

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE ONE EAR BACK

by Tina Connolly

I hated my mother for the curse she bore.

In this cold rocky land, the huldufólk leave strange imprints upon us, curses molding souls as a cup does water. My mother angered one of these hidden people—how, no longer matters. She was cursed to live as a cat until she did a good deed that had never yet been done.

I have since heard of curses stranger, but this is the one that affected me, for she was pregnant when the curse fell.

* * *

Mother was a companion to Thurid, the Chieftain's wife. She had gathered mosses and lichens for Thurid as a human; as a cat she wept because she did not have hands to help her lady. She killed the mice and insects that crept over the twig floor, and Thurid laughed and petted her.

Thurid had a daughter, Ingibjorg, and we grew side by side. Or yet—we did not. Though we played together, though we slept curled together, kid and kit in a pile of shredded moss, all too quickly the difference in our births showed itself.

As Ingy learned her letters, I learned the trundle of insects.

As she combed her golden hair, I licked my mackerel fur.

As she pressed through linens with sharp needle, I speared mice with a claw.

I tried to take pride in my catly skills, but how could I? If not for my mother, I would know the delights of fingers. I would not be a soul squeezed black and twisted into a kitten shape, a soul overflowing kitten ears.

I rejected the skills of my body and watched blackly from a corner as Ingy studied cooking and my mother did unimportant, everyday deeds for Thurid. She was weak, my mother. Weak and toadying. What good deed could she do that had not been done a thousand times before?

The pettiness of her deeds made them insignificant, and I resented her for it.

* * *

If there had been any act of my mother's bold enough to have broken that spell, it should have been the one that happened when Ingy and I were nine.

That day, Ingy was marching towards the forest, the gentle boy Osvif and I trailing her. She had woven sticky purple butterwort into her tangled curls and it attracted gnats, which she batted. The end-of-spring chill was just lifting, and now that her morning chores were finished, Ingy was determined to pack the afternoon with excitement. Usually that meant

climbing grey-brown cliffs after birds' eggs or acting out great adventures with Ingy directing who was to say what. She would not let me play a human girl's part as often as was fair, and I refused to play any of the trolls or fairies' parts that littered her inventions. Osvif often had to moderate between us.

But today Ingy's thoughts tended towards the forest. "I want to see the giant," she said.

Osvif stopped dead still and I faltered. I knew what tangling with huldufólk—the hidden ones—could mean.

"No, Ingy," Osvif said.

"Yes, Osvif," mimicked Ingy. "The giant's home is in my father's territory. Which makes him my subject."

"Don't say that," said Osvif.

"Why not? It's the truth. Besides, how could he hear me? Giants have sharp noses, not sharp ears."

"They smell feelings the way you hear a tone of voice," said Osvif. "Your words carry on the wind to his nose."

"Do not!" said the chieftain's daughter.

"Do so!" said Osvif, and he tickled her nose with a curl of her hair. "He can smell pretty girls, too."

"Oh!" said Ingy, and she giggled.

I felt funny watching them. Ingy had already forgotten about her mission. And forgotten about me the moment my tail

dropped from view, as though I were a simple cat in truth and not a girl in spirit.

Maybe that's why I said, "I can find the giant."

"Kisa!" said Ingy. She turned from Osvif. "Can you really?"

I wrapped my tail around my paws. "Cats can. Our senses aren't troubled by the hidden turnings on the way to his house." Instinctively I knew it was true of this body I bore, though I had never tried it.

"You can't," said Osvif, and his joking was gone. "You shouldn't encourage her, Kisa. The giant's dangerous."

"She'll encourage me if she wants to!"

"This could bring trouble to the whole village," said Osvif soberly. "Let's turn back."

"I will see the giant," said Ingy. She was always very obstinate. "I will remind him of his allegiance to me. And I'll take him a present, cause that's what you do. Osvif, run and fetch me that cheese we had at dinner last night."

Osvif looked torn, but for Ingy, he went. And I, glad that a cat always looks brave, even when she's not, said "Come on, then." I turned my nose to the north and headed into the birch forest by the trail only I could see.

Ingy plunged behind me. "I'll leave a trail of petals for Osvif to follow," she said. "That's what chieftain's daughters do in stories. The others will be sorry they missed this!"

The shadows between the trees were dark and I stood between two birches, sniffing out the right way. My tail was high. This was no headless mouse. This would impress Ingy.

Left past the bent birch, straight towards the two skinny birches. We went more slowly as the trail grew harder to find. The loose canopies of the birches were tight-woven here, dark all around. I sniffed again. The air was thick with quiet.

“Kisa,” said Ingy. One finger skritchd my head. “Have you ever seen the giant?”

“No.” My ears were on high alert.

“How does it feel to be under a curse?”

One ear flattened in discomfort. She would despise me if she knew how I sat and dreamed of being her human friend. “I’ve never known different.” I wondered if she wanted to turn back. If so, then what else could I show her?

But she stood. “Let’s keep going.”

Further in we crept, on the path-that-didn’t-look-like-a-path, until I knew the giant’s house must be near. There was a clearing with a bit of sun, and we crept out into it.

My cat senses realized something else before my human wits did. The giant, himself. Suddenly the stink of giant was all around us and I didn’t know how I’d missed it a moment before.

I was looking into his ankle, then there was a frightening jerk on my tail and I was peering into his long wide face. I spat and shrieked, clawing at his nose. He grabbed me, dropped me. I flew back into the undergrowth to Ingy.

But impetuous Ingy had run towards the giant, trying to save me, and now he had her dangling by an arm.

“Help!” cried Ingy. “Help!”

I shrunk into the twigs and moss. I was not a quarter the size of Ingy; I had no fingers to wield a knife. I was just a useless cat.

That was when Osvif stumbled into the clearing, wide-eyed, his shock of hair on end. I didn’t know how he’d found us —Ingy’s petal trail was laughable—but then I saw my mother, her spine and tail bristling.

“Put her down,” shouted Osvif.

The giant set Ingy on the ground, holding onto her hair with a fist as large as her torso. “Don’t like intruders.” He spat a big glob towards me, a mound of silver and white that smeared the brush.

He picked Ingy up by the waist, raised her as if to bite off her head. Gentle Osvif rushed forward with a fish knife—a suicidal undertaking. But before he reached Ingy, another form flew past. Flew up the side of the giant, scratching and hissing.

My mother.

The giant dropped Ingy in surprise, and she tumbled, clutching her ribs, coughing. Osvif ran to her, the rest of us forgotten. The giant roared as my mother's claws tore his skin, his face.

Too quickly he caught her. Too quickly he squeezed.

The giant leered and flung the body of my mother to Ingy's feet. "Don't disturb my home again," he said. He turned and vanished into the swaying white forest.

A moment ago I had thought my cowardice when Ingy was grabbed was the low point of my life.

Until now, when the first thing I did upon my mother's death was look down at my furry body, expecting it to change.

"Oh, Kisa," said Ingy. She reached for my scruff but I backed away and hissed. She crawled towards me, coughing again, and I pelted through the birch, hurled myself through the forest till I couldn't run anymore. We cats are made for speed, not stamina. I had barely come a hundred bounds. There was a cairn of rocks there and I sunk panting to them, eyes glazed, breath shallow. My sides were raked and bleeding from his nails, some part of my ribs were broken, and for the first time in my life I thought I might die.

I huddled on the rock I do not know how long. Until a voice said, "What's all this bleeding in my home about?"

Something that looked like a smaller rock unfolded itself and looked down at me with beady black rock eyes. “Why, I know you,” it said. “At least, I knew your mother. I suppose she’s still a cat?”

I said nothing. I would be dead soon, and this hidden one would be gone. My mother, Ingy, everything would be gone, just like they wanted. Why couldn’t I weep? Real humans could cry. Real humans didn’t run away.

“Oh,” it said softly. “I see.” It reached under an outcropping and scraped out a blue-green moss I was not familiar with. It patted my wounds with it; my tail, my ear, my flanks. Strange to say, as it covered me in moss my body healed; though I knew of nothing that could effect such a swift change.

“I can’t help you with the lost blood,” it said. “Rest yourself a few days, get some sleep.”

I listened, but as its hand came towards me with more moss I snapped at its craggy fingers.

It jumped. “I suppose from your point of view I deserve that,” it said. “I can’t remove the curse from you, and I think it would do you good, anyway. But I will give you a gift. Steady.” It folded some moss into a neat pocket and tucked it into my ear before I could bite its fingers. “You will be half-deaf till you

need it, but I assure you that's a fair trade. Goodbye, little cat." It tapped my ear, and then there were only rocks once more.

I crawled into a dirty cave and hid. But no matter how long I huddled there, my cat body would not weep for my mother.

* * *

A week later I set out around the coast. He must have wits who wanders, they say, and I learned that in short order. The summer was fine and sunny and it was a fine time to learn surviving by myself, though in my cold determination I thought I knew everything. I set forth and did what Mother had not thought to do, systematically performing one good deed after another, out in the wide world. Now the weight of breaking her curse had fallen to me, and I was determined to wrest free and find a place among humans.

I caught baby puffins for old women to eat; I speared brown trout for beggars. After every good deed I looked at my body.

But nothing changed.

Winter came and I felt my first taste of real cold, cold with no one to curl up against, cold day-after-day with galing winds that could blow a kitten straight up a birch tree. The mice and voles vanished into their dirt homes and I thinned, till my ribs poked my knees. I was caught in a blizzard and almost froze, except a kindly shepherd boy took pity on me, fed me scraps of

mutton and let me lay against his side through those long winter nights. I did eleven good deeds for him before I left that spring, but none of them were new.

That summer I turned my attention to the cliffs. Surely in the desolate heights, among the goat herders, I would strike upon new good deeds. But the hidden one's curse was a good one, and I could do nothing that had not been done before. Before the next winter came, I found a farmer's family to adopt me, and I passed that winter in a lovely thick turf house, parceling out the rats and mice till spring.

Another year came, and the good deeds I tried were fewer. What use catching baby puffins for some old hag if it didn't make me human? I rescued a woman's mutton chop from being stolen by a fox, but when I didn't change, I took the mutton with me and ate it myself. Dragging it was hard with my kitten jaws, but that's what I still was, even though in human terms I must have been finally nearing adulthood.

Another year, and the thought of having clever hands and a pretty face grew hopeless. I found a pack of adolescent cats and fell in with them. To them, I was a strange runty kitten, but I knew more about mousing than cats much bigger in body. They were long-legged and had torn ears and broken tails and we all had fleas. I didn't speak like a human to them and they didn't startle from me.

Maybe they didn't know I had a human soul inside.

Maybe I never really had.

Such brooding was useless. The cats accepted me; one of the youngest males groomed me and the oldest female got my back when a frothing rat attacked. I had a place at last.

And in their company, I finally started to grow.

My legs lengthened, my body changed, and overnight, it seemed, I was grown-up. I looked like the mangy stray I was.

I looked like my new family.

* * *

A year later and the pack was on the west of the island. Few of the individual cats were the same, but the pack was still a unit. We were dashing from a bunch of nasty kids when I veered to lose myself in the market by the bridge. The rest of my pack scattered.

I passed by the boy with his cheeses and the wet men hauling writhing fish. There was a woman with a makeshift stall of baskets and table and I ran there, ducking behind a sharp-smelling basket till the boys went by.

I sneezed and looked up. Herbs dangled around me.

I had chosen well.

Apothecaries liked me. Much of their good stuff wouldn't grow in this cold and blowy country. It had to be brought by ship, and the price showed. I looked around for a rodent on

which to show my skill, but before I found one, the woman grabbed my scruff. There was a strange foxy glint in her eye as she popped me in one of those baskets. I yowled and tried to break free. But she had tied it closed.

I was there till the market faded with the sun. I fretted—a day or two and the pack would think I was dead and move on without me. I was picked up and I complained some more. When she opened the basket we were at the hot springs outside the little town. A strong hand closed on my scruff and she dunked me in the water.

Worse, she scoured me raw with a wire brush that hung from her belt. The water and the bristles fizzled on my skin as the brush yanked through years of matting and dead fleas. I swung for her with long claws but she said “Stop it,” in a terrifying voice and her grasp on my scruff tightened. I only hissed after that, even when she ran her fingers around my eyes and down into my ears.

After an eternity she yanked me out and ran her other hand down my hide, wringing the wet from my fur. At last she sat me on flat rock and I shook myself, splattering her.

She grinned. “I’ll wager no one’s done that to you before.”
Hiss. Spit.

“Come off it,” she said. “I know what you are. You’re under a curse, but that don’t mean you have to be thick with fleas. I bet you can hear better, too. Right?”

I shook my head again, loosing more water and mites. I could hear better. But I was grouchy and chilly in the cooling spring night. And who knew what else this far-seeing woman had in store for me?

The woman kicked off her shoes, dangled her tough feet in the hot springs. “I’ve seen a lot of curses in my time,” she said. “Distinctive things, each as unlike as water hemlock from wintergreen.” She studied the air around me and I licked my damp shoulder. “Rock fairy?” she said. “From the south?”

I was both annoyed and curious. One ear flattened, and her sharp eyes picked up on that telltale sign.

“I hear word from down south,” she said. “The giant is on the move again. He’s raging around the woods of—what was that orphan girl’s name? Ingveldur, Athalbjorg? Something very like...”

“Ingibjorg?” I croaked. I had not used my voice in five years, but that word came right back. “But what of her parents?”

“The giant killed them,” said the woman. “And she’s got no brothers, so the place is in turmoil, all fighting over who’ll be the next chieftain. Poll’s boy two stalls down, him what’s tired

of making candles, set off to try his hand at winning a village over. Fat lot of luck he'll have, with no gold to win their trust. A leader's naught without gold. But what do you care? You've got your own mission to fulfill. Which is...?"

I thumped my tail. "Have to do a good deed that's never been done before. It's a stupid impossible quest. But how did you know I wasn't just a cat?"

The wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she narrowed her eyes at me, examining. "I didn't at first," she said. "And usually I can tell. Human souls take up too much space for a small animal. They look different. Squeezed, or stuffed, somehow." She picked at a callus on her toe, her eyes on me. "But you look almost like any feral cat."

A night breeze pricked up the hairs on my spine.

"Then I saw this hanging from your ear," she said. "Not long and it would've fallen out completely." From her sleeve she extracted a packet of blue-green moss.

I stared. Memories of bleeding on a rock flooded me.

"Forgot you had this, did you?" she said. She unfolded it and it sprang open, seemingly more than the packet could hold. "You won't begrudge me a small portion, for the information I have given you."

The small portion was half, and I rumbled dislike at her.

She folded the other half and stuffed it back in my ear. “You better hurry, little cat. Or there won’t be enough left of you to become human.”

* * *

It took me two months to pad to the southern part of the island, and when I got there I found that the old woman was accurate in her depiction of the town. The fields hung heavy with fear. Acrid smoke rose from the birch woods. Even the white trunks of the birches were stained black with it.

I crept into the great house. Those villagers who were left were gathered in the hall, and a small crowd they made. Many of them were so young. Across the way Ingy was speaking with passion to a group of young men, stirring them to fight once more in a hopeless battle. The voices around me rose in different murmurs, and I heard one boy say that the village was cursed and it should be abandoned to the giant, and another, in quieter tones—that Ingy should be left in the forest as an offering. I hissed at that, but when the boy looked down he saw only a cat.

I sidled towards Ingy. She was grown-up now but otherwise just as I remembered, just as I always wanted to be. Silly kitten dreams, wanting fingers and golden hair. Why pine after that when claws and teeth are so much more useful?

Next to her stood gentle Osvif, also full-grown. He was not as tall as some of the doggish young men, not as wide. But when he spoke those around him quieted to listen. He put a comforting hand on the princess' shoulder, telling everyone that they should withdraw from the attack and burnings, that the giant would fade away if they did so. They couldn't ever find the giant, he said, for he knew how to stay hidden. They were only making him madder. They should stop seeking revenge. Ingy leaned into him.

I felt more alone than I had since I found my pack. These were not my people. They had grown, the village had changed, and I was still a cursed cat. They were doing human things like falling in love and fighting wars and I was catching mice and getting forcibly bathed by old hags.

I bit Ingy's ankle.

Gently. But I bit it, and darted. She looked down and followed the green eyes she saw, coming over to examine.

I do believe that if she had acknowledged me for who I was, I wouldn't have done what I did next. I would've swallowed my loneliness, and bid her follow Osvif's advice.

But Ingibjorg the chieftain's daughter said, "What a darling little cat."

I didn't owe her anything. It was she who had gotten my mother killed. "I can find your giant," I said.

“You can talk,” she said. “I used to imagine that my cat could talk. Or did I?”

I rumbled dislike. “I’m sure I don’t know what you imagined, my lady,” I said. “Leave a fish head at the door if you change your mind.”

“Nothing to change,” she said. “We’ll go right now, and I’ll take my mother’s kitchen knife. If you dare find the giant for me, I’ll dare face it.”

I put one ear back at that, because I knew what the giant was like, even if she’d forgotten or didn’t care. If she could forget such an important incident anyway, I didn’t care what happened to her.

We slipped out of the great house. “One of your ears is back, Kisa,” she said. “That means you’re conflicted about something.”

“Oh, so you do remember me,” I said crossly. I couldn’t get the ear to go up, so I put the other one down as well.

“I know there was a horrible day where we met the giant,” she said softly. “And then you disappeared. I cried for weeks.”

“Truly?” I said. “Then why are you blithely trotting after me now?”

“Because,” said Ingy. “If I hadn’t disturbed the giant’s home in the first place, he would never have come after the town. All this is my fault, and now you’re here to help me face

it.” She sounded quite cheerful. The massacre must have made her crazy.

“Turn here,” I said. I led her through low-hanging branches, which she ducked. After all these years I could still feel the twists and turns into the giant’s heart. The woods grew darker, the stench of soot and bone harsher. “Have your knife ready.”

“I do.” Her footsteps were tense behind me. The silence got thicker, each paw padded slower. Guilt almost made me turn and lead her out of the forest, but no, she wanted to face the giant and I wanted her to face it. Still my steps slowed, till I was no longer leading her.

I hissed as she trod on my tail.

“Sorry,” she said quietly. Then, “Kisa? Do you ever think you’ll get your curse lifted?”

My ears were belled out, quivering. “I don’t think I’ll ever try again.”

“But—” she said, and then the giant towered in front of her. He was bigger than I’d remembered. Had he grown? I was bigger and stronger than five years ago, and yet the sight and stench of him widened my eyes and froze me to the ground. There was a smoke-stained birch concealing me from him; I couldn’t seem to move around it.

Ingy rushed at him with her kitchen knife. She hacked at his shins, his fingers as he tried to deflect. He bellowed as she aimed for arteries—for a second I thought she might have a chance. But the giant wrested the knife from her weak wrist, tumbled her, pinned her to the ground. With one stroke he swung the knife and chopped through her ankles like they were carrots. Ingy screamed. Fell silent, unconscious.

Then she was laying there, her feet all separated from her body, the shell of her completely unlike the vibrant Ingy I had known.

The giant put her pink feet in his pouch. He hoisted her to his shoulder so I saw the stumps of leg—oddly quite bloodless. He swung around and set off, Ingy's hair whipping around and her pink smooth face blank, vanishing behind black peeling trunks.

For one horrid instant all my cowardice rushed back upon me and I thought of running away. Running to the west, finding my cat pack again. I needed no part of human affairs.

But in the dark woods I heard Osvif, tearing madly and randomly about, calling for Ingy. My last shameful thought vanished like hot breath into frozen air. I raced forward, along the giant's footfalls, quick and calm as only a cat can do. When I reached the clearing of his cabin I halted, for I know how keen the giant's smell is. But Ingy was there and so in one bound I

jumped in the nastiest, smelliest thing nearby to hide—the giant’s midden.

I crawled in the nasty tunnel underneath the house wall, peeked up into the house. The smell inside was interesting and acrid; burnt bones and hair and the strong musk of giant. There was a cooking pot at one end and a chest of gold coins at another. The giant sat brooding in the middle of the room. And there—Ingy, dumped on a heap of moss and peat ash, her feet thrown down next to her.

I waited and waited, probably a short time in reality, but it seemed endless. At last the restless giant picked up his water buckets, heading for the river. He peered out of the cabin, drew his head back to smell the air for human, for fear. But either because he wasn’t looking for cat or because his own stench hid mine, he didn’t sense me.

The instant his tread lumbered off, I sprung from my hiding place. I lugged each of Ingy’s feet over by biting their toes, lined them up with her ankles. “You could help me, you know,” I said, but I might as well have been talking to rock. With the back of my paw I dug the last of the moss from my ear; the packet fell on a bruise and the purple faded. Oh no you don’t, I thought, and I hurried before the moss wasted its power on scrapes. I nudged the moss with my nose to her

ankles, tore and laid it around them, nudged the feet to the legs by pressing my back against them.

Then I hopped onto her chest and, yowling, kneaded her neck. Her eyelids fluttered. “Wake up, Ingy,” I said. But my kneading did no good. “Wake up!” I said again. There were strange drops of water falling on her neck.

But I couldn’t wake her. I couldn’t move her. I was just a cat. I swallowed my rivers of pride and guilt. I left Ingy there and flew back to the forest to where clumsy human Osvif was still searching. I did not want to talk to him, but he, unlike Ingy, recognized me—or admitted to recognizing me—instantly.

“Why, I know you,” he said. “I’d know that mackerel coat anywhere.” He dropped to one knee, lowered himself to me. “Have you seen Ingy?”

And so I lashed my tail and turned and walked a few paces, looked back. When I was sure he was following me, I set off at top speed to the giant’s house, leading him through trails that only I could find.

His face paled when he saw her.

I took pity on that and spoke. “Careful of the ankles. Keep the moss on them; keep her off her feet.” I did not really know, but I guessed, based on what I knew of the moss and the apothecaries’ sayings.

He nodded, worried but calm. A careful, solid man. A strong-souled human.

My ears stayed upright and steady. “And Osvif,” I said. “Take the gold.”

Osvif looked at me sharply. Then he took a mere three handfuls from the chest, filling his pouch. He swung the unconscious Ingy to his shoulder, just as the giant had done, and hurried out of there, back through the forest.

He walked into the great house with poor half-dead Ingy on his shoulder, and in a louder voice than any I’d ever heard him use, he bought the men off of their anger with gold. He rallied them to his strange cause of non-aggression, and because of the giant’s gold, they followed.

I followed him back to the village slow and unstopping—a test of endurance for an energy-spent cat. I often thought of laying down and sleeping forever, but Osvif chivvied me again and again until we made it home. She will reward you, he repeated, but I spat when he said it. Much I cared for that. Not with Ingy hanging from his shoulder like a dead deer.

Her body was cold and shaking by the time he laid her in the sleeping loft of the great house. I padded up the stairs after them, one red paw print after another. I was bone-tired, my tail dragging, my pads bleeding, but I saw one last thing I could give the girl who had everything. I jumped onto her pallet and

curled around her shivering feet, feet with blue toes and bits of moss still sticking around her ankles like fetters.

I kept her feet warm until she fell asleep, and in the morning I was human.

* * *

A good deed that had never been done before. I don't know what moment tipped that balance. It worked, anyway, for I am human, and isn't that what I always wanted?

But now that I am human I am never satisfied. Ingy and Osvif are married, and he is the chieftain now, though he bids everyone call him Osvif. Ingy can walk, though now that she has her own princess on the way, she stays off those delicate ankles and keeps to the bench near the hearth. They gifted me one of the abandoned turf houses and a servant girl to help me adjust to buttons and mending and cooked food.

Sometimes I go up to the great house and sit with her. But sitting is not the same as running through the forest. Needlework is not the same as a wild chase after a giant.

And I am no more her equal than I ever was.

I feel strangely hollow these days. Lost between worlds; I can't curl up with my pack of cats, nor can I feel at ease with these large-souled humans. Osvif and Ingy overflow with generosity to me. But I seem to have used up my humanity in my quest to become one.

Ridiculous longings! The dreams of a kitten. I knew where my soul was, once. It fit right between the ears, in a little fuzzy body.

Once I had a right-sized soul, the soul of a cat.

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Tina Connolly lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and young son, in a house that came with a dragon in the basement and blackberry vines in the attic. Her stories have appeared in Strange Horizons, Fantasy, multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and the anthology Unplugged: Year's Best Online SF 2008. Her debut fantasy novel Ironskin is forthcoming from Tor in October 2012, with a sequel in 2013. She is a frequent reader for Podcastle and is narrating a 2012 flash podcasting venture called Toasted Cake. In the summer she works as a face painter, which means a glitter-filled house is an occupational hazard. Her website is tinacnolly.com.

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DEATH AND THE THUNDERBIRD, PT. I

by Michael J. DeLuca

I.

Carelessly tossed, the sheathed knife cleared the chaos of platters on the table and skidded towards Bienor across the surface of the map. He stretched a shaking hand to stop it falling to his hooves, willing away the alcoholic shivers and the nervous urge to rear. The hilt was elk-horn, scrimshawed in the likeness of a sheaf of rods. “The fasces,” he acknowledged, scowling. A symbol of unity: a joke in the worst kind of taste.

Nessus’s teeth flashed around the cigar clamped between them. The sight of that ossuary grin inspired no less terror despite the wear of a decade’s devouring since Bienor had last been privy to it. The high desert gale, contorting through the gap in the tent’s stretched skin, caused the map to quake like living flesh, weighted down though it was with the leavings of a carnivore’s feast. In the blankness West—those scant regions Eurytus’s domination hadn’t reached—Nessus had scrawled the terms of the offer in a bloody hand, signed with his symbol. Treason. The centaurs of his retainer shifted nervously, scraping hooves into the hard-packed earth.

Bienor wanted nothing so much as to turn tail and run, past the hard young colts who'd dragged him here, out into the wind and dark. But they'd catch him. They'd done it once already. He was slower than he used to be.

The cigar swirled ash over Nessus's chestnut coat; a slave brushed frantically at the embers. "Eurytus and I campaigned for moons among the peaks," he said. "Every savage who'd ever escaped him must have fled there—we won more spoil than even *he* could have aspired to, enough to overflow the *Achilles's* every coach and cattle car. I had to arrange for a second train.

"In the morning he returns with the first to New Ilium, where I've ensured he be met with celebration appropriate for a homecoming his people hoped never to see: orgies, feasts, fireworks, a week of discounted fees at the Circus. While his ego is thus occupied, you'll meet the second train—the *Echidna*—at the switch house east of Prometheus Gulch. You'll divert it north, here, along this abandoned spur."

His grease-stained fingertip slid over hill and butte until it reached a name whose red Greek lettering was stricken out in black: *Epimethea*.

"I'll be waiting at the end of the line. And when it's over, you'll never need rustle minotaurs or smuggle redeye again. Or did that old shotgun still of yours in the fens by Satyr's Spike finally go up in smoke?"

“You caught me square,” said Bienor with a grimace, “no need to flay it. You’re offering me this windfall... why? Not because I deserve it. Why not use one of your retainers?” He aimed the fasces knife, still sheathed, at the muscled young bay spoiling at Nessus’s elbow. “What have I got that he doesn’t?”

The end of the cigar flared gold. “Besides experience and a rifle taken from the corpse of Pyretus himself? Deniability. This is Eurytus. That bastard’s got eyes in his asshole.”

He could buy that, as far as it went. Not far enough. “What makes you think I want your money? Gryneus and I didn’t turn outlaw out of objection to our portion of the spoil.” Not entirely true—but with Nessus you gave as good as you got.

“Gryneus is dead. You’re not the young colt you were. You’ve lived by your own terms, I respect that. But you deserve better than the gristle left once we *loyal* centaurs have carved up the meat.” Nessus unstoppered a crystal decanter, poured three fingers of liquor the polished bronze of the River Acheron at dusk. He thumbed the glass forward, sloshing its contents aromatically across the map.

That buttery scent, burnt sugar aged in oak, the faintest, iron-metallic hint of ashes—this was no backcountry moonshine, as suitable for soaking rust off shoeing nails as drinking oneself blind. It was Labyrinth Bourbon—from Eurytus’s own cellars.

Drink had been a fine vice when Bienor was younger. Now it was killing him—killing his aim, his self-control, eating money he should have been spending on bribes, bullets... maybe once in a long while a roll in the hay. A bellyful of bourbon wouldn't get him out of this alive.

He breathed the scent, told himself that was enough. "It's not that I mind acquiring the means to ease my dotage. Forgive me, Nessus, but throwing in with you is no way to live that long."

"Refusing me will kill you even swifter."

Maybe he'd need a drink to make it through this after all.

At least they were getting to the marrow. He was an asset Nessus didn't mind expending, with a weakness that made him easy to control. He swallowed, dry. "Not if you were hoping to loot the Pyretus rifle off my corpse." He'd been just sober enough to hide it when he heard them coming. Likely that had saved his life.

Nessus laughed, too quickly. "You've survived too long in the outlands, my friend—it's made you paranoid in your old age."

"Don't kid me. Redeye rots the liver, not the brain. Even a blood pact wouldn't stop you cheating on a deal. You want my help, give me an excuse to trust you."

“Trust... yes of course, I’d forgotten; you consider yourself a centaur of principle. A rare thing these days, almost mythical. But if what’s required is a show of faith, I believe I can oblige.” With a heavy arm, Nessus swept the jumbled plates and heaped bones clattering from the table. He performed an unsubtle prestidigitation, producing a wallet sewn from ill-cured leather, then leaned intimately close across the map. “I stole this wallet from the corpse of a savage sorcerer Eurytus slaughtered among the high peaks.”

Bienor glanced down at the knife in his hands. He couldn’t remember when he’d been this close. The big bay stiffened, reaching for the revolver at his withers.

Nessus paid no attention. Opening the wallet with a creak, he tipped across the map a stream of things shriveled and tawny like buttons of flesh. “These are the mythic flower-hearts of human prophecy. The visions they grant allowed the Anemoi to pass the siege of Acoma unscathed. After the uprising at Epimethea, the rebel leaders Hippodamia and Scylla divined by these flowers the means to escape execution. No centaur since Chiron has attained the power of prophecy. Until now. Do you understand me?”

“Prophecy.” Bienor tried to moisten his cracked lips with his tongue, tasting grit, imagining whiskey. Eurytus had disavowed the gods of the centaurs—they all had, long before

they had come to the New World. They had given up Fate to worship power.

Nessus's eyes were huge, unblinking, black. "I have eaten of these flowers, and they've shown me the path to Eurytus's defeat."

The words came to Bienor unbidden, almost a prayer: *the death of Eurytus*. Gryneus had lived by those words, drank to them, fucked to them. Gryneus was dead at Eurytus's hand. Bienor's own hands shook. "Why should I believe you?"

Grinning, Nessus spat the stub of cigar from his lips. He brushed the heap of flowers into cupped hands and raised them. "The death of Eurytus," he intoned, a prayer to a lost god in whom Bienor knew Nessus had never believed.

The flower-hearts spilled down his gullet and over his lips, catching in his beard and the gray curls that frosted his chest. The human slave made to brush them away; Nessus backhanded her into the dirt. He lunged across the table, ripped the sheath from the fasces knife and gripped Bienor's fists around the blade. The bodyguards shouted, drawing their guns. Bienor barely found the presence of mind to recoil; the force of Nessus's grasp prevented even that. His black eyes swelled with the flowers' effect, irises contracting to nothing, pupils edging out the white. Was it only the the beaten slave's

reflection, or did Bienor imagine human figures moving in their depths?

“Yes,” hissed Nessus, his voice suddenly distorted, sibilances stretched. The flowers’ bitter scent mingled on his breath with aromas subtler and more profane. “They’re real. Don’t believe me? Still don’t trust my word, my symbol? Try them yourself, and *see*.”

His death-grasp weakened. His hands fell away. His eyelids slammed like furnace-mouths, and the earth itself trembled as he toppled against the cushions.

Bienor’s age stared back at him from within the bloodied steel, accusing: the canyoned, bald pate, the crags framing his lips, the iron-filings stubble. His blood dripped across the parched skin of the map and was absorbed. He seized the untouched glass of Labyrinth Bourbon in trembling hands. “The death of Eurytus,” he whispered, and drowned doubt in a torrent of molten gold blended with ashes.

Beside Nessus’s symbol on the map, he smeared his own: the half-moon of Artemis, divided by an arrow-shaft. There on the page, it evoked the idealistic delusions of his youth.

The bodyguards converged. He wrenched the map from the table, enclosing the knife and decanter of bourbon in its folds, and clutched them to his chest as the bodyguards hauled him out into the writhing desert wind.

II.

Five Legs returned from the hunt to find his adopted tribe's campsite trampled and burning. He could find no signs of life or death—no bodies—only heaps of smoldering skins stinking like funeral pyres, smashed weapons and tools, shattered pottery ground into dirt, and hoofprints, everywhere, hoofprints. Like his own.

He searched the camp twice and started again before he recognized the hot clench in his belly as hunger. His tribe's tradition was to fast on the hunt in honor of the prey, then feast in celebration. Days, he'd been gone, on the far side of the valley; his equine endurance and stride let him range farther than the other hunters—that, and his need for their approval.

He slung the two dead does from his back next to a scattered firepit and made effort to assemble cinders for a cooking fire. But his limbs dragged to a halt, and he sank to the trampled earth beside his kill like a foal on its first legs. With a knife of flint, he sawed a haunch from one of the deer, skinned it carelessly, and ate, salting the raw meat with his grief while the sacred mountain and the evening sky looked on, serene.

A shriek came from behind him. He turned, deer's blood slick on his lips, relief welling in his throat to choke off breath. Something hobbled towards him on a splintered spear. A

tattered cloak, feather-trimmed, broke its outline against the jagged flame-lit dusk such that the figure flickered in and out of tangibility: a rangy juniper, it seemed, then a bundle of rags and sticks awaiting fire, a carrion-bird, and then an old, old woman—tiny, angular, and masked.

The elder. How had she survived? If the centaurs had judged her too weak for toil, they should have killed her, if only to prevent her passing word to the next tribe of what they'd done.

Five Legs threw away the haunch of venison, suddenly appalled at its slick, ropy texture and faint warmth. He tried to wipe blood from his lips, realized his hands were covered in it. Centaurs ate their meat raw, like beasts. What was he?

“Look at you,” the elder whispered. The immense wooden mask, with its hooked beak and gaping eyes, was jubilant and cruel, the eyes of the old woman lifeless behind it. “You claimed to have renounced their ways. You feigned desire to learn the wisdoms we could teach. Was this what you wanted, all that time? You brought them here.”

Denying it would have felt like a lie.

Her withered hand, clawlike, reached for his left haunch—the place where Thin Crow had painted the medicine wheel. “You never deserved this. I knew.” Her blackened talons dug

through tar-and-milkweed paint into the scars beneath. He cringed but couldn't pull away.

Her people loved their elder, spoke of her with more than reverence. Grandmother, Thin Crow had called her, though if she'd ever possessed a family of her own they had outraced her to the grave. To Five Legs, she had always been a mask without a face. Did she know what he'd been—what lay beneath the paint?

Had Eurytus come seeking his wayward son, and finding him gone, taken his tribe instead?

He choked out the only answer he could muster. "I'll go after them. Our tribe—please, elder, tell me, you must have seen—"

"Go after them for what? To ply the whip? To sever their feet and make them drag stones across the desert for your pleasure?" The elder's voice was brittle. The mask leered its derision.

They had done such things, and worse. His people, centaurs. "To help them," he whispered.

Her claws dug deeper, drawing blood. "My tribe was taken to a train—one of those starving machines that have devoured the trees, even the land itself from end to end. You could never overcome such a thing—even if you weren't a

traitor but a hero of our race and this new vow not as much a lie as everything you've ever said."

Five Legs struggled to recall Thin Crow's gentle hands on his hide, Thin Crow's calm voice, whispering. The medicine wheel—it had been his meditation, an image that should come to mind as easily as breathing: a consummately human symbol, signifying elemental harmony, eternal return. For a time, it had allowed him to believe himself one of them. Human.

Thin Crow, now chained and crammed into a cattle car along with every other member of his tribe but one; with Nine Fawn, Standing Hare, all the human beings Five Legs had learned to think of as his own. As his possessions.

"Go ahead, elder," he said. "Scrape the wheel from my hide, as I deserve."

She obliged him without mercy, the mask laughing, her nails seeming to lengthen and sharpen into talons, tearing free hair and skin along with the tar.

When the last of the medicine wheel was ripped away, leaving the symbol it concealed as red and raw as on the day it had been seared into his flesh, Five Legs glimpsed recognition in the eyes beneath the mask. The spiral brand—Eurytus's mark—she knew it.

The home fires had spread to the grasslands, fanned by wind. Smoke circled the camp in a widening gyre as dusk fled before night.

The elder lightly traced the spiral's shape with fingernails upon his skin. She turned up the palm of the hand she'd used to flay him, exposing a deep scar limned in red: the sacred mountain, whose shape in the north was outlined by the last rays. It was her own symbol: the mark of a sorcerer, carved not in ownership but sacrifice, no doubt by her own hand. In seven years, he'd never seen it.

"Lend me your power, your vision," he said. "I knew their ways once. We can free them."

The elder's hands retreated within the feathered cloak. She propped the sole of one foot against her knee, defying the mask's massive bulk, balancing her weight against the spear: a pose unassailable, distant, a stork on the hunt amidst the stream.

When she spoke, the elder's words were nearly lost amid the rush of fire. "I will share one portent, traitor. Unless you're prepared to embrace what you are—to abandon the compassion and the will to peace that my people gifted you against my wish—you'll fail. And if by exploiting that inborn viciousness, you free my people but find yourself incapable of

covering up that centaurness with paint and lies a second time, you'll die. If not by another's hand, then by mine."

III.

Bienor reached Prometheus Gulch before dawn. It had been a long, unsteady gallop in the dark along the trail out of the hills, the crystal decanter a pendulum of fire swinging open in one fist, the unearthed Pyretus rifle in the other, frost-edged buttes like ancient human faces lurching up against the starlight.

He dozed away the night's last hours dead on his hooves at the station house bar, knees locked, his cheek in the stains, the rifle in his arms. By sunrise, the bourbon had driven a bent shoeing-nail through his skull. He staggered out into the street and picked a string of dog-ends from the gutter, practicing holding each one still enough to light the next, burning his fingers often as not. Liquor would have worked better, but he barely had coin enough for what he needed as it was. And the golden half-inch left in Nessus's crystal decanter, buried like stolen bullion deep in his possibles bag, he was saving for later. Liquor was killing him, but he wasn't such a fool to think he could live without it.

There was too much traffic in the street for so early a morning in this dusty shithole of a town—but then, the train was coming. He studied everyone who passed: ranchers,

prospectors, slaves and slave-drivers, centaur, satyr, human, beast, people of class and of the road.

The two deserters came out of the low country south, headed straight for the bar. One was bragging to the other, loud, showing off a pair of repeating pistols he claimed he'd lifted off the madam of a cat-house in Niobe's Hole, brandishing their tarnish-silvered gleam as though he were performing for a sold-out Circus crowd. Stupid, even in the outlands. But Bienor wasn't looking for genius. At least they'd had the sense to ditch their army issue.

Battered floorboards ringing under his hooves, he stepped to the bar, brushing gently against the quiet one's flank. He liked what he felt: well-muscled. This one could move fast when he had to.

"Got a problem, old horse?" said the loud one with the pistols.

Bienor let that slide, gave them the easiest smile he could muster. "No problem. Sounds like you foals might have some profits chafing your hides. Thought you might fancy a roll with the Fates." He opened a trembling hand on a set of dice: Gryneus', hand-carved from a dead hoplite's hip, and hand-skewed.

In a dozen throws against the peeling pillars of the station house porch, he took them for half what they'd stolen—army

scrip mostly, a few cat house tokens, chips of shaved silver stamped with a medusa's head. Enough.

Deimos—that was the loud one, a stringy, slope-shouldered chestnut scared of everything and faking fearlessness. Phaeton was dapple-grey, long-limbed and graceful, slow to form an opinion, slower to speak it. They didn't love Eurytus, though they envied him. They'd abandoned his host on the Asphodel Mesa near the start of this recent campaign. Since then, they'd wandered, living on what they could hustle.

There were dozens like them in the outlands, more every year: disillusioned and dangerous, resentful of their lot, at a loss for how to change it. Bienor understood all this too well. He and Gryneus had been the first.

He bought back into their good graces with cheap wine and the lost ideals of his own youth, dressed in kid leather and lambswool like he still thought they were anything but bullshit. "In the Old World," he told them, "the humans ruled, and we were the downtrodden. We lived as philosophers, healers, adherents to the cult of Artemis and of the moon. We hunted the red deer and the wild boar; ran with muses among the glades, drinking nectar and ambrosia, answering to no one but the gods. The humans, jealous of our freedom, desiring control, persecuted and pursued us into exile. Here in the New World,

Eurytus has transformed us into what we hated.” *And Nessus*, Bienor did not add.

By the time they broke into the second wine-jar, he’d whispered his dead lover’s name, and they were with him. Slumped against grimed windows in a low-slung backless chair, Bienor sucked smoke and watched them drink, wondering how much more like Nessus this job would make him. He and Gryneus had been as young as these two, would have jumped just as quick at a promise of change—if there’d been one—and been just as unprepared for the consequences. He remembered that first night of their rebellion; the steer they’d poached and spitted in the wilderness, coyotes’ eyes glinting jealously from distant buttes. The things they’d said; oaths, promises.

But he didn’t want to think about Gryneus. So he drank a little wine. And then a little more.

These two idiots might survive what was coming. If they did, if Nessus could do as he promised, they’d have a chance to live like centaurs of the Old World. Of course, they’d be rolling the dice. Or rather, he’d be rolling for them.

* * *

The *Achilles* roared past sometime after noon, waking Bienor from numb contemplation of the bottom of a jar. Glue-eyed and corpse-mouthed, he dug his hat from under Phaeton’s

unconscious bulk and joined the crowd outside the station, seeking in vain for a glimpse of Eurytus through the glare in the Hypnos car's windows for a glimpse of Eurytus. He counted fifty cars, each as wide as ten centaurs, long as twenty, drawn by an iron demigod hunched snorting over a bellyful of fire, sorcery, and steam.

As the train slowed for the curve at the outskirts, a bag-man flung himself aboard from the tin roof of the water tower. A leather-faced wrangler leaned out the sliding door and jabbed him with a prod; the bag-man teetered and fell through the gap between cars. The wheels cut him in two.

The crowd dispersed, disappointed and murmuring. He hoped they hadn't come here just for this. The clatter of the last car faded; the crackling spider-legs of sorcery settled back into the rails.

Only then did the sun-scattered figure appear coming down out of the hills.

Bienor splashed his face from the trough, tipped his hat to shade his eyes, and the blur resolved into a blond palomino, bare-chested, moving with a posture of determined exhaustion. Another deserter?

The palomino gazed along the tracks in both directions, then laid himself belly-out in the dust and held an ear against

the rail. A cold slackness in his face, as he rose; he hadn't liked what he'd heard.

Bienor intercepted him wandering the sharp shadows between the slave kennels, unarmed, unshod, without a hat, whispering at iron doors unanswered, straining at the bolts with bare hands. He was younger than the other two, barely a colt. Only a hint of growth darkened his jaw, though his matted mane spilled wild down his back and over his chest. By the burrs and thorns lodged in his coat, he'd been sleeping hard. On his left haunch gleamed a spiral scar, its lines doubled, blurred, as though applied by a sober drunkard.

Or with the desire to inflict the utmost possible pain.

At Bienor's approach, the palomino fled for the end of the row, skittish as a deer. Fading bourbon hangover and fresh wine warmth struck precarious balance at the base of Bienor's skull. He didn't trust himself, didn't trust this. Somewhere in those hills, Nessus lay wrapped in his prophetic coma, the sumptuous cloak of a savage king. What had the poison flowers shown him, and what had he already known? Had he arranged for this colt to be here, a deserter young as this one, wearing Eurytus's own mark, when Bienor was just drunk enough to believe it?

Buzzards spiraled over the bag-man's remains. Thin clouds poured out of the hills, spreading across the flatland sky

like a flash flood; catastrophic, brief, then gone. The colt slowed, looking back. His face, painfully young, transitioned from fear to resignation. Then he charged.

The colt was tired, distraught maybe, but not stupid. He faked a body blow, went for the rifle. Bienor stepped aside with a twist and shoved him back into the narrow shadows of the kennels. Pressing close, he trapped the colt against the hot, pale wall. Drinking made some things easier: easier to take a hit without feeling it, easier to act without having to think.

“Where have they taken them?” the colt demanded, his Greek faintly accented, making him sound almost human. He tried to rear.

Bienor didn’t give him room. “Shipped south, some of them, field hands for New Tyre. Or north and east—strip mines that way, foundries. Or east to the city, downriver from there.”

Despair stole over the colt’s sun-browed face. Bienor frowned. You didn’t let yourself feel sympathy for slaves. You didn’t think about them—not if you expected to keep yourself alive. There were two or three swallows of bourbon left in the bottle; he could share them, wallow with this stranger awhile like he had with Deimos and Phaeton. But this colt was no deserter.

Drinking made lots of things easier. Like the truth. He tried to put it gentle. “Nobody uses these cells anymore. No

work for chattel slaves in these parts, supply's all dried up. These days, they come by train out of the west."

The colt took it in stride. "When?"

Bienor stepped in to look at him close. The crescents beneath the colt's eyes hardened, but he didn't flinch away. He had a fighter's instincts. And he was no more afraid than he should be.

"You want to free slaves?" Bienor said. "Get yourself in order. Otherwise you're no use to anyone. Get a bath, a shave, a coat, a set of shoes, a tavern berth. Keep your mouth shut, but let yourself be seen."

The colt looked at him blankly.

"Wait here. Understand? Just wait."

Bienor went and thudded his hoof against the battered boards of the station platform until a ticket-seller came to the window. He traded what remained of his swindled riches for a ticket, one way, to the Tethys Stockyards, on the Acheron downriver from New Ilium. He ducked into the bar, kicked Phaeton gently into a passable semblance of sobriety, poured a few instructions in his ear. When he came out, the colt stood in the street watching a slave woman empty slop into a hog run across the way. The woman watched him back, her eyes bitter—begging for trouble.

It was the colt who looked away.

Scowling, Bienor stepped between them. The woman snatched her pails and fled into the alley.

The colt stared at the ticket. “Why are you helping me? Who are you?”

“Bienor.” Clearly the colt had never heard of him. “Just an old outlaw looking to change my luck. You want to help humans, you’ll do as I say.” He unslung the Pyretus rifle, angled it at a spire of wind-worn sandstone jutting up out of the hills. “When you’re rested, meet me there. Tomorrow before daybreak—that’s when we move.”

“How can I...” The colt looked himself over; his naked chest, the dust caked on his skin, the thorns lodged in his coat. “How can I do what you ask—pay for clothes, a room? I don’t have money. I don’t have... anything.”

Bienor smiled. He’d blown his brief wealth on the ticket. And the wine, which was filling his vision with the faintest of phantom black-powder detonations and a heady sense of the foreordained. “Doesn’t matter. With that spiral on your hide, they won’t even ask for credit.”

IV.

The barber, a satyr whose elaborate moustaches concealed his reaction as efficiently as a cameo, took one look at Five Legs’s spiral brand, unfolded a razor from his robe, and went to work.

Slaves watched from the corners of the shop, barely breathing, as the satyr slid blade and fingers intimately over Five Legs's cheeks and chest, even venturing past his navel almost to the bristles where his hide began. Dimly, through the haze of terror, Five Legs perceived that a liberty was being taken: in the slaves' eyes, it amounted to a violation. They were waiting to see the barber taught a lesson of the kind only a favorite of Eurytus could provide.

That he was capable of grasping such subtlety made his flesh crawl to the point that it required an effort not to twitch and open his own throat on the blade. He was still a centaur. The red-and-white barber pole—blood and bone—spiraled hypnotically between Corinthian plinths made of crumbling plaster.

Murmuring smooth nothings about marauders in the hills and the inflated price of rendered fats, the barber executed shave and hoplite-cut so thoroughly and so close that Five Legs thought he could have made a second copy of himself out of the slough—of his upper body, his human part, at least. When it became clear no retribution was forthcoming, the slaves herded him out into the street to scrub him down with pails of suds and bristled brushes—which, along with the subsequent towels, oils and creams, they plied with still more brazen intimacy. He let them stroke and prick and maul him as they wished. This

was what he'd come for: to be punished for the crimes of his race.

“Only the finest,” said the barber, “and to Hades with the shortage. We don't skimp on what's important.”

After the barber came the smith, with hammers, hot nails, shoeing irons, and throaty anecdotes about long-past campaigns of conquest. A seamstress, fumble-fingered with terror and free with her pins, fitted Five Legs with a coat and collar, a thin tie of black cord, a shallow, flat-brimmed hat made from an unrecognizable skin. At the tavern he was served a globe of black wine and a leg of minotaur artfully charred at the surface and raw at the bone. He forced himself to swallow everything. Finally, a young slave led him to a sleeping berth, then waited, expectant and shaking, until he slammed the door.

He sicked most of his supper into the basin, slept fitfully, and woke long before dawn.

* * *

Native constellations crowded in around Andromeda, who dangled from the Pegasus in chains. A cold wind crept up at the first insinuation of daybreak, and Five Legs clutched his new coat close. The starched fabric of his collar prickled his freshly-shaved throat; he missed the weight of his matted mane, the familiar thickness of sweat caked in dust. His whole self felt shorn away, leaving only newness and pain.

The sandstone spire towered black against the paling heavens. He circled its base, his shod hooves ringing in the darkness, and stepped into a shaking cone of lamplight.

“Now you look like someone deserving of that brand.” Pleasure crinkled Bienor’s features, lascivious, but without malice. He wrapped a forearm around Five Legs’s withers, drew him in close to the light.

A railroad surveyor’s map lay unrolled across the slab, weighted down against the wind by a battered signal lantern. The terms dried on it in blood were predictable, save for the symbols beneath: a theta, quartered, beside a hunter’s bow.

There was an answer to the question he’d asked and Bienor had ignored. *Why would you help me?* Not for any human’s sake.

Nessus.

“Deimos and Phaeton,” said Bienor, beckoning two others from the shadows, “meet our inside man.”

Their clothes weren’t as fine as his own, their shaves nothing like as close. They wore no brands; he envied them that. “Five Legs,” he muttered, the Greek words thick and heavy on his tongue.

Deimos, the jumpy chestnut, was turning a little silvered repeater over and over in his hands. “That supposed to be a *nom de guerre?*”

It wasn't a centaur's name. Stupid—he'd opened himself to attack. He'd already thrown away everything else Thin Crow had given him.

Bienor's reaction was subtler, silent. He studied the spiral brand.

“Let's go over it again.” This from Phaeton, the dapple-gray.

Bienor pointed out the town on the map, the rail line heading east, the abandoned spur running north through the gully. “Our prey is the *Echidna*: the most powerful locomotive in service on any line between here and the Abyssine, pulling the richest payload there is, as thinly guarded as you'll ever find.”

Money. Slaves to be sold. The scent of alcohol lingered on all of them. Five Legs's face burned hot. The first centaur he'd met had deceived him, first thing from the gate.

“Details,” said Phaeton. “What payload? What guard?”

It was all there on the map in blood. But Five Legs saw they hadn't had his education.

“A luxury sleeper for the brass, one coach full of heavies, another for private passengers. Then near fifty freight cars loaded with the fruits of conquest: fresh slaves, gold, and who knows what, enough to sate even the appetites of New Ilium for a while. All arriving at the Gulch come nine by the dial. She'll

refill her boiler reserve, take on a passenger or two.” Bienor’s gaze hadn’t left Five Legs. “You’ll board the passenger car, posing as an envoy to Eurytus. Meantime, over at the gully mouth, another train is passing the switch—the *Hyperion*, bound for the Lethe Valley. Rest of us wait at the first bend out of sight. Six after nine, the *Echidna* gets underway. At the switch, there’s a three-minute gap between when the *Hyperion* goes by and the *Echidna* closes. That’s when you boys bust up the switch house. Change the eastbound track to send the *Echidna* north along the spur. Then meet me at the top of the gully, fast as your little legs can get up here.”

“How come we get saddled with the wet work?” said Deimos.

Bienor scowled. “Because I’m old and decrepit—I’d slow you down. Because I’m the one with the plan. And because I have this.” Out of the spire’s shadow he drew the long-rifle he’d been carrying in town: a thing of beauty, elegant, its lines so austere they might have been carved over millennia by wind and rain, like the buttes. He threw back the bolt, held the chamber to the rising light, blew away an invisible speck. “A Pyretus rifle. Made, so goes the lie, from the melted cannon and split timbers of the *Scylla*.”

Five Legs had heard that lie over the range fire on the Labyrinth Ranch. The *Scylla* was the ship that had brought

centaurs to these shores in exile, more than a century ago. Another rifle just like this one had been mounted in Eurytus's study.

“With this I can bring down a swallow at a mile. I can kill the fireman and the engineer before they sound the alarm. If we're lucky, they won't even see us coming.”

“What if we're not lucky?” said Phaeton.

Bienor slid the bolt into place. “That's why we got an inside man.”

Five Legs took a breath. “I don't even have a weapon.” His bow and skinning knife he'd left behind; among centaurs they'd have been useless, absurd. Once or twice, long ago, he'd used a gun. It hadn't occurred to him to try and barter for one with his scars.

“You don't get one,” said Bienor. “Any conductor on the New Ilium and Acheron won't be as easy to cow as a country barber. Show him a gun, he'll want a reason not to take it. Try to hide one, you risk fouling up the whole job. Of course, a true envoy to Eurytus—someone *worthy* of that brand—wouldn't need a weapon.” He flashed again that easy grin, suggestive, forced. In his mouth, the glint of silver. “Just start some kind of ruckus, distract them a minute. Until the rest of us can get aboard. Then you leave behind whatever mess you made and come forward to the engine. You'll do fine.”

Alone on a train full of centaurs. It was suicide. But wasn't that what he'd expected, what the elder had promised? He'd come chasing a conquering army. Even if he managed to survive, the elder said she'd hunt him to death. The sudden weakness in his knees was telling him to turn tail, go back to the mountains, find some other human tribe to hide in until the centaurs had enslaved them too, then another, until there was nothing left.

A hard, dry crack made everyone start, and Five Legs saw Phaeton's for the first time: a shotgun, sawed-off, shoulder-slung. Deimos had let the hammer of his silvered revolver snap home on an empty chamber.

"Do that again," growled Bienor, "I'll break it over your head. Give it here."

Phaeton beat him to it—a gentle hand over the pistol, and Deimos let it go. It pained Five Legs to watch, their vocabulary of subtle touches, looks. He thought of Thin Crow, packed with a thousand others into a cattle car stinking of fear. The artistry in those delicate hands, wearing raw against a miner's pick. His body flung atop an incinerator heap. His wisdom lost, reabsorbed into mountains, rivers, trees. Until centaurs came to take them too.

"Where were we?" said Phaeton.

“Old horse just killed the brakeman,” said Deimos. “So how are we supposed to stop the train?”

“We don’t. Top of the gully, just before the grade comes level with this ledge, we’ll have a chance to leap aboard the tender. Incline will slow her up some. Easy. She’ll already be underway, crew already dead—we’ll be in control. Then we can focus on the real work. Killing.”

Deimos snorted. “Three of us. Four, if we’re *lucky*. Two deserters, a pretty-boy foal, and a glue-factory waiting to happen. Against a train full of hoplites.”

Bienor’s knuckles were white on the rifle stock. He looked ready to knock Deimos’s jaw from his face, but his voice remained coldly calm. “There’s two access points from the passenger cars: forward door from first class, and the roof. Just have to keep those covered and pick off anyone comes through.”

“Yeah? For how long?”

“Til the end of the line. No more than an hour.” On the map, Bienor traced the spur to its terminal point: a sheer-sided valley nested in canyons, the name stricken through in black ink. *Epimethea*.

Five Legs remembered that name, too: the ruined mine where once a human uprising had come as close as any ever had to overthrowing the rule of Eurytus. “What happens then?”

“That’s when the cavalry arrives. We stop the train, get off, get paid. In gold, no questions asked. But that’s not what we’re in this for, is it, boys? It’s not the money. It’s the chance to spit in Eurytus’s eye. To put a few who love him in the ground. He needs this train. His regime depends on slaves to keep us pacified, to keep us lazy. When he can’t provide that anymore, who knows what might happen? We pull this off, there’ll be more like us. Who knows but this won’t be the spark that sets off the revolution?”

Sun broke from the horizon through a line of molten cloud. The shadow of the spire stretched beyond them, infinite. Bienor’s hat-brim shadowed his eyes.

“Who knows,” repeated Deimos, his voice harsh. “Who’s this cavalry? How do we know we’re not getting paid to do the dirty work and then get shot?”

Bienor slung the rifle behind him, slow and deliberate. “I’m afraid there’s no time for whining. You want to walk away, walk. This doesn’t work unless I have all of you. Otherwise, the opportunity passes us by.” He blew out the lantern, dropped a sheathed knife from his coat onto the map. “I’ll want all your symbols next to mine.”

A rooster cackled, somewhere down in Prometheus Gulch. Phaeton took the knife.

“I’m with you,” he said, though his eyes were on Deimos. “We can’t keep going on like we have. All we do is take risks, tempt fate, just to survive. That can’t last. Might as well get killed trying to accomplish something.”

He gasped as the blade opened his forearm. His symbol was the adze.

When it was done, he held out to Deimos first the revolver, then the knife. In the fraught silence that passed between them, Bienor averted his gaze. Five Legs, overwhelmed with jealousy, could not.

Finally, Deimos’s hands met Phaeton’s. “To Hades with that,” he said. “You three can do what you want. Me—whatever I said in my cups notwithstanding—I’m in this for the money.” Tail twitching, he bent over the map.

Then it was Five Legs’s turn. He felt empty: a suit of clothes, a skin that wasn’t his hung on a skeleton.

A blood pact, signed with centaurs against centaurs. Stealing human beings from Eurytus on behalf of Nessus; not to set them free, but for what? To hold them hostage, ransom them for the rule of the New World—and when that didn’t work, slaughter them like cattle?

There was some kind of flickering shadow in front of the sun, causing the world to shift in and out of darkness and glare,

the indistinct edge between the two rushing across the stony landscape like a cloud. Like wings. It looked like wings.

A gray shadow materialized on the sloping, jagged face of the gully wall below. It rode towards them, wings stretching broader, jumping and blurring as it crossed dry scrub and broken stone.

“What in Hades is that?” said Deimos. From somewhere out of sight, he produced a second gun.

“Buzzard,” muttered Bienor, backing away.

It wasn't.

Seven years Five Legs had lived among the River Crow, as far from centaurs as anyone could reach, struggling to erase the horrible thing he had been, to make himself human. Seven years, he had looked to the rare sky beyond the peaks, waiting for a glimpse of just such a thing as this—proof that the ancestor spirits of his new clan, the gods of the New World and the human race, had forgiven him, welcomed him as something like their own.

Now his tribe had been taken from him, his past forced like raw flesh down his gullet, and that omen had come: a reef of golden feathers streaked with rust and marred with gaps revealing ancient, pebbled skin, all surrounded by a corona of fire. A thunderbird.

In that moment, he pitied it: removed from everything, looked upon for so much.

There was a pair of staggered clicks as Deimos cocked his pistols.

“Don’t, you idiot—” warned Bienor.

Deimos opened fire into the heavens, the shrill bark of the repeaters echoing back from the spire, the gully walls, the hills. The thunderbird’s shadow slid up the stone face of the spire and was gone, leaving behind an echoing cry like the blast of a locomotive whistle. Five Legs closed the space between himself and Deimos in a stride, driving a shoulder into his chestnut flank. They fell together, grappling for the pistols. Five Legs spat curses, without thinking, in the human tongue. The corners of his eyes pricked hot; his vision blurred.

“A spy,” said Deimos, his voice high and terrified. “A spy for Eurytus. It might have seen the map. It might have read our very symbols from the page.”

Then Bienor was between them, knocking them apart with a swipe of the Pyretus rifle, clubbing Five Legs in his stomach with the stock. Five Legs rolled away, gasping. Phaeton gripped Deimos around the chest, helping him to get his hooves beneath him.

Bienor leaned on the stock of the magnificent rifle, hands shaking. “No such thing as thunderbirds. It can’t be. We wiped

them out. The last one withered years ago in a cage at the Circus menagerie.”

Five Legs might have believed that when he was twelve. If he'd taken the elder's advice, become fully a centaur again, he might believe it now.

The elder already wanted him dead. So would these three before long, if they didn't already. Let Nessus and Eurytus get in line.

He staggered back to the slab, slid the tip of the blade across his palm and traced a broken spiral on the map in blood. Only as he let the blade fall clattering onto the bloodied map did he recognize the fasces. His bitter laughter rose and was absorbed into the desert silence like the beat of wings.

“Good.” Bienor brought the Pyretus rifle to his shoulder and swung it round. “Now get out of here, all of you. Whoever—whatever that monster was, it might come back. Anybody heard those shots, they might come looking. Go on. Got a hour to get in position.”

The barrel fixed on Deimos. He wavered under its focus, turned, and fled north towards the top of the gully. Phaeton touched his hat, gave Five Legs a lingering, uncertain look, and followed his lover.

The muzzle shook—barely, but enough that Five Legs dragged his eyes from the sky to grant it his full attention.

“You listen to me,” Bienor growled. “I don’t know what you are—some kind of sorcerer—raised by mustangs—I don’t care. I see that bird again, I’ll kill it. Got your own reasons for putting your symbol next to mine? Know more than you’re telling? Fine. You do anything else to put me or my allies at risk, I’ll put lead in your eye. Spiral brand or no.”

The skies were empty by the time he looked again. But he’d seen it. He’d *seen* it. Hadn’t he?

V.

Five Legs circled through the desert to be seen coming into town from the south. A white plume hung like a thunderhead on the west horizon, heralding *Echidna*.

Yesterday, the Grecian facades lining the main street had awed him; today, they were slapped together out of plywood, whitewashed, and propped against hovels they barely concealed. Aside from the station house, the only structures of any permanence in Prometheus Gulch were the empty slave kennels. The barber let off stropping a razor on his porch to bow greeting. The dust-faced dial on the station house roof gave Five Legs ten minutes.

Teeth clenched, he shouldered his way into the bar. As before, he didn’t have to speak: the bartender slapped down a sloshing cylinder of liquor the color of straw, then retreated behind a pillar. Five Legs gazed into it, working up the effort.

The last time he'd drunk whiskey—the only time—had been with Amycus, an old soldier shattered by a grief he wouldn't share, relegated to herding minotaurs and spinning yarns on the Labyrinth Ranch. Amycus prescribed liquor for every affliction, a cure-all: proof against the fear of death, the hazard of long life, and the waiting in between. Drinking, he said, was a mistake, and mistakes were the only way to learn anything.

He was killed not long after that, brawling in the stands at the Circus: a meaningless, arbitrary death, a purposeless sacrifice, achieving nothing. And Five Legs had abandoned Amycus's monstrous flock and headed west until the humans found him.

He drained the glass. His eyes watered, but he kept himself from coughing.

Announcing its presence with a tortured whistle-scream, the *Echidna* arrived at the platform. Billows of white steam, vented from her straining brakes, beckoned Five Legs out the bar's swinging doors.

The locomotive was a hulk of dead-black iron, artfully sculpted to evoke a monstrous leering head, both serpentine and simian: a brooding, heavy brow, and fanged jaws parted to swallow the track, sorcery crackling in its throat. The cars drawn behind it stretched west out of sight, scuffed catwalks

glinting. Curtains were drawn in the passenger windows. Between gaps in the slats of the slave cars, sallow human faces shone, then faded, like the faces of the dead.

The thin crowd on the platform wrung each other's hands and tittered; they were here not to board but to gawk, like the barber and his slaves. The Circus crowds were the same, Five Legs remembered—in a culture of submission, the greatest thrill came from vicarious fear. Only one centaur stood at the ramp: a giant muscled black, coat groomed to a viscous sheen, surrendering a pristine carbine into the conductor's waiting hands. Bolstered by the flimsy confidence of drink, Five Legs took a place behind him.

“Where you bound?” asked the conductor, a centaur in a long, brass-buttoned coat and matching cap.

“The Labyrinth Ranch,” Five Legs said, not even looking at the ticket.

Murmurs spread across the platform. He felt eyes upon his back and on the brand. The black flashed him a voracious grin, then stepped aboard.

The carbine went into a heavy safe just aft of the door, the key into the conductor's coat. So he wouldn't need to worry about guns—except the conductor's, a snub revolver peeking from the shoulder-holster under his arm.

As Five Legs climbed the tarred ramp, his shadow fell over the platform's edge and beyond onto gravel and dust. Far down the track, a hand reached out between the slats of a slave car, gestured defiance, then was withdrawn.

His false arrogance broke. There were people he cared about in those cars, people he loved, crammed in suffocating darkness like fine cigars; valuables to be preserved. They were hurt and terrified, and he was betraying them. He wasn't a centaur. He slipped a hand beneath his shirt-tails, down his stomach to the place where skin gave way to hide.

The conductor glanced at his pocketwatch, cleared his throat. The trains of the New Ilium and Acheron line—driven by sorcery—were always on time.

Letting his hat-brim shield his panic, Five Legs ducked onto the train.

The steward was a human boy, impeccably dressed in servant's livery but naked from the waist. Five Legs itched to slap his downy cheek and drag him by those starched lapels down the corridor to the end of the car, to show him what his people were suffering while he serviced the elite. Instead, he rested a hand on the boy's shoulder and let himself be led.

The compartment was spacious, the paneling dark wood the color of human skin, leering sileni carved at the corners. No brake cables to be seen. Eurytus's trains were on time, on pain

—and hazard—of death. A divan styled after a *sella curulis* was fixed to the wall beneath the window; another by the door. The low table between them had been set for a sumptuous breakfast.

A snatch of throaty song from the corridor preceded the black Five Legs had met on the platform, his supple bulk filling the doorway frame to frame. “You,” he said, licking his lips. “What luck—there are things I would enjoy... discussing with you.” He threw himself down on the couch by the window, kicking his hooves playfully like a foal in fresh grass. Stiffly, Five Legs took the seat across from him.

Satisfied with his display of virility, the black sat up and leaned across the table, nodding to the spiral brand. “Eurytus. You must know him—tell me about him.”

Out the window were the hills and the sandstone spire where Bienor lay in wait. That spire had stood before the first centaur’s hoof had broken the sand of the Abyssine’s shores; it would stand when the spilled blood of humans and centaurs had turned this desert green.

The train rocked gently, rattling the silver—were they loading the baggage? Something tapped at the roof—a monstrous beak, he imagined, probing the *Echidna*’s iron skin for a place it might get at the meat. The compartment darkened as an immense wing, impossibly large, brushed across the

window: burnt-golden, textured like the forests of the sacred mountain, gapped with the scars of millennia. Five Legs flinched away, fearing, *knowing* it had come for him.

The black waited, rapt, for Five Legs's answer. If he had noticed any of this, he didn't acknowledge it. What answer could he expect? He was huge, imposing, barely older than Five Legs himself.

Five Legs studied his scarred knuckles, his palms, reminding himself what they'd been capable of when he was twelve; a scrawny, underage ranch hand still burning with pain from the brand, and with hate, struggling to hold his own against centaurs twice his age. He knew how to fight dirty. To talk dirty. Seven years among humans hadn't erased that, much as he wished it. Just buried it deep.

He closed his eyes and dug it up again. "He's... passionate. Insatiable. A brilliant judge of character and a better liar. An incorrigible, discriminating aesthete, in everything from violence to cuisine. A killer, remorseless. His ambition to power brooks no obstacle, yet he's incapable of turning down a challenge, and he demands the same of all in his circle. And his cunning... but you've heard of that. You look like him, a little."

The black flushed with unwarranted pleasure. He stretched a smoothly-muscled arm across the silverware and linen cloth, a beckoning hand, the insinuation clear.

Five Legs picked a cocktail fork from his place setting. He toyed with it, rolling it between his fingers, wondering if Eurytus might have sired this fool. The New World was peppered with bastards in the path of his conquests—no doubt more of his issue were already gestating aboard the slave cars of the *Echidna*. Five Legs himself had been lucky; acknowledged, at least insofar as it got him a place on the Labyrinth Ranch. “Whose is that?” he asked, feigning innocence, indicating the theta inscribed in the black’s sculpted bicep, so new as to still be red with scabs.

“Nessus,” said the black, his chest swelling. “I go now to meet with Eurytus on his behalf. A place is reserved for me in Eurytus’s own box at the Circus of King Minos’s Masque.”

Amycus had been slaughtered at just such a place. Five Legs shoved down the pity that welled up for this black’s absurd innocence, which must have been what prompted Nessus to

put him on this train to die. The whole situation warranted shame, not pity: on behalf of his race and for what he was about to do. Instead, Five Legs felt the sickening urge to laugh.

The conductor appeared in the doorway, ticket-punch in hand. Once he’d returned their tickets, he moved on down the corridor, his iron tread muffled but distinct. From outside

came a clang and a rattle as the ramp was raised; the brakes disengaged with a hiss. They were getting underway.

Five Legs rose with a suggestive flick of his trimmed tail, the cocktail fork concealed against his wrist. He leaned out into the aisle and shouted for drink, trying not to smile at the thought of the havoc he would wreak with such a tiny implement of decadence. Nessus might appreciate the humor; the black would not. It was easy, thinking like a centaur. That was the danger of it.

The steward boy came from the forward compartment, pushing a cart laden with tobacco, candy, and liquor. Five Legs thrust aside the offered wine list; reaching past the boy, he lifted a pearl-green gallon of apsinth, then slid the compartment door closed.

He saluted the black with the jug, pulled the cork free, and raised it to his lips.

The anise-bitterness of wormwood constricted his throat; tears blurred his vision. He slammed down the jug and leaned over the table, gasping. The black stood and came around to thump him on the back. Five Legs took the offered hand, gripping tight, drawing the black close across the divan. "Let me give you some advice," he said, when the burning subsided enough to let him speak. His lips were hot and buzzing with the

alcohol, too near the black's own. "When you meet Eurytus, don't believe a word he says."

With a backhanded stab of the cocktail fork, he punctured the black's throat at the base of the jaw—the wound would gout blood but not deprive him of the breath required to scream—then yanked the fork out again and plunged it through the wrist, severing the vein, down between the bones of the arm and into the divan. Smirking, he gave it a twist.

The black screamed and writhed, knocking the jug awry, spilling absinth everywhere. Five Legs contorted out from under him and helped it along, soaking the walls, the linen tablecloth, the carpet. Fumes filled the compartment. Coughing, he cracked open the compartment door.

"Help!" shouted Five Legs. "There's been an accident!" The steward boy stood in the corridor, transfixed. The car lurched as the *Echidna's* piston limbs began to pump in earnest; the boy pitched into Five Legs's chest.

"Matches," breathed Five Legs, catching him by his pristine lapels, staining them with red. He pawed a box of phosphors from the boy's breast pocket, then thrust him up the aisle into the arms of the conductor, who approached with revolver in hand.

A sharp kick to the liquor cart smashed open half a dozen bottles. The conductor gripped his arm.

Five Legs drove a whiskey bottle's jagged heel into the bridge of the conductor's nose. With the wet crunch of cartilage, his upper body went limp, depositing the revolver into Five Legs's waiting hand. He struck a match to life on the conductor's brass badge, shoved it inside the box, then dropped the resulting flare of blinding-white into the fuming puddle on the floor. Cobalt and orange flames singed the hairs off his fetlocks and crawled up the walls to lick at the ceiling. The varnish on the carven sileni began to peel. As he groped in the conductor's coat for the key to the safe, he hoped insanely that the thunderbird on the roof had found a different perch.

The door to the forward car slammed open just as his fingers found the key.

He didn't wait to see how many hoplites poured through or whose symbol they wore branded on their hides. He'd never make it to the engine that way. Not that he meant to—the slaves were in the other direction. Let Bienor and his dupes fend for themselves.

Five Legs flung the key out an open window, swept the shrieking steward boy from his feet, tucked him under one arm and went aft.

Through the windows, Prometheus Gulch slid away into the desert.

VI.

Stretched atop the red ledge cold with morning, Bienor settled the barrel of the Pyretus rifle atop the piled folds of his coat and spent a moment marshaling his shaking hands to adjust the sights for the range and drop. Then he tipped his hat high on his brow and pressed his cheek to the stock's worn-smooth mesquite.

Bright plumes from the *Hyperion's* stacks hung low over the hills beneath a sky blissfully empty of wings. Freight cars crawled past the switch house with a river's ceaseless rhythm. The switchmaster, a satyr in striped coveralls, stood on the embankment working an enormous wrench in the gearbox below the signal Bienor had gently sabotaged on his way out of town.

Leaving the rifle's chamber empty, he laid his sights on the center of the switchmaster's spine, slid his finger through the trigger-well, and let out a long breath. When the hammer clicked home, the sight pin jerked up and to the left, out from between the satyr's shoulder-blades and past his neck. Useless bugging drunk.

Deimos and Phaeton waited in the gully's shadow, collars turned up, handkerchiefs knotted loose about their throats, huddled together against the chill so that the two of them appeared a single centaur, two-headed. They passed a hand-

roll back and forth, blowing smoke over their shoulders up the gully in an echo of the train. Their closeness dragged Bienor dangerously along the warm curving grain of the rifle's stock, towards the memory of Gryneus's touch.

Gryneus the satirist, the hedonist, the pragmatist. The legendary outlaw; hands so steady he could feed a kestrel from his palm, such a hothead he'd killed centaurs for so much as letting slip his name. The Pyretus rifle had been his: taken from a mass grave in the badlands below Acoma in the aftermath of the siege. When the time came for him to go into the ground, when the Pyretus rifle was all that remained of him, Bienor couldn't bear to let him keep it.

The half-pint of Labyrinth bourbon called to him from the bottom of his poke. A belt of it would go down smooth, take the edge off the chill, the jitters, the double-edged fasces knife of memory.

But he was sober now, dead sober, for the first time since he'd put his symbol next to Nessus's in blood. If he hadn't been so desperate to dull his wits, afraid to wallow in memory, he might not have been so ready to assign Deimos and Phaeton the future he and Gryneus had desired. He might not have accepted so easily an exiled plaything of Eurytus stumbling out of the desert just in time to contribute to his plans. If he'd been

sober, maybe he'd have been doing this alone, going to his death. A glue factory waiting to happen.

Maybe that would be better.

The *Hyperion's* last car coasted away along the southward track to New Tyre. The satyr reset the signal, wiped hands on his coveralls, and climbed the embankment towards the switch house, looking over his shoulder to the *Echidna* with a frown. Phaeton passed the cigarette to Deimos, pulling the scattergun off his shoulder. Deimos dragged, then flicked it away, snorting smoke like a minotaur. Raising their handkerchiefs to mask their faces, they stepped out from the gully's shadow.

The switch house was a fortress, carved from the same stone as the hills. The caryatid columns flanking its stone portico depicted a Pallas not warlike or wise but downtrodden, shoulders bowed beneath her burden, chained to the pedestal on which she stood. A bust of Eurytus was carved below the cornice. Phaeton shot off its face.

Laughter shook their shoulders as they stepped between the switchmaster and the door. His head barely reached Deimos's withers. All he had was the wrench. Beneath the grease stains and the grizzled beard, his face was passive. Resigned. The poor old billy-goat. No doubt he'd toiled for the railroad all his life. He hadn't asked for this. But he was ready to defend what was his.

The satyr cocked the wrench over one shoulder, revealing a row of symbols burned into the underside. The clear sky seemed to darken. The rails of the Epimethea spur, long-disused, crackled with traces of power.

Deimos and Phaeton kept coming. Why should they stop? They wouldn't know sorcery from the shakes.

Bienor threw open the bolt of the Pyretus rifle. No use shouting—they'd never hear him from up here. His shaking fingers knocked awry the row of shells he'd arranged across the ledge; he snatched one up, shoved it into the chamber, snapped it home. He centered his sight on the satyr's profile, just behind the ear. Merciful. Quick. Better than he meant to offer most of those he killed today.

He breathed, squeezed the trigger. The rifle jerked, low and to the left this time. Stupid, piss-sipping old swayback. The bullet still ought to have ripped through the switchmaster's spine; instead it deflected off the wrench as though it were a pebble.

Bending low upon his goatish hocks, the switchmaster launched himself at Phaeton.

Time slowed. The satyr's teeth were yellowed, worn.

Phaeton—the idiot—let loose with just one barrel. He hadn't reloaded, had no idea what was coming at him. For all his show of wisdom, he'd no better respect for age than

Deimos. Guilt stabbed at Bienor, numbing, as he saw what would come. He should have prepared them. There hadn't been time.

Blood burst from a dozen holes in the satyr's face and chest, staining his beard with red—but he didn't stop coming. The wrench shivered, pulsed and doubled in size; its enormous, toothed head whipped around, crashing into Phaeton's flank and through his ribs, knocking him sideways off his hooves into the dust.

The switchmaster, flecks of skull exposed beneath his cheeks, turned to Deimos, swinging the wrench on the backhand.

Howling, Deimos opened fire with both his guns. The satyr rocked back against the switch house door as the hammerblows of bullets struck—but the damage was done. Deimos's face was flushed, his eyes contorted. Bienor knew what he was feeling, much as he wished he could forget. Deimos flung himself upon the satyr, striking viciously with hooves and the butts of empty guns. Phaeton lay unmoving.

The *Echidna* roared into view around the side of a hill, snorting steam, its body streaked in orange ribbons of firelit smoke spilling from the passenger car windows. Deimos didn't even look around.

“The switch!” Bienor shouted, uselessly. “The switch, you worthless crowbait, look!” He reloaded, swung the rifle towards the oncoming train. It was still out of range.

The satyr was dead by now, had to be dead, but Deimos went on tenderizing his corpse, oblivious. Bienor aimed at the crown of his hat—but the shakes weren’t getting any better; he couldn’t risk a shot. He was watching a death-bout from the Circus stands, heavy money on the wrong side of the fight.

Whiskey. Whiskey would steady him.

He scrabbled for another shell.

Then Deimos jerked round of his own accord. Phaeton had raised himself on an elbow, was struggling to stand. The satyr’s corpse slumped as Deimos rushed to help him. Phaeton waved him away, pointing at the switch house door.

Bienor sat back from the sights, brushing dust and perspiration from his wrinkles. Enough of this. Enough. He yanked open the drawstring of his poke and dug inside. The rolled-up map. A twist of tobacco, another of pemmican. A deadwood carving of a face he’d done in sleepless hours before dawn.

The bottle, smooth and temperate to the touch—he drew it out by the neck, held it up to the still-wingless sky. Three good gulps left, four if he conserved. He pried out the cork, releasing pent aroma in a low hummed note barely audible above the

wind. He breathed. He took two greedy swallows. The endless complexity, the memories it evoked, the transformation that ensued in his body and mind—sometimes he wondered if Eurytus laid a personal sorcery on every bottle his cellars produced. He carefully replaced the cork, his thumb lingering over the raised shape of the spiral.

Deimos drove a shoulder into the stone door at speed, without effect. He wheeled away, scowling up at the cowed face of Pallas. If the door was sealed by sorcery, they were finished.

He got up to a canter and went at it again. This time, the door pivoted slightly, opening a lightless crack. Deimos took the wrench from the dead satyr's fingers and used it to pry open the darkness enough to let it swallow him. A grayed old donkey emerged, braying; it snuffled at its master's body. Bienor blinked back ridiculous sympathy. The signal-arrow spun ninety degrees, east to north, as inside, Deimos threw the switch. He emerged onto the switch house porch and rushed into Phaeton's arms.

Bienor resisted the urge to cut them both down where they stood.

An arm, shoulder, and head emerged from an eye-shaped window in the *Echidna's* cab: the engineer, gripping his striped cap against the wind, looking from the prone form of the satyr to the two masked centaurs, then aft to the fire and smoke

pouring from the passenger car. Bienor understood his hesitation. Interrupting the schedule would mean his job—perhaps his life.

Bienor put a bullet through his skull, saving him the trouble. His aim was perfect. The conductor's upper body slumped over the window frame, the top of his head spilling off with his cap, gore fluttering away in the wind. Inside, his equine half didn't accept the end so peacefully; writhing and kicking in its death throes, one of its hooves caught the human fireman square in the chest, and he crumpled.

Bienor swore an oath of thanks to the long-defiled ghost of Artemis and, running his tongue around the inside of his mouth, to the neglected, nameless deity of distillation. Maybe Eurtyus could occupy that gap in the pantheon once he was dead.

He stuffed the remaining shells into his bandolier, firmed his hat upon his pate, and rolled onto his hooves, joints creaking. He fired once into the air to make his point, shoved the near-empty bottle of bourbon into his poke, and ran for the rendezvous.

* * *

When he looked, they were thirty strides ahead of the train, Phaeton hunched over his injured side, Deimos half-turned at the waist, goading him on. The *Echidna* was gaining.

He reached the jump point, the ledge that paralleled the tracks, the rails vibrating only a yard or two below along the gully slope. Easy.

Something moved on the roof of the train, an angular shape obscured among mingling smoke and steam. A brakeman, most likely. Five Legs, making his way to the engine. Only it hadn't looked like a centaur. Bienor raised the rifle, tracking. The equilibrium the drink had imparted wouldn't last; two swallows were barely enough to wake him in the morning. Might as well take advantage.

A twitch in the wind lifted the smoke for a span of heartbeats, and he glimpsed it again: something long, curved, and slashing, there and gone again before he could adjust his aim. The headless body of a centaur toppled out of the smoke and slammed into the catwalk railing, tearing it free from the side of the car with the screech of metal.

A hooked beak, long and sharp enough to shear a head from a spine.

He'd seen the last thunderbird die; he'd been there in the stands to watch its broken, golden body dragged away into the bowels of the Circus to be minced into slop for hogs and minotaurs. It hadn't frightened him then—but that had been the point. The centaurs' gods were dead. How could they permit those of the humans a different fate?

He strained his eyes, sweeping the clouded roof and the sky above the gully walls.

Then Deimos crested the lip of the gully, hooves eroding the dry earth in clods, dragging Phaeton behind him. “Let’s go, old horse, come on!”

They galloped, raising red dust in their wake, as the snarling iron snout, curled lip, and scornful eye of the *Echidna* drew up beside them. Bienor recognized those features—they were stretched, distorted, but there was no mistaking that jaw, the arrogant sweep of the brow. The engine rolled past, its mask wearing a smooth disdain that promised the New World’s last and only god, Eurytus, knew their plan too well, knew Nessus’s mutinous intent, and couldn’t be bothered to care.

“Go on,” gasped Phaeton, faltering. “Jump—I’ll follow.” A purple-black, blood-blistered wound covered his side where the switchmaster’s wrench had crushed his ribs, perhaps a lung. He was a centaur; he could survive it, given rest and time. He wouldn’t get either.

The coal-car platform came level with the ledge. Bienor put on a burst of speed, twisted, and leapt. He cleared the railing. His shoulder and hip collided with the coal-car and he slid to the platform’s latticed floor, cradling the rifle and the precious bourbon in his poke.

Deimos performed with the grace of youth, landing easily on his hooves. Gripping the rail, he reached across the gap to Phaeton, who galloped doggedly, barely keeping pace, a grimace of pain ill-concealed by the slipping handkerchief.

A hundred strides ahead, the ledge veered away from the track. Bienor shouted warning over the apocalypse-drumbeat of pistons.

As Phaeton angled his body, gathering his weight for the leap, an eroded chunk of sandstone disintegrated beneath him. His foreleg twisted at an unnatural angle. His stride broke, and what color remained in his face drained away. In the instant before he plunged into the gap between iron and rock, Bienor saw in his eyes what he'd seen in Nessus's before the poison flower pulled them closed. He'd seen it on his own face too often to forget, looking up at oblivion out of the bottom of a glass.

Phaeton fell, dragged down by inevitability. The *Echidna* plowed on.

Again the lingering detachment of drink allowed him to act, to move past consequences to what must be done. Bienor pushed past Deimos to the edge of the platform. He leaned out over the rushing ground, watching as the rolling earth whisked Phaeton away. He raised the rifle, steadied it, and fired.

At the strangled shriek of rage and disbelief, Bienor twisted smoothly and caught Deimos by the throat coming at him with closed fists. “A broken pastern-bone. The way he collapsed—you know it as well as I. He would have died regardless, alone. I lessened his pain.”

Deimos struck at him, but listlessly, without strength. Hot tears seeped over Bienor’s hand, searing. Deimos pulled away, gripped the railing, averting his face. “You should have let me do it.”

Bienor resisted the urge to clutch the poor idiot’s head to his chest.

His longing for Gryneus had mellowed, like the rotgut from his old shotgun distillery rig would have mellowed if only he could’ve made it last. But he remembered well what grief had been like while it was young: helplessness, all-devouring, enervating as a slave-car’s worth of chain. Bienor wanted him here even now: to lean on, to trust, to take the place of this stupid colt, to wield the Pyretus rifle that had once been his and fight off the army, the grief, and the ending that were coming.

But there wasn’t time for wanting or for grief.

He drew out the bottle of Labyrinth Bourbon, flung away the cork into the rushing air and smoke. “Drink this,” he said. “It’s good.”

* * *

He found the coal-cart overturned in the engine-house doorway. He righted it, salvaging what coal he could, and shoved past the bodies of the fireman and engineer to feed the furnace. The *Echidna* had climbed free of the gully. On either side of the cab, desert hills fell away into twisted juniper and scrub. He leaned out into the wind. In the distance ahead, blood-red canyonlands opened like the convolutions of a maze. Epimethea lay somewhere within.

Bienor cleaned splattered blood from the gauges, wiping his hands on the engineer's shirt. He slung the dead fireman across his back, surprised as always by the airy lightness of human flesh, and carried him out to the rear of the engine where he tossed him into the gap between the locomotive and the coal-car. Then he spat in his palms, hardened the muscles of his spine, gripped the engineer's corpse by the hocks and wrestled it too across the floor and into the gap. The iron wheels of the *Echidna* crunched the bones of slave and centaur without so much as a stutter.

Buzzards gathered in the train's wake, summoned by their god, the thunderbird, or else merely scenting a feast.

He found Deimos where he'd left him, swallowing, blinking red eyes clear of blur. The bottle was empty. "It still hurts," he said.

A few swallows were never enough.

The door to the forward passenger car clattered open, emitting a billow of smoke and a centaur, stooped and coughing, in the short, leather-braced tunic of a hoplite. He was young, soot-stained, parts of his auburn mane singed away. His eyes widened, and he reached for an empty holster at his withers. Smoothly, Bienor reloaded the Pyretus rifle and shot him in the face. No shakes. Not yet. But they were coming. He found a craftsman's quiet pleasure in ejecting the spent, smoking shell.

There was comfort to be had in killing: the ageless catharsis of violence. Revenge could be misdirected with ease against the pawns of Eurytus, when the real guilt lay within.

He took the empty bottle from Deimos's dangling grasp, downed the trickle that remained. He slammed the heel against the railing, handed back the jagged crown. He pulled Deimos to him, the coarse hairs of his hide pricking as their flanks brushed together. "Fight dirty. The eyes or the throat. A centaur's not as easy to kill as a satyr—or a human. You hold the door to the passenger car, I'll cover the roof."

Deimos's knuckles tightened on the bottle's neck. He nodded, muscle standing out against his jaw, then drew a pistol and advanced along the coal-car.

No sign of Five Legs. Likely he was dead.

A shattering scream from the rooftops; another body tumbling hooves over head. A baleful eye glaring out of the smoke, and Bienor could no longer deny it: something was there, neither centaur nor human. As he hunkered down against the corner of the coal-car, he struggled to accept it. Whether a ghost, a god, or the malevolent sorcerous eye of Eurytus, it was there. Real. The thunderbird.

An hour to Epimethea.

* * *

[\(Concluded in Pt. II, in BCS #98\)](#)

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COVER ART

“Knight’s Journey,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste is a Senior Art Director on videogames and cinematics. He was the Art Director at Ubisoft on such titles as *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin’s Creed*. Raphael stepped away from the game industry to work as a Matte Painter and Senior Concept Artist on such feature films as: *Terminator: Salvation*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *Repo Men*. Raphael now works as a Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts and now Ubisoft. His artwork “Chinese Steampunk Village” was the cover art for *BCS* in winter 2010. View his gallery at www.rafael-lacoste.com.

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