

THE DOUBLE AXE

1

MYRRAH'S CURSE

Before anyone had even heard of the Minotaur, before Myrrah uttered her terrible curse, we were out hunting a white hind in the forest. The hounds, led by my favourite, Patch, found her scent immediately.

We were galloping along, the branches of cypresses waving against the brightening sky. I was keeping close to the front, so they could say that I, Prince Deucalion Stephanos, had ridden bravely.

That was my full title. Most people, though, called me Stephan. I preferred it.

I was riding my grey mare, Swift, and I jumped a stream at the same time as my father, King Minos, on his black stallion, Farseeker, and I caught an expression of pure joy in his face. He shouted out and surged ahead, so I spurred Swift on. Hunting was something we both loved.

“Imagine you’re drawing the sun’s chariot, not carrying stupid old me!” I whispered to Swift. Silly, I know,

but I liked to talk to her. She whickered and flicked her ears, as one of the huntsmen came up to us on his horse and my father sped on.

“She’s going up by the Black Lake, towards the mountains!” he cried.

Timon, my father’s steward, came panting up behind me. He was having trouble controlling his stallion. Timon’s face was shiny with sweat. He was wearing a crimson-tinged tunic, with gold glinting on his fingers.

“You are enjoying yourself, prince?” he simpered.

I nodded curtly.

“Your brother Androgeos would have been far ahead by now,” Timon continued. “He’d have scented the hind himself, he had such a good nose!”

I kicked Swift’s flanks, holding on to her mane; she whinnied and hurtled on. The feel of the hunt was filling my blood, and Timon’s veiled taunts were angering me. I could do as well as Andro. He was away, over the Middle Sea to the north, on the mainland, staying at the court of King Aegeus of Athens. I would be as good as him.

I overtook my bodyservant, Bansa, who’d somehow got ahead of me on his young mare. Bansa laughed as

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I went by. “The hind! She’s white as milk!” he shouted. “Clever too.”

I grinned at him.

I spotted Farseeker and my father, and urged Swift on. As I came up beside him, he turned his head and gave me a joyful smile. “Ahead!” he cried.

My father was full of the fire of the hunt. We thundered onwards through the trees, and I did my best to stay just behind him.

I was thirsty. My spear was heavy in my right arm. Bansa had forgotten to give me a water bottle and I hadn’t drunk anything since the wine at the start of the hunt.

The baying of the hounds became louder, and we came out to where a small waterfall trickled down the rocks.

There was a circle of hounds – Patch, his little throat quivering with sound, and Keen, and Bounce – all eagerly barking.

Our quarry, the hind, was at bay. She couldn’t get up the rocks, and she was hemmed in on all sides.

She was larger than was usual for her age and sex. Her head was raised up and, like a swan, she was pure white.

I'd never seen anything like her before – so beautiful, like a creature of moonlight.

Suddenly, I didn't want to hurt her. She was frightened, exhausted. She skittered from side to side, and jumped back, scared by the string of red feathers that the men had placed in the trees to frighten her. The dogs were barking, their jaws gaping, snapping at the air, as she evaded them.

The sun was high, and it gleamed off her flanks. There were men hidden behind the trees, waiting with nets – but now I wanted her to run, to escape.

“The prince should take the first throw!” shouted Timon.

I looked at my father. He nodded.

Bansa stood transfixed. “As white as the moon!” he said, eyes staring.

“Come on prince!” called Timon. He was beside me now. The dogs were yapping, the hind trapped.

I could feel all the men looking at me, their horses restless, their eyes keen.

The hind was slow and tired now. She could barely move. Her body was slack and the dogs were nipping at her.

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A huntsman raised his arm and I took that as a challenge, lifting my spear. My aim was good. I could get her in her flank, in the heart, in the best place. Behind me Timon was whispering – more remarks about Andro, perhaps. Hefting the spear above my head I heard my father's shouts of encouragement and all the men roaring and the whole clearing ringing with noise.

For a second she lifted her head up to me and I looked into her eyes.

I couldn't hold that milky gaze. I threw the spear, blindly. There was a pause, in which I could only make out a single dog's bark: it was Patch.

And then the men shouted. Through their cries I heard the hind's moan of pain. I looked up, barely wanting to see.

Timon was clapping his hands. My father was shaking his spear in triumph.

I'd got her. I'd got the hind. The thought seared through me, making my whole body tingle. I'd got the hind.

My spear was sticking out of her flank. The blood was spotting her whiteness. She staggered and fell to

her knees, and the other huntsmen went in to finish the job, the dogs awhirl around them.

My father rode up to me and clapped me on the back. “A fine shot, Stephan!” he said. “Fit for a prince!” He grabbed my arm in congratulation.

His approval washed over me. But somewhere inside me, I also felt sick. I’d killed that animal, that beautiful creature, and maybe we would never see anything like her again.

“Stephan!” shouted Minos, and the men took up the cheer. As they shouted my name, excitement and pride spread through me to see them all standing around me, some holding nets, some with knives, while the dogs pestered the hind’s corpse, waiting for their reward. I was elated.

The men cheered once more, then slowly returned to their tasks. My father stayed with me for a second.

He was about to say something, when a sharp, wailing sound, like the lamentation of women at a funeral, chilled the clearing. At first I thought it might be the hind giving out its final cry, and my stomach twisted. But it couldn’t be. The keening was much, much harsher

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than anything a hind could produce, more harrowing than anything I'd heard at a funeral. My father released my arm. He turned round, slowly and deliberately. Swift shivered beneath me.

From out of the trees, into the clearing, came a woman, screaming.

“Who is she?” someone said.

Tall and veiled, she was shouting something I couldn't understand. She tore off her veil and it floated away from her into the trees. Everything paused.

“It's Myrrah!” cried a voice. “The priestess. She lives by the Black Lake!”

We had passed her house on the way – a low, wooden thing, smoke billowing out of the roof. I hadn't given it a moment's thought.

The entire crowd of hunters fell silent. The dogs, cowed, turned away from the hind. The huntsmen's hands were dripping blood.

Only Myrrah's insistent screams pierced the air.

Now I could make out a word – a name, among the screams. “Dictynna... Dictynna!”

Dictynna – the hunt goddess. She was calling the name of the hunt goddess.

My father got off his horse and handed me the bridle. He walked calmly through the crowd of hunters. I dismounted as well, and gave the horses to one of the huntsmen to tend.

My father and I went right up to Myrrah. Only then did she stop wailing, and the silence rang like thunder. Her black hair was uncoiled, hanging loosely around her face.

“Violation!” Myrrah screeched. “Dictynna is violated! The white hind is killed...”

My heart jumped in my breast. Now I was so close to Myrrah, I could see her clearly. Her face was frozen, and the voice that came out of her mouth was deep and gravelly and somehow different. It was as if someone else were speaking.

“I have a message from the gods,” she said. “A message from the Mother herself. It came to me this morning in the half-light. It came through the fires and the fumes, and it came in blinding strength.” Her voice was lower now, but in the silence it seemed as if it could be heard everywhere at once, between the trees and from the sky above.

“There is a curse on you, and on the whole House of Minos!”

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The words sank through the air like stones thrown into a lake. Sickness spread out through my body from my stomach. I wanted to retch. Nobody spoke.

My father's face briefly crumpled, then set solid again. There was a deep sadness in his eyes that I had never seen before. It was only there for the smallest moment, but it felt to me as if I had stared into the far reaches of the cosmos, into the places where the gods lived, into somewhere beyond time. He blinked, and the feeling passed.

He stretched out a hand, almost as if he were about to hold Myrrah's.

"Take away that woman," shouted someone. Hunters moved forward uncertainly.

"Wait!" My father's voice rang out imperiously. Everything, and everyone, halted. Time swallowed us all.

"Please, forgive my men," said my father, gently. He motioned to an attendant, who hurried forwards with water. Myrrah pushed away the beaker. She remained, arms held out in front of her, like some figure built to scare away birds. "What is the curse?" asked my father. I could sense the strain in his voice; I hoped that nobody else could.

She pointed her finger at me and at my father.

“There is death in your house, King Minos. There are things twisted out of joint. The stench of darkness is in your minds. And none of you – none of you – will escape it.”

A breeze rustled through the trees, and its rushing filled the world.

“I see a confusion full of blood! I see corridors, twisting, turning! Lines filled with blood!” Her voice was loud, ringing, fierce, and an arc of spittle came from her mouth.

“Is there no way out of the curse?” asked my father.

“I see no way out of the curse.”

My father, always a king, bowed to her. He offered to have an attendant lead her on a horse to a resting chamber in the palace, but she refused.

No way out? I thought. No way out of the curse?

Myrrah looked at me. Hunters were levelling their weapons; lords were glaring; attendants were panicking. Bansa was poised and ready, his body making an arrow towards me and the woman. Myrrah strode towards me slowly, each step seeming huge.

“In your face I see two things,” she muttered. There was a stink on her like smoke and sacrifice.

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“What are they?” I asked, trembling, as the noise and shouts and bustle continued around me.

“A monster,” she said.

Me? A monster?

“And death.”

The word pricked me like the tip of a knife.

Timon approached, more swiftly than his overweight frame seemed capable of. He touched the priestess on the shoulder, and she seemed to grow limp, and clutched at him. He led her away, leaving me standing on my own, the dogs barking around me, my hands slippery with sweat, with a dark taste in my mouth.

I was a thirteen-year-old boy, the son of a king. I had killed a white hind. And I'd been marked by a priestess, for death.

2

BY THE BLACK LAKE

The sun was high in the sky before the white hind, no longer dripping blood, was trussed up on a pole and we were ready to return home. But I was in no mood to celebrate during our silent journey. We came to the Black Lake, the sun reflecting in its still waters. A swan beat down to the surface and glided along. I glanced up miserably – there was the low, wooden house by the side of the water, with a path leading to the front door, and smoke billowing from somewhere inside. I had to speak to her again, the priestess. Was Myrrah prophesying my own death, or somebody close to me? And what did she mean by a monster?

There was a shadow in the doorway, and for a moment I was afraid. Then the shadow detached itself and came forward.

Myrrah's face was barely lined, even though I knew she was older than my father. Her eyes glinted in the sunlight.

She gazed at me. I tried to speak, but I couldn't. Her eyes were holding me. It was as if she could look beneath my skull and find what thoughts lay within. It felt like now there was nothing else in this world, apart from me and Myrrah. I couldn't even feel Swift's hot flanks beneath me.

Timon broke the spell. He brought his horse up beside me. "Greetings, Myrrah," he said.

I snapped back to the moment. "Priestess," I said, bowing my head. "I've come to ask you about the prophecy."

No answer – just that all-seeing gaze. My lips were chapped, and I ran my tongue over them.

"I would like some water. Please will you allow me to rest for a moment in your house?" I spoke formally, not wanting to offend her.

She shifted her body to block the path. I moved Swift forward slightly, and Myrrah held out her arms as if to say: go no further.

Why didn't she want me to go inside the house? What was she hiding in there? She was a priestess, true, but that didn't mean her house was out of bounds.

I tried again, but Myrrah put her hand on Swift, who whinnied and halted.

This was – this was insolence! I looked around, to see if my father, King Minos was in sight. My spear shifted beneath my arm. My mouth felt full of sand.

Myrrah spat, slowly and lazily, on the ground at Swift's feet.

Without thinking, I pulled my sword out of its sheath. Myrrah looked up at me, and for a moment I was poised there, the sword held high, the bright eyes of the priestess tearing into me. The sword felt heavy and I wanted to drop it. I held on to it tightly, not knowing what I was doing. She'd spat at me, and I was thirsty, and I was a prince. Anger was swirling through me, and shame. I wanted to cry.

"Prince!" It was Timon. He'd come up behind me. "May I remind you that the priestess is inviolable?"

I turned to him, and felt Myrrah's gaze shift away. I flicked my tongue over my lips again. My arm dropped. "That does not excuse such behaviour," I managed to whisper. Re-sheathing the sword, I bowed again, curtly.

She just stared ahead, eyes filled with a strange kind of light.

So I sat there, on Swift, feeling ridiculous.

Myrrah delved into the folds of her robe and held out a small flask, which she offered to me. I didn't want to take it. I didn't want Myrrah's water any more. I didn't want anything to do with her. But I still had to know.

"I came to ask you, Myrrah, if you will explain the prophecy to me?"

Her interminable stare. I bowed to her again, cheeks flushing, turned Swift around and left.

I caught up with the King as we neared the palace.

"Father," I said quietly, trying not to draw any attention from Timon, who was sleepily padding along behind us.

He looked at me with a distant gaze. "Mmmm?"

"Myrrah – I went to see her, to ask her about the prophecy. She... she wouldn't let me into her house, and then she spat at the ground in front of me."

"You're trying to tell me that one of the senior priestesses of the Mother Goddess was insolent to you?"

I nodded.

He sighed. “The priestesses cannot be touched, Stephan. They are holy. No doubt Myrrah was simply clearing her throat.

“But—”

“She meant no ill. You must be courteous at all times. To everybody.” He kicked his heels into Farseeker, and trotted on.

The palace of Knossos was on the top of a small hill, built out of stone. To me, it looked like it grew out of the ground. Layers of floors rose up into the sky, held up by scarlet pillars. I could see people moving about the terraces, and the guards with their bronze armour flashing.

After taking Swift to her stable, and instructing the stable boys to make sure she had enough food and water in her trough, I made my way round to the stone steps at the front of the main palace complex, the guards at the gate parting to let me through, and went into the darkness of the entrance hall.

I stopped a moment to blink: it was always difficult adjusting your eyes from the light outside. Though there was an opening above, it was cool and gloomy in there.

Somebody barged past me as I came into the darkness, and, a little flustered, I turned to see the back of a tall, wiry man, holding several scrolls, walking in the direction of the New Temple. Three or four scribes following him all bowed and nodded at me as they went.

“Daedalus!” I called.

The wiry man stopped and turned, spilling a couple of scrolls from his bundle, which were immediately picked up by a scribe, who held them carefully.

“Pulleys,” said Daedalus. “Know anything about them?” His eyes were bright.

“Well...” I started to say. “Pulleys...”

“Thought so.” Turning, he hurried off to his construction site, where he was building the New Temple to the Mother Goddess. It was to be my father’s great legacy: a temple whose beauty and brilliance would be known throughout the Middle Sea, and beyond.

“All will become clear, my prince,” he shouted over his shoulder. “The world will marvel at my creation! Now, if you knew anything about steam it might come in handy...” And he turned to one of his scribes, who immediately began jotting something down on a tablet.

Smiling a little, I continued on into the palace. I wanted to see my little brother Asterius, who'd be in his rooms with his nurses. I'd whittled him some wooden toys – a man, a bull and a horse – so I needed to get them from the cedar chest in my bedroom. On the other hand, I also needed to avoid my tutor, Theo – yesterday I'd bunked off my lessons to play on the shore with my sister Ari. So I kept to the busy parts of the palace, where I might go unnoticed, going through the Hall of the Double Axes, past the light well and the workshops and the storerooms, taking the roundabout route.

As I rounded a corner of the kitchens, a wooden stick shot out to bar my way. It was carved with a bull's head, and the horns caught my side.

“Ouch!”

“You may think I am old,” murmured Theo, “but I can still work out what you young people are up to...”

“I'm sorry, Theo,” I said, and it was partly true. I didn't like making him angry. His lined face in the torchlight looked at me with those sad, wise eyes.

“I'm disappointed in you, Prince,” he said. “Your brother Androgeos is such a keen learner, and Ariadne has a quick mind too – quicker than Androgeos's,

I'd say. I still have high hopes for you, but even so – I am instructed by your mother Queen Pasiphaë to confine you to your room as punishment.” The way he said it sounded almost apologetic. He never liked punishing me.

“But...” I said, as the kitchen aromas of roasting meat swirled all around me.

“...without supper.”

“Theo!” My stomach was empty – I'd hardly eaten all day, nothing but a handful of berries, what with the excitement of the hunt and the weirdness of Myrrah's prophecy.

“It's not for me, or for you, to argue,” said Theo.

So off I slunk to my quarters, with Theo walking closely behind. He left me with some exercises to go through (the names of the generals of our armies; the myriad names of the Mother Goddess), and closed the door with a sigh.

A cough as I entered made me look up. My sister, Ari, was leaning against the far wall by the window, looking thoughtful, as she often did. Her long hair – blond, which came from my mother's northern side, though some said she was descended from the sun

god – gleamed on her shoulders, matched by a torc around her neck.

“Why aren’t you with the men?” she asked.

“Confined to quarters,” I said grumpily. “Why are you in my room?” I flopped down onto my couch. I was sweating, and needed to pour cold water over myself. Should I tell her what had happened in the forest?

“Nobody can find me here,” she said. “They wouldn’t think to look. But listen. I heard something this afternoon. In the market.”

“And what were you doing in the market?” It was outside the walls, and Ari had to get permission to go out there – and then go with a full load of attendants. She hated that.

She smiled at me. “That didn’t worry you when we went to the beach.”

“True,” I conceded.

“I have my ways. Nurses fall asleep. Guards don’t always know that the girl in the cloak carrying a basket full of eggs is a princess.”

“You steal eggs?” I said, only half-joking.

“I put them back.” She slid out of the sunlight and drew a fold of material over her face. “See? Now I’m

just dozy Dorcas, up for market for the day from a sleepy little village.”

“It’s dangerous. You could get hurt, or kidnapped.”

“Rumours, I heard. Strange rumours.”

“What?” She was talking over me. She always did. “All the more reason for you not to go to the market.”

My room was cool at that time of day. Ari leant against the wall, back in the light, covering up a frieze of a blue monkey, crinkles appearing on her forehead. She took a breath, choosing her words carefully.

“No, Stephan. All the more reason that I should go. It’s important to hear what people are saying.”

“And what are they saying?” I slumped back in my couch. “Wait, let me guess.” This would be easy if I just conjured up in my mind the petitioners that came to my father daily. “They are unfairly taxed. The gods are against them. The price of corn is too high. There are no siring bulls, and the...”

She blanched, the sun coming off her pale cheeks, her hair as gold as the sunlight, where mine was blacker than the night sky. Like mine, her eyes were light green with a touch of blue.

“They say all that, yes. And they also say that our mother...” She put a slim hand to her throat.

“What about our mother?”

Ari gulped. Her eyelids fluttered up and down. “I... don’t know how to say it.”

I sat back up, looking at the mixture of confusion, fear and pain in her eyes.

“Please,” I said. “Tell me.”

Ari nodded. “They say... they say that she and Daedalus...”

“Has he been boring her about pulleys and steam?” I said, searching for a joke to ward off a dismal feeling, thinking of those bright, shadowed eyes.

“Daedalus... and my mother...” Ari was trembling. “They say they are lovers.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” I cut in, almost giddy with relief that the terrible rumour was so stupid.

“It is, isn’t it?” she pleaded.

My mother, and Daedalus? I’d never even seen them together, never mind known them to pass a word. How could they meet, when she was married to my father, King Minos, and Daedalus was forever buried among his drawings and his beloved building works? A quiet

rage came over me. “Gossip, that’s all it is. She mustn’t hear of this.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Ari answered, as I sunk my head in my hands – first Myrrah and her horrible prophecy, now idiots spreading insulting rumours. “But what’s the matter, Stephan? If it’s no more than a rumour?”

I clenched my hands together. Should I tell her about the prophecy, about Myrrah?

Ari always knew what to do, how to get what she wanted. She started to poke me playfully, drawing a smile from me despite myself. And then I said, “Ari. Something awful happened today.”

The white hind and the prophecy, Myrrah’s wicked presence at the Black Lake, the spittle of the silent priestess on the ground near my feet – after I’d gone through the whole thing, Ari brooded, taking her time to answer.

“Interesting. You say she barred your way?”

I nodded. “She wouldn’t let me go down the path. And more – Swift didn’t seem to want to go either. Swift sensed something, I think.”

“And there was smoke coming from the house?”

“There was.” Suddenly I realized how odd that was. A blazing fire, in the heat of summer?

“Stephan,” said Ari carefully, her eyes serious but bright, “let’s go down to the Black Lake, and see what Myrrah’s doing. Why would she behave like that? Isn’t it treasonous?”

“How shall we go?” I asked. “You don’t have the excuses I have to leave the palace, and I find it hard enough to get away from Theo.”

Ari folded her cloak over her head again. “Eggs, eggs, fresh-laid eggs!”

“You can’t pull that one again.”

“I always have a way.”

And it was true, she always did have a way. Ari knew the palace complex much better than I did, always slipping in and out of places, like a cat. As quick as smoke, Theo used to say.

“We can’t tell anyone,” I said, remembering my father the King, and how he’d reacted when I’d told him.

“Night is our friend,” said Ari. “Be ready for me.” She stood up – and then she was gone, as fast as a dragonfly slips from the surface of a stream.