

## SAMPLE CHAPTER OF PYTHAGORAS DREAMING

### 1. THE DEATH OF A DREAM

THE SKY CRACKED OPEN with thunder and lightning and through the jagged canyon of rain swept clouds came screaming the banshee Furies, blood on their lips and fire in their eyes and the vengeance of the gods in their icy hearts. Down to the spume they hurtled to race across the surface of the surging sea, their skeleton fingers trailing through the wave tops, those black robes almost invisible against the storm clouds and the tormented night. Their screaming blotted out the thunder and the pounding waves as they swooped upon the defenseless ship, their glare enough to cause the sail to spontaneously combust, their breath splintering the timbers of the hull. Any poor souls aboard must have rushed below, knowing they were lost but their screams of terror were pitiful squeaks compared to the voices of the Furies. And so the helpless vessel was driven wide, toward the rocks that waited to gore its hull and smash it and everything in it to splinters on their jagged edges.

Hippasos, Hippasos, I knew the doom in your soul. And I remembered then the prophecy of the oracle, the all-seeing Pythias – “And the storm will bring with it the death of a fabulous dream, and the greatest hope of humanity will crack like the spine of the ship when it hits the beach and be shattered like the surging debris amid the surf.”

Oh Zeus, mighty Zeus, don't let it be my dream. Don't let it be mine.

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Milo brought them to me himself, entering quietly—he moves with remarkable stealth for such a big man. He waits until I acknowledge his presence—it is a game we often play. I pretend to be asleep, he pretends to try not to wake me as if he has forgotten my power to sense the presence of any mind, whether I am sleeping or awake. Either way, I will know he is there and tempt him to disturb me, but he waits, silently, and it is always me who has to speak first.

“What is it, Milo?”

He allows a little pause and, I suspect, a tiny smile of victory.

“You have visitors, Great Father.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes.”

It hardly matters what hour it is—in fact I am only guessing. That he entered so quietly is my only clue that it is probably night—the room seems

dark but my eyesight is so poor these days that it is hard to tell. I am allowed to receive visitors only for one hour in the morning and the afternoon, otherwise my only company is Milo, and Xephanope, and Lysis and Nicarete who is my physician. They alone, through all my hours of slumber less sleep, and I can read all of their minds better than they can themselves.

"Hippasos is here to see you, Great Father."

There had been a pause – perhaps I had nodded off for a moment.

"What does he want?"

"He wishes to take his family and leave the Academy."

"He is free to come and go as he chooses, as are we all."

Except perhaps those of us bedridden and unable to leave their room.

I don't really want to see Hippasos – I'm not even sure if I remember who he is. My memory of terrestrial things is so poor these days. But I know too that Milo would not have allowed this visit without an important reason – still I make him explain.

"Pythagoras, he wants you to give him your blessing."

"He can't have it. I want him to stay."

Free to come and go, yes, but you can't have them running to and fro willy-nilly.

"Then you'd better tell him that yourself."

On my flesh, I can actually feel Milo's scowl. My mind playing tricks again. I wonder if he is actually speaking, or just allowing me to read his thoughts. No, you can't put such a gruff tone into your thoughts.

"Oh, very well, Milo. Show him in."

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My father was a gem engraver and when I was a boy he would take me on his knee and allow me watch him cut the stones. I would hold them, entranced by the perfection of their gleaming facets, but mostly I was proud of the skill with which he transformed those rough dirty stones into such beautiful gems. When I was older, he taught me his secret.

"I don't transform the stones at all. The perfection is already there, locked up inside the stone. My skill is to know which way to cut to bring forth that beauty."

It wasn't until I became his apprentice and began to do it myself that I knew what he said was true. Any rough irregular stone could be cut and ground and polished and made into a thing of beauty. The rare ones were valuable, and usually more radiant, but all were beautiful – the crudest piece of granite could be made to shine with smooth brilliance, the coarsest lump of iron could reveal a breathtaking solid drop of blood. But all of them, when they first came to hand, from the richest diamond to the coolest emerald, was a course rough stone that offered no clue to the beauty hidden within.

I walk out on the road and picked up a handful of gravel, and gazed at the distant clump of boulders, and tried to imagine their secret perfection. The scabby bark of a tree that hides the superb scrolls of the grain of the wood

inside, the heart of shining glass in the sand between my toes, all perfection and harmony and beauty in the world lay hidden from the eye and needed knowledge and skill to bring it forth. Everything had its secret heart and in that heart was exquisite perfection. The answer to everything was a secret code, all you had to do was learn the code and perfection and all knowledge and all beauty would be yours. Find the way to cut the stone of life and reveal the wonders within.

And I went out into the world to seeking that cosmic code.

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Milo has moved me from my bunk to the chair that stands beside—just three paces distance and I am exhausted, as much by the pain and the effort. He has thrown a cloak about my shoulders and it weights heavily, stooping me forward. Milo stands at my side, ready to steady me if I begin to fall. His massive hand on my shoulder constantly presses to keep me awake. It is all too difficult—I have no time for Hippiasos nor anyone else.

“Great Father, give us your blessing and wish us safe journey.”

Hippiasos? I peer at him in the yellow oil light and slowly the blur comes into focus. Oh yes, of course, I know him well. “Why do you want to leave, Hippiasos?”

“I don’t want to leave. I *must* go. I can say no more.”

His fear pervades the room, startling everything. The oil lamps seem to flare at it. Inanimate objects hide behind their shadows. So great is his fear that it envelopes all other thoughts. I can no longer sense Milo’s presence although his steadying hand tells me he is still here. I cannot even sense my own thoughts. Everything is Hippiasos and his jangling nerves. I can smell it too, nauseatingly. I must try to calm him. “Haven’t you been happy here?”

“The best years of my life, Pythagoras, are those I have spent here. I came with nothing. Now I have a good business and a fine wife and two children almost full grown. My life here has been happy and fulfilling. The best days I have ever known, but they are over now.”

Hippiasos speaks unevenly, and seems to be glancing over his shoulder constantly even though nothing can touch him here.

“Our work has hardly begun...”

“Others must carry on. I must go.”

“If you must, then go. But are you leaving in anger?”

Anxiety replaces his naked fear—his brain is no longer running from me. He seems smaller, suddenly. Perhaps he has fallen on his knees before me—it’s hard to tell. No. That is forbidden. It is merely that his aura of panic has diminished.

“Oh no, Pythagoras. Not anger, never. I will always love you, and remember with joy my time at this great Academy.”

“Then what? What is it I see in your eyes? Fear?”

I see nothing in his eyes. I know only the terror in his soul. And rightly so, for he is doomed and there is nothing can be done. He really just ought to get

on and have the pain and anguish over with. That is the only way for him now.

"Please, Great Father, I can't speak of it."

"Nor can I oblige you to do so. Go if you must. But I warn you, the omens are bad. There are evil signs in the Numbers, and I have been having dreadful dreams."

"I can't help that," he says bravely. What more warning can I give him? You are dead, my friend. Face it and be done with it.

"I see grave danger."

"I will have to face the danger."

"Only the foolish ignore the omens."

"Pythagoras, Great Father to us all. Give us your blessing."

"I cannot. You must stay."

"No, we must go. And if not your blessing, then wish us safe journey."

"Your journey will not be safe. You face the gravest dangers."

"Is that all you have to say, Great Father?"

I'm sure it is. If he goes he is doomed. If he stays I still probably cannot save him. What else can there be? One thing more, just to be certain.

"Is the rest *Unspeakable*, Hippiasos?"

He will not answer immediately. I remain silent, as does Milo. If he is to betray us, it will be now. In the end, he can only commit himself with a meek voice, trembling, weeping perhaps. "Yes, Father, it is."

"Then we cannot speak of it."

"No, Great Father, we cannot."

So the interview is over, and the rest mere words lost in the mellow thickness of the smoky, musky atmosphere of the room.

"Then go, if you must. But I have warned you of the danger."

"No chance of a blessing?"

"I cannot defy the omens."

"I will miss you, Pythagoras. Thank you for the warning. But we must leave."

"What is it that you fear more than the omens?"

"If I stay, the *Unspeakable* will be spoken."

"I see."

"I must go where there is no danger of the *Unspeakable* being spoken."

"There is no such place."

"Still I must go there."

"The omens are against you. You have no chance."

"Goodbye, Great Father."

"Farewell, my friend."

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Its origins lie in the barbaric orgies of the Orphic mysteries. In order that a man's soul might be perfect when reincarnated in the next life, it must first be purified in this. And the form that purification takes is in the numbers. The

numbers are everything—all things known, every object in existence, each moral quality, all forms of politics and social conditions, and all inner beings, or souls—all of these things are actually numbers. The contrast of opposites is everything, the two sexes, day and night, waking and sleeping, all of it is given expression by odd and even numbers and blended by the harmony of mathematical perfection. So they are the laws that govern our lives—necessarily those same laws that govern the very universe itself.

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Something crashes out there, tearing me awake. Milo is there, huddled in his cloak, bringing a tray of food that he sets down beside me. Why does he bother? But Milo has always bothered.

“Is there a storm, Milo?”

“Yes, Pythagoras. Quite a blow, in fact.”

“It’s the Furies.”

“No. It’s just a storm.”

Milo’s voice is weary, exasperated, defeated. He sits with a groan in his favourite spot, on the step at the head of my bunk, leaning back against the pillar. He knows I can’t see him there, but also that he cannot hide his feelings from me.

“Hippasos is gone? And his kin?”

“Yes. They’ve gone.”

“The Furies are now pursuing them.”

“Yes. I think you succeeded in putting the fear of death into him.”

“Yet he still went?”

“Obviously something else scared him more.”

Yes, there is a very exasperated tone in his voice. He doesn’t usually allow his feelings to show so nakedly. Men are likely to get torn limb from limb if he loses his temper so he keeps a tight reign on it, but he is angry now, and willing to share his anger with me. I feel almost honoured. “Why are you angry with me, Milo?”

“It might at least have offered him your blessing.”

“It wasn’t possible, Milo. You know that.”

“I’m not sure of what I know any more.”

“All harmony is in the numbers, Milo. Hippasos was all discord. Couldn’t you feel it yourself?”

“He was scared out of his wits, if that’s what you mean.”

“And rightly so, for he had everything to fear.”

“I tried to persuade him to wait until the storm had passed but there was no holding them back.”

“It would make no difference.”

“I keep thinking I should have gone with them to protect them.”

“You couldn’t protect them from everything forever. There was nothing you could do Milo, I assure you.”

“In any case, if there is danger, my place is here, guarding you Pythagoras.”

"I am not in danger."

"How can you know that so certainly?"

"The Numbers, Milo. Will you never find faith in them?"

"Eat your dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"You'll feel better if you eat."

"I hear thunder."

"There's a storm."

"The Furies..."

"It's just a storm."

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I was born and raised on the glorious island of Samos, a paradise on earth with its fine harbour against the backdrop of distant rugged mountains. At the time it was a centre of art but not a lot of learning, and I was sent to Miletus on the mainland to be instructed—amongst others—by the Great Thales and Anaximander, both of whom were very old men at the time. Then I travelled to Egypt to learn from the priests the wonderful geometry with which they built the pyramids, and to Babylon to understand their astronomy and see the remarkable mechanics of the hanging gardens.

When I returned to Samos, I soon realised that my homeland's beauty and splendor was poisoned at the source for all that cultural and artistic and economic development was entirely the result of the local tyrant who was named Polycrates, curse his soul for eternity. He was really just an elaborate pirate and had subjugated the surrounding islands as well as Samos where he built his palace and was well on the way to establishing a rich little empire at the expense of everyone except himself. I never saw him, even though my father was his favourite jeweler, for my mother hid herself and we children in the cellar whenever he was around. He was a fine cultured aristocratic gentleman with a divine right to rape any woman he fancied and cut the throat of any child to ensure he got his way.

Polycrates, having made an enemy of everyone around him, sought a trade allegiance with Egypt and invited the Pharaoh's envoys to witness the splendor of his small but powerful kingdom and they were sufficiently impressed to arrange an audience on the Nile. But the Pharaoh was a shrewd old devil and offered a condition. Polycrates, he declared, was a very lucky man to have got where he was but all that good luck was bound to run out in the end. What he needed to do was take his most valued possession and throw it into the sea, whereby he would have had some bad luck to counterbalance the good. Then, perhaps, an allegiance might be considered.

Polycrates searched his vast riches for that which he valued most, and finally came up with a brilliant emerald ring. It was the largest and finest emerald that anyone knew of, magnificently cut and mounted, and had been made as a gift to his most beloved wife. He got it back because he had been obliged to strangle her with his own hands when she failed to provide an heir

after two years of marriage. Yes, that would be the very thing with which to impress Pharaoh and so he took a ship outside the harbour and threw the ring far out into the sea.

Two days later, a fisherman arrived at the palace gates bearing the largest sea trout anyone had ever seen. He wished to make a gift of it to Polycrates because it just wasn't safe to own anything that might in some way be regarded as better than that possessed by the tyrant. But when the fish was prepared and presented to Polycrates, there from its innards fell the emerald ring. Polycrates was enraged and took every revenge he could think of. My father had cut that stone and I had actually helped him cast the ring. I returned from a hunting trip to find the house ablaze with the slaughtered bodies of my mother and siblings inside and my father hanging from a tree out the front. My youth ended in that instant—I could offer no assistance, I asked no questions, there wasn't any time for grief. I turned and headed for the distant mountains as fast as I could go.

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I see you, Milo, in my never ending waking dream. I see you riding out into the rain, teeth gritted against the stiff breeze, bared muscles of your arms defiant of the cold, urging the reluctant horse forward. By dawn the storm has abated but the rain still drizzles and the wind gusts in chilly squalls. The water drips from your hair and chin but you ride on, eyes dark with anger, searching for Hippasos. The numbers lure you on but it is all against the odds. At your side rides the fierce young Amazon Niobe and behind the ever-complaining Phaxos, huddled in a blanket, but following no less loyally.

Some passing wayfarers came to shelter at the Academy and brought with them news of the wreck, and you rode out along the cliffs, searching anxiously, Niobe watching your back, guardian to the guardian. Bands of marauders plague this wild coast and although their activities are of a rather piratical nature, still you ride armed and ready for anything. Niobe and Phaxos that is, for you, Milo never carry weapons, unless you count those massive muscles that are the source of your immortal fame. These days you're nearly fifty, and growing flabby and I know you are troubled by gout and arthritis. Mighty Milo, they still call you, and if it is a bit of a joke these days, no one dares laugh.

They ride to a place about halfway between the Academy and Croton where the terrain is open and sparsely vegetated but a hundred paces away to the left, the land suddenly falls in a steep cliff to the sea. Up ahead, Milo can see that Niobe, who always wants the most dangerous jobs, has dismounted and approaches the edge to peer downward. When she waves affirmatively, Milo and Phaxos immediately rein in and make a careful study of the hills beyond. Around these parts, wrecked ships often mean pirates, along with frenzied scavengers from the villages, once word of the wreck gets around.

Content that they are first to arrive, Milo rides to where Niobe waits and the ship comes into view below. He can see it is a large vessel and given the litter

of wreckage scattered about, probably very recent. The absence of villagers also attests to this.

“It’s a very big ship, Olympian,” Phaxos breathes unnecessarily, for he is given to stating the obvious, usually loudly and excitedly. He is a hyperactive scrawny fellow with frenetic movements and wild eyes and fast with a knife, but his real asset is that he is scared of everything. There is no likelihood of falling into the trap of underestimating dangers when Phaxos is around.

By contrast, Niobe remains still and silent. Had she dressed appropriately, she would be a very attractive young lady with a most delightful smile that she only ever uses by accident—preferring a dark-eyed scowl most of the time. She keeps her hair chopped short and wears a man’s leather jerkin laced half-open down the front for she knows how to use a distraction to put an opponent off-guard. She regards her breasts as the terror of her life—a view rarely shared—the real Amazons reputedly loped one for archery purposes, Niobe would have chopped them both if she thought she might survive it.

Now she stands at the very edge of the cliff, for she never misses an opportunity to display her nerves of steel, and even leans outward as she studies the beach right up to the foot of the cliff. “No sign of anyone down there,” she says in her husky voice, teeth gritted against the wind.

Milo nods his curt appreciation—the only sort she ever wants. That spares him the need to approach the edge—the beach is wide at this point and he can clearly see the wreck when standing three paces back from the rim. It is a merchantman, of twenty-eight oars, aground on the beach having hit the rocks at the point, no doubt. The stern still rears with the incoming waves.

“It looks fairly recent too. Probably happened in last night’s storm,” Phaxos declares. Since the debris remains scattered and unclaimed by the local scavengers, that is obvious. In a day or two, once word gets out, the ship will be no more than firewood stacked and drying under the eaves of every hovel in the district.

Milo looks both ways along the beach. There are no corpses to be seen. That strikes him as improbable. Although he has never witnessed a shipwreck before, he has heard many stories of them and all seem to describe bodies everywhere, living and dead. There is wreckage strewn all about and some of it in quite indistinguishable shapes but none of it human or formerly so. And there is something else that seems to be wrong with it all, but he can’t for the moment put his finger on what that might be.

Meanwhile, Phaxos babbles on, telling his companions more of what they can plainly see for themselves.

“Such a big ship, Olympian. The mast is gone. And the oars. It’s a very big ship.”

Milo is always unreasonably patient with him.

“Calm yourself, Phaxos. But yes. We’d better go down and have a look, in case there’s something we can do.”

“Not worth the risk,” Niobe says in faint protest. The climb does seem very steep and with this penetrating wind now carrying the spray from the surf,



the way will be quite slippery. But then, Milo realizes that it isn't the cliff that she is referring to.

"I want to see this," Milo says determinedly.

She simply shrugs her compliance.

If Niobe is reluctant, on the other hand Phaxos needs no further instruction and has already started on the downward climb.

"All right, let's go," Milo commands pointlessly, while Niobe confines the remainder of her protests to rolling her eyeballs toward the heavens. "But you're right. We must be careful. You never know what to expect on this barbaric coast."

The judgment of Niobe is all but vindicated several times as they make the treacherous climb down the cliff-face for Milo's knees go to jelly – though he doesn't admit it – and he slips and struggles to save himself several times. He was never good at heights, not even in his prime. Niobe, right behind, does not embarrass him by offering assistance. She, of course, is part mountain-goat. Milo curses himself for a fool – he might once have been a champion of the arena but that is a long time ago and he has never come to terms with the passing of his youth. Xephanope will undoubtedly have a few things to say about this when she comes to hear of it.

But finally, they make the beach and can turn their attention to the ship. At closer range it proves to be a far larger vessel than it appeared from the cliff tops. It is one of those older Greek ships that carry both conquest and commerce to distant places and therefore has capacity as both warship and trading vessel. Beneath the two great eyes painted on the back-sloping bow is a ram in the form of an extended boar's head and along the side are holes in the outrigger for a total of fourteen oarsmen. There are no oars evident immediately for they have been shipped, but that, Milo assumes, is practical in storm conditions. The mast, however, is in place, although snapped off about a third of the way up. The ship, he realizes, is in grave danger of breaking amidships, for the sweeping fishtail of the keel and railings at the stern rise and fall drastically with the incoming waves while the bow is stuck fast for that boar's head ram has gouged deep into the shaly beach. The ship will be utterly destroyed within a few hours, already it is groaning and creaking as the forces of the sea and wind toy with it – sometimes those timbers creaking are more like screams of agony.

They advance warily, but there is no sign of anyone being around. Several times, waves bursting over the stern cause a timber to snap explosively and all three of them jump with fright. In their minds, each of them perceives eerie thoughts of Furies and phantoms and demons possessing the scene, but only Phaxos is silly enough to express them.

"Olympian. The ghost of the ship cries out from its watery grave."

"This is difficult enough, Phaxos, without you spouting your superstitious nonsense," Niobe snaps.

Milo is pleased to observe that she is as nervous as he is.

"There's no one around. They've all drowned," Phaxos says morbidly.

"We don't know that yet," Milo answers curtly. "But the timbers do seem

freshly splintered..."

"All drowned..."

"Perhaps they all got ashore and went for help."

"And abandon such a fine ship to the peasants?"

"It isn't a ship anymore, Phaxos. It's a wreck."

"But where would they go?"

Milo doesn't want to think about where they might have gone.

Finally, they are there, standing below the great arching bow with its all-seeing eyes that betray no shame at their utter failure to see all of Southern Italy coming at them.

"You stay here," Milo says to Niobe, but she has already turned her back to the wreck and faced the direction from which any threat might come.

"Phaxos, you check the other side."

While Phaxos makes his way up the beach and past the ram, Milo moves toward the water. The ship is listing that way, and the outrigger has been ripped off and almost touches the beach. It would be an easy climb to the deck, but Milo is still feeling the effects of his embarrassing scramble down the cliff. No less embarrassing is his attempt to clamber onto the deck. He needs a bunk up but is too proud to ask for it, his bad knees straining with the effort and his back wrenches breathtakingly and he eventually arrives on the deck like a beached whale, tangled and sweating. His first reaction is to glance toward Niobe, who still has her back turned, but he is sure that she is laughing. Age is a leveling experience.

As the waves twist the ship, the deck lurches and maintaining balance is far from easy. It is an utter shambles up here. The mast has fallen and collapsed the storming bridge such that this section of the deck is completely covered with splintered timbers and a jagged stacks of broken railing and oars, all twisted with the tatters of the sail and bound together with a bewildering tangle of ropes. Milo has never realised there is so much rope on a ship before. As a result, there is no access to the hold below as he has hoped, unless he scrambles along half the rocking deck to the broken seaward section.

He is beginning to persuade himself that there is no point in further investigation. There is no sign of any kind of cargo amongst the wreckage, nor any trace of the ship having been manned at the time it floundered – the oars are shipped and lashed before the waves tore them free and the sail appears to have been bound – those sections not shredded still are. It seems obvious that the ship has been abandoned in good time and in a very orderly and tidy fashion at that.

"There's a big hole in the hull down here," Phaxos is calling from the far side.

"I'm not surprised," Milo grunts.

Presumably, the ship has hit those rocks at the headland, so forcing its abandonment.

"It's big enough to climb through."

"Like the one in your head, Phaxos," Milo mutters in disgust.

But because there is something that can be climbed through, so the likes of Phaxos have no choice but to climb through it. Milo can hear him scrambling beneath his feet. He wants to shout to him to be careful, but then decides there is no reason for that either. Phaxos, Milo has long since learned, possesses a most extraordinary blend of courage and cowardice. His curiosity leads him into trouble recklessly, and his faint-heartedness makes damn sure he gets out of it again.

"Olympian. It's dark in here," Phaxos calls, his voice ringing hollowly beneath the planks.

"Truly?"

"Wait. There's something here..."

Something where?

The scream of terror that Phaxos then emits sends the seagulls scattering from the beach hundreds of paces away, and Niobe long-striding through the sand toward that side of the ship.

"What is it, Phaxos?" Milo shouts helplessly, but he knows there isn't much chance of getting any sense out of a panicky Phaxos.

"Olympian! Help me! There's someone here..."

Milo is on his way immediately, making frantic progress sternwards, almost losing his balance twice before he jerks and jolts to a place where he can get under the collapsed storming bridge and into the cargo hold below. All the time he suspects he is over-reacting to the foolishness of Phaxos. Undoubtedly, he has encountered a jellyfish trapped in the hold...

"Stay there. I'm coming down," Milo yells.

"It's touched me. They touched me...!"

Milo goes through the opening and lowers himself down, going up to his chest in the surging hold—the water is bloody freezing! Milo feels his heart seize up and stop, and then get going uncertainly again—what is certain is the cramping in his thighs and his testicles pain as if someone has kicked him in the scrotum. He groans and shivers and, with his teeth rattling furiously, plunges back toward Phaxos.

In the hold of these ships at the best of times it is only possible to walk doubled over—now many beams and planks spear downward from the ceiling, like stalactites and Milo has to crawl with only his chin above water before he can get through—a decent wave right now and he might drown. At least he can see where he is going for the hole in the hull that Phaxos has referred to admits plenty of light in the bow section and as Milo struggles toward it, the water recedes to ankle depth. It doesn't help his shivering—he is sure to get a terrible cold out of this little episode. Perhaps for that reason, Phaxos is anxious to assure Milo that the matter is worth all this trouble. "See, Olympian, see. Dead people. They're all dead!"

Bending forward, bumping his head on a beam, Milo can see that they are indeed dead. A bunch of people, in an untidy heap of torsos and limbs, their skins as grey as the sky. It looks like some sort of giant octopus that has got itself all in a knot and died.

"Look that them," Phaxos is saying, calmer now that Milo is at his side.

"Look at them! All tied together. Dead..."

"Yes, yes. They're dead all right," Milo murmurs in a quivering voice, but that is rather more from the cold than the excitement. And the coldness is mostly in his heart for already he knows what he will find here. He tries to stay calm, and doesn't want to go closer, dreading what he will confirm.

"Four of them, by the look of it. All drowned..."

Milo looks down below his sodden clothing to where there the water doesn't quite manage to cover the feet of his hunting boots.

"Not enough water in here to drown anybody..."

"Perhaps the water ran out through the hole after the ship ran aground," Phaxos speculates with all the wisdom of someone who knows nothing about seamanship.

"If the hull has filled with water, the ship would have sunk on the spot, you imbecile. Obviously, the wind drove it onto this beach before sufficient water came in that hole to sink it."

That too is speculation, for Milo is no sailor either. Niobe, who has come to stand at the entrance of the hole and peer inward, silently reminds Milo that he is talking rather than doing, and what he isn't doing is touching those obscenely dead things. Somehow, it seems utterly repulsive, the way their bodies intertwine.

"Olympian, all four are naked," Phaxos says, which gives Milo no further choice but to lower himself to his knees beside the corpses.

"Very observant of you, Phaxos," he grunts and leans over them. What he sees makes some things a lot plainer, others less so.

"Do you suppose the storm was so violent that it tore away all their clothing?" Phaxos wonders hopelessly.

"While they're down here, below deck? I don't think so..."

"Perhaps they fled down here in their dying terror..."

"Phaxos. If you look closely, you'll see that each of them has been bound hand and foot, and then lashed to the mast."

For that is so. What might have been some sort of dying perverse orgy is anything but—that the four people expired in this naked intimacy is plainly not of their own choosing.

"Ah. Then that's why they couldn't escape when the water came in the hole..."

"Stop gibbering Phaxos and help me."

Milo is trying to move the corpses and arrange the face of one of them where he can get a good look at it. Heartlessly, he needs to drag the head by the hair and when he does, he quickly lets go again. He groans. From outside the hole, Niobe reads his thoughts precisely.

"We know them, don't we," she says flatly.

"Yes. It's Hippasos, and his wife, and his son and daughter."

Niobe immediately turns her back, sitting on the edge of the hole, her head bowed, hand to her face. Milo remains, kneeling by the bodies, his own head bowed. Even Phaxos is stunned to silence, although only for a moment.

"Hippasos. Our Hippasos. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

In fact Milo knew the wife of Hippasos only slightly and his offspring not at all. Nodding acquaintances about the Academy and in the darkness of the hull no positive recognition is possible. Still, there is no doubt it is them.

They have each been bound by the wrists with leather thongs which was looped about the base of the mast and similarly at the ankles such that they would have originally been standing and only slid down to this orgiastic heap in death. Their skin is cold, meat rather than flesh. The siblings lie face to face, bodies pressed together, almost like sleeping lovers, but perhaps the deadest sign of all is that the penis of Hippasos dangles flaccidly under such improbable circumstances. That they are a family group is all the more disgusting. That girl, plainly, had been rather pretty when she was alive...

Bile surges within Milo but he suppresses it, for the moment. Not so Phaxos who clamps a hand over his mouth and flees out through the hole to the beach. Hearing him retching out there doesn't help matters. Niobe comes in through the opening, squatting just inside it. She glares at Milo and jerks an indicatory finger toward the corpses.

"You knew about this," she says by way of accusation.

"Yes," Milo admits, as much to himself as to her. "Last night Hippasos came to me and declared he was leaving, taking his family away by ship. He asked me to watch over his affairs."

"Did he say why he was leaving?"

"No. I suspected that he wanted to tell me more, but didn't. Still, I did have the strong suspicion that they were running away from something."

Niobe says nothing further, forcing him to continue. "That's why we hurried here this morning. I feared this."

"Then you knew they were in danger."

"No. I didn't know anything. But Pythagoras gave out all sorts of threats about bad omens."

"You don't believe in omens."

"No. But I did have a bad feeling about it."

"Maybe that's the same thing."

"Maybe."

Had she been a properly brought-up woman, Niobe would surely have approached and given Milo a hug of comfort that he then so desperately needed. Instead she stays where she is, eyeing him coldly, hating him for keeping things from her. Hippasos did seem agitated, yes, and trying to hide it. But he was always a timid fellow. The family's departure from the Academy was precipitous, yes, but they had expressed veiled dissatisfaction with their lives there for some time.

Perhaps there were questions Milo should have asked at the time, but Pythagoras had accepted their departure and for Milo to question that was inappropriate. Still, maybe he should have interrogated Hippasos and broken him down and made him air his grievances. To be sure, there are aspects of this that Milo is not prepared to face. One is that, had he enlightened Niobe concerning his suspicions, she would surely have followed them and perhaps

this tragedy could have been averted. Her eyes tell him all this and her silence admonishes him more than mere words could have.

What he needs badly is for Phaxos to offer some idiot distraction at that moment. There is no problem being obliged. He returns to the opening in the hull and leans in.

"Olympian. Do you suppose they're not really the family of Hippasos but instead daemons?"

"Daemons don't die, you fool, Phaxos. You have to be already dead to come from the Underworld."

"I want to go now, Olympian. I think the Furies have been at work here."

Milo sighs. The Furies. The nightmare of children whenever there is a storm. Nasty nannies tell them the Furies are passing, driving some poor disgraced individual to his eternal suffering.

"The Furies, indeed. That might explain the violence of the storm but nothing more than that."

But now that Phaxos' head is full of Furies, there will be no emptying it. It is an irrational fear. To be haunted by them required first that you be of noble birth—no mere bondsman can be honoured with their frenzied attentions. Moreover, the hounding to eternity by The Furies is a fate the gods reserve for those sorts of crimes where even torture and death is considered inadequate punishment. Dullards like Phaxos could never have conjured crimes of that order.

Niobe, meanwhile, has been considering the timbers around the hole in the hull. "Here, look at this..."

Milo scrambles over, pleased to be activated.

"Can I look at it from the outside, Olympian?" Phaxos says nervously.

"That's the point," Niobe says grimly. "The timbers are broken outward."

They can see that she is right.

"It's probably the way the Furies went out, Olympian," Phaxos babbles—clearly, he is in need of some basic instruction on superstitious nonsense. Niobe impatiently obliges. "I scarcely think, Phaxos, that entities capable of passing straight through walls and demolishing fortresses with the scream of their voices would need such a hole to escape, much less to make use an axe to provide it."

"An axe?"

"Looks that way to me."

Milo touches several places where the deep indentations have occurred, rather more to assure himself of it than Phaxos.

"All right, Niobe," Milo says, finally decisive. "Remove this timber and bring it with us."

She smiles her approval begins to kick and prise and lever at the nominated timber.

Milo makes one final examination of the scene to assure himself that he has missed nothing and then extracts himself through the hole and is walking back up the beach. Before them lies that awkward climb again, but he strives to think about something else.

"Phaxos, I want you to ride back to the Academy and tell him what we've found here."

"I'll ride like the wind, Olympian."

"There's no hurry. Just make sure you tell them how it is here."

Phaxos is already away and taking to the climb, delighted by the prospect of delivering news of such moment.

"Oh, and Phaxos..."

"Yes, Olympian?"

"Keep it simple. Say only that there has been a wreck and Hippasos and his family are dead. Don't mention any of the other strange things we've seen. Not the nakedness, nor the bindings, nor the axe."

"Shouldn't I warn them that the Furies are abroad?"

"Especially not that. Now go on, get going."

With Niobe at his side, Milo pauses on the beach to look back before beginning the arduous climb. The two searching eyes of the ship gaze back at them helplessly, yet Milo knows there is more to this than he dares to think. It is no longer possible to ignore the obvious; no longer possible for him to turn his back and walk away from what he doesn't want to know.

"Are you going to tell me what's really happening?" Niobe demands.

"I'm not sure if I know. Not really."

"Then whose fingers do I have to break one by one to find out?"

"Apart from those of Pythagoras himself, perhaps no one."

"Pythagoras? The Great Father? You think somehow he is responsible for this?"

"He knew it was going to happen in advance."

"But he has magic powers. He can see the future and read minds. Everyone knows that."

"Everyone *thinks* that. He dreams a lot. Usually he doesn't know what day it is. And he doesn't understand most of his dreams anyway."

"How else could he have known?"

"Yes. How else indeed."

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Yes, how else indeed. Am I really seeing and hearing this the way it happened, truly reading Milo's thoughts from half a day's march away? Or is it just a dream, and merely my imagination. I truly don't know – it seems to come and go, this power. Though sometimes I read their thoughts with great intimacy, still I never know everything about them. I read best those people I know best – perhaps it is just all intuition, sheer knowledge and a bit of perspicacity. Who can say? For if I truly possess such powers, surely I would know everything and not be left so bewildered and with little but this pain and this helplessness. And the *Unspeakable* would never have come into existence.

He is my friend and protector but he is also Mighty Milo, five times champion of the arena in Athens, three times Olympic champion, the

Colossus of Corinth, guardian of the Pythagorean Brotherhood and the Academy of Croton. And if the time of his fabled strength lies long in the past and grows dim in some memories, I suspect the day is coming when those people are going to be reminded of what they have forgotten.