, paying no attention whatsoever, he nervously pondered the future of his kingdom. He had still not decided who would be his heir.

He was the sovereign of Paphlagonia, one of the first nations in the region of Anatolia. With more than one thousand years of history, it had been named in Homer's Iliad as an ally of Troy. Its lands, strategically located, were an essential path for the armies that crossed from Asia to Europe. Hundreds of years before, the Greeks and the Persians plunged into various battles over its possession. Now, the ambitious King of Pontus, Mithridates VI, intended to begin a campaign to take over the whole region.

Pilomenes had not been blessed with the privilege of having sons; quite the opposite, the Gods had given him six daughters. He knew, however, how to make the most of the situation, marrying his daughters to each one of the princes who were heirs to neighboring kingdoms. It was a very intelligent strategy that would guarantee him a balance of power in the region, it also meant that he could count on influential sons-in-law who would stand up for him, should it be necessary. It was a tactic that his ancestors had used in ancient times, and one that had supported the long-standing survival of the kingdom.

In spite of planning everything to the minutest detail, his strategy had not been quite as successful as he had hoped. The eldest of his daughters, Toula, had been repudiated by her husband. Toula was not an ugly woman, but her unbearable disposition, together with

the tone of voice she used to put it into words, were enough to drive any man beside her insane with despair.

The fact that Toula's dowry had been one of the highest recorded in the region was irrelevant. Phelon was not able to bear more than seven years with such a reptile by his side. Although he had to spend the last denarius in his kingdom to pay back the dowry, and aware that his actions could bring disastrous political consequences, he sent her back to her family home under the pretext that she was incapable of conceiving an heir.

Even though he never admitted it in public, Pilomenes understood his former son-in-law perfectly well and there was no enmity between them. The King thanked him for the seven years that he had kept her out of his house, and Phelon took pity on the poor father who had to have Toula under his roof once again. Paradoxically, Pilomenes had his strongest ally in Phelon.

Pilomenes thought about the avatars of destiny; of his six daughters, the eldest, Toula, and the youngest, Rikae, were the only ones who gave him a headache. Toula was ill-raised, possessing the stupid airs of an offended princess. Rikae, his youngest daughter, was ambitious and had no scruples. *Rikae is completely different*, Pilomenes thought, shaking his head. Without any doubt at all, she was the most intelligent, manipulative, and egotistical of his daughters.

A good strategy might be to offer her hand in marriage to one of Mithridates' sons. Perhaps with this alliance, the King of Pontus might quench his thirst for Paphlagonia, considering it as already conquered. He would then direct his zeal for invasion towards other kingdoms in the region. In the negotiation of the nuptials, he would delicately put out the idea that he would name her as his successor, without, of course, putting anything in writing. As soon as they married, the conqueror would think that Paphlagonia was now part of his territory, with Rikae being the future heir. Only he would know that his daughter would never inherit the kingdom.

Pilomenes knew that in times of political turbulence, it was all a matter of waiting. An ambitious sovereign who intended to confront the Romans with violence would not survive for long. He doubted that Mithridates would die peacefully of old age, surrounded by his family in front of the fire. He, on the other hand, without participating in any warlike conflict, would be able to maintain control of his subjects until his death. *But, then, on my death, who will the heir be?* He asked the question for the millionth time.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice the servant coming towards him. He stopped at a distance required by protocol and, trying to call his attention, said in a formal tone, "A messenger is asking to see you, my Lord."

"A messenger? We will receive him in the pavilion in the garden," Pilomenes replied.

He took his wife's arm and they moved towards a great tent of Oriental style, in the center of the palace gardens. This pavilion was only set up in summer time, so that the King could stop for a rest from his walks during the hotter months.

Pilomenes was sitting inside the tent drinking spring water from a jeweled cup when a tall woman of athletic stature entered with a confident stride. She was dressed in silver armor to her waist, and she wore a short skirt made of bands of leather. On her shoulder, she carried her bow and an empty quiver; the guards had disarmed her before she could present herself to the King.

Resolute, and in a powerful voice, she asked, "Are you King Pilomenes?"

Pilomenes assented.

“I bring an urgent message on behalf of my Lady, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons.”

The ceremony would take place in three days. All the young Amazons were excited in the preparations for what would be the most important day of their lives. All the young warriors were dedicated to the task of polishing their swords until they shone like mirrors, filing axes so that they could split a hair, and preparing arrows to fill every quiver to the limit. Only Zoe walked with her head down, pensively. Only her equipment lay dirty and unpolished, abandoned on the ground.

She took hold of her *pelta*, the light shield in the form of a crescent moon that was used by the Amazons. They spent so much time polishing these shields that, in open battle, the shine would blind the enemies. When she saw the reflection of her face in the shield, she made a decision. With a decisive step, she made her way to the Royal Palace where her mother, Queen Hippolyta, was presiding over the Council of Warriors.

The Royal Palace was a structure that imitated the style of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, and a monument that the Amazons had helped build. Of lesser dimensions, it conserved the same proportions, and was constructed in its entirety of red marble from the region. The inner chamber was long and narrow, and at the end there was a canopy that held the statue of Artemis, *The Virgin Huntress*, the Goddess worshipped by the Amazons.

The Queen’s throne was in front of the statue, with chairs for the Amazons who officiated at the council forming a semi-circle around it. Hippolyta was seated on her throne; the statue of the Goddess behind her giving the Queen an imposing air. Zoe interrupted her, “Mother, I would like to speak to you now.”

Every head in the room, irritated, turned towards the inopportune girl.

“This meeting has concluded,” Hippolyta said, addressing the women who were around her, at the same time throwing her daughter an angry look because of her lack of formality.

Displeased with the interruption, but without wanting to appear contrary to an order from the Queen, the women all left the enclosure. They passed by Zoe’s side, sweeping out of the room arrogantly to show their feelings of disapproval. The girl took the arm of the last of the Amazons who was about to leave.

“No, Lisipe, do not leave, please,” she asked, in an imploring tone. Lisipe was an excellent Amazon who had stood out because of her ability in warfare. A contemporary of Hippolyta, from a very early age she had been the strongest competition that Hippolyta had faced to become Queen. Nevertheless, when the Council of Warriors unanimously decided that Hippolyta would be sovereign, Lisipe accepted her defeat in a stoic manner, and with the passing of years, she became her adversary’s best advisor.

When they were very young, Zoe and Xanthe, Lisipe’s daughter, became inseparable friends. The mischievous girls would escape from their training to eat fruit from the trees, and to plan magical excursions in the neighboring forests. Both enjoyed horse riding, and although Zoe was always faster, she would slow down her mount so that they both reached the finish line at the same time, not making her friend feel bad. Xanthe, for her

part, behaved the same way in combat with weapons. Although she was superior in this discipline, she never defeated Zoe; rather they would declare a draw just before the thrust that would give her the victory. Hippolyta was riled by such attitudes, since while this was going on her rivalry with Lisipe was at its peak.

Zoe was sweet, carefree and a dreamer, and Xanthe was disciplined, responsible, and loved all aspects of being an Amazon. Lisipe dedicated a great deal of time in the equal instruction of both girls, giving no preference to her daughter. She was a strict but understanding teacher, she knew how to reward or to penalize, giving neither excessive praise nor punishing her students' egos too harshly.

"Zoe, what can be so important that you interrupt a meeting of the assembly?" Hippolyta asked, still irritated.

Without giving the Queen any forewarning of what was to come, Zoe, looking directly into her mother's eyes, said, "I am pregnant."

Hippolyta was stunned. For a moment she lost her voice. Making an evident effort to remain calm, she asked, "How? Where did you meet a male? It is prohibited to have intimate relations before the initiation ceremony." Hippolyta shook her head in despair. "Besides, an Amazon can only meet a man within the boundaries of our customs. We have agreements with neighboring armies; you can only lie down with a chosen soldier..."

Zoe interrupted her, "Mother, I swear in the name of the Goddess that I have not been with any man..." The feeling of impotence made her want to cry, but she contained herself. Her mother had never pardoned a tear. She wanted her mother to believe her; she had not committed any wrongdoing against the code of the Amazons. She had not lain down with any man.

"Stop your whimpering! Do not shame me!" Hippolyta said, irritated. And then, with a worried look she continued, "This very much complicates your initiation..."

"Mother, I do not want to be an Amazon!" In spite of the deep hurt that it caused her to disappoint her mother in this way, Zoe no longer suppressed her desires.

Hippolyta collapsed in her throne. In a brief moment, her only daughter, her great pride, the one in whom she had placed all hopes for her succession, had told her that she had committed a grave wrongdoing, and furthermore, she was asking for something that would only lead to her expulsion from the community.

"I want to have this child," Zoe continued, with a challenge in her voice. "If it is a male, I will not consider giving him up!" The rebellion that been building up throughout her whole life uncorked, and for the first time Hippolyta saw her daughter defend a cause with passion and strength.

The affront was, however, too great, and she proudly raised her hand to give her a smack, but Lisipe intervened. Holding the Queen's hand in the air, she said, "Enough! Zoe, you can leave. Let me speak to your mother in private."

Zoe left the enclosure slowly, with her head held high and her spirit revived. Lisipe remained alone with a hurt and confused Hippolyta. The two women, sisters in battle, looked each other straight in the eyes.

"I don't know why you are so surprised. You knew very well that this was going to happen, but you refused to see the signs from the beginning." Lisipe walked in circles around the enclosure, trying to shake off the heaviness in the air. "Zoe never showed any interest in weapons. You placed her in atrocious training which she managed to master,

but she did not inherit your warrior's blood... nor your ambition," she concluded, gently.

Lisipe had known of the circumstances for several days, since Zoe had approached her in the quest for advice. From that time, she had spent the nights wondering how they could tell Hippolyta the news. Apparently Zoe had not wanted to wait until she had some plan of action, and she had sprung the news on an unsuspecting Hippolyta. Lisipe knew her very well, and she knew that she would try to change her daughter's opinion in any way possible. Ever since Zoe was born, her greatest dream was to make her the successor, and now her own daughter had made it clear that she did not want that destiny.

"And besides, times are changing rapidly; you know that our end is coming. There are more and more kingdoms hostile to us that want to take over these lands. Only the Goddess knows how much longer we can contain our enemies. Maybe if she gives birth to this creature far from here, there will be some hope for us."

Hippolyta let out a breath. Her face did not reflect her customary pride. For the first time, the Queen's expression was one of sadness and disillusion.

"What you say only matters if she gives birth to a girl," she said, bitterly. "And you already heard her; with all her soul she wants what is growing in her womb to be a male."

Hippolyta's lips were pursed; there were many things happening at the same time, her daughter pregnant, the initiation ceremony, Zoe's decision. When had all of this started? Was she the only one who did not notice Zoe's feelings? Moreover, there was the prickly subject of the baby...

"How did she become pregnant?" she asked.

"Zeus," Lisipe replied. "Just as he did with Danae when he transformed into golden rain and she gave birth to Perseus, or when he turned into a bull and seduced Europa. This time he chose the form of a horse. A white horse with a golden mane and silver hooves. A brilliant idea to conquer an Amazon."

When she heard Lisipe's cynical comment, Hippolyta let out an acrid laugh. The cunning Zeus knew how to change his form to best seduce his prey. The problem was that this time the victim was her own daughter.

Shaking her head in desperation, she began to bellow, "But my daughter? Why does my daughter deny who we are?" Hippolyta was unable to resign herself to reality.

"The Fates stitch straight tapestries with twisted threads." It was so difficult to convince someone as stubborn as the Queen of the Amazons.

The silence of the two women pervaded the room. The statue of Artemis shone white and brilliant under the sunlight that penetrated the room from the various crevices in the roof. In this statue, the Goddess was represented as a young girl, strong and athletic, preparing for an evening hunt. Hippolyta fixed her gaze on it, silently asking her for help in dealing with this dilemma. Her countenance began to change slowly as she started to conceive an idea in her head. The furrow on her forehead disappeared; she stood up, resolute, and said, "We have to call the Council. My successor must be chosen right now." Looking straight into Lisipe's eyes, she said, "It is common knowledge that Xanthe, your daughter, is the best warrior out of all of this generation that will be initiated."

Taking the hand of her former rival, she said, "Lisipe, we have grown up together, and regardless of our rivalry, you have become the best advisor that a queen could have. You are the only person in whom I entrust my most prized possession. Let us make a pact: I will make your daughter an outstanding Amazon, and a queen who will take my

place when the time is propitious.” A promise made. A promise to which she would dedicate her life.

“What do you want in return?” Lisipe asked, well enough acquainted with Hippolyta to know that she never gave anything without receiving something in exchange.

“I will take care of your daughter, and you take care of mine. You leave with her, and make sure that she fulfills her destiny...whatever that may be,” Hippolyta said, with a hint of melancholy in her voice. The proud Queen would never cry, especially not in Lisipe’s presence.

“Where are you going to send us?” she asked. She had accepted the pact. Lisipe’s heart was filled with a deep sense of pride; Xanthe, her daughter, would one day become Queen.

“Where else, if not to her father?” Hippolyta replied.

Pilomenes read the message delivered by the Amazon several times. *He’d had a daughter with Hippolyta!* He could not believe it. A flock of images danced around in his mind; the memories of that night under a full moon, when he was young and just another soldier in his father’s army.

From time immemorial, it was a custom in his kingdom to unite the young and strongest Amazons with the most gallant young men in the army on certain nights during a full moon. Nine months later, when the Amazons gave birth, they kept the females and they returned the males to the King. These boys received special care and they were put into fast-paced training from a very young age so that they would form part of an elite army corps.

This was a beneficial arrangement to both parties, since it guaranteed the Amazons their perpetuity, and it provided the King with future strong warriors; furthermore it lowered the levels of prostitution in the kingdom, and it kept the morale of the soldiers high.

Pilomenes met Hippolyta when she was fifteen years of age. She had arrived at the Palace of Gangra in the company of her mother, Penthesilea. He remembered her black, defiant eyes, and her red hair that resembled a fit of fury. She was taken aback by what she saw in the palace; it was clear that it was a new, unknown world that was unfolding before her eyes.

When her mother entered the audience room and she remained alone, without a chaperon, he introduced himself and invited her to take a tour around the palace. Hippolyta looked at him with suspicion while he showed her the reception rooms and other chambers. They arrived at the gardens, and after walking through them for a short while, they sat down to rest under a tall tree.

“Where does the training take place?” she asked curiously.

“The soldiers train far from here. My father ordered the construction of precincts outside the palace for that purpose.”

“Where do you train?” she asked, surprised.

“One of my father’s generals comes to give me classes in fencing and body-to-body fighting, three days a week. A teacher for philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics comes on the other days.”

“Is it the case, perhaps, that the son of the King does not practice every day?” the young Hippolyta made fun of him, condescendingly. “True, you have a light, weak build to be the heir to your father’s throne.”

Pilomenes’ masculine pride had been stabbed to death.

“Weak? Thank the Gods that you are a damsel, and that I am bound by the sacred laws of hospitality; if not, right now, I would give you a beating that would be anything but weak.” He spoke with fury.

“You defend yourself under the guise of being a host!” And then, looking at him in a mocking way, she said, “Well, show me that you are a man of combat. I challenge you to a race; this way you will not insult your noble position, and I will show you how weak you are compared with a true Amazon.” Hippolyta tossed the challenge into the air.

Pilomenes accepted without giving it any thought. They agreed that they would run from the eastern part of the gardens to the entrance of the stables, a distance that Pilomenes had never covered before. They took their positions at the starting line, and Hippolyta signaled the start of the race.

They had barely set out when Hippolyta took the lead at great speed. Pilomenes was running behind her, appreciating the line of her back and the slenderness of her legs. The young girl was too fast; he knew that he could not beat her, so he made a decision that would leave his male pride in better standing. With all the momentum he could muster, he jumped on her from behind and pushed her to the ground. They rolled one on top of the other until they ended up lying down, Pilomenes on top of her, looking into each other’s eyes. He could feel her anger and the softness of her body under his. She began to struggle but he tried to keep her still beneath his weight.

“You cheat, you could not beat me so you chose to knock me down!” she said, spitting out her words.

“Have you not heard, dear damsel, that all is fair in love and war?”

“What has love to do with all of this?” Hippolyta asked angrily.

“Nothing, perhaps,” Pilomenes said, realizing that the idea that had fleetingly crossed his mind would be impossible. She was an Amazon, a woman who would never subject herself to a man. But he could not deny how pleasant it felt to have the soft body of this woman beneath him.

As they talked, Hippolyta remained still, and feeling more confident, Pilomenes relaxed the pressure on her. It was strange to observe this Hippolyta, motionless and submissive. Maybe she, too, was enjoying the contact.

But he was wrong. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his gut. Hippolyta had taken advantage of his distraction, and she had dealt him a strong blow with her knee into his private parts. An acute pain invaded his crotch and quickly spread through his thighs. He was unable to resist when Hippolyta pushed him and rolled him aside. The young girl got up quickly. She gave him a steadfast look, her red hair disheveled from the race and the rolling around.

“It is only in *war* that all is fair.”

And she walked towards the palace, leaving him on the grass, crying out in pain.

The second time he saw her was on the night of a full moon; the night agreed for the

meeting between the Amazons and the soldiers from the army. The encounter between the soldiers and the young girls would take place in a copse consecrated to Artemis, located on the border between the two countries. The most striking of the Amazons would sound the Sacred Horn, and while the notes filled the air, the girls would hide themselves in the forest. When the sound of the horn came to an end, the soldiers would go in and look for the young girls among the trees, with the approval of the moonlight that lit up their path.

Given her lineage and the reputation she had earned with her feats, Hippolyta had sounded the horn, and therefore she was the last to enter the forest. Pilomenes knew he had to look for her. It was a tacit agreement that the daughter of the Queen kept herself for the son of the King.

He began to stalk the land, as though he were preparing for a hunt. He looked for the trail of footprints on the ground and he penetrated into the forest, knowing that finding Hippolyta would not be an easy task. He saw a track of steps and he followed it; the footsteps were fading out at the base of a large tree with a thick trunk. He looked up and, from the crushed leaves, he deduced that someone had been there just a short time before, no doubt spying on him from above, and laughing as he searched for her.

Nevertheless, she could not have gone very far. He knew that she had been the last to enter, and this gave her little time to be able to move far into the depths of the forest. He was also a consummate hunter. He had learned to hunt with his father and a certain instinct allowed him to smell when the prey was close by. He stayed still for a few minutes; if reason did not fail him she had to be hidden somewhere close to here. He began to look around the tree, searching for the girl's potential hiding places. Suddenly he saw it. It was just a tiny glimmer. Artemis, Pilomenes' accomplice, was helping him that night. Hippolyta had moved imperceptibly, but the mouthpiece of the Sacred Horn, carved in silver, gleamed in the moonlight.

Hippolyta immediately realized that Pilomenes had discovered her hideaway. She quickly stood up and began to run, as she had done the time before. Just like on the previous occasion, he began to follow her and, using the same trick that had been so effective, he once again leapt on her from behind and knocked her over.

This time there was no force; the two of them remained stretched out on the grass, Pilomenes on top of Hippolyta, looking intently into her eyes. How she had matured from that time! Regardless of the fact that she was an athletic woman, Hippolyta now possessed a body with more pronounced curves, curves that were once again molding themselves perfectly into his manly body.

"You will take your revenge?" she asked.

Pilomenes plunged into the dark sea of those eyes that he had not been able to get out of his mind, and there he saw fear. *Fear? Calm down, I will not hurt you.* With a sweet smile, he said, "I already told you the last time, my beautiful damsel, all is fair in *love* and war." He began to kiss her softly, while those marvelous legs, that he had dreamed of so often, embraced him.

After that night, he waited nine months for the delivery of the males. They followed the progress of each one of them with great care, but the Amazons had an absolute and unbreakable rule; there were no explanations with regard to paternity. No child carried any mark or sign that would allow recognition of who his mother was, or from which father he had been conceived. As for the girls, it was best to forget; they already formed

part of the community and nothing more would be known of them.

None of the boys looked like either himself or Hippolyta. Either the young girl had not been left pregnant, or the fruit of their relationship had been a girl, in which case he would never know her. A short time later, his father arranged his betrothal to Valia, and as time passed and his daughters arrived, the memory of Hippolyta remained guarded in the depths of his mind.

Now Hippolyta had told him that they had conceived a daughter, and she had asked him to host her in his palace. Something very serious must be happening for Hippolyta to break the rigid tradition and ask him to welcome her heir in his palace, he thought, rather worried.

“Another female child,” he said aloud. The Gods had denied him a male heir, but he was happy. On that night, under a full moon, he had left his seed in that untamed woman.

Valia and Toula looked at him closely when they heard him. Instinctively he knew that it would not be an easy task, but he would take the girl in and protect her. He owed it to the only woman in his life he had ever loved.

CHAPTER THREE

The moment had arrived; he and the Word would transform into one sole being.

He was completely naked, with his shaven head and his shaven face on the Sacred Stone, waiting for the arrival of the Council of Wise Men. They would begin the ceremony, a ceremony that dated back to the beginning of the world, when the Word had been proclaimed for the first time.

It was a secret ceremony, since few could know the Great Mystery that led to the Word. Only a few chosen ones... to preserve it from generation to generation, across the path of time.

And he was the one chosen to be the Bearer.

He wanted to pluck up his courage and not to cry out. He knew that blood would flow, his own blood... But as the worthy heir of his father, he would not scream, he would not move, he would not display any sign of weakness.

Once the ceremony came to an end, he would have to be stripped of his privileges, his vestments, his servants, and his chambers. A difficult decision. Others would not have withstood the sacrifice implied in being the Bearer, but he most certainly would. He swore to himself upon that Sacred Stone that he would be a dignified heir of the tradition.

He heard the chants from the Circle of Blind Ones who preceded the entry of the Wise Men.

The ceremony had begun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Queen Aruza had been riding her favorite horse across the desert, just like every other morning. She used the pretext that her morning exercise kept her robust, but, in reality, it was the only time in the day when she could be alone with her thoughts; when she could enjoy the peace that the landscape inspired. She had spent more than three hours mounted on her mare. The sun was starting to reach its zenith, and heat blanketed the air. It was time to go home.

On horseback, she swiftly took the trail back through the desert. Aruza recognized a huge mass of rose rock that towered over the silver sand, above the outline that the horizon drew on the sky. The sun shone on the gigantic pink rocks, revealing a dark fissure between them. It was the *Siq*, the tight gorge that gave way to the triumphant entry to Petra, the Rose City of the Desert.

Immense, thick, walls flanked the *Siq*; the lowest part measured three hundred feet, climbing to more than six hundred feet at their highest point. Aruza was indeed an experienced rider; few could boast going through this access at such speed, since at some points in the passage the distance between the two walls was barely seven feet in width.

The reward for the journey was the spectacle of welcome extended by the *Al Khazneh*, the first building that any traveler would see after completing the more than five hundred yard ride through the *Siq* when he entered Petra.

Carved in the beautiful rose stone that defined the city, this temple measured almost one hundred feet wide by one hundred and thirty feet high. The ample façade, sculpted directly into the stone, had six sustaining pillars whose heads were finished with acanthus leaves, like the temples dedicated to the Gods on the other side of the Mare Nostrum. The lintel was the only part that followed local style; rather than the triangular line of the classic pediments, this one split in the center to make way for a circular shrine topped with an urn.

After admiring the building's façade, she set off towards the main thoroughfare that was bordered with buildings also carved in pink stone. *Petra*, she thought, while she looked around with pride, *one of the most beautiful cities in existence, ever*. The color of its stone was indescribable. At first, it could be defined as a light pink, but the inside of the stone displayed veins ranging from blood red to toasted brown, creating an explosion of color that was a delight to the senses.

Petra was beginning to enjoy its greatest era of splendor. Its territories would soon stretch from Damascus to Gaza, and the stone city would dominate all routes for all the caravans that came laden with incense, spices, pearls, and ivory.

Suddenly, Aruza heard a soft sob that was barely perceptible. It took a few minutes to realize its source. Dushara, the God of Petra. The inhabitants of Petra did not represent their God with a glorious statue of a human figure as was done in the West, rather with a block of stone.

Stone was not by chance the very essence of Petra. Then should they not give reverence to it, in the same sacred way that it gave life to the city? It was for this reason that they could see large square blocks of spectacular rose stone in distinct points of the metropolis. The blocks were the abode of the God, and, at the same time, his altar.

Upon one of these blocks of sacred stone, Aruza saw the tiny naked body of a

recently born baby. Shocked, she moved towards the little creature resting on the hard stone. *A girl*. For a woman who had given birth to seven males, seeing a recently born baby girl aroused an intimate desire, a repressed wish to coddle, caress, kiss, and breastfeed. A wish that she could never express to her sons.

She wrapped the baby up in her shawl, and taking her in her arms, she held her to her breast. She noticed the chill of her skin. *As if she is made of stone*, she thought to herself. Her white skin also resembled stone; it was an immaculate white, like alabaster. The only touch of color the child had was the black mop of hair on her head... and the eyes. The child opened her eyes and Aruza could see that they were a deep, brilliant green, like jade. With a sweet funny face, the baby smiled at her.

At that moment, Aruza decided to keep her. Surely, the Goddess Al'Uzza, a woman like her, had sent the baby in response to a solitary prayer that she was never able to say in the presence of her husband, a husband who only wanted strong males to continue his lineage. She had to give thanks to the Goddess Al'Uzza. And to the God Dushara, of course.

"Where did you come from, little one?" She asked, in a sweet voice, as she lulled her to sleep against her chest. "How could anyone leave you, so tiny and naked, on this stone?"

And suddenly, the absurd idea that the stone had given birth to this little one, sprung to mind.

There was no doubt; Dushara, too, had sent her.

Petra had a princess.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mithridates, the sixth of his name, watched how the skin of the poor miser, whom his men had forced to drink poison, continued turning blue. His tongue was starting to swell and it seemed as though his throat was doing the same, as he was making guttural sounds, trying to breathe an air that was apparently not reaching his lungs.

He was in his personal laboratory, a room in the west wing of his palace, far from all the happenings in the court. It was a room without windows, the lintel of the heavy door, with an iron lock that brandished the entrance, constituted the only opening. No one could enter there, only he and the tight circle of his Royal Guard. He wanted absolutely nobody to know his secrets.

On top of a vast wooden table, there was an infinite number of glass and ceramic jars, with distinct herbs, animal fluids and other preparations. There was an antique still near the chimney, and a strange odor of sulfur filled the room.

The victim of the poison, a wrong-doer pulled from the prisons, was at the point of death, but the King wanted to wait until the last minute to fully understand the effect of the poison. When he realized that if he delayed one more second he would lose the opportunity to test the antidote, he raised his hand, and a soldier swiftly moved the body of the dying man to his majesty's side.

Mithridates opened his mouth with his own hands and poured the contents of a glass bottle down his throat. The prisoner started to scream as the liquid burned his throat, but color quickly returned to his cheeks. He took deep breaths as he struggled to trap the oxygen that had refused to enter his body because of the intense contractions in his throat. The struggle lasted a few seconds, but straight away the prisoner, who had fallen to the ground on his knees, was able to sit up and gently control his breathing. He leaned to one side, vomited up the entire contents of his stomach, and collapsed onto the stone floor.

"Give him some fresh water and let him sleep on a straw mattress," the sovereign said. "Don't let him have anything solid until tomorrow."

Mithridates was happy; he had tried seven different potions and each time the victim had died, but this test had been distinct. At last he possessed the universal antidote that he had wanted to acquire so badly.

He still remembered clearly the banquet when his father died of poisoning. He was only twelve years of age, and ever since that time this was one of the recurring themes of his dreams. Every night, as he went to sleep, he could see his father laughing and enjoying the festivities at the large round table, surrounded by neighboring kings and allies, raising his goblet to the dancers who were entertaining the dinner guests.

An ox that had been sacrificed for the royal banquet was slowly cooking in the great brick oven of the palace. Tireless servants served plates of wild venison, recently hunted, and trays of precious mackerel from the Black Sea. Platters of olives, peaches, and cherries flowed swiftly from table to table. Each dish was served individually, but they were all washed down with copious amounts of wine. To entertain the guests, there were magicians from Parthia, snake charmers from India, and beautiful Syrian dancers who shimmied to the sound of the music from the harps, flutes, and drums.

In the jubilation of the party, the King let out a few cries of joy and raised a goblet of wine to his lips. Instantly, his eyes opened wide, like plates, and his chest began to move

like a worn-out accordion. He put his hands around his neck in a vain effort to remove the invisible thongs that were choking his throat, and suddenly he collapsed on the table.

The music stopped immediately, and, motionless, the dancers stared at Mithridates V. When his wife leaned over him, it was already too late; the sovereign had died.

Mithridates VI was sitting at a side table, observing the whole scene with the innocence of youth. In the uproar that ensued, a pair of strong hands grabbed him and pulled him out of the royal palace. The boy recognized Dorylaeus, one of his father's most loyal generals. He surreptitiously took him from the dining room, and taking advantage of the confusion that had erupted, he put him on a horse and took him far away from the palace. They rode all evening and, in the dead of night, they arrived at a cabin in the middle of a forest in Amasia.

"Why?" The child asked the general. It was the first time they had spoken since they had abandoned Sinope, the capital of the kingdom.

"To protect you, Your Majesty," were the faithful soldier's words.

Mithridates did not respond. He nodded in agreement, and went into the cabin where an old shaman was cooking a stew in a large casserole. He ate what was offered and lay down to sleep on a straw mattress in the corner of the cabin. From that night, and the following nights of his young life, he would always have the same dream, the image of his father laughing while he raised a glass of wine to his lips, and then the look in his eyes when he fell on the banquet table, with the boy's mother leaning over him. The silver goblet was silently spilling the rest of the poison onto the thick carpet.

A short while afterwards, he received news that his mother had proclaimed herself Queen Regent, and had declared his younger brother, Mithridates Chrestus, as successor. No further explanations were necessary. Everything was clear in the boy's mind.

He lived distanced from the court for seven years, in the cabin in the middle of the woods. In this wild environment, he learned to brandish a sword, to fight, to kill wild boars with a spear, to break spirited steeds, and to concoct a substance capable of acting as an antidote against any poison.

The shaman who lived in those woods taught him the art of identifying and mixing the right herbs, to capture vipers and extract the poison from them to make an oil that he would use in his mixtures, and to take small doses of lethal poisons so that his body would become used to them and render him immune. Fascinated with all that he was learning, the young Mithridates dreamed of finding the universal antidote.

After those seven years that gave him courage and strength, he assembled a group of soldiers still faithful to his father's ideals, and he attacked Sinope. The first thing he did when he entered the palace was to look for his mother, Gespaepyris, and his brother Mithridates Chrestus. No one had to confirm it for him; he was certain that the hand that poured the poison into his father's goblet was that of his mother.

He ordered the Queen's and the anointed prince's imprisonment. They were sent to the deepest and darkest cell in the palace. He took personal charge of the foods that were given to them. A short time later, the Queen and the heir died of a strange illness caused by the humidity in the cell, or so the royal doctors said. Nobody would dare to contradict the cause of death of a queen who had fallen into disgrace.

Mithridates organized royal funerals for both, and ordered mourning in the city for three days. When he saw his mother's corpse on the stone slab, the image of his father, asphyxiated and falling on the table, came back to him. *Father, now you have been*

avenged, he thought, with the pride of a loyal successor. He looked back at the remains of Mithridates Chrestus that rested by the side of the Queen. Killing his brother had been a matter of survival, his mother had anointed him heir; he had no other alternative than to wipe him off the face of the earth.

Soon afterwards, he married his sister Laodice, to further legitimize his rights to the throne. His heirs would have royal blood that was indisputable. He locked his other sisters up in a tower separated from the palace. He could not take any risks, they had to keep their virginity and remain in waiting. If Laodice did not give him male heirs, perhaps he would need another royal wife, and they constituted the best reserves.

Even after crowning himself King of Pontus, he continued to study poisonous substances and their antidotes; the fear of dying of poison at the hands of a coward, and not in battle like the great warrior he was, possessed him. He resumed the work of his grandfather, King Pharnaces, the first of his name, a sovereign from whom he had inherited the obsession of discovering the antidote to any poison.

He revived his personal garden, where he cultivated all the herbs necessary for his potions. He had a small zoo with different species of snakes, scorpions and poisonous toads, and he purveyed all the essences, crystals and metals that were traded in the rich city of Sinope on the border of the Black Sea.

The King also owned nefarious mines of rare minerals, which gave off vapors so toxic that only the slaves sentenced to death for committing terrible crimes worked in them.

Mithridates focused his attention on the most dangerous one, the mine known as *Sandarakurgion Dag*. This quarry most resembled hell on earth. It was made up of a series of underground passages that went inside the heart of the rocky mountain. By virtue of a lashing, the prisoners were obliged to enter on their knees. None of them lived more than six months after beginning their somber task. The skin of these poor wretches would turn green in a few days. By the end of three months, their reddened eyes would lose vision, and they had to use the sense of touch to find their way around in the caverns. The prison guard would argue with cynicism that, in any case, the sense of vision was useless in dark places not reached by sunlight. The cough that they developed from the early days was one that would eventually end their lives, since the toxic vapors would destroy their lungs.

None of these events generated compassion in Mithridates' soul, on the contrary, his curiosity and desire to discover a potent poison led him to study the composition of the mine in detail. Taking samples of its earth and, one more time, using defenseless prisoners as laboratory rats, he succeeded in isolating a substance that he named *Zamikh*, a colorless, odorless poison that caused instant death. Once he had his new poison, he dedicated himself to the task of looking for its antidote, and he had finally found it.

His devotion to the study of poisons and antidotes had become an obsession, only surpassed by his desire to destroy Rome.

Mithridates left behind him a legend of poisons and antidotes well respected by all herbalists who continued his work. Zamikh would later become known in the West by the name of Arsenic, and it caused many deaths and misfortunes.

Of his two obsessions, to destroy Rome and to distill new poisons, we can say that the first was the cause of his death and, paradoxically, the second impeded that his departure was quick and without pain.

When Pompey, one of the three greats of Rome that he confronted, corralled him in and he realized that all was lost, Mithridates tried to commit suicide, using the poison from the handle of his dagger, but all the years of ingesting its antidote had taken their effect and the King, terrified, could see that his nemesis was very close and would trap him alive. Unable to stand the idea of dying in a Roman jail, he asked one of his most loyal generals to kill him by sword.

However, we are getting too far ahead of ourselves with these events; there is still plenty of the story to be told before we reach this episode.

CHAPTER SIX

Raiko was hoisting the sails on the ship. He looked out at the ocean, where bursts of foam marked the trajectory that they had just made. One more time, thanks to the song of the mermaids, they had fooled the officials, and the cargo of contraband had passed through without inspection by the authorities. He was on his way to making himself extremely rich - richer than he would ever have imagined when he used to wander the ports, hungry and barefoot. Nevertheless, in spite of having chests filled with gold, his heart did not find peace.

Maybe it was because he spent so much time at sea. He had not stayed on firm ground for more than three consecutive days in the last seven years. He was nostalgic for his land, for his home... right now he would have given anything to know what happened to his family. Would his father still be alive? Would he still feel as ashamed of him? Would he have forgiven him? What would have happened to his brother?

Going home to find the answers to these questions was not an option. Perhaps if he consulted the oracle... The idea had been dancing around in his head for months, inciting him. Yes, definitely, he would go to the Oracle of Delphi, he would offer the corresponding sacrifices, and he would try to find out if his destiny was to stay on this ship, roaming the seas. He wanted to know if one day he would be able to face his past.

He looked at Odon, his faithful friend, and said to him, "Turn the ship to the West."

"To the West?" Odon asked, surprised. "The island of Rhodes is in the other direction."

"I want to head towards the port of Kirra. I would like to visit Delphi."

"Do you want to go to the Oracle of Delphi?" he asked, with derision. "Since when did you believe that your destiny is governed by the Gods?"

"Perhaps we'll have the chance to do some business in those lands. It is in times of war that we earn more money. Maybe we can get them to pay a high price for what we have in the hold," Raiko lied, turning away.

Odon looked at him directly and did not let himself be deceived. He realized that for the first time in seven years, Raiko wanted to reconcile what had happened.

"As you like. Your wish is my command," he said, sarcastically, making an exaggerated and sardonic bow.

The ship changed direction, while Raiko, from the railing on the deck, looked out over the vast blue ocean. From the water, the mermaids greeted him with a flirtatious splash. Instinctively, he put his hands on the necklace of shells hanging around his neck. The gift from the Goddess.

I don't know where my trade would be without you, he thought, and offering them his finest smile, he waved his hand in the sign of a greeting. Seeing that the ship changed direction and was heading towards the port of Kirra, the mermaids bade farewell with a cry that signified *until we meet again*, and they distanced themselves into the ocean.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The oracle was celebrated on the seventh day of each month, from spring through autumn, to commemorate the birth of Apollo. On a day such as today, the seventh of *Bysios*, the God had come into the world with the help of his twin sister, the Goddess Artemis, who was born one day before him, and who had helped her poor mother Leto with the task of the birth of her brother. The jealous Hera, in the knowledge that Leto's swollen belly was the fruit of her infidelity with Zeus, had prohibited her from giving birth on solid ground. Then, the island Delos emerged from the sea, a shield of water covered it like a transparent cloak, and the wretched Leto was finally able to give birth, to not one, but two children.

As it was a day of great consequence for the followers of the cult, the priests were waiting for a visit from pilgrims en masse. They were stationed on the terrace of the greater temple, since, from there, they had a privileged view over the whole sanctuary. It was an excellent spot to watch people arriving without being seen.

The number of people circling inside the walled enclosure was greater than usual; they were able to recognize the people of Sparta, Thebes, and Phrygia by their dress... only the Athenians were notable by their absence.

"It seems as though today we will receive people of pedigree, as we are accustomed to do," said Enos, as he pointed to a royal committee that had just arrived.

"They have the emblem of Petra," said Duos as he recognized the emblem of the Rose City of the Desert.

"But it is not the King," Exos replied, who, on hearing their voices, joined in the conversation. "It must be someone else from the royal family."

A strong man with long black hair pulled back in a braid, and with a long, equally black beard, got down from a horse that was pulling a carriage. From his muscular build, it could be perceived that he was a robust man, and no stranger to the elements. A beautiful woman stepped down from the carriage; she was tall, with long, black, curly hair and large green eyes. Her most striking feature, however, was the color of her skin. Impeccably white, flawless. She possessed majesty and serenity beyond equal. She walked slowly and silently, as though her feet did not touch the ground.

"Might these visitors have anything to do with the prophecy?" Enos asked curiously, pointing at the entrance.

The priests followed with their eyes to where their colleague was pointing his finger. A man and a woman arrived accompanied by one single servant; they had neither standards nor shields, but by the quality of the horses and their attire, it was easy to deduce their noble pedigree.

On looking at the man, anyone could have believed that the God Apollo himself had come down from Olympus to visit his temple. He was young, blond like molten gold, with clear, bright eyes like rays of sun, and he had perfect physical form. He was wearing a short tunic gathered together on only one shoulder, leaving his chest partially uncovered. His body, sculpted by long hours devoted to physical activity, gave him the same proportionate and perfect appearance as the statues of the God.

The girl was beautiful, slender, and well proportioned. She had hair that was the color of recently polished copper, and gray-green eyes. She did not wear a tunic like other

women, but instead, a short *quiton* in the style of the Amazons that exposed a pair of well-toned legs. The two dismounted, and leaving the servant in charge of the horses, they approached the group of stalls that had been set up in the southeast corner of the enclosure.

“It could be that they are the chosen ones.” Pentos, who was listening to the other priests, answered the question that had been left in the air. “But remember that we have left the mission in Heptos’ hands, and he alone is in charge of carrying it through.”

“Are you all certain that Heptos is the right person to fulfill the task of saving the Treasure?” a voice asked.

The voice came from a priest who had stayed inside the temple listening to his companions’ conversation. He took a few steps forward and the sunlight revealed his face. It was Tesseros.

He was the youngest of the priests, and the one who had most recently joined the cult. From the beginning of his residency, he had not developed bonds of trust with any of his companions, and he considered this the opportune moment to sound out the loyalties of those present.

“Of course!” Pentos answered immediately. “He is the priest of the greatest hierarchy in the oracle. He is the one who knows the whereabouts of the sanctuary’s riches.”

What was known as the Treasure of Delphi was not only a group of statues and architectural pieces that decorated the enclosure, it also included the collection of objects of value, works made from precious metals, jewelry, and gold and silver coins that the different Greek city-states had donated to the oracle in the past. Some important Greeks had also used the treasury as a safe to guard their personal fortunes under shrines that carried their family name.

After the holy wars and the invasions of Phillip of Macedonia, Delphi realized that it was not immune to plundering. For this reason, the priests had created hiding places throughout the enclosure and in the adjacent areas, to conceal the pieces of value that could be stolen by future invaders. The guardian of this secret was normally the priest with the greatest hierarchy, or seniority in the position.

The coins, jewelry, and goods easiest to transport were inside makeshift wooden chests in simple carts pulled by mules; they had placed dry straw on top of them so that they would not attract attention. When the seven chosen ones of the prophecy met, they would be responsible for putting this fortune in a well-sheltered place.

Heptos would lead the group of seven to save the Treasure of Delphi. The priests were sure that the oracle would be reborn once more, after the war between Rome and Pontus ended. That was the significant fact that they had interpreted from the prophecy that the Pythia had told them a few days earlier. Sulla, the Red Commander, would plunder them, or at least he would pillage whatever they allowed to be taken. However, they were not afraid. The same had happened in the past, wars came about, and the victors took what they could get on the way. It was only a matter of waiting, and going back to rebuild everything again, but this time they would have sufficient funds.

Tesseros looked suspiciously at the others. He, in particular, never totally trusted Heptos. The old priest was not a greedy man, nor did he display an insatiable thirst for power. On the contrary, he always had a humble and servile attitude, however Tesseros was afraid that Heptos would use the gold for another purpose, even though he himself did not know how to determine what this was. He greatly distrusted him, and even more

so that servant of his, Cleantes, who was as agile as a cat.

Tessero did not feel safe blindly leaving his future in the hands of Heptos. At that moment, he decided he would take the necessary measures to ensure that the oldest priest complied absolutely with the task that they had so nobly offered to him.

