

## EYES OF FATE

"My name is Kris. I never thought I'd find myself recounting my adventures again—those extraordinary events that unfolded during my business trips. Very unusual trips, to be precise: journeys into the past. These expeditions are an integral part of my responsibilities as the Head of the "Department of Artifact Delivery and Appraisal" at the Museum of Fine Arts.

My direct supervisor, Otto Schneider, was fortunate enough to acquire the long-lost blueprints of a time machine. Its use has elevated our museum to an unparalleled level, far beyond the reach of our competitors. Following my journey to the Cretaceous period, our new paleontology department transformed into a leading research hub, attracting some of the most prominent experts in paleontology and genetics. No wonder—after all, we became the proud caretakers of a living specimen of a previously unknown species, *Pteryx curiosus*—the "Curious Pteryx."

Yes, the very same Curious Pteryx I rescued from the claws of a massive prehistoric predator, *Harpactognathus*. According to the official version of events, its emergence in our time was attributed to the brilliant work of scientists who successfully cloned it from DNA fragments preserved in Arctic ice. And, of course, all of this was carried out under the direct supervision of Otto Schneider, briefly

making him the most celebrated figure in the world. Otto basked in the glory of his success, granting interviews only to the most renowned journalists. Meanwhile, Curious enjoyed a carefree life in a spacious enclosure designed specifically for him.

Out of habit, I still call him Curious, though his official name is Otto. He's grown accustomed to it and responds willingly. To Otto Schneider's credit, he developed a strong attachment to Otto-Curious. As he once confided to me, he'd formed "a mutual emotional bond" with the prehistoric pteryx. This revelation greatly reassured me. Knowing my boss's meticulous nature, I was now fully confident that Otto-Curious was in good hands.

By all accounts, I should have been satisfied as well—after all, the charming prehistoric pteryx I saved was thriving, and the balance of events had been restored. Yet, at times, I felt a wave of melancholy, a persistent sense that something was unfinished—or perhaps, improperly done. I tried to analyze these feelings, revisiting the events in my mind, but this only deepened my sadness. So, I resolved to let things unfold as they may and occasionally reread my memories of the time I'd spent in the world of pteryxes. The communicator brooch I'd received from Kartis was always with me—a small indulgence to remind me of my pteryx friends.

Nearly two months had passed since my return from the Cretaceous period with the rescued Curious-Otto. The time

for my next assignment from Otto Schneider was approaching. Thus, I wasn't entirely surprised when my phone rang one Saturday morning, just as I was about to head out for a walk after feeding my cat, Watson.

My boss's voice sounded agitated, and without even a greeting, he blurted out:

"Kris, you must come immediately! Otto—my Otto—no, you have to see this. Come to the enclosure at once."

My heart sank as a thousand grim scenarios raced through my mind.

"What's happened? Is he okay?" I shouted into the phone, but Otto Schneider had already hung up, leaving me without an answer.

I bolted out of my apartment, racing toward the subway while scanning the traffic for an available taxi. Luckily, I managed to flag one down. From my perspective, the car crawled along at a frustratingly slow pace, stopping obediently at every traffic light. Then again, I couldn't exactly expect the driver to break traffic laws just because I was in a hurry.

The driver, however, was not content with silence. He kept trying to strike up a conversation, fishing for details about the famous pteryx, Otto. After all, the enclosure's location was known worldwide, though access to it was strictly controlled. "To avoid distressing my boy, Otto," my boss had once explained this precaution to me. "He's been

through enough already." I completely agreed, and besides, Otto Schneider always knew what he was doing. Finally abandoning any hope of drawing me into a conversation, the taxi driver focused on the road, grumbling under his breath about arrogant scientists who had supposedly lost touch with ordinary people.

My mind registered these events mechanically, while the rest of me burned with impatience to see Curious and find out what had happened to him. Never before had my boss summoned me with such urgency.

At last, the taxi pulled up to the guarded gates of the enclosure. I paid the disgruntled driver and sprinted toward Otto Schneider, who was already waiting for me at the entrance.

"Come, Kris," he said, grabbing my arm and leading me forward.

We approached a small electric cart with an open top and drove toward a dense thicket of bushes located in the far corner of the enclosure. I dreaded looking in that direction, fearing I might see Curious-Otto's lifeless body.

We stopped a few meters from the bushes. To my immense relief, I saw Curious sitting on his hind legs, his broad tail spread out across the grass. Overcome with joy that he was alive, I ran toward him, arms outstretched, only to be stopped by a menacing hiss from the usually gentle pteryx. Stunned, I turned to Otto Schneider, who was wiping sweat from his brow. He nodded several times

before speaking:

“Exactly. He won’t let anyone near him. Don’t frighten him now—let’s step back a little.”

Confused, and unable to take my eyes off Curious, I followed Otto Schneider as we retreated a few steps. Curious, watching us closely, stopped hissing and ceased stretching his long neck in a threatening manner. I looked at my boss in bewilderment.

“Is he sick?” I asked, my throat dry and my voice quiet and raspy.

Otto Schneider turned to face me, and for some reason, his voice was equally low and hoarse as he began to explain:

“My boy Otto has become a mother. He’s laid an egg and is now incubating it. Which means... he’s actually a she.”

I was speechless, my mind struggling to process this revelation. Curious had laid an egg? Should we start calling him Ottia now?

Schneider shook me by the shoulders, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“If only we could send you back to the Cretaceous period again to find him—uh, her—a mate. I’d even volunteer to go myself.”

The mention of the Cretaceous period immediately triggered a flood of memories. In my mind’s eye, I saw the ginkgo tree with its dense foliage, where Dr. Kurio’s pet

primate, Kris, used to hide; Curious screaming in terror as he desperately struggled to escape the deadly grip of a giant predatory bird; and Kurkin the Third, distressed and holding me close to his feathered chest.

Otto Schneider interpreted my silence in his own way. “I understand how you feel, Kris. I know how much you care about him—or her.”

He waved his hand in front of his face a few times, then added:

“Well, about our Otto. That’s his name, and he’s used to it. Let’s go inside and talk calmly there.”

I forgot to mention that Otto Schneider had purchased a vacant lot next to his country house, where he had built the enclosure.

We got back into the electric cart, watching as Curious-Otto, now calm, carefully preened the feathers on his chest. Imagine that—Curious incubating an egg! Our prolific pteryx! A surge of pride washed over me—for him and, in a way, for myself. After all, it was I who had saved him from certain death. To me, he would always be Curious—the adorable prehistoric creature I had rescued. Curious, who had laid an egg. My thoughts became tangled as I struggled to reconcile this new reality: that he was, in fact, female. Thankfully, I didn’t have to dwell on this for long, as we soon arrived at a large wooden bungalow surrounded on all sides by vibrant flowers and shrubs.

Following the silent Otto Schneider, I stepped into a spacious living room with a large leather sofa. The furniture in the house was also wooden. My attention was drawn to a heavy chest of drawers with gilded handles, unmistakably from the Louis XV era. I had personally acquired it for a mysterious client who had wished to remain anonymous. Now, it seemed, I knew who that client was. On top of the chest rested a large laptop, looking more like a decorative prop meant to remind visitors that this was also a workspace. Otto Schneider noticed my interest in the chest.

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” he said quickly. “I just allowed myself this little indulgence.”

He gently nudged me toward the sofa, which turned out to be exceptionally comfortable. In truth, I wasn’t surprised by my boss’s secretive nature. It was simply part of who he was. At the moment, however, my thoughts were consumed by the situation with Curious-Otto. Why was it so urgent to bring him—or her—a mate from the Cretaceous period? Was it somehow tied to the “legend” that he had been cloned?

“Right now, it’s important to discuss Otto’s situation,” Otto Schneider said, as if reading my thoughts. “But first, I need a drink. You know, all this stress, all the attention on us, and now this,” he said, almost apologetically, as he retrieved a dark bottle from an antique cabinet with glass doors.

I sat silently on the sofa, surveying the room around me. It resembled a display room in a museum of antique furniture. There wasn't a single misplaced object or crooked chair in sight. I couldn't help but wonder—did my boss even have a family? It seemed pointless to ask him directly; he always kept such things to himself.

Otto Schneider sat down on the sofa next to me, handing me a glass filled with a dark liquid.  
"Real cognac from France. Give it a try."

I'm not much of a drinker. Perhaps it's because, in my mind, alcohol is meant to accompany conversation—a tool to ease tension between people. And in this moment, that was exactly the situation I found myself in: a conversation with my boss, and a pressing need to relieve some tension. The news about Curious laying an egg had thrown me completely off balance, upending all my usual logic.

I took a sip of the tart drink and leaned back against the sofa, keeping my eyes fixed on Schneider. The idea of visiting the Cretaceous period once again filled me with a sense of unease. According to our code, it was forbidden to visit the same time and place more than once. And I had already been there twice. For many reasons, I was not keen on going back a third time to rescue Curious, who later became the cloned Otto.

I voiced my concerns aloud, carefully avoiding any hint that I had already been there twice.

"Another 'trip' to the Cretaceous period could cause

complications in the chain of time and events. After all, I'd inevitably encounter Curious—uh, Otto—again. I'd have to relive events whose outcomes I'd already know. And, besides, where would I even find another pteryx?"

Otto Schneider set his empty glass on the floor beside him and folded his arms across his chest. He always folded his arms when discussing difficult topics.

"You're right, Kris," he said. "Intervening in events twice is a rather risky undertaking. That's why I had the idea to visit the Cretaceous period during a different timeframe. But unfortunately, that's not possible—at least not for the time being. So I've come up with a different plan."

"Why isn't it possible?" I asked, slightly puzzled. "Is there something wrong with our time machine?"

"I'll explain," he replied, standing up from the sofa. In the process, he accidentally knocked over the glass with the remnants of cognac. Otto Schneider simply waved it off, as if the incident was of no importance. This surprised me, given the almost military-level orderliness of his home. Standing across from me, he began to explain:

"The temporal fields of the Cretaceous period have developed interferences since your last return. These interferences prevent our time machine from locking onto that period, as they absorb the signal entirely. Figuratively speaking, it's as if the period is now shrouded in darkness."

I froze, strongly suspecting that these interferences were my fault. After all, I had been there twice, each time

rescuing the same Curious. It was as if the Cretaceous period had closed itself off, shielding itself from further intrusion.

Otto Schneider seemed to read my mind and added: “Kris, I’m not trying to assign blame to anyone for this. What’s done is done. Besides, I’ve devised another plan. If it works, it will divert public attention with a new sensation. And my Otto will have time to peacefully incubate his—or rather, her—egg. Once the baby pteryx hatches, we’ll, so to speak, clone it again. What do you think?”

Without waiting for my response, he headed toward the Louis XV chest of drawers. Pulling open the top drawer, he retrieved a small compact disc and, walking over to me, handed it to me.

“Here, this is my idea. It’s the song of the year, topping many charts, though it’s not exactly my taste.”

“Ostriches incubate their eggs for about a month and a half, and crocodiles for two months. So Curious—uh, Otto—will likely need about two months as well, by my estimates,” I said while examining the disc with the so-called “song of the year” in confusion.

“That’s not an issue,” Otto Schneider said, casually waving his hand. “Sensations can be sustained. I’ll take care of that. As for you, when you get home, I need you to find out everything you can about an emerald-set earring called the ‘Eye of Fate.’ You’ll need to locate its pair—the second earring. Then, draft a report with your proposals. I

need to know which year and place you'll need to go to. In the meantime, I've already arranged new excavations at the ruins of ancient Pella. So the legend is ready."

I was somewhat stunned by this sudden presentation of my new assignment. At the same time, I had a strong feeling that Otto Schneider was eager to send me home, perhaps tired of my company. I wouldn't say I was deeply upset, but it did sting a little.

"You must be exhausted yourself, with all these responsibilities. And you need to get home," I managed to force a sympathetic smile.

Otto Schneider froze, then burst out laughing, extending a hand toward me.

"Well, Kris, you just can't resist analyzing the situation, can you? And how did you guess? I tried to make this showcase home look cozy. It's my official countryside residence."

I decided to compliment my boss's taste:  
"It's quite cozy—tastefully chosen furniture and wooden wall paneling. But there's nothing personal here, and you didn't even pick up the glass of leftover cognac. I doubt your real home is this orderly."

Otto Schneider grinned and nodded several times, saying:

"You'll manage, Kris! I'm confident in you. And my Otto will be able to peacefully incubate her egg."

He headed for the door, inviting me to follow.  
“Since you’ve uncovered my little secret, I’ll drive you home. And yes, I’m quite tired.”

I asked Schneider to drop me off at the entrance to Central Park, where I had planned to go for a walk that morning. The compact disc my boss had handed me was now tucked into the inside pocket of my jacket. At the same time, I felt the familiar round brooch I always carried with me.

That Saturday, the park was crowded, and I had to wander along its paths for a while before I found an empty bench. Sitting down, I let myself reflect on the events of the day and my conversation with Otto Schneider. An emerald called the “Eye of Fate”—I had never heard of it before. And then there was that song on the disc. Looks like I’d have plenty to keep me busy in the coming days. I decided to start my research the next day, dedicating the rest of the day to pleasant idleness in the company of my cat, Watson. It would help me organize my thoughts and prepare for my new investigation.

I was genuinely excited about the new assignment. Every now and then, I still felt pangs of sadness when remembering the friends I’d left behind in the world of pteryxes. But in the days ahead, I’d be processing a mountain of information, leaving no time for unnecessary musings. Besides, I felt reassured about Curious-Otto’s fate, peacefully incubating its egg. Otto Schneider would

undoubtedly provide everything necessary to ensure its offspring's safe arrival. At the thought of Curious suddenly turning into a "lady," I couldn't help but smile.

In good spirits, I began gathering information. My main goal was clear: to uncover the origins of the mysterious emerald earring—its era, place of creation, and, if possible, the craftsman who had made it.

I started by listening to the song on the compact disc Otto Schneider had given me. I was curious to see how it tied into my new investigation. Settling comfortably on the couch next to Watson, feeling the pleasant warmth of his side against my thigh, I inserted the disc into the computer on the coffee table in front of me. At the same time, I entered "Eye of Fate emerald earring" into the search engine.

Music began to play from the speakers, accompanied by skilled guitar work. A pleasant, soulful female voice sang:

*Two green eyes of fate  
Have watched through endless years,  
Through mists of sorcery and time,  
Your face began to disappear  
A radiant green eye so bright  
Shall split apart, its truth revealed,  
It seals the path of thorny plight,  
And broken hearts shall soon be healed.  
The eyes will meet, their bond reclaim,  
Dispelling magic's shadowed veil.*

*They are love's eternal flame,  
A warmth no time shall ever pale.*

I must admit, I'm not a fan of such songs, and the lyrics brought little clarity: thorny plight, magic's veil. Was it about unrequited love? There are countless songs on that subject, many with more straightforward messages. Still, I had to acknowledge the skillful performance and pleasant melody, even if the public that had propelled it to the top of the charts had peculiar taste. That said, the song did mention the "Eye of Fate," which was central to my investigation. That was a start.

I discovered that an earring by that name was on display at the British Museum in London. Experts attributed it to the era of ancient Babylon, roughly the 4th or 5th century BCE. It had been found near the ruins of the ancient city of Pella, the birthplace of Alexander the Great. Further research revealed that after conquering Babylon without a fight in October 331 BCE, Alexander declared it the capital of his empire in 324 BCE, while his native Pella retained the title of the second capital. That same year, he sent 1,500 horsemen, who had been with him since the beginning of his campaign, back home. These were tired and wounded soldiers who had lost their health in the grueling military marches and battles. As compensation for their service, Alexander generously rewarded them with gold and silver, which he had received as gifts from the Babylonians. Among these treasures were also precious

jewels. I had processed a great deal of information about how other ancient Babylonian jewelry could have made its way to the capital of ancient Macedonia, and I concluded that the most likely scenario was that the "Eyes of Fate" earrings became part of the war spoils of one of the 1,500 Macedonian veterans who made it back home. After reading numerous ancient Greek sources, I discovered that a large group of Macedonian cavalry, accompanied by many wagons, left Babylon on August 20, 324 B.C., heading back to their homeland. It would have taken them about four months to cover the more than three thousand kilometers.

I congratulated myself on my diligence, which had helped me precisely determine the date the Macedonian cavalry left Babylon. Now I just had to wait for them at the city gates and seize their spoils to find the coveted earrings. I smirked at the thought: first of all, it would be unfair to take away the hard-earned reward of veterans who had fought in difficult battles, and second, I had no chance against armed Macedonians—my invisibility cloak wouldn't save me.

I decided to postpone my thoughts about the date and place of my appearance in the fourth century B.C. Instead, I went to London for a couple of days, leaving Watson in the care of the neighbor, to visit the British Museum and see the "Eye of Fate" earring in person. After all, no photograph could replace the original.

There was a large crowd around the display case with the earring, and some visitors were singing the song about the "Eyes of Fate" while taking selfies. Otto Schneider was right—given the hype surrounding the popular song, the discovery of the second earring would cause a sensation and shift attention away from the story of our Curious-Otto. Finally making my way to the display case, I carefully examined the delicate golden piece of jewelry with an oval emerald at its center. Every detail was intricately crafted, and it was clear that the jeweler who made it had used all of his skill. Beside the earring lay a fragment of papyrus inscribed with Greek letters. Thanks to my work, I had become well-versed in many ancient languages, so I easily deciphered the remaining lines: "The Green Eyes of Fate have looked through the centuries..." Could this be the original lyrics of the song?

I was fortunate to be an employee of our Museum, which had a solid reputation. Using my business card, I managed to arrange a meeting with the curator of the ancient Greek department at the British Museum. He was quite flattered by my interest, and I promised, in exchange for his information, to give him a personal tour of our museum.

Through him, I learned that the "Eyes of Fate" earring was discovered in the early 20th century, in 1918. It had been wrapped in parchment with the verses that formed the basis of the famous song.

The curator's story led me to some reflections. Parchment could only be afforded by the wealthiest inhabitants of ancient Macedonia; clay tablets were usually used for various writings and even personal letters. On the other hand, Macedonian military veterans, generously rewarded with jewels, immediately raised their status and became very wealthy individuals. What was particularly intriguing, however, was that the earring found during the excavation was wrapped in parchment with verses. This must have held some significant meaning for the girl who came into possession of the earrings. I was certain that the owner of the "Eyes of Fate" was a young, romantic girl. This, in my view, would explain the presence of the verses she had written. Apparently, fate had separated her from her beloved, to whom she had passed on the second earring. But where could I find her "beloved"?

This and many other questions occupied my thoughts until I returned home to my cat, Watson, whom I found in good health and high spirits. I could always rely on my neighbor, especially considering her love for animals.

Summarizing my thoughts, I concluded that I needed to appear in the city of Pella by the time the veterans returned. According to my calculations, the population of this city was around three thousand people. Therefore, not all the veterans would be heading there, which made my task not easier. Just in case, I would ask Otto Schneider to extend my stay in the past to more than a week. I hoped

that, during this time, I could find the girl with the "Eyes of Fate" earrings, surely the daughter of one of the veterans, along with her beloved. If I arrived after her separation from him, I would simply have to find him and try to buy the second earring.

With this plan in mind, I set the date for my trip to the past to December 30th, and the coordinates would be determined by the specialists operating the time machine. They would also prepare the appropriate winter clothing for that region.

I still had some time before the start, so I dedicated it to my brooch-communicator, which had somewhat become my talisman. The thing was, its screen no longer turned on. Yes, I confess, I sometimes opened the brooch by pressing an inconspicuous side button that transformed it into a communicator. Somewhere deep inside, I hoped to hear the excited voice of a pteryx. Common sense told me this was impossible, but I allowed myself to dream. Moreover, I was curious to find out what kind of battery it used. For that, I ordered a jewelry toolset for beginners and a simple ammeter through a delivery service to measure the current. I always had a stock of batteries at home. Using a jewelry screwdriver, I managed to open the lower part of the brooch. I found a small metallic button inside it. I presumed this was the battery. I reasoned that, given the roughly similar technological progress in our world and the pteryx world, the batteries for such small devices would

also be around three to four volts. Connecting three standard 1.5-volt batteries in series and securing them with adhesive tape, I hoped to create a homemade charger. I attached wires to both ends of the outermost batteries and then connected them to the battery button of the communicator—one wire on the top side and the other on the bottom. Now, I needed the ammeter. I connected it to the metal button and sadly discovered that no current passed through it. Undeterred, I swapped the wires. My heart skipped a beat when the needle of the ammeter moved from zero and stopped at the 1.2-amp mark. After removing the ammeter, I left my contraption on the table and decided to check the results of my experiment in a couple of hours.

After feeding my cat and playing with him, I eagerly looked at the clock. Only forty minutes had passed since I had connected the brooch-communicator to my "charger." I decided to use the remaining time before my self-imposed deadline to re-read all the information I had gathered about the emerald earrings, "Eyes of Fate." Well, I know where and approximately when to search for them, and the rest will be up to my experience and resourcefulness. In any case, I will behave discreetly, not interfering with whatever events unfold around me. Reassuring myself with these thoughts, I glanced at the clock and made my way to the charging communicator. After disconnecting the wires, I

screwed its lower part back on. I didn't want to open it while it was in an incomplete state, as I might damage it. With some anxiety, I pressed the inconspicuous button on the side of the case, transforming the brooch back into a communicator. I slowly ran my finger over the round display, which immediately lit up. I congratulated myself on my ingenuity and quickly closed the communicator, transforming it back into a brooch. I didn't want to waste its battery unnecessarily, although logically, it wouldn't do me much good in this world, so distant from the world of pteryxes. I remembered Kurkin the Third, pressing me to his chest covered in gray, disheveled feathers, and involuntarily sighed.

I decided to distract myself from my somewhat gloomy thoughts, especially since I had a new task ahead of me that required concentration. After all, I had set the time for my appearance in the city of Pella purely intuitively, which prevented me from coming up with a clearer action plan. I called Otto Schneider and asked to meet him at the aviary, where Curious-Otto was incubating his egg. This way, I could discuss matters with him and also check on Curious. For some reason, I didn't want to go to my boss's "showcase country house," which resembled a museum exhibit. I politely expressed my desire, and he agreed. This time, I took a taxi and, comfortably settled in the back seat, watched the streets and passersby. Very soon, I would see the ancient city, the capital of ancient

Macedonia. I felt that the new task had fully captured my attention. Honestly, deep down, I was hoping for something more than just the search for a missing earring with the strange name "Eye of Fate." What if I turned out to be the unknown lover of this romantic girl? I was certain she was romantic; otherwise, she wouldn't have written those mysterious lines that became the basis of the now-popular song.

Fortunately, the driver was taciturn, and I could quietly indulge in pleasant daydreams. In general, I always considered myself pragmatic, not inclined to such fantasies. Apparently, this mysterious story with the separated earrings and the vague verses had put me in a romantic mood. I decided not to be distracted from reality. And reality was this: unlike my other tasks, I was now conducting an investigation to find the returned veterans in the city of Pella and locate the owner of the emerald earrings. And as an experienced time traveler, I would never allow myself to break our code by forming emotional attachments with anyone. I would act discreetly and think logically. As always. Or almost always. In any case, I had successfully completed all my tasks.

"You've always managed to handle every assignment," Otto Schneider said to me as we walked together across the lawn toward the bushes where Curious was sitting on his egg. To me, he remained Curious, so I would continue to call him by that name.

"That's exactly why I believe only you can find this earring," he concluded.

Unlike him, I wasn't so optimistic. All the data I had gathered about the likely location of the "Eye of Fate" was very approximate, and it was hard to even estimate how much time I would need to find it.

"How much time will I have?" I asked, while also observing Curious, who cautiously stretched his neck as we approached. At a certain distance from him, bowls of food and water were placed, allowing him to keep a constant watch over his egg with minimal distraction. We stopped, not daring to approach Curious any closer so as not to disturb him.

Otto Schneider looked at me thoughtfully.

"I hear uncertainty in your question," he said. After a brief pause, he added, "To avoid losing you in the past, the maximum I can allow you is a week. My technicians are wary of setting a longer period after the cretaceous period closed for us. And the marker will be with you, just in case."

"What if I don't manage in a week?" I asked, a little worried.

"I've already thought of that," my boss replied encouragingly. "After all, Pella was the capital of a great empire, where loot from the lands conquered by Alexander the Great gathered. There will surely be a jewelry shop or something like that. Buy similar gold earrings. We'll find the

emerald here. The main thing is that the manufacturing era matches. And we'll supply you with coins."

Well, it's good to have a backup plan. I could then calmly, without hurry, devote myself to the search for the "Eye of Fate."

Otto Schneider sensed my relief. He confidently placed his hand on my shoulder and said:

"Don't worry, Kris, and don't forget to send me the objects you find worthy for our Museum. That will already be an achievement. And my specialists are preparing winter clothing for you, so you won't freeze during the middle of winter there."

Feeling that he had provided me with all the necessary information, he removed his hand from my shoulder and, with a fond expression, began watching Curious.

"What a specimen, huh?" he murmured, as if speaking to himself. "We'll make sure she sits calmly, without unnecessary attention from her little pteryx chick, won't we, Kris?"

I simply nodded, signaling my full agreement. There was essentially nothing more to discuss with Otto Schneider, so after chatting briefly about the winter weather in ancient Greece and observing Curious a little longer, we said our goodbyes.

At home, Watson was waiting for me, hungry. I hadn't paid him much attention lately, and I felt guilty. After feeding him, I played with him to his great delight. My

thoughts, however, were occupied with my upcoming “assignment” in 324 BC. Otto Schneider’s assurances that it wasn’t strictly necessary to bring back the real “Eye of Fate” earring didn’t mislead me. Any specialist would be able to tell the difference between a fake and the real thing. He was simply trying to calm me down and relieve some of my internal tension.

Over the next few days, while waiting for a call from Otto Schneider, I tried to plan my course of action for the week I would spend in the ancient city of Pella. I would likely need to first familiarize myself with the city’s layout, dividing it into sections, and then begin searching for the families of the returning veterans, focusing on the presence of young women. After that, I’d act according to the circumstances. Just to be safe, I decided to take my invisibility cloak with me, which had served me well during my “assignment” in the cretaceous period. The prospect of meeting armed Macedonians didn’t exactly thrill me. Who knows how they would react to me? At least this would provide some protection. I informed my superior, Otto Schneider, of my intention, and received his consent.

Finally, the day of the “launch” arrived. A pleasant excitement enveloped me, as it always did on such days. But this time, the excitement was a bit stronger than usual, since I was planning to bring my communicator with me to ancient Macedonia. I hadn’t parted with it since my return from the world of the pteryxes, and I wasn’t planning to

change this new habit. I knew it went against all the rules, but on the other hand, what harm could a simple brooch cause in a technically underdeveloped country? I wouldn't even have anyone to contact through it.

At the appointed time, I arrived in Otto Schneider's office, clutching my cherished brooch in my trouser pocket. It was evident that some anxiety showed on my face, because my boss, with an encouraging smile, addressed me:

“Don’t worry so much, Kris. You survived among the ancient dinosaurs, completing your mission excellently. And ancient civilizations are nothing new to you.”

I nodded in agreement and even smiled in response. “I’ll need winter clothing and money for unforeseen expenses,” I said.

Instead of answering, Otto Schneider slid open a drawer of his desk and pulled out a leather pouch filled with coins. I opened it, peering inside. The amount of money seemed more than enough for my nearly week-long “assignment.” An audacious idea suddenly came to me, one that I immediately decided to carry out. All I had to do was divert my boss’s attention away from the pouch of coins.

“And I’ll feel more confident with my invisibility cloak,” I added.

“Your cloak is already upstairs,” he replied, slightly turning toward the elevator behind him and waving his

hand. That moment was enough for me to quickly slip my cherished brooch into the pouch with the coins.

“Well then,” I said in an exaggeratedly cheerful tone, “I’m ready.”

I was surprised at myself. I had never allowed myself such a trick before. Had something changed in my character without my noticing? I’d have to think about it later, after returning from ancient Macedonia.

After exchanging a few more casual remarks, I followed Otto Schneider into the elevator, holding the pouch of ancient coins un my hand.

“Your clothing for the ‘trip,’ your cloak, and a container with provisions and a marker are already on the ‘launch pad,’” he explained as we moved.

After a disinfecting shower, I changed into the clothes prepared for me: short woolen trousers, a gray, dense fabric himation, a heavy sheep-skin cloak over my shoulders, a small felt hat, and shoes made from bullhide, lined with soft felt.

The clothes were very comfortable, though the himation—a rectangular piece of cloth—refused to become the elegant Greek wrap it was supposed to be, constantly slipping off my shoulder. I’d need to practice wearing it. The woolen trousers threw me off a bit; as far as I knew, they weren’t worn in ancient Greece. Mine were quite short and completely covered by my himation.

I appeared in my new attire on our “launch pad,” under Otto Schneider’s encouraging smile.

“My specialists took the liberty of giving you warm pants,” he said. “As you can see, they’re hidden under your cloak, whatever it’s called—chiton, himation? Oh, doesn’t matter. The important thing is you won’t freeze.”

I thanked my boss for his foresight.

“It really will be cozier and warmer in low temperatures,” I said.

“Ready?” he asked. “The pouch with the coins is already in the container.”

“My invisibility cloak. I should wear it, in case I run into a crowd there. I’ll need to act discreetly.”

“Well, you’re actually supposed to appear outside the city walls. At worst, they’ll mistake you for one of their Gods. You won’t quite make it to Apollo, but you’ll do as some kind of satyr,” he laughed heartily at his joke.

I felt a bit offended, but I understood: it had evidently become a habit for Otto Schneider to joke on the “launch pad” just before my “jump” into the past.

Without commenting on his joke, I silently put on my roomy invisibility cloak.

“Okay, the satyr thing was a bit much,” he said, still chuckling. “But Hermes—that’s more like you, the god of trade and travelers.”

“And also the guide of the souls of the deceased,” I added, no longer upset with him.

At my comment, Otto Schneider suddenly grew serious and, in his usual tone, said:

“Good luck, Kris. I believe in you. Ready?”

I positioned myself in the center of the platform, next to my precious container, and nodded in response:

“Ready.”

The attic space of the museum I had been in disappeared, and I squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them, I saw nothing. Surprised, I shook my head and noticed that the hood of my invisibility cloak had fallen over my eyes, blocking my vision. I pulled it off and, with satisfaction, inhaled the crisp, somewhat cold air. By habit, learned from the pteryxes, I sniffed the air, closing my eyes. It smelled of dried herbs and smoke. And it was remarkably quiet. I opened my eyes and froze: around me stood men dressed in chitons with cloaks made of skins draped over them. Some of them had scabbards with swords attached to their belts. Apparently, my sudden appearance had rendered them speechless.

I couldn’t think of anything better than to dramatically raise my right palm and speak in the most refined ancient Greek:

“Honorable citizens of Pella, I greet you!”

At my innocent gesture, the crowd around me recoiled, looking at me in horror. Suddenly, a little girl, about eight years old, squeezed through the crowd, approached me, and said:

“Honorable Alala greets you, speaking head with the severed hand!”

I was a bit stunned by this greeting, but then it dawned on me that I was still in my invisibility cloak with the hood pulled back, so my body wasn’t visible. Only my head and my raised right palm for greeting were on full display. One of the men rushed to the girl, Alala, picked her up, and disappeared into the crowd.

Honestly, I didn’t know what to do next. I had never made such an unfortunate appearance in public before. According to Otto Schneider, I was supposed to appear outside the city walls and then enter the city unnoticed. Apparently, the exact layout of Pella had not yet been discovered by science, and the technicians who calibrated the time machine worked intuitively. I would have to act intuitively as well. I decided to remain still and wait for further reactions from the “honorable citizens of Pella.” At the same time, I observed the men around me: their weathered, grim faces stared back at me. I noticed numerous scars on many of them. Muscular arms and legs peeked out from under their clothes. I concluded that I was face-to-face with veterans of Alexander the Great’s army. This meant my calculations were correct, and they had already returned home with their war spoils. One of them stepped forward and loudly said:

“We feared no enemy, defeating them with our military skill and our courage. And there were none of the Gods

with us, sending their fiery arrows at our foe. And we have no reason to fear you, floating head in the air.”

“Good words, Yorgos!” Encouraging shouts came from the crowd. “Ask him what he wants!”

I was somewhat tired of being called a “floating head,” so I removed my invisibility cloak, which caused even more widespread astonishment. Yorgos raised his hand, shielding his eyes with his elbow, and hesitated to speak to me again. Honestly, I was surprised by this. After all, standing before me was a battle-hardened soldier. Apparently, even such tricks surpassed his imagination. From the crowd, the polite little girl, Alala, ran out again, pointed at me, and said:

“Now you’re fully here. You’re... what was it... Papa! What was his name, from the other world, with the big hat?” she addressed someone in the crowd.

“Hermes,” a hoarse voice responded.

For a moment, a heavy silence hung in the air. Then, as if snapping out of a trance, Yorgos scooped Alala into his arms, handed her over to the men standing behind him, and said, addressing one of them:

“Diomedes, watch your daughter!” Then, pulling a massive dagger from its sheath, he pointed it at me and said, glaring fiercely:

“I don’t care who you are. But you’ve appeared at a difficult time for us. Follow me!”

Of course, I could have wrapped myself in my invisibility cloak again and silently slipped away from the hostile crowd facing me. Then I could have waited somewhere in hiding, biding my time. But I dismissed such cowardly thoughts. Besides, I was curious to know what Yorgos meant by saying it was a difficult time for them. So, I took a few steps forward, allowing several veterans to encircle me. I obediently followed them off the square, after stowing my cloak in the container, looking around with curiosity. I suddenly felt like a carefree tourist, dragging my wheeled container behind me, resembling a medium-sized suitcase. The only difference was its metal casing.

In the center of the square, if I'm not mistaken, called the agora, stood a neat temple with columns painted in blue and gold.

Wide streets branched off from the square, wide enough for two large carts pulled by horses to pass side by side. On both sides of the cobbled streets stood stone two-story buildings. Each entrance was framed by columns decorated with depictions of Greek gods. At regular intervals along the streets on both sides, large torches emitted thick smoke from poles. In their flickering light, the painted gods seemed alive, bouncing to the beat of an inaudible music.

I was somewhat surprised by the beauty of Pella. I had expected to see a small town with scattered, modest huts.

I even felt a pang of regret that this city hadn't survived to this day in all its splendor.

We stopped at a building with columns decorated with painted grapevines and a thick Dionysus lounging beneath them. Above the entrance was the inscription: "Ταβέρνα" (Tavern). High up under the roof, I noticed window openings covered with sheepskin.

It was starting to get dark, and I mentally complained that I had been sent to ancient Pella in the early evening. I would have to hurry to complete my task.

I was gently pushed into the spacious room as a large, heavy hide, presumably from a bull, was moved aside at the entrance.

Warm air greeted my face, which I liked. Only now did I notice that I had gotten a bit cold, despite the warm clothes prepared for me by our specialists. I couldn't help but admire the muscular bare legs of the Greeks around me, visible from under their togas.

The tavern appeared to be well-frequented, as many oak tables were occupied by men and women spending their evening leisure in a literally "warm" company. I was distracted from my thoughts and only now noticed the heavy silence surrounding me. It didn't surprise me at all: people fear the unfamiliar and the out of the ordinary. Just in case, I smiled, trying to show my full friendliness.

"I would like to rent a room for a couple of days," I said, while pulling out my pouch of money from my container and addressing someone in the middle of the room.

"That's a box with the souls of the dead," someone whispered in horror. "And that's their money."

"This act will not fly in my tavern!" A short man with thick arms and a belly hanging over his belt stepped forward. At the same time, knives and daggers were directed at me. Even the women in the tavern stood up in a threatening stance, hands on their hips.

To say that I was frightened would be an understatement. Trembling, I completely opened the lid of the container with my provisions and vials to show there were no souls of the dead inside.

The people surrounding me recoiled, still threatening me with weapons. Suddenly, Alala darted forward, taking advantage of her father Diomedes' momentary fear and escaping from his strong embrace. A soft sigh passed through the room.

Without giving anyone a chance to recover, Alala ran to the container and efficiently began tossing small wooden packages of cookies and dried meat from inside it. Nimble, she jumped into the almost empty box and slammed the lid shut.

With a wild roar, Diomedes rushed toward the container, ready to stab me with his dagger. Just then, the lid flipped

open, and a scruffy head of Alala appeared from the container.

"Are you Hermes, or what?" she asked me almost angrily. "There are no souls in there."

"I-I'm K-Kris," I stammered in reply.

"Kakris, the noble Alala will punish you!"

Having regained his composure, Diomedes scooped up the resisting Alala in his arms. A young woman, dressed in a long yellow chiton, approached them. With a slight smile, she soothingly placed her hand on the girl's head.

"The noble Alala will have dinner and go to sleep, like all good girls," she said, emphasizing the word "noble" with irony.

Alala noticed this and, somewhat offended, said:

"Kakris called me noble when he only had a talking head. My dad will confirm it."

Fortunately for me, the atmosphere in the tavern had somewhat relaxed, leaving only strong curiosity and some mistrust. But the Greeks still holding their weapons on me didn't dare lower them.

The tavern owner picked up a couple of packages that had been tossed out of the container. Pulling a biscuit from one, he crumbled it in his hands and sniffed it.

"Dried flatbread?" he asked me.

I nodded in agreement.

"And also dried meat, there, in the other packets," I added quickly.

He walked confidently toward the container and peered inside. Seeing the glass vials in the side pockets, he pulled a couple out and held them up to his eyes.

"Oh, real glass. These would be useful!"

I was somewhat surprised by his interest in the vials and dared to ask him what he would use them for.

"Kreon is our healer," one of the men standing opposite me replied for him. "They'll be useful for his ointments, right, Kreon?" he asked, keeping a keen gaze fixed on me.

"You weren't asked, Linos," Kreon shoved the speaker aside and addressed me: "For three—no, for five coins from your pouch, I can give you a guest room upstairs. The glass vials are included in the payment."

I obediently counted out five gold coins from my pouch, which instantly disappeared into his large palm.

Closing the container's lid, I tugged at the strap, intending to take it up to the room I had rented.

"Wait, the wheeled box is also included in the payment. For storing the dried meat."

Without resisting, I handed him the container, still holding my invisibility cloak, turned inside out, under my arm. After all, in a couple of days, my container would end up back in my time, with all its contents. I'm quite curious to try the dried meat prepared according to the old Greek recipe.

The curious crowd around me dispersed, seemingly losing interest in me. I, on the other hand, began to look

around for Alala, thinking to myself that it wasn't proper for such a small girl to be in this kind of setting.

I saw her sitting at a table next to her father, Diomedes. On the other side of her was the pretty woman in the yellow chiton. On the table in front of them were a wine jug and plates with various food. I sat down at the table opposite them, deciding to get to the bottom of the situation with Alala. After all, she was the only child I had seen here. The other children were likely at home under supervision.

Alala, with her head tilted and sticking her tongue out in concentration, was drawing Greek letters on a scrap of parchment with a charcoal pencil. Diomedes, lost in thought, was staring at a wooden cup filled with wine. I leaned toward him and touched his hand, trying to get his attention. He looked up and met my gaze.

"Diomedes," I addressed him, "why don't you send Alala home? It's already late."

"There's no one at home," he replied. "It's just us: me and Alala, Alala and me."

A large tear rolled down his bearded cheek. Apparently, the wine had started to take effect, making him more open and candid.

"Her mother, my wife, died during childbirth, and her sister Ianta took over the care for her." He leaned toward Ianta, sitting next to Alala, and patted her hand. "I never even saw her grow up."

Diomedes let out a loud sob, propping his chin on his huge fist. Alala, who had been carefully drawing letters, pushed aside her charcoal and started wiping away her father's tears with her soot-covered hand.

I seemed to understand the situation: having finally gained her father's attention, Alala didn't leave his side for a moment, savoring his presence. I was glad that Ianta was nearby; I didn't quite trust the heavily drunk Diomedes, who was lost in his memories.

I was about to suggest to Ianta that she take Alala upstairs to my room when a loud, cheerful voice rang out right beside my ear:

"Well, tell me, who are you, Hermes or what, Kakris?" I jumped in surprise and turned toward the voice. It was Linos, who had been watching me closely earlier during my conversation with the tavern owner, Kreon.

Linos had a very neatly trimmed beard and beautifully styled curly hair, which made him look like a Greek hero often depicted on vases and other ceramic pieces. In fact, he was an ancient Greek, though he didn't know it.

Linos affectionately threw his arm around my shoulder, turning partly toward me. It seemed that his other hand was aiming at my invisibility cloak, which I had tucked into my belt. I carefully moved away from him, smiling politely. Linos laughed merrily, raising his arms in the air.

"Hey, Kreon, wine for everyone!" he shouted, drowning out the murmur of voices in the tavern.

A few women approached Linos and, taking him by the arms, led him away to their table.

"Finally, someone who knows how to have fun!" one of the women laughed.

If you were to assess the society based on its attitude toward women, the ancient Greeks were quite progressive in this regard: their women felt confident and enjoyed themselves alongside men, exchanging sometimes inappropriate jokes.

A deep wooden mug appeared before me, immediately filled to the brim with thick red wine by someone's helpful hand. I'm not much of a fan of alcoholic beverages, but this tangy, slightly sour wine was to my liking. I slowly sipped it, savoring the taste and getting lost in my thoughts. Here I was, sitting in a tavern among cheerful ancient Greeks, listening to ancient dance music. Musicians, who had seemingly appeared from nowhere, were playing on kitharas—small harps—and keeping rhythm by tapping wooden sticks on an aulos—a taut bullhide stretched over a wooden hoop.

A few men moved the tables beside mine, clearing the center of the room for dancing. The music and the shouts of the dancers were so loud that they drowned out all the conversations. Suddenly, the loud crash of an overturned heavy table broke the idyll of the cheerful Greeks. The music and laughter immediately ceased, and in the silence, a loud voice rang out:

"Our guard isn't here to protect the city from Makednos of Aegae and his whole army so that you can drunkenly misbehave. Especially at night when the enemy is particularly treacherous. Do you want to surrender our share of the military spoils without a fight? Do you want to dishonorably surrender our capital, the birthplace of Alexander the Great?"

The dancers, who had been lively moments ago, grew silent and gradually dispersed, returning to their tables.

"Indeed, no more wine for now, just in case," said a hesitant voice.

I listened attentively to the conversations, making mental notes. A certain Makednos from Aegae—a neighboring city—was apparently after the military spoils of the veterans of Pella and threatening the city, claiming it as the capital. I remembered that Aegae had once been the capital of Macedonia before Pella, and its residents still resented the relocation of the capital.

Feeling satisfied with my deduction, I glanced at Diomedes, sitting across from me, intending to ask him for more details about this conflict. Suddenly, I realized that the spot next to Diomedes, who was sitting detached and propping his head on his hand, was empty. Where was Alala?

I began to nervously look around, silently cursing the irresponsible veteran for not keeping a proper eye on his daughter. Fortunately, I spotted the messy head of the girl

disappearing through the entrance. I quickly ran to the exit. No one paid attention to me, as everyone was listening with downcast eyes to the angry speech of Yorgos, who kept pounding his fist on the table.

Outside, I saw Alala, trying to stay in the shadows, her figure faintly illuminated by the flickering light of the smoky lamps. I had the impression that she was following someone. Sure enough, ahead of her, I noticed a silhouette moving quickly in erratic bursts toward the central square. I had a feeling it was best not to draw attention. I wasn't particularly skilled at stealthily following anyone, so I pulled out my folded invisibility cloak from my belt and draped it over myself. The felt shoes helped me step softly on the cobbled street, making no sound. I quickened my pace, trying to catch up with Alala while wondering what this was all about. The dark figure occasionally stopped, glancing over its shoulder suspiciously. My concern for Alala grew. It was clear that the figure ahead was making an effort to move in secrecy. Perhaps he was armed. What would happen to Alala if he discovered her? With my heart pounding, I picked up the pace, closing the distance between me and Alala, who was skillfully hiding in the shadows whenever the figure ahead looked back.

We passed along a wide side street that led out of the city gates. Here, I caught up with Alala and covered her with my cloak. I placed a finger to my lips. Startled by my

sudden appearance, Alala recognized me and also pressed her finger to her lips.

We pressed ourselves against the outer side of the city wall.

"You're good at hide and seek," Alala whispered approvingly in my ear. "Now it's just the two of us against Linos. Let's jump out and shout 'Gotcha!' at him, agreed?" She squirmed with impatience, trying to wriggle free from under my cloak.

I put my finger back to my lips, signaling for silence.

"It's still too early. Better not reveal ourselves yet, or we'll lose the game," I said, trying to smile conspiratorially. Alala froze next to me under the cloak, and I carefully peeked out from beneath it, trying to assess the situation.

Not far from us, two bonfires burned, around which armed men sat. Some of them stood in a circle, keeping watch over the area. I assumed these were the guards stationed at the city's entrance. Above the seated guards stood Linos, holding a wine jug in each hand.

"The night's cold," his friendly and warm voice reached me. "A sip of wine on a night like this will warm you up without getting you drunk. And we need a good guard. To our watch!" he called, raising the jug to his lips.

"To us!" a chorus of voices chimed in, though not in perfect unison.

"Oh, the eloquent Linos," one of the guards said as he stood up from his spot by the fire. Reaching for one of the

wine jugs, he added, "Indeed, a good sip of wine on a winter night wouldn't hurt."

"Not only wouldn't it hurt, it will boost our spirits and our vigilance!" Linos answered with a merry laugh.

The guards perked up, passing the jugs around the circle.

Impatient, Alala tugged on my ear and whispered:  
"Now we'll jump out!"

Something told me it was better to remain undetected by Linos.

"You know what? You've already won and showed me how to play hide and seek. I'm really impressed!" I said sincerely. "Let's head back to the tavern, your dad is probably worried."

Alala surprisingly agreed quickly, yawning deeply and resting her dark-haired head on my shoulder.

I carefully stood up, lifting Alala and holding her tightly against me. The guards were laughing loudly, enjoying the unexpected appearance of wine. Linos was nowhere to be seen. Apparently, he had already decided to return to the tavern, to join the other veterans.

Carrying the sweetly sleeping Alala in my arms, I walked back through the gates into the city, heading toward the tavern. Linos was nowhere to be found, neither ahead nor behind us. On the way, I thought about him. Why had he brought the wine to the guards secretly, staying on the shadowy side of the street? What was wrong with

supporting the morale of the guards? An uncomfortable feeling arose in me, and I decided to speak with Yorgos about this when I returned. After all, if it hadn't been for Alala, no one would have known about his movements. Thinking of Alala, my heart froze as I realized the danger that this innocent little girl had been exposed to. I would need to talk to Diomedes and Ianta as well, urging them to keep a closer watch on Alala.

No one noticed my return with Alala, as we were both covered by my invisibility cloak. I climbed upstairs to my room to lay the sleeping girl down in bed. Not finding a blanket or any suitable mat, I covered her with my cloak, knowing from experience that it would protect her from both heat and cold. Then I went downstairs to find Diomedes or Ianta to inform them of Alala's whereabouts. I hadn't made it down all the steps when a very distressed Ianta ran up to me. She grabbed my cloak, and I had to hold onto the railing to keep my balance.

"Have you seen Alala? She's gone missing," she said in a trembling voice, barely holding back tears.

I patted her hand reassuringly.

"I laid Alala down to sleep in my room upstairs. She's fine," I replied.

I decided not to tell her about our little adventure with Alala, as I didn't want to worry Ianta too much or put Alala at risk of being punished for leaving the tavern without permission.

Ianta dashed past me up the stairs and burst into my room, throwing the door wide open. I quickly followed her and saw her standing in the middle of the room, confused.

"W-where is she? Where did you put her? Are you kidnapping children?" she stammered, starting to pound her fists against my chest, tears flowing from her eyes. I silently moved her aside and approached the bed, pulling back my cloak. Before us, curled up in a ball, was Alala. She must have been very tired, and our conversation hadn't woken her.

Ianta sighed with relief and sat down on the edge of the bed. She whispered to me:

"Sorry, Kakris, I've been running around everywhere looking for Alala. You don't think badly of me, usually she's under my supervision, but today, well, the music started playing, and I trusted Diomedes, but he fell asleep right at the table. I'll stay here with her."

She looked at me questioningly, waiting for my permission. I gave her an encouraging smile and left the room. Now, I had to find Yorgos and talk to him.

The tavern had quieted down somewhat, and a small group of men and women were gathering at the door, getting ready to go home. I was somewhat relieved by this, as it would be easier to speak with Yorgos one-on-one, and fortunately, he was still in the tavern, sitting at a table with two of his fellow veterans.

I looked around, also searching for Linos, but I didn't see him. Approaching the table where Yorgos sat, I took a seat on the bench opposite him, trying to get his attention. But he didn't even glance in my direction, continuing his conversation:

"That's what that traitor Makednos wanted! Our loot and our city as hostages!"

"We won't give it up! This is the city of our Alexander! The capital will stay here!" said one of his companions, nodding emotionally.

"Here's another thing," added the third speaker. "Where is it seen: Aegis, the capital of the Greek Empire! The capital of Babylon!"

Yorgos sadly propped his head up with his hand and, sighing heavily, said:

"We were battle comrades, how much we've been through together! We covered each other's backs in so many battles. And look at him now, the farther he gets from Alexander, the more he thinks of himself as a general. Look at that!" he repeated, shaking his head reproachfully.

I decided to get his attention by asking:

"Yorgos, it's a cold night, should we check on the guards by the city gates?"

I didn't dare to bring up Linos right away, fearing that my suspicions about him might just be a product of my paranoia.

Unfortunately, Yorgos' reaction to my words was not what I expected. He stood up from the table, leaned toward me, and grabbed me by the neck.

"Spying? You need our guard?" he said, pulling me closer to his face. Both of his companions jumped up from their seats, swiftly drawing their daggers from their belts. The situation became threatening for me, and it was hard to breathe.

I waved my hands in protest, but Yorgos' grip didn't loosen. Suddenly, behind me, I heard a familiar voice, that of Linos:

"What's this about the guard, Yorgos? What's got you so worked up? The shift change is in a couple of hours."

"Well, this Hermes-Kakris, or whatever his name is, is interested in our guard. I've suspected for a while that Makednos has a spy in our ranks, but that he'd send a spy directly to us—well, I never thought of that," Yorgos replied, still glaring at me with hatred and holding me by the neck.

My vision began to darken, and I was ready to bid farewell to my life, for it was worth nothing in the eyes of Yorgos and his comrades, who saw me as a traitor. But Linos saved me, addressing Yorgos:

"Let him go, or you'll strangle him by accident. If he really is Makednos' spy, we need him alive for interrogation."

Finally, Yorgos released me, and I sat down on the bench, breathing heavily and coughing. I felt Linos' hand

firmly grip my shoulder. I didn't turn to look at him, not wanting to meet his eyes, as my doubts about him had only grown. Why was he suddenly so concerned about me? And where had he been all this time? Why had he been sneaking wine to the guards, looking around cautiously? These thoughts raced through my mind. In my current situation, it was better to stay silent to avoid inciting more anger toward me.

"I'll take care of him," Linos said to Yorgos, still gripping my shoulder. "I won't take my eyes off him," he added, twisting my arms behind my back and pulling me off the bench.

I knew I had to do something quickly. If anything happened to the guards at the gates, we would all be hostages of this Makednos within the city of Pella. I really hoped I was wrong about Linos. He brought wine to the guards, so what? Maybe it was just his nature, trying to please everyone. I decided to find out everything in a conversation with him. It seemed like he wanted to talk to me about something too.

Linos dragged me toward one of the tables in the corner. Without ceremony, he practically pushed me into the wooden seat, sitting down next to me right away. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and brought his lips close to my ear:

"What's with the interest in our guard, Kakris? And you got Yorgos all worked up. Not good."

He pulled back a little, clearly expecting an answer from me. I didn't know what to say in response, so I decided to ask him directly about his recent run with the wine jugs. This was the only way I could find out the truth about his intentions and confirm or disprove my suspicions.

"I saw you secretly bringing wine jugs to the guards," I said. "Why didn't you want to be seen, hiding in the shadows?"

I knew that asking him directly could bring me a lot of trouble, but I didn't want to beat around the bush. Besides, I hoped that my direct question would elicit a clear reaction from him, explaining his intentions. And I wasn't wrong.

Linos immediately covered my mouth with his broad hand. His handsome face twisted in anger, his eyes seemed to pierce through me.

"So, I wasn't imagining things, you've been following me! In your miracle cloak!" he hissed through his teeth.  
"Give me your cloak, and your wallet with money."

His hands began to search my waist for my wallet and cloak. Apparently, he had been keeping a close eye on me and had noticed how I had tucked them into my belt. Pulling out the wallet, he hissed quietly, shaking it in front of my face:

"Where's your miracle cloak, Kakris, or whatever your name is? Makednos would pay a lot for it. Where is it?"

"Isn't the coin in the wallet enough for you? Maybe I lost my cloak somewhere on the way while running from you,

and it's lying around invisible, and you can't find it," I logically asked him, trying not to show my fear. After all, like all traitors, he was capable of anything, and I didn't expect anything good from him.

"Think carefully," he whispered directly in my ear, "Makednos could reward you handsomely for that cloak that makes you invisible. And what do you expect from Yorgos and his men? They have no brains, no drive, just vague ideas about honor. Ha, you won't get far with that."

I pulled my head away from his lips, shielding it with my hand.

"Why don't you want to search for the cloak? You seem used to running around at night," I replied with some sarcasm, surprising even myself.

Linos' eyes narrowed, turning into slits, making him strangely unattractive. He no longer resembled an ancient Greek hero.

"So, you don't want to do this the easy way? Then you have yourself to blame. Yorgos is just waiting for my signal to deal with you."

I looked back and saw Yorgos and his battle companions sitting at the table, their suspicious eyes never leaving me.

"And I always get what I want. Watch this..."

I never heard what else Linos was threatening me with because his speech was interrupted by the outraged voice of the tavern owner, Kreon:

"My jar of ground poppy seeds broke! How am I supposed to sedate the wounded now?"

I looked carefully at the now tense Linos. He must have mixed the poppy seeds with the wine to put the guards to sleep. And he broke the jar to divert suspicion from himself.

"And the guards are sleeping," I muttered involuntarily. Linos heard me and, grabbing me by the scruff of the neck, shouted:

"Yorgos, this Kakris just confessed that he broke the jar on purpose to steal the poppy seeds and put our guards at the city gates to sleep!"

I heard the outraged roars of Yorgos and his companions, like the roar of lions. Acting on instinct, I grabbed my wallet from Linos' hand and ran toward the tavern exit.

I was lucky that Yorgos and his companions hadn't yet gotten up from the heavy oak table they were sitting at, which gave me a couple of seconds. That was enough for me to escape the tavern and follow the familiar path toward the city gates where the guards' camp was located. This way, I would bring Yorgos to them, and perhaps he'd be able to wake them up. I heard the pounding of feet behind me.

"Get the traitor!" a loud shout echoed at my back, quickly picked up by my pursuers and loudly reverberating through the night city. Likely, other citizens had joined the

chase. I could clearly hear the frightening clinking of swords.

With the last of my strength, I increased my pace, trying to reach the gates first. In truth, I understood that they would catch me anyway, so logically, there was no point in running. And Yorgos already knew about the sleeping guards. But my legs carried me away quickly, driven by some instinct.

At last, I found myself beyond the city wall, where drunken guards lay sprawled by the nearly extinguished campfires. I turned around and saw Yorgos drawing his sword. It was beginning to dawn, and I could make out the fierce expression on his face, which quickly changed to determination.

Suddenly, all of us – me and my pursuers – were surrounded by dark silhouettes advancing on us from three sides. I froze in place, unsure of what to do next. I had no weapon to join Yorgos' warriors, and even if I did, it wouldn't change anything; I wouldn't know how to use it. So, logically, I figured it would be best to step aside and not get in the way. Right now, my invisibility cloak would come in handy. But it covered the sleeping Alala. I looked at myself and only then noticed that I was still clutching my pouch of coins. Tucking it into my belt, I began to move cautiously back towards Yorgos and his companions, taking small steps. A loud shout, taken up by powerful

voices, made me crouch down and hide among the sleeping guards.

"Ale-alala!" came the war cry of the people of Pella, immediately echoed by their opponents, who had now fully emerged from their hiding places. I found myself between two groups of bearded, warlike Greeks, swinging swords and seemingly trying to outshout one another. Their cries began to rouse the wine-drunk, poppy-seed-dazed guards, who rubbed their eyes in confusion and fear.

Alala (Ancient Greek: Ἀλαλά, alalá — "battle cry") was an ancient Greek goddess, the personification of the battle cry in Greek mythology.

Of course, Alala — the ancient Greek goddess representing the battle cry. A fitting name for the daughter of Diomedes, who had already shown her restless, warrior spirit. I involuntarily smiled at my thoughts, momentarily forgetting the dangerous situation I was in. To my horror, I noticed in the rays of the rising sun the outline of a wooden catapult slowly advancing towards us. It is unlikely that the veterans of Alexander the Great's army, returning from long military campaigns, dragged this heavy structure along with them. Even disassembled, it would have been a challenge—and who would burden war-weary soldiers, laden with rich spoils, with such a cumbersome weapon?

I concluded that Yorgos's opponents, namely Makednos and his followers, had meticulously prepared for this attack, waiting for the right moment. They had surely brought boulders as well, intending to use this formidable stone-thrower to lay waste to Pella, the capital of Alexander's vast empire.

All these thoughts quickly flashed through my mind, making perfect sense.

Judging by the sudden tense silence, Yorgos' warriors had also noticed the approaching catapult. From their experience, they knew the kind of destruction this machine was capable of. Supported by a group of archers, it could easily demolish the city walls and the buildings behind them. Moreover, Yorgos and his warriors were not prepared for such a turn of events and would not have been able to fend off this attack. After all, it's useless to wave swords at boulders flying high overhead.

I felt the confusion emanating from the warriors of Pella standing behind me. In horror, I thought about the unsuspecting peaceful citizens of the city, the women and children, and Alala, peacefully sleeping under my invisibility cloak. Something had to be done urgently to prevent the seemingly inevitable disaster. Impulsively, I rose from the ground and took a step forward, towards the enemies standing opposite us with self-satisfied and confident expressions. I still didn't know what I was planning to do next, but I noticed the curious gazes of

Makednos' warriors, who began to examine me with interest. Judging by their reaction, my sudden appearance hadn't surprised them, as though they already knew of my existence and were now simply staring at me. It was likely that Linos had told them about my appearance and my wonder-cloak, which had intrigued him so much.

Yorgos stepped forward, roughly grabbing my shoulder. "Brothers-in-arms!" his loud voice boomed right by my ear. "How can you forget our battle comradeship, the battles where we covered each other's backs? And we always shared our spoils fairly. We didn't go through that long journey home from Babylon to kill each other now! And for what? We have enough treasure to make our families and cities rich and independent of foreign merchants!"

I found his speech quite convincing. After all, what else could he do but try to persuade his enemies to lower their weapons? Under different circumstances, he would undoubtedly have rushed into battle alongside his comrades without hesitation. But now, he needed to somehow delay the fall of his city, Pella, the birthplace of Alexander the Great.

The warriors opposite us listened intently, exchanging glances and nodding in agreement. I noticed how they began lowering their swords. A sigh of relief came from behind me. But then, several horsemen approached our group.

"Makednos," I heard a loud whisper.

"Aha, they recognize me!" one of the horsemen loudly replied, standing out from the rest with his powerful build. His long hair and beard gave him a bandit-like appearance, barely concealing a long red scar crossing his left eye and running down, disappearing into his dark, bushy beard.

"Save your words, Yorgos! You know why we are here—to secure the power we earned through countless bloody battles! Alexander is far away, and I will take his place here! He won't have to search for a successor when the time comes!"

He raised his hand high, and the huge arm of the catapult swung up, launching heavy stones toward Pella. I didn't even have time to feel fear, watching their trajectory with my eyes. It felt as though time slowed down, showing the breach in the city wall, forcing us all to duck our heads. A few boulders hit behind the city walls, making the air tremble with the roar caused by collapsing buildings.

"We need to buy time," I whispered to Yorgos, who was standing beside me.

I looked at him and saw that his face had turned red, his eyes burning with fury. Shoving me to the ground, he leaped several times and reached Makednos, who was sitting on horseback, waving his sword. With a quick move, Yorgos yanked him off his horse, pressing his sword to his throat.

Everything happened so fast that Makednos' guards didn't have time to react and were immediately surrounded by Yorgos' warriors.

"You always lost to me in a fight, have you forgotten?" Yorgos hissed at him, twisting his arms and pushing him forward.

The veterans of Pella, including the now fully awake guards, joined the fight, skillfully swinging swords and shooting arrows, scattering the confused enemies. Zopyros, a tall Greek who had been sitting at the tavern with Yorgos, shouted loudly:

"Go away, traitors! We'll deal with Makednos!"

He didn't have to repeat himself. The confused warriors of Makednos, who had witnessed the sudden attack on their leader, began to retreat toward the still-standing catapult. They watched as their leader, accompanied by Yorgos and other warriors, disappeared behind the fortress wall surrounding the city of Pella.

All this time, I stood still, not attempting to hide. No one paid attention to me, and I didn't want to be seen as a coward after being unjustly branded a traitor. I nervously glanced towards the catapult, fearing that it would be activated again. But after reasoning logically, I decided that our enemies wouldn't dare, fearing they might bury their leader, Makednos, under the ruins.

Having come to this conclusion, I joined Zopyros, who was gathering the weapons discarded by the enemy.

Limping on his left leg, he moved quickly, and I struggled to keep up with him. Honestly, after raising two heavy swords, I was beginning to bend under their weight. Moreover, other warriors were helping him, so I wasn't of much use. Instead, I started looking around the extinguished campfires for empty wine pitchers, which Linos had brought to the guards the previous night. I spotted two cracked pitchers lying nearby. After handing my swords to one of the guards, I picked up the pitchers and sniffed them. I detected a faint oily, nutty aroma coming from the remaining drops of wine. Not knowing much about seeds and herbs, I decided to take them to the tavern to Kreon, who was skilled in healing. He would know what to do. Involuntarily, I remembered Kurkin the Third, with his grandmother and her herbal tincture. I would never forget its smell! The memories of my friend, the Pteryx, brought a smile to my face, which quickly turned into worry. I suddenly remembered Alala, whom I had left in my room at the tavern, covered with my invisibility cloak.

Holding the pitchers with remnants of wine, I nearly sprinted towards the gates, heading across the main square to the tavern.

The square was crowded with people eager to catch a glimpse of the captured Makednos. Yorgos and his comrades struggled to restrain the furious mob, which was ready to tear Makednos apart. I kept running, noting several destroyed buildings and the loud wailing of women

along the way. *"Please let the tavern be intact,"* I kept thinking.

Finally, I reached the entrance to the tavern and was relieved to see that it hadn't been damaged. Pushing open the heavy door, I entered. The morning light freely poured in through windows almost near the ceiling. All the tables were arranged along the walls, with wooden benches placed beside them. In the middle of the room, there was one huge wooden table, on which lay a wounded Greek. His right side was covered with a light, rough cloth, soaked in blood. Behind the counter stood Kreon, the tavern owner, diligently grinding some herbal mixture in a mortar. He looked at me from under his brow and for some reason nodded several times. Interpreting this as a greeting, I raised one of my hands holding the pitcher and politely said:

"Greetings, noble Kreon!"

In response, he rolled his eyes in contempt and replied: "What's that you've got? Bring it here. And then, you'll help me with the wounded."

I walked in confusion toward the counter and placed the pitchers with the wine remnants on it, trying not to knock over any vials. Just a few hours ago, I had fled the tavern, fearing the righteous wrath of the Greeks who had accused me of treason. And now, Kreon greeted me as though nothing had happened, even asking me to help him with the wounded. And then I suddenly realized that no

one had pursued me after the fight, nor had anyone paid me any attention. All of this seemed extremely illogical to me. I decided to ask a leading question:

"Kreon, you don't really want to use the help of a traitor, do you?"

He sighed impatiently and replied, pushing the mortar aside:

"Alala told us everything. Linos is the traitor. And speak plainly, short and to the point."

I felt relieved when he mentioned Alala, which meant she was all right.

"And where is Alala now?" I asked, hoping I had phrased the question briefly enough.

"At Ianta's house," Kreon answered. "And your wonder-cloak will stay with me as compensation for the inconvenience you caused. Because of you, I lost my assistant, Linos, so you'll be helping me now."

His reasoning seemed very unfair to me. I shook the pitcher with the remnants of wine in front of his nose.

"Here, smell this. I'm sure it smells like seeds that induce sleep. Linos's doing. If Yorgos hadn't arrived in time, there wouldn't have been anything left of your tavern!"

I was surprised by my own outburst. Normally, I preferred to stay silent. Besides, I still didn't understand Yorgos's behavior—he had simply waved me off. After the

confrontation with Makednos's warriors, he had stopped paying attention to me entirely.

I wanted to clarify this with Kreon, who was holding the pitcher I had handed him up to his nose, but the noisy arrival of Greeks carrying two severely wounded comrades on makeshift litters prevented me from doing so. Well, I would think about this later.

"Wash their wounds, don't stand around doing nothing!" Kreon barked at me, immediately handing me several strips of cloth. Only now did I notice that small tubs of clean water had been placed on the benches by the tables. I decided to show myself in the best light, probably also to make up for the little spat with Kreon. After the wounded had been laid on the available tables, I approached one of them to clean his wounds. I began examining the deep cuts on his side and thigh as he groaned in pain. I noticed a bone through the wound, with the spearhead lodged in it, and I felt a wave of nausea. I only remember the contemptuous laughter of the Greeks around me before everything blurred in my consciousness. No, I don't feel ashamed when I think about this event now. After all, I hadn't slept for nearly a whole day, and so many disturbing things had happened during that time, that my sudden weakness was completely understandable.

I woke up in my room on the upper floor of the tavern. Someone had apparently taken the trouble to carry me here. From below, I could hear a murmur of voices. No one

bothered me, probably, Kreon, the healer, was managing without my help. I decided to take advantage of this and finally focus on my primary task—searching for the "Eyes of Fate" earrings. An artifact with such a peculiar name would surely be easy to find, or at least I would be able to find out who currently owns them. There's a chance they're part of Makednos's spoils, in which case I would have to think about my next move.

I formulated two related questions in my mind, both crucial for completing my mission. The first was to find out what was going on in the city and what Yorgos's plans were. Only then could I focus on finding the earrings. After all, not knowing the situation might land me in some tricky situation without learning anything about my objective.

I sighed heavily, reflecting on how badly timed my arrival was: right in the midst of a conflict between the veterans of Alexander the Great. On the other hand, this assignment would certainly not be boring or monotonous.

With this thought in mind, I made my way downstairs into the main hall of the tavern, which had turned into something of a makeshift hospital. All the tables were occupied by wounded men, and even many of the benches were taken. The room was filled with groans interspersed with curses.

I spotted Creon, bent over one of the wounded men, holding a sharp, thin knife. His clothes were soaked in blood. Two men were holding the patient's shoulders tightly

as Kreon worked on him. Several women were washing and bandaging wounds. I breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that my presence wasn't needed after all.

The tavern owner, and also the healer, noticed me and loudly called out, his voice cutting through the noise of the room:

"Hey, Kakris, get something to eat at the counter. There's meat and wine on the plate!"

Then, without a second thought, he returned to his patient.

I was touched by his simple way of showing concern for me. Indeed, I suddenly felt hunger and the desire to have a bite.

At the counter, I took a juicy piece of meat from a large platter, which turned out to be very tasty, soaked in the aroma of herbs and some spices I didn't recognize. I decided not to drink wine, limiting myself to a mug of water. After all, I needed to keep a clear head.

Having satisfied my hunger, I looked around. In the far corner, behind wide shelves laden with large wine jugs, bundles of herbs, and small vessels, stood my container, which !reon had taken in exchange for the payment of my room. Somewhere around here was also my invisibility cloak. I decided to try and find it and take it back, but I knew I didn't have much time. If I started searching every corner, sifting through the shelves, I would draw unnecessary attention to myself and possibly incur Kreon's

wrath. So, I decided to think logically, slowly chewing on a piece of meat while keeping an eye on !reon, still busy with his wounded patient.

Where would I hide an invisibility cloak if I were the tavern owner? I had already taken a stranger's large box of vials. And where would I hide the cloak? Somewhere I could find it again, considering it's an invisibility cloak. If I were in Kreon's place, I would turn it inside out, hiding it with the opaque side facing out, and stash it in the container. I could be wrong in my reasoning, but I only had one chance to check if I was right.

Not taking my eyes off Kreon, still focused on his wounded fighter, I quietly edged toward the container. Then, quickly bending down, I opened the lid, saw my cloak, grabbed it swiftly, and tucked it into my belt. Once again, my logic proved useful. Pleased with myself, I straightened up, only to immediately find myself face-to-face with Kreon. He tried to grab me with his blood-soaked hands, but I managed to pull back, brushing against a shelf of jugs. Now, my logic told me that I needed to leave the tavern as soon as possible and focus on my task.

Accompanied by the crash of jugs falling from the shelf and Kreon's loud curses, I quickly circled the counter and ran toward the door, pushing past the tavern owner who stood in my way. I successfully dodged the tables and benches filled with the wounded and the women attending

to them. No one chased after me; they just watched in astonishment.

At the entrance of the tavern, a line had already formed of people suffering from the wreckage of the collapsed buildings. Kreon evidently had more pressing concerns than chasing after me. And no, I didn't feel guilty about what I had done. I do not like it when my property is taken by dishonest means.

I slowed down my pace and decided to blend in with the crowd to listen to the conversations and get a better sense of the situation. The main topic of discussion, of course, was the events of the past night. From all sides, the names Yorgos and Makednos could be heard.

I headed to the city square, the Agora, filled with people of all ages. Noticing a group of children swinging wooden swords, I tried to find Alala among them, but she wasn't visible anywhere. She was probably under the care of Ianta, which was good in these uneasy times for the city of Pella.

Suddenly, the square was filled with jubilant welcoming cries. The crowd parted to make way for several riders. Leading them was Yorgos, holding his head high and raising his sword in greeting. Behind him followed three other riders, one of whom I recognized—Zopiros, the man I had helped gather abandoned weapons at the city gates. In any case, I had tried to help.

The group of riders stopped in the center of the city square. Sitting on their horses, Yorgos and his companions stood tall above the crowd, clearly visible to everyone gathered.

Yorgos raised his sword several times in the air to the cheers of the crowd. Then, he sheathed his sword, and immediately, silence fell. The children, who had been playing on the side, tried to push through the dense crowd to get as close as possible to the riders. Clearly, Yorgos was expected to deliver a fiery speech. I wasn't wrong, hearing his deep voice fill the silence:

"Free and proud citizens of the city of Pella! The city—the capital of the great empire, stretching across all the inhabited earth! And the capital of Hellas!"

At this point, he paused, and the square erupted in excited cheers.

"Our great king, Alexander, is far away, and the responsibility for our capital now lies upon our shoulders! Our carelessness nearly betrayed us. You saw how the traitor Makednos tried to destroy Pella and steal our spoils earned by our brave swords. But our gods helped us, and Makednos, disarmed and miserable, was captured by us."

The crowd interrupted his speech with cries:

"Death to the traitor! Execute him!"

Yorgos raised his hand to calm the crowd. Once again, his loud voice rang out:

“We will not spare the traitor! But our vengeance will reach him in the ruins of his native city Aegae, which we shall seize! And we will take his military spoils, which he and his accomplices do not deserve! All for our capital Pella!”

He drew his sword from its scabbard again and, raising his hand, began to wave it around. Amid the excited and jubilant shouts of the crowd, he cried:

“Today we will march to Aegae and punish the traitors! We will not give them time to regroup!”

The frenzy in the square increased even more. I decided to find a quieter corner to think over what I had just heard. Since the city streets were now full of people, I decided to head outside the city gates to reflect in peace.

No one paid attention to me, so I calmly made my way to the city gates, where I could still hear the noise of the voices coming from the square.

The guards stationed there recognized me. Two of them crossed their swords in front of my face.

“Hey, Hermes, or whatever your name is, no one is allowed to leave the city without Yorgos' permission,” one of the guards said.

I didn't argue with them, especially since their heavy swords were a good enough argument not to engage in a quarrel. I obediently turned around and reentered the city. I didn't really feel like going back to the tavern. Moreover, I had some suspicions that I wouldn't find the peace and

quiet I needed there. This meant I would have to use my cloak of invisibility.

Walking down the wide street leading away from the gates, I quickly ducked into the narrow space between two buildings, partially ruined by Makendos' and his solgers' night attac. After putting on my cloak, I stepped back out onto the street and glanced around. Not seeing anything suspicious, I made my way back toward the gates, trying to step as quietly as possible. I managed to bypass the guards, who didn't notice me in my protective cloak. Moving along the city wall, I circled around it and, seeing a large boulder in the distance, headed toward it. Settling under it, I began to think.

To be honest, I didn't like Yorgos' plans. Judging by his speech, he was preparing to declare himself the governor of King Alexander's entire empire in Greece. Surely, this was the same goal that Makednos was pursuing by attacking Pella.

This struggle for power and military spoils brought from Babylon will lead to no good. After all, this is precisely the reason why the vast empire collapsed so quickly after the death of Alexander the Great. I took a deep breath, recalling the tragic fate of his family, who had perished at the hands of his former comrades. But that was a historical fact to which I had no connection. What did concern me, however, was the search for a pair of earrings with an intriguing name—"The Eyes of Fate." If I take the reality

into account, I absolutely cannot show any interest in the jewels brought from Babylon. Otherwise, I could be declared a spy once again, with grim consequences for me, and I was sure of that. Therefore, I decided to find out which of the returning veterans had an unmarried daughter. I was certain that I needed to look for an unmarried girl, because it's unlikely that a worthy wife of any veteran would write tender poems about the separation from her beloved and then give him a single earring. But how could I find the information I needed? From Diomedes, Alala's father! He knows all his fellow veterans, and it would be easy to talk to him. I slapped my forehead in excitement, accidentally pushing the hood of my cloak off my head. Immediately, I heard a muffled scream from the left side of me. Turning to the scream, I saw several armed warriors crouched by the city wall with swords and arrows. They looked at me with wide, horrified, and surprised eyes. I decided to act decisively, not giving them a chance to recover, and ran towards the guards who were placed at the city gates.

“Ambush! Ambush!” I shouted as I ran, waving my arms. One of the guards ran towards me, sword drawn.

“Behind me!” I waved my hand back, not slowing down. The guard coming toward me whistled loudly, and several armed soldiers rushed to his aid from the direction of the gates.

With my heart pounding loudly in my chest, I reached the gates and leaned against the stone wall to catch my breath. A Greek standing nearby, armed with a quiver of arrows on his back and a huge sword at his waist, advised me:

“Take off the cloak so it doesn’t hinder your movements, and take a deep breath, stretching your arms up. You’ll look better with a body, because right now, only your head is sticking out.”

Losing interest in me immediately, he drew his sword, gazing intently at the approaching group of people. In the center of the group were three disarmed warriors who looked up at us with annoyance and confusion.

I didn’t wait for them to approach, leaving their fate to the defenders of Pella. Following the guard’s advice, I began to take off my cloak, but just then, someone’s hand yanked it off my shoulders.

“Well, looks like your miracle cloak has been found,” I heard the smooth voice of Linos over my shoulder.

Turning around, I could only make out a quickly disappearing figure with a fur hood on his head, firmly holding my cloak of invisibility under their arm. I sighed, deciding to take this philosophically. After all, it would eventually return with me to my time, along with the container that the tavern owner had taken, which had a special sensor. Naturally, I also felt a bit uneasy about how Linos would use my cloak. But that feeling quickly faded as

I had my own mission to complete, and for that, I needed to find Diomedes.

I entered the city through the gates, where the hustle and bustle still reigned. I was almost knocked over by a cart filled with stones and construction debris. No one paid me any attention. I can't say I was upset, but at that moment, I seemed insignificant to myself. Apparently, the ancient Greeks quickly get used to oddities. And I was certainly an oddity for them with my sudden appearance, draped in a cloak of invisibility. Or maybe, given the virtual state of war, they simply didn't pay attention to events that had no bearing on the matter. All these thoughts quickly flashed through my head, triggering a sudden feeling of loneliness. I shook my head, as if trying to rid myself of pessimistic thoughts. At that moment, a loud voice called out:

"Kakris! Where have you been?"

Smiling broadly, Alala ran up to me and hugged me tightly, pressing her head against my stomach. I noticed the nearly undone blue ribbon that was wrapped around her head, leaving her forehead exposed. Instinctively, I tied it, forming a small bow at the top of her head. Alala lifted her head and explained:

"Ianta did my hair today. And we went out to see what's going on."

I pulled her away from me, looking around. Noticing Ianta nearby, looking around with concern, I called her

name and waved my hand. These actions of mine displeased Alala. She squinted her eyes and said resentfully:

"I wanted to play with you, but now I'll get scolded. Why does this always happen to me?"

She threw her arms wide and sighed deeply, probably showing me all her disappointment, which made me smile. Ianta hurried over, out of breath, and grabbed Alala by the hand. I quickly stepped in to protect the girl, though I knew that Ianta would be right to scold her for being disobedient:

"Don't scold her. She would have come back to you on her own. This well-mannered girl just wanted to say hello to me."

The "well-mannered" girl immediately grinned broadly, nodding her head vigorously, which softened Ianta's heart. I decided to use this encounter with them to arrange a meeting with Diomedes. After all, he was acquainted with all the returning veterans and could be a valuable source of the information I needed. I just needed to find a reason to justify my desire to meet with him.

"And how is Diomedes?" I asked Ianta. "He drank too much wine yesterday, and I thought it would be a good idea to visit him since he was very friendly to me."

"Yes, yes," Alala eagerly chimed in, "Papa is very friendly, and you should visit him. But right now, he's guarding Makednos, let's go there!"

She tugged at my hand, clearly excited about the idea of meeting her father, even though he was busy guarding Makednos. Ianta tried to protest, but we were already running through the crowded streets, skillfully avoiding obstacles. I was already familiar with the road leading to the tavern, but we turned in another direction and, after several turns, found ourselves on a narrow street with lower, more dilapidated buildings. Along the street stood armed people, making it impassable. Apparently, they were guarding the path to where the captured Makednos was being held. The street we were at the beginning of was a dead end; I could make out a high stone wall at its end, blocking the exit.

The guards blocked our way.

"This is no place for little girls," said one of them sternly, looking at Alala. Another guard pointed his sword at my chest, eyeing me suspiciously. Alala decided to take the initiative and shouted loudly:

"Daddy! Where are you?"

"That's enough!" the guard said irritably. "Go away. You take them out of here," he addressed Ianta, who had arrived to us.

Ianta, with a flushed face, tried to grab Alala's hand, but the girl kept avoiding her. The loud noise and shouts coming from further down the street made everyone freeze for a moment. Gradually, like an echo, the words came: "Makednos has disappeared! Makednos has disappeared!"

The guard standing next to me quickly came to his senses and, twisting my arms behind my back, pressed his sword to my throat.

"Who did you give your invisibility cloak to, traitor?" he growled threateningly in my ear. "People don't just disappear like that."

Before my mental gaze, I saw a figure with a hood on his head, quickly moving away while holding my cloak.

"It's Linos, it's Linos. He took it from me," I muttered, trying not to move to avoid the sharp dagger pointed at me.

"Get across the street, hold your weapons out!" the order passed from one guard to another. I thought that this command made perfect sense, allowing them to "feel out" the fugitive hidden under my cloak. I was certain that Linos had used my invisibility cloak to organize Makednos' escape. The only question is how long ago the escape took place. Do they have accomplices? If they have already left this alley, catching them in this chaos will be extremely difficult. All these thoughts flashed through my mind in an instant. Right next to us, the clashing of daggers sounded. Over the shoulder of the guard holding me, I saw Makednos' head seemingly floating in the air, the dagger swinging right and left. Makednos was a skilled warrior!

I tried to reach out to Alala, who had used the commotion to move forward and get a better view of what

was happening. But my guard interpreted my attempt to free my hands differently, tightening his grip, which made my wrists hurt.

"Don't try to escape, traitor," he whispered in my ear. At that moment, Makednos threw off my invisibility cloak and, swinging his sword, literally leapt toward Alala, grabbing her with his strong hands. He clamped his left hand around her throat, while his right hand kept his sword pointed forward.

"One more move, and the girl is finished!" he shouted. The soldiers reluctantly stepped back, giving him space. Ianta began to scream, and I also heard Diomedes' desperate shout as he made his way through the crowd toward us. The grip of the soldier holding me loosened slightly, and I, pulling away from him, shouted:

"Makednos, take me hostage, leave the girl!"

In response, I heard a contemptuous laugh:

"Why would I need you? Your cloak already came in handy. What else do you have? Everyone clear the way!"

I shouted the first thing that came to my mind:

"A flying carpet! You can fly over your enemies on it!"

Deep down, I knew this sounded a bit ridiculous, and since I had no value to the Greeks, they would simply get rid of me to stop the runaway Makednos.

"I'll just run after you!" I shouted to Makednos, trying to position myself next to him. "I don't even have a weapon," I showed my empty hands.

The defenders of the city of Pella gave me contemptuous looks, and some even spat in my direction. It didn't bother me much, as they had already called me a traitor here. The most important thing to me was not to leave Alala alone.

Makednos grabbed the girl under her arm and ran toward the city gates. I tried not to fall behind, desperately watching as Alala struggled to free herself from his grip. Soldiers were running after us at a distance. Suddenly, armed people, who had been pushing carts with construction debris, appeared to oppose them.

"We've been betrayed!" came the cry. "These aren't workers, but Makednos' people!"

Makednos kept running without stopping, never letting go of Alala or his sword. I had a hard time keeping up with him. Once we were outside the gates, Makednos continued running, occasionally whistling loudly. Apparently, he was calling his supporters. Finally, a rider appeared, leading another horse. As they approached, I recognized it was Linos.

Makednos deftly mounted the horse. I could see the confusion on Linos' face when he spotted me.

"Should we trample him?" Linos asked thoughtfully.

Makednos waved his hand dismissively:  
"He still has that flying cloth. We need to check it out.  
Put him up with you."

"Kakris! Kakris!" Alala shouted.

"It's a game!" I shouted back unconvincingly.

I climbed onto the horse behind Linos, gripping the saddle tightly as we galloped away.

Since I had nothing else to do but watch the road we were traveling, I decided to indulge in some thoughts. Most likely, we were heading to Aegea, Makednos' hometown. They will keep us locked up with Alala. They'll probably post guards as well. I don't know martial arts, and I can't take down the enemies like the heroes in some films. So I'll need to come up with another plan to escape captivity. The simplest way would be to bribe the guards. At that moment, I realized and discreetly started feeling my belt for the hidden wallet. After all the recent events, I had completely forgotten about it. Fortunately, the pouch with money was still there. I breathed a sigh of relief, although deep down I knew my plan wasn't guaranteed to succeed. But for now, nothing else came to mind. Speaking of money, Linos will probably take it from me once we arrive, so my plan could be dismissed. I'd have to act according to the circumstances, and the most important thing was not to panic, because little Alala was in my charge and needed my support.

I remembered the brooch-communicator hidden in the money pouch. It had become my talisman, reminding me of the friends in another world far from reach. I had to pull myself together to keep from falling into gloomy thoughts. After all, they don't even know about me. Still, I won't let

Linos get his hands on this precious brooch. Holding onto the saddle with my left hand, I reached into the pouch with my right to feel for the brooch. Luckily, Linos was looking ahead at the rocky road, not paying attention to me. Time seemed to stretch as I fumbled through the gold coins in the pouch. I was also careful not to make any sudden moves so as not to attract Linos' attention. Ahead, the city gates appeared on a small hill, with guards standing in front of them. Finally, I grasped the coveted brooch. Now the question was where to hide it, since I would most likely be searched, at least for the flying carpet I promised Makednos. I couldn't think of anything better than hiding it in my shoe, under my foot.

I bent to the right to execute my plan, which immediately caused Linos to yell in annoyance:

"Sit still and look ahead, no funny business!"

He turned to me, grabbing me by the side and forcing me to straighten up. I had already managed to slip the brooch into my fur boot. With a calm conscience, I promised him that I would behave.

"My back's stiff from the unfamiliar posture, I haven't ridden a horse in a long time," I started to justify myself, which was true. The last time I had ridden a horse, or rather a small pony, was when I was still in elementary school. In response, Linos sneered contemptuously, not deigning to reply.

I had to hold on tighter to the saddle as the road started to rise, and Linos spurred the horse on, almost throwing me off onto the road. I heard Alala's loud crying coming from the horse in front of us, and my heart ached with despair and helplessness.

When we reached the gates, the horses came to a sudden stop. I bent forward to avoid falling off. Linos' strong hand grabbed me from behind and yanked me off the horse, setting me down roughly on the ground. I swayed, trying to regain my balance, when Linos expertly searched me, pulling the pouch of coins from my belt and hiding it just as swiftly. I didn't even have time to see where he put it.

"Now you've got nothing left," he hissed maliciously in my ear. "Unless you teach Makednos how to fly." He started laughing, clearly pleased with his joke.

I wasn't in the mood for his laughter. My eyes were fixed on Alala, who had shrunk in fear in Makednos' arms and was desperately looking at me. I was a little scared myself, but I decided not to show it, standing straight and trying not to shake. I even tried to force a smile, but I wasn't sure I succeeded.

"Hey, Linos!" Makednos' loud voice made even Linos flinch. "What's taking so long? Get over here!"

We quickly moved toward the gates, where armed guards were waiting for us. They immediately searched me, fortunately not making me take off my shoes.

Surrounded by armed soldiers, we passed through the city gates into the town, its streets filled with an excited crowd cheering and praising Makednos. Some of the men in the crowd reached out to touch me, but the guards pushed them aside. Under different circumstances, I might have started to observe the unfamiliar city's streets and buildings, but now I just noted that its layout didn't differ much from the layout of Pella, the city I had recently been forced to leave. The street we followed from the city gates led us to the main square. I sighed, preparing to listen to Makednos' fiery speech to the gathered residents and warriors of Aegea, but to my surprise, he kept moving quickly, still holding Alala tightly in his arms. The soldiers ahead of him parted the crowd, clearing a path for us as we moved swiftly. Linos held onto my shoulder tightly, making it ache.

Leaving the square behind, we proceeded down a broad avenue before turning onto a narrow, sloping alleyway that rose gently upward. I noted how the city of Aegae was built across several hills, in contrast to Pella, which sprawled over the flat plains.

Our small procession came to an abrupt halt in front of a modest brick building, its white paint peeling in large, uneven patches. The wooden frames around the doors and windows were warped with age, and instead of a proper door, a heavy animal hide hung in its place. Thick, dark fabric covered the window openings, blocking out any

light. The building felt lifeless, abandoned, and under the dim glow of the setting winter sun, it exuded an air of foreboding.

One of the guards pushed aside the hanging hide to let us through. Makednos gently set Alala on her feet, and she immediately dashed toward me, wrapping her small arms around my waist and pressing her face into my stomach.

“Take these two to the cellar,” Makednos commanded the guards before turning to Linos. “Come, we need to discuss this new development.”

I stroked Alala’s hair and, holding her hand, followed the guards into the dimly lit building. Inside, two flickering torches mounted on the walls provided sparse illumination. They led us down a steep staircase to a basement room sealed by a sturdy oak door that looked newly installed. The scent of fresh wood lingered in the air, and I noticed shavings scattered across the dirt floor near the threshold, evidence of recent carpentry work.

The door creaked shut behind us, and Alala and I were left alone. I opened my mouth, intending to comfort her, but she spoke first, tugging my head down to whisper in my ear:

“Don’t be afraid, Kakris. I’m here with you. We’ll figure something out.”

Her courage and optimism astounded me. For someone so young, she displayed a strength that put my own doubts to shame. I wouldn’t call myself a sentimental man, but her

words brought tears to my eyes. Not wanting her to misinterpret them as a sign of weakness, I quickly turned my attention to our surroundings. In one corner of the room, I noticed a pile of straw.

“Let’s sit,” I suggested. “Resting helps us think more clearly.”

“Yes, let’s think of a plan!” she agreed with infectious enthusiasm.

Settling onto the straw, I leaned back against the cool stone wall, stretching my legs out before me. Alala sat down beside me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Kakris,” she began thoughtfully, “you’re so old—” She paused, likely seeing my raised eyebrow at her choice of words. “I mean, older than me. You must have made lots of decisions in your life. Teach me how to make them, and we’ll escape from here.”

The trust in her voice only deepened my sense of unease. I couldn’t possibly admit that I had no plan—not even the faintest idea of one. Perhaps she sensed my hesitation. Smiling warmly, she added:

“Think back to the choices you’ve made before. Maybe one of them will work for us. Papa says experience always helps. And he’s so experienced, you know!”

My foot shifted unconsciously, feeling for the brooch-communicator hidden in my fur-lined boot. Carefully, I pulled it out and held it up for her to see.

“What’s that, Kakris?” she asked, her curiosity piqued as she reached for it with eager hands.

“Careful not to drop it,” I cautioned, gently placing the brooch into her small palms. “This,” I said with a faint smile, “was one of my important decisions.”

“A magic button!” she whispered in awe. Her wide eyes sparkled as she gazed at it. “Show me how it works!”

On one hand, I didn’t want to disappoint her, knowing full well that the communicator was utterly useless in this world, whether in the past or the present. On the other hand, I was curious to see if it would still work—I had, after all, charged it before leaving home, though I couldn’t say why I had done so at the time.

“It went like this,” I began my story. “I found myself in a very unpleasant situation, much like now.” Remembering Kurkin the Second, father of Kurkin the Third, I added, “Though back then, I had a friend.”

Alala listened intently, holding her breath, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“I took this magic button,” I continued, gently retrieving the brooch from her small hands, “and pressed this hidden switch—right here—and transformed it into a miraculous tube.”

Her eyes widened, and she instinctively leaned back as the brooch shifted and extended, morphing into the sleek communicator. A moment later, her fear gave way to delight, and she clapped her hands with unbridled joy.

“And then,” I explained, “I did this—” I ran my finger across the surface of the communicator, demonstrating the gesture. To my pleasant surprise, the screen flickered to life. My unorthodox method of charging it with regular batteries had apparently worked—a small triumph that, briefly, filled me with pride. But the feeling was fleeting. Alala was expecting a miracle, and I had nothing to offer her beyond an empty gesture. Why had I even shown her the communicator? What use was it in a world like this? I needed to think of something—anything—to distract her before disappointment crept into her bright eyes.

“What happens next, Kakris?” she asked, tugging at my arm. Her voice trembled with excitement. “What happens next?”

My thumb involuntarily brushed against a small glowing screen. A moment later, a voice cried out:

“What in the world, where am I?”

In the dim light, a tall figure appeared, draped in a tunic, from under which a long, wide tail was visible. I rubbed my eyes, shaking my head in confusion.

“Great,” I muttered under my breath. “Now I’m hallucinating.”

“Kakris! Your decision—it’s here!” Alala exclaimed, her voice brimming with amazement. She pointed an eager finger toward the figure.

The stranger stumbled backward into the corner, his tail rhythmically thumping against the earthen floor. Could Alala see this too?

“What do you see, Alala?” I asked her softly.

“A griffon!” she cried out, her voice alive with wonder.  
“It’s a griffon! Ianta told me all about them!”

Before I could stop her, Alala leapt up from the pile of straw we’d been sitting on and darted across the room. She flung her arms around the knees of the bewildered figure, holding them tightly. Silence fell over the room, broken only by the faint crackle of the torches.

I realized I needed to take control of the situation and stood up. Grabbing one of the torches from the wall, I approached the pair huddled in the corner, raising the light to illuminate the newcomer.

“Kurkin?” I asked, my voice trembling with uncertainty. The name escaped my lips instinctively, though my mind struggled to reconcile the surreal sight before me. It felt like a dream—too bizarre, too absurd to be real.

“Kris? Kris the Reasonable?” the figure replied, his voice tinged with disbelief.

My legs felt weak, and I nearly dropped the torch. My thoughts spiraled into a chaotic whirl, fragments of logic and denial colliding: *This can’t be happening. Kurkin is here? I have to wake up.*

Alala let go of the knees of the stunned Kurkin and took a step back.

“Noble Alala greets you, friendly Griffon!” she said, raising her right hand in a gesture of respect. Then she nudged me in the side and whispered:

“You should be polite. Say hello!”

Kurkin hesitated for a moment, then raised his right hand, its long dark nails catching the flickering torchlight, and looked fondly at the girl. Afterward, he wrapped me in a strong embrace, sniffing me unabashedly.

“It really is you, Kris!” he exclaimed with a laugh. “And you’re... well, a father now. Unbelievable!”

“What’s he saying?” Alala tugged excitedly at my arm.

“What is she saying?” Kurkin asked at the same time.

I wanted to pinch myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming, but then I noticed the communicator brooch still clutched in my hand.

“A solution, Kakris, a solution!” Alala chimed in, taking Kurkin’s hand and pulling him toward the pile of hay where she and I had been sitting just moments ago. She was right—we needed to discuss this new and utterly baffling situation quickly. Who knew how much time we had before the guards returned?

After securing the torch in its holder on the wall, I sat back down on the hay.

“We’ll speak in the griffon language,” I said, patting Alala on the head reassuringly. She simply nodded, curiously observing the feather-covered Kurkin. Without wasting time, I quickly explained our predicament to Kurkin. I told

him about my mission to locate the ancient emerald earrings, the warring Greeks, their ruthless struggle over the spoils of war, and their thirst for power. He listened intently, his tail curled across his lap.

“And now Alala and I are trapped here, uncertain of what awaits us. But how did *you* end up here?”

Kurkin the Third raised one finger dramatically, a broad grin spreading across his face.

“I arrived just in time! But tell me—why did the little girl name me “Griffin”? And what language is she speaking?”

The question made me laugh, though the gravity of our situation quickly pulled me back to reality. The danger was still very real, and I didn’t want to put Kurkin at risk, let alone expose him to a past world where he clearly didn’t belong. And yet, here he was. How?

“Her name is Alala,” I explained, my tone serious now. “I’m responsible for her. She speaks an ancient language—Greek—from a civilization that lived here over two thousand years ago. She called you a “griffon,” a mythical creature from their legends. You do resemble one, with your feathers and all. But how did you get here?”

Kurkin the Third glanced fondly at Alala, his sharp teeth gleaming in a gentle smile. I pinched my thigh hard, once again trying to confirm that this wasn’t some bizarre dream. Alala beamed back at him, her trust unshaken, and boldly climbed onto his lap, curling up comfortably.

Kurkin the Third wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders and began his tale. As it turned out, my visit to the world of the Pteryxes had left ripples—vague memories of me persisted there, or perhaps just impressions of the events that had unfolded. It was difficult to explain, even for him. Kurkin described the phenomenon with a new term he had recently learned and seemed to enjoy using: “déjà vu.”

What shocked me most was this: Kurkin told me that my city—my home—had briefly appeared on the communicator of Kartis’s wife. Just for a moment, but it had appeared. That meant there was some connection, however faint, between our worlds. How else could Kartis’s wife’s communicator, now in my possession, have responded to a signal initiated by hers?

This communicator, due to its significance, had been entrusted to the Institute of Time, under the leadership of Dr. Kurio. Out of curiosity, Kurkin had often visited the Institute, hopeful that Dr. Kurio and his team might uncover clues about my location. For the most part, Kartis’s wife’s communicator had remained near the time machine launch platform, silent and dormant. That is, until the moment it suddenly lit up. Dr. Kurio, startled, had accidentally brushed the activation button of the time machine. Kurkin, who had been standing on the launch platform at the time, was swept into the machine’s field and sent hurtling

through time, following the faint signal emitted by my communicator.

Kurkin the Third fell silent, gazing tenderly at the now-sleeping Alala, who rested peacefully in his arms.

“I like you, Krys the Reasonable,” Kurkin suddenly declared, nodding his feathered head several times as if to emphasize his words. “And we must save the girl. We need to come up with a plan.”

On one hand, I was overjoyed by Kurkin’s unexpected arrival and his willingness to help us. On the other, I didn’t want to drag him into our dangerous and unpredictable situation.

“Kurkin,” I began, addressing him, “you need to go back. I don’t want to put you at risk here. I’ll use my communicator again, and Dr. Kurio will pull you back to your time.”

We were speaking in whispers, careful not to wake Alala. My friend Kurkin pursed his lips in an expression of wounded pride and was about to protest, but at that moment, a commotion erupted outside the cellar door. There was the clatter of metal, loud voices, and the heavy stomp of many feet. A booming voice rose above the noise:

“Where’s my daughter? I’ll kill you—out of my way!”

Alala woke with a start. Jumping to her feet, she ran to the door.

“Papa, I’m here!” she shouted, pounding on the door with her fists. “I’m here!”

“I’m here too, Alala!” came the response from Diomedes. Then the noise escalated. There was the sound of a scuffle, followed by a pained groan and mocking laughter:

“We’ve got you now, Diomedes. You’ll be keeping your daughter company soon enough.”

Kurkin listened intently, stretching his neck forward.

“The door’s about to open. Get ready,” he whispered, nudging me toward the door where Alala stood. “Pick her up.”

I began to understand his plan. Lifting a wriggling, protesting Alala into my arms, I pressed a finger to my lips and quickly whispered in her ear:

“Hold on tight. Your father will love this—don’t be scared.”

The heavy cellar door began to creak open. At the same moment, Kurkin’s strong arms swept me and Alala onto his shoulders. Squeezing through the door, Kurkin charged up the stairs in long, powerful bounds, his arms and muscular tail flailing wildly. I caught a glimpse of the Greeks’ stunned and terrified faces—including Diomedes, reaching out for Alala in desperation.

The Greeks barely had time to react before we reached the street. As we passed through the door, they finally recovered their wits, shouting:

“The griffon! The griffon has stolen the prisoners!”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Diomedes running after us, his speed astonishing. It was a stark reminder of just how swift the ancient Greeks were.

Alala leaned over my shoulder, cheering him on:

“Papa, run faster! Don’t fall behind!”

Our element of surprise worked in our favor. The sudden appearance of a ‘griffon’ on the streets of Aegae threw the city into chaos. Residents scattered in panic, diving into alleys and slamming their shutters.

At Kurkin’s pace, it didn’t take long to reach the city gates. They slammed shut behind us as soon as we passed through. Evidently, Kurkin the Third had struck such fear into the hearts of the city’s residents that they decided to seal it off entirely. The guards who had been stationed outside the gates fled in terror, shouting:

“The griffon! Prepare for vengeance!”

Spotting a small olive grove in the distance, Kurkin sprinted toward it, alternating between running and taking enormous leaps. Reaching the grove, he skidded to a stop and crouched low, deftly depositing us onto the ground. He steadied us with his hands to make sure we didn’t fall and then burst into hearty laughter.

“What a run! What a run!” he exclaimed.

Kurkin bent over, slapping his knees in delight, his tail swishing playfully behind him. Alala, utterly charmed,

began mimicking him, slapping her own knees and giggling. Her antics made me laugh despite myself.

From behind one of the olive trees, Diomedes emerged, panting heavily from the chase. He collapsed face-first onto the ground, arms outstretched. My smile faded as I rushed to help him.

“Papa, what’s wrong?” Alala cried out, running to him.

Suddenly, Diomedes raised his flushed, sweat-covered face, looking both sheepish and terrified. Turning to Kurkin, he spoke in a trembling voice:

“Oh, just and merciful Griffon! Return my daughter to me unharmed! Judge me for my sins, but spare her!”

Kurkin stared at Diomedes with his black mouth slightly open. Then he scratched his head, accidentally pulling out one of his feathers. For a moment, I was frozen with shock. Then I remembered the role griffons played in Greek mythology. Turning to Kurkin, I whispered:

“That’s Alala’s father, Diomedes. He thinks you’re a griffon—the guardian of treasures and the decider of punishment or protection. Griffons are said to be temperamental, and their decisions depend entirely on their mood.”

“So what am I supposed to do now?” Kurkin asked, his voice just as quiet.

“I’d suggest being polite. Don’t scare him, but act important.”

Alala, who had been listening intently to our hushed conversation, crouched down beside her father, who was still sprawled on the cold ground. Leaning close to his ear, she whispered:

"It's the griffon language, Papa. And don't worry—this griffon is kind. He came out of a magic button."

I approached Diomedes and helped him stand up.  
"This griffon is my friend and poses no danger to you. Don't be afraid," I told him.

Kurkin then straightened himself majestically, raising one hand up and parting his thin black lips in a smile, revealing sharp white teeth.

"Is this good?" he asked through his teeth.  
I simply nodded in response, trying to keep a serious expression and not burst out laughing. That would have been entirely inappropriate.

Diomedes cautiously raised one hand, forcing a smile, while pulling Alala closer with his other arm, holding her tightly by the shoulders.

"Mighty Griffon," he addressed Kurkin after clearing his throat. "Let my daughter and me go and do not harm us."

It was clear that the words were difficult for him, as he was still gripped by fear.

Kurkin stayed silent, waiting for my explanation.  
"Diomedes wants to return home with his daughter. I think that would be best. It looks like rain is coming soon," I said.

We both glanced at the sky, which was becoming increasingly overcast with heavy clouds. Kurkin nodded meaningfully.

Diomedes interpreted our conversation, of which he didn't understand a word, in his own way. Apparently, he thought we were consulting the heavens, as he threw his eyes skyward and cried out desperately:

"Oh gods, appease the Griffon who emerged from the magical button! Allow us to go our way, my daughter and I!"

Kurkin slowly waved his hand, and I turned to Diomedes:

"Go home. Just be careful on your way."

Alala broke free from her father's embrace, ran up to Kurkin, and hugged him.

"This was a good decision, Karkis," she said to me before leaving with her father.

We watched them walk away, and I pondered what exactly Alala meant by "a good decision." Kurkin the Third's appearance as a griffon or the decision to let them go home? Probably both.

Kurkin's excited voice snapped me out of my thoughts: "Kris, what an adventure! Honestly, it hasn't been this interesting in a long time!"

"Yes, it's been a while, in another world, your world," I replied, suddenly realizing the fact that my friend Kurkin

the Third, whom I had already given up hope of ever seeing again, was actually here, right next to me.

Kurkin picked up on the nostalgic tone in my voice and curiously asked:

"We had adventures, Kris? In our world? I knew it, I felt it—that *déjà vu*. Tell me!"

Impatiently, he began tapping his tail. I, too, couldn't wait to tell him about what had happened to me in the world of the Pteryxes and relive those events. But the first raindrops, quickly turning into a heavy downpour, disrupted those plans. In less than a minute, we were drenched to the bone. The sparse foliage of the olive trees did little to shield us from the weather. Add to that the cold gusts of wind, and I began thinking about finding dry shelter.

"We'd better head back to the city," I said. "There's a tavern there, something like an inn, where I have a room."

"And what if they lock us in the basement again? Although, to be fair, it was dry down there," Kurkin said.

"No, not that city. Another one, where Alala is from. It's called Pella. The towns here are quite small, consisting of a square and a few streets enclosed by fortress walls."

I spoke through chattering teeth from the cold. My soaked clothes clung to my body. Kurkin shook himself off, simultaneously swinging his tail wide, sending water droplets flying in all directions.

"Here's the advantage of having feathers!" he said cheerfully, giving me a patronizing pat on the shoulder.

"Underneath them, I'm dry, while your skin is bare. Which way is this city where Alala lives?"

I pointed in the direction where Diomedes and Alala had disappeared just a few minutes ago. Kurkin deftly lifted me onto his shoulders and dashed off, alternating between running and jumping. Before long, we spotted Diomedes and Alala running across the rocky, rain-soaked field.

"Hey-hey!" Kurkin shouted. "Wait for us!"

Startled, Diomedes turned around. Seeing us, he drew his sword from the scabbard on his belt. His face contorted with fear and anger. We were almost upon them when I shouted, trying to calm the old warrior:

"We're heading to Pella too! To escape the rain."

I had no desire for him to accidentally wound any of us. Diomedes hesitated, then stopped, while Alala ran up to us, and Kurkin deftly lifted her with his strong arms and handed her to me. I caught her, and she, leaning over my shoulder, shouted:

"Papa, run with us! I'm hungry!"

"Where are we running to?" Kurkin asked, slowing down.

"Take a little to the right!" I shouted into his ear, pleased with myself for navigating the terrain so well.

We raced on, and I was relieved that I didn't have to run after this swift Pteryx myself. And even if Diomedes fell behind, it wasn't a big deal—he knew the way to his city and wouldn't get lost without us.

When we reached the city gates, they were locked. Water was streaming down both me and Alala. Kurkin was somewhat out of breath after the challenging run. With relief, he set Alala and me down on the ground and shook himself, sending again streams of water flying in all directions. The feathers on his head were matted together, and a droplet hung on his dark nose. I felt guilty for having been just a passenger, comfortably seated on his shoulders the entire time.

Alala, soaking wet, sneezed loudly. I started pounding on the gates, but they wouldn't open. Diomedes, who had caught up to us, joined in, banging loudly on the heavy door.

"Open up!" he shouted. "It's me with Alala! My girl is soaked! I'll find whoever isn't opening this door, and they'll regret it!"

I'm not sure what convinced the guards behind the gates to open them—mentioning Alala or the threat of Diomedes' wrath. Either way, we made it into the city. Diomedes immediately picked up Alala, glared fiercely at the two guards who jumped aside, and rushed off without even saying goodbye to us. I hope he'll keep a closer eye on Alala in the future. Though, I have to admit, she's hard to keep track of. Well, in any case, she's with her father now.

"Now follow me, Kurkin!" I said, running down the familiar streets toward the tavern. Strangely, despite being

drenched to the bone, hungry, and exhausted, I felt happy, splashing through puddles alongside my friend, Kurkin the Third.

We reached the tavern fairly quickly. We entered without any trouble, immediately feeling the warmth emanating from a large stone oven built into one of the walls. One of the big wooden tables was still occupied by one of the wounded, who was tightly bandaged from head to toe. His black, wide eyes, visible beneath the bandages, filled with terror as he began mumbling something unintelligible, trying to speak. Judging by his expression and muffled cries, I could guess what he was saying:

"Griffon! Griffon!" upon seeing Kurkin.

From behind the counter appeared the burly figure of Kreon, the tavern's owner. He was making his way toward us, holding an iron pike threateningly in front of him. I couldn't help but wonder: "Where did he get that?" Instead, I asked:

"Where are the other wounded?"

"They've all gone home! And you two should leave as well! Who knows what to expect from you!"

He let out a quiet whistle, and a few men sitting at the tables stood up, beginning to surround us, their weapons at the ready. I could sense their fear, though they tried to bolster each other's courage with comments like, "A griffon, huh? We'll show him!"

Kurkin the Third, not understanding the ancient Greek language, curiously observed them, apparently mistaking their actions for some kind of unique greeting ritual.

Suddenly, he sneezed loudly, closing his eyes, then shook himself, first his head, then his entire body and arms, finishing with a wide sweep of his strong tail, spraying everyone in the tavern with droplets of water from his feathers. At the same time, his tail struck the Greeks standing beside us, knocking them off their feet. They fell flat on the floor, dropping their swords and covering their heads with their hands.

Taking advantage of the situation, I addressed Kreon: "My friend, the griffon, is angry, Kreon. You'd better bring some food and drink to my room upstairs. Oh, and a couple of towels while you're at it."

Kreon dropped the iron pike from his hands and, bowing repeatedly, backed toward the counter, mumbling hurriedly:

"I'll bring it, right away. For your griffon friend too, of course!"

Not wanting to waste any more time, I grabbed Kurkin's hand and led him upstairs to my room. It was a bit chilly in there, but at least it was dry. Kurkin stood in the middle of the room, inspecting his wet toga. Soon there was a cautious knock at the door. When I opened it, I saw Kreon holding a large tray with food and a pitcher of water. Towels were draped over his shoulder. I took the tray and towels from him and, before shutting the door, said:

"Don't bother us again, Kreon! We're holding a war council. I'll call you if we need anything."

I tried to look as intimidating as possible, furrowing my brows. In truth, I just wanted to spend time with my friend Kurkin. He surely had many questions for me.

Kreon offered a servile smile and quickly retreated down the stairs.

We dried ourselves off, enjoyed the food Kreon had brought, and settled comfortably on the bed to reminisce. Or rather, I reminisced, recounting to Kurkin everything that had happened to me in their world. I also told him about his father, Kurkin the Second, who had long been held captive by the Hilarts and their leader, Krabun.

"My father came to us!" Kurkin announced happily. "He suddenly had a dream about me, said it felt as real as life itself, and he escaped from the Hilarts! Just like that! Another *déjà vu*!"

I was overjoyed at this news. We sat in silence for a while, lost in thought, and I didn't even notice when I fell asleep.

I was awakened by Kurkin's voice as he gently shook me by the shoulder.

"Kris, wake up, there's noise downstairs, it looks like a lot of people have gathered. And there are voices by our door,"

I sat up on the bed and rubbed my eyes. Indeed, I could hear the hum of voices coming from the tavern hall and a

scratching sound at our door. I approached and swung it open. There stood Kreon, trying to peer into the room over my shoulder. Upon seeing Kurkin standing in the middle of the room, he quickly jumped back, nearly knocking over a Greek behind him, who was staring at me with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

"Yorgos and his team are down there, having a war council. They're waiting for you," Kreon said quickly, then hurried down the stairs.

I was somewhat surprised by his fear of the Griffon, as I had assumed his character would be more one of inner superiority. It seemed that meeting a mythical creature known for its unpredictable nature and love of treasure had thrown him off balance.

I turned to Kurkin to explain what was going on:

"The Greeks downstairs, led by their leader Yorgos, are waiting for us. Let's go listen to them. Diomedes might be there too. I need to speak with him."

I sighed, remembering my task. I was still no closer to finding the "Eyes of Fate" earrings.

Kurkin placed his hand on my shoulder, grinning:

"Don't worry, I'll keep up the important appearance, and then we'll see."

And indeed, what was there to worry about! Even if I didn't find the earrings, I'd still consider this journey a success. Just meeting Kurkin was worth so much!

We began descending the stairs to the tavern. As soon as we appeared, the noise of voices fell silent, giving way to a tense stillness. Seeing us, some of the men knelt down, stretching out their hands. In the center of the room stood Yorgos, trying to appear dignified, but not quite succeeding. His eyes widened with curiosity and fear, his lips moved as if he was trying to say something, but all that came out was something incoherent like, "Well... here I am." Behind him stood Kreon, the tavern owner, cautiously peeking over his shoulder.

Kurkin smiled awkwardly, scratching his head. Then, evidently remembering he had to maintain a certain dignity, he straightened up, folded his arms across his chest, and wrapped his broad tail around his legs.

Since Kurkin didn't speak Ancient Greek, I decided to act as his spokesperson. Raising my right hand in greeting, I said:

"We greet you, noble representatives of the city of Pella!"

Kurkin glanced at me sideways and raised his own right hand. Then, leaning toward me, he whispered:

"Tell them to rise and not to be afraid of me. I'm a little uncomfortable."

Clearing my throat, I addressed the assembly again: "Rise and don't be afraid! The Griffon will not harm you."

Yorgos, now a little bolder, addressed his comrades: "Come on, get up, move."

We stood there, watching as the bearded, strong men carefully straightened up, afraid to raise their eyes to us.

"What do we do next?" Kurkin whispered to me.

"I don't know, let's fold our arms and wait to see what they say," I replied.

We crossed our arms and stood tall. I met Yorgos' gaze and gave him a meaningful nod, as if encouraging him.

Yorgos cleared his throat and began speaking. I whispered softly:

"That's Yorgos, their leader."

His voice was much quieter than usual, likely due to the great anxiety he couldn't hide. But in the silence of the tavern, he didn't need to raise his voice.

"Oh, the treasure keeper Griffon, sent to us from the heavens and emerging from the magic button! You did not come to us by chance, first sending your messenger Hermes. Now we're sure it's Hermes, no matter what he calls himself."

At this, he shot me a piercing look, as though accusing me of pretending to be someone else. Then he continued:

"Kreon told us that you, Griffon, held a war council against us, mere mortals. We are not your enemies. We will share our spoils with you."

He fell silent, evidently waiting for our response. I was so pleased with his offer that I could barely contain my joyful smile. I would finally have the chance to inspect the treasures taken from Babylon, searching for the "Eyes of

"Fate" earrings. And I wouldn't have to interrogate Diomedes, make lists of veterans, or figure out where everyone lived and what offspring they had. I whispered to Kurkin:

"Nod your head importantly and say something in my ear."

Kurkin obediently leaned his head toward me:

"How do I look as the Griffon? Is everything okay?"

"The Griffon wants to know if all your treasure is in one place or if it's already been divided among you, the veterans," I asked sternly. "Because in that case, he'll have to visit each of you individually."

A murmur rippled through the tavern. It seemed the idea of hosting the Griffon in their homes wasn't something they were particularly fond of. The voices grew disjointed:

"We gave everything back to Yorgos. Early this morning. Ask him. Yorgos knows."

"Look at Yorgos sternly," I whispered to Kurkin.

Kurkin tried to frown, which somehow made his feathers twitch on his head and forehead, and stared at Yorgos.

The latter, clearly frightened, said:

"We'll give you half, Griffon."

Kreon, standing behind him, shoved him in the back, muttering something angrily under his breath.

"One third, I mean, as it's supposed to be," Yorgos corrected himself.

"Let's act like we're thinking about it," I said quietly.

Kurkin flicked his long, wide tail, causing frightened gasps from the crowd, and slightly closed his round black eyes. I, too, squinted, lost in thought. One third of the spoils was little. The chance of finding the earrings I needed in that part was slim. Besides, how could I be sure the earrings were even in Pella? Perhaps they were with other veterans from the city of Aegae. But we'd go with the flow.

I turned slightly to Kurkin and whispered:

"They're ready to give us one third of the loot. Wag your tail and shake your head angrily."

Kourkin slammed his tail loudly against the floor, then flicked it and jumped high, quickly shaking his head and pursing his lips. A sigh passed through the room, and some of those present dropped to their knees again. Unexpectedly, a young Greek squeezed forward, holding a small board and a charcoal pencil. He approached us closely, admiring Kurkin the Third with enthusiasm.

"Agapitos," someone whispered loudly, addressing him. "What are you doing? It's dangerous!"

"I'm drawing the Griffon from life. What luck!" Agapitos quickly moved the charcoal across the board. Kurkin and I froze. I decided not to wait and barked at Yorgos:

"Where are the treasures? Lead us there!"

Grabbing Kourkin by the arm, I pulled him toward the tavern's exit. As we passed by Yorgos, I lightly slapped him on the shoulder, saying:

"Go ahead, show us the way."

Just yesterday, I wouldn't have dared slap Yorgos on the shoulder. But now, after my transformation into Hermes and standing next to Kurkin the Griffon, a creature that inspired fear in the ancient Greeks, I had gained some courage.

Yorgos ran ahead of us, glancing over his shoulder warily.

"It's not far," he said as he ran. "It's at my house."

No one else dared follow us, apparently preferring to keep their distance from the potential danger posed by the formidable Griffon. Only the artist Agapitos kept up with us. I also noticed Diomedes joining our small procession. I jogged happily, recalling the time I had spent in the world of swift pteryxes. I glanced sideways at Kurkin, whose evident enjoyment of the situation was clear.

We didn't have to run far. Just at the end of the street, almost at the entrance to the square, Yorgos stopped in front of a two-story house painted white. Yesterday's catapult strike had spared it, only chipping a corner of the building, while almost completely demolishing the neighboring house.

Yorgos glanced back at us, visibly relieved when he saw Diomedes. I understood him — being alone with the

fearsome Griffon and the mysterious Hermes was not reassuring. Who knew what these legendary figures might do? The presence of loyal Diomedes seemed to bolster his confidence.

Agapitos, standing next to us, resumed his drawing, occasionally glancing at Kurkin. I, however, was scanning the area for Alala, knowing her restless nature and her tendency to stay close to her father. But she was nowhere to be seen. Only a crowd had gathered some distance away, keeping a safe distance but eyeing us with undisguised curiosity.

Yorgos hesitated by the entrance to his house, which was covered with a huge animal skin. Diomedes placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. I decided to hurry him along to start inspecting the treasures left under his care for the "Eyes of Fate" earrings. Finally, we entered the house, finding ourselves in a large room without windows, with a large wooden table and benches in the center. A door led out to an inner courtyard, where olive trees were planted around its perimeter. In the center of the courtyard was a well, surrounded by stones. To our right was a stable, where the sound of horses whinnying could be heard. A woman's face peeked out from the opposite door but quickly disappeared. It seemed there was another living space there.

We followed Yorgos toward the stable. Despite the open door, it was somewhat dim inside, and it took my eyes a

moment to adjust to the twilight that filled the place. I saw two armed veterans standing at the entrance to a stall, where a black horse was nervously tapping its hooves.

"What a horse!" whispered Kurkin, cautiously extending his hand toward it.

"Careful, Griffon, he doesn't let anyone near him except me!" warned the flustered Yorgos. Before he could finish his sentence, the horse lowered its head affectionately onto Kurkin's shoulder, allowing him to pet it behind the ear. Enthusiastic Agapitos, not falling behind us, became even more diligent in sketching, and Yorgos, unsure whether to pass by Kurkin into the stall, simply pointed at the chest behind the horse.

"Take a third of the treasure, Griffon," he said, indicating the chest, "and return to your world of immortals."

Kurkin stepped further into the stall and, after a moment, carried out a heavy wooden chest filled with jewelry. The soldiers guarding the stall froze in amazement and quickly retreated to the far corner of the stable. I was surprised by Kurkin's strength too, but then I remembered how easily he had tossed me onto his shoulders.

In the daylight, I could see heavy gold and silver candlesticks, plates decorated with intricate patterns, and chains with pendants lying on top. I sighed heavily, thinking how long it would take to search through all this treasure for the earrings I needed. Kurkin, having seen the chest's

contents, scratched his head thoughtfully. Yorgos interpreted our hesitation in his own way.

"Take half, Griffon, if a third is not enough!" he offered eagerly. It was clear he couldn't wait to be rid of us.

Just then, one of Yorgos' soldiers interrupted our conversation. Stopping by one of the olive trees and keeping a safe distance from us, he shouted excitedly, waving his arms:

"Makednos sent a messenger! Linos! He wants peace!"

The mention of Linos made me wary. That trickster surely wasn't up to any good. He had already betrayed his comrades, and betraying them again would be nothing for him.

"Be careful, Yorgos," I warned him. "Linos can't be trusted."

Yorgos nodded, seemingly agreeing with me.

"But it's worth listening to him," he said, eyeing me carefully. "And you, Hermes, don't forget our hospitality and generosity. You were locked in the basement at Makednos' town."

I understood the meaning of his words: Yorgos wanted to be sure that Kurkin and I would side with him. I simply nodded in agreement, not wanting to discuss how much I disliked this conflict between the veterans of Alexander the Great's campaigns.

Yorgos approached the soldier who had brought the message about Linos' arrival as a mediator, and began

speaking to him. The soldier listened attentively, nodding his head in agreement and making brief remarks. It was clear they were discussing something. I wanted to approach them to overhear their conversation, but at that moment, Kurkin, who had been standing by the stall with Yorgos' black horse, came up to me. He was clearly thrilled, smiling as he petted the horse's shiny mane.

"Hey, Kris, ask if I can ride this horse? I'm, well, Griffon, maybe he won't mind?" he asked, placing his hand on my shoulder and grinning. "What a horse! He's bored standing here, he needs to move," he urged, as though the decision rested with me. I thought for a moment. Of course, in the current, let's say, military situation, it wouldn't be very safe to go for horseback rides, but on the other hand, I really wanted to make Kurkin happy. And I wanted to repay him a little for his hospitality when I ended up in the world of the pteryxes by chance.

I decisively approached Yorgos, who was still conversing with his soldier, the one who had been too afraid to come closer to us with Kurkin. The soldier instinctively shielded his head with his arms, unwilling to look at Kurkin, who accompanied me.

"No, no, don't take me with you, Griffon! Why is he smiling?" he cried out in fear, addressing Yorgos.

Yorgos froze in tension, unsure of our intentions. It was clear that he was struggling to maintain his composure. He straightened up, staring ahead, trying not to meet our

gaze. I found it somewhat amusing to see a battle-hardened veteran so disoriented. I had no idea that the ancient Greeks believed so strongly in their mythical creatures, ones they had created themselves.

“The Griffon asks permission to ride your horse, Yorgos!” I said, trying to make my face look serious and stern.

“My Meteor doesn’t allow anyone near him except me,” Yorgos replied, finding his voice with difficulty. There was even a hint of indignation in his tone. “Isn’t the treasure enough for you?”

“The horse’s name is Meteor,” I quietly said to Kurkin. “And make your face serious, stop smiling.”

My friend Kurkin narrowed his round, black eyes, folded his strong arms with long black nails across his chest, and began tapping his tail.

“My Griffon is willing to give up most of the treasures you’ve given us. In compensation, he asks to borrow Meteor for a while,” I addressed Yorgos. Then, leaning toward his ear, I added in a confidential tone: “Don’t anger the Griffon, Yorgos. I wouldn’t vouch for the consequences.”

After a brief pause, Yorgos asked:  
“Is it true that the Griffon came here only to save little Alala?”

I wasn’t sure what he was driving at, asking me this. But considering that rescuing the girl from enemy captivity could be considered a noble act, I decided to agree with

his assumption.

“The gods favor Alala and care for her well-being here,” I answered, waiting for his decision. “And for the well-being of all worthy citizens of the city of Pella,” I added hastily.

Apparently, I had said exactly what Yorgos wanted to hear, because he turned to Kurkin and said seriously:

“Your support from the gods has come at just the right time. I allow you, Griffon, to saddle my horse. Take good care of him.”

Kurkin listened attentively, slightly tilting his head to the side.

“He agreed, Kurkin. Wave your tail and bow your head as a sign of agreement,” I translated Yorgos’ words in my own way.

Kurkin the Third waved his tail and gave Yorgos a strong hug, pressing him to his chest.

“Thank you, my friend, e-eh, Yorgos,” he sincerely thanked him and immediately ran toward the stable where Meteor stood. I was genuinely happy for Kurkin, knowing his love for animals.

Surprised and delighted by Griffon’s display of emotion, Yorgos confided in me:

“We are planning to lure Makednos and his followers into a trap. Your presence and favor could work to our advantage. Can you, Hermes, aide to Griffon, ask him to accompany us beyond the city gates for a meeting with Makednos?”

“You’re planning to set a trap for him? What if they have the same intentions toward you?” I asked reasonably. “I’d suggest waiting, buying time,” I advised.

Yorgos straightened proudly, replying:

“We, the sons of Hellas, don’t waste time when our enemy is on the move. Makednos is surely plotting something.”

I paused for a moment. To be honest, I understood he was right. I just wanted to go for a ride with Kurkin, without getting involved in military matters. I was sure my friend would take me along, sitting me behind him on the horse. But on the other hand, I didn’t want to ruin the trust we had established with Yorgos. He would certainly hold a grudge if I refused his request now. I didn’t want that. Reluctantly, I said to the expectant Yorgos:

“I’ll talk to the Griffon. I just hope you have a good plan against Makednos. I’d rather not be in danger.”

“Don’t worry, Hermes, with the Griffon on our side, we’ll put that arrogant Makednos in his place!” Yorgos responded cheerfully.

I, however, was not feeling cheerful at all. I was very reluctant to once again be dragged into the military conflict between two veterans of Alexander the Great’s army, both striving for power and wealth. But I hoped my compliance will work to my benefit, making the search for the earrings,

which brought me here after a journey over two thousand years ago, a little easier.

I turned to head toward Kurkin, who was at the stall with the black-maned horse, Meteor. At that moment, I bumped into Agapitos, who was hurriedly pulling a new drawing board out of the pouch attached to his belt.

I walked past the chest of treasures, which was still in the inner courtyard under the guard of two armed Greeks. I thought it might be a good idea to ask Yorgos to assign someone from his men to sift through the contents of the box in search of the "Eyes of Fate" earrings. Now that we had established a trusting relationship, I didn't think it would be a problem. Encouraged by this thought, I walked more briskly to the stable in search of Kurkin. He was hesitating near the stall, holding something that looked like a heavy, silver-edged carpet.

"Look, Kris, they don't have saddles, just a blanket with straps. Help me secure it," he called to me. "Pat him on the withers, don't be afraid."

I hesitated, unsure whether to approach the horse. The last time I was near a horse, I was eight years old, and it was a small pony. But now, standing before me was a large horse, restlessly shifting its hooves. And Yorgos had mentioned that this horse, Meteor, had a stubborn temperament and didn't allow anyone near him except his owner. Kurkin, however, was a different story; he knew how to approach animals. Gathering some courage, I

squinted and reached out my hand, lightly touching the horse's coarse mane. Kurkin burst out laughing and said:

"I'll handle this, Kris, it's just that I have more experience, I understand how it works. Just stand by me."

I sighed in relief. Honestly, just riding behind the experienced rider Kurkin felt much safer to me, and I was sure that my friend Kurkin was a skilled rider.

Taking a step back, I watched Kurkin's deft movements as he secured the blanket with wide leather straps, fastening them around the horse's belly.

"We're going for a ride now! Let's explore the surroundings!" he exclaimed joyfully, patting Meteor on the back. "You'll love it!"

"I'm not so sure about visiting the surroundings, Yorgos is asking us to accompany him to meet Linos, the messenger from Makednos," I reluctantly told him. "We can ride out to meet them, we have permission to ride the horse," I added quickly, noticing that Kurkin seemed a bit deflated.

"I take it it's better not to refuse Yorgos's request," Kurkin replied meekly, climbing onto the horse and swishing his wide tail to the side. "Let's go at a walk then. We'll get used to each other, me and Meteor."

He extended his hand to help me climb onto the horse behind him. We left the stable, heading across the inner courtyard toward Yorgos, who was watching us intently. I could feel that he was struggling to refrain from taking his

horse back from us. Kurkin noticed this as well, so he gave Yorgos a friendly smile.

"Makednos will be waiting for us in the open field halfway to Aegae, his city," Yorgos grumbled, casting a dissatisfied glance at Kurkin. Apparently, his jealousy over his horse was stronger than his fear of the formidable Griffon.

"And where is Linos?" I asked, somewhat concerned. "We can't take our eyes off him, he's sly and dangerous."

"Do you think I don't know people?" Yorgos replied indignantly. "Linios delivered the message to the guards at the city gates and then ran off."

"And when is the meeting scheduled?"  
"We're leaving now. My men have already been informed. We're gathering in the square."

I was honestly surprised by how quickly Yorgos was acting. Only a short time had passed since the guard informed us of Linos's arrival with a message from Makednos. Maybe the swift-footed Greeks were able to send messages faster than any of our modern equipment. Leaning forward toward Kurkin, I quickly translated what Yorgos had said:

"We're leaving now to meet Makednos. The gathering is in the city square. Let's follow Yorgos."

"It's a shame I didn't fix my feathers," Kurkin lamented. "So many people will be watching me!"

"Don't worry, to the Greeks you're a real Griffon, and that's already something!" I reassured him, holding back a smile.

Kurkin straightened in the saddle and nodded graciously at Yorgos, lifting his nose in the process.

"How are we getting out?" he whispered to me. "We won't fit through the door."

"I think we should go through the stable," I whispered back.

As if answering our conversation, Yorgos moved toward the stable, signaling his companions to follow him. Quickly saddling the bay horse next to Meteor, he mounted it, and our procession moved forward. Agapitos, the artist, decided not to fall behind. His presence was accepted by everyone as a matter of course, and no one, except for me, paid him any attention. I even thought about how he was the true ancestor of the omnipresent journalists who report the latest news.

I was right in assuming that there was a separate exit for the riders from the stable, leading into a narrow side alley between the rear walls of buildings. It was narrow enough for us to move only in a single file. Yorgos led the way, with his bodyguards following him. Kurkin and I on the horse brought up the rear. Of course, this didn't count the nimble Agapitos, who wasn't falling behind. I was surprised I hadn't noticed him before. He was probably busy drawing more significant events than me. I even felt a bit offended,

as my sudden appearance here was quite an extraordinary event. Deciding not to dwell on it, I began thinking about our current situation.

I had no desire to put Kurkin in danger, especially since he had ended up here solely because of me. I needed to keep my brooch-communicator at hand, so that in case of sudden danger, I could activate it and open a temporal tunnel between our two worlds. Dr. Kurio was probably already trying to bring back Kurkin, who had mysteriously disappeared from the world of the pteryxes.

Our procession turned onto one of the wide streets leading to the main square, where the townspeople had gathered. They greeted us with cries of "Rejoice, Griffon, rejoice!" while waving their arms. There were many women with children in the crowd, who were jumping joyfully and shouting loudly: "Rejoice, rejoice!"

"What are they shouting? What does 'Chaire, Griffos' mean?" Kurkin asked me, smiling and nodding his head. It was clear he enjoyed being at the center of the enthusiastic crowd.

"They are saying, 'Rejoice, Griffon!' It's a common greeting among the ancient Greeks. Although right now, they don't realize they're ancient," I explained.

Kurkin also decided to be polite, shouting loudly, "Chaire, chaire!" which prompted a wave of applause. Ahead of us, Yorgos turned around and gave us an annoyed look, pressing his lips together. Apparently, he

didn't like the crowd's attention on Kurkin, who had pushed him into the background. He raised his hand and said loudly:

"Listen to me, people of Pella!" But his voice barely cut through the noise that filled the square. The soldiers, who had been standing in a line along the mass of people, started to admonish the crowd, trying to restore silence. Finally, they succeeded, and Yorgos began speaking, addressing the gathering:

"The gods are on our side, sending us their messengers, the mighty Griffon and his assistant Hermes! This coward Makednos has sent us the traitor Linos to arrange a meeting. But we will not fall for their attempt to make peace with us. They will have to pay for all they've done to us. We will capture their city Aegea and teach them to respect us. In the name of all the gods!"

So, that's Yorgos' plan! He doesn't want peace. And Makednos probably has in turn some treacherous plan against Yorgos and his warriors. I thought with sorrow that centuries of war and bloodshed hadn't changed people, making them seek enemies just to prove their superiority. I decided to distract myself from these gloomy thoughts, especially since I had no power to change the minds of the warring sides. Besides, I definitely couldn't get involved in the course of events. Looking around, I noticed that the soldiers, who had been standing in a line on the square, had disappeared. They must have taken hidden positions

for an attack on Makednos. I couldn't think of any other explanation for their disappearance.

Yorgos signaled, and we moved toward the city gates, pushing through the parting crowd. We, riding on horseback, towered over everyone, attracting curious and admiring glances. I sat tensely on the horse behind my friend Kurkin, gripping the communicator tightly in one hand. I didn't like any of this. I regretted that I had inadvertently brought Kurkin here, putting him in danger. I was tempted to activate the communicator right now to send him back to the world of the pteryxes. I was sure that Dr. Kurio, the director of the "Institute of Time," was trying to bring back Kurkin, who had mysteriously disappeared, awaiting a new signal from my brooch-communicator. Leaning forward, I looked at Kurkin's face, sitting ahead of me on the horse. He smiled encouragingly at me, squinting his eyes meaningfully.

"Our friends are preparing for battle, I take it?" he whispered. "And we can slip away on the horse, what do you think?"

He patted Meteor on the shiny black withers affectionately. I was about to briefly explain to him that it probably wouldn't work, since we were part of Yorgos' plan and we would be closely watched, when suddenly a loud child's voice pierced the air: "Kakris! Kakris!"

It was Alala. She was standing nearby in the crowd, trying to break free from Ianta's strong grip. The horse,

startled, reared up, lifting onto its hind legs. I grabbed the saddle tightly, dropping the brooch-communicator in the process. Desperately, I wanted to jump off the horse to find it, but Meteor charged ahead, bypassing Yorgos, whose horse had jumped aside. Meteor must have already known the way to the city gates, leading to the hill-covered plain, because it went straight there, pressing its ears back against its head. I was a little frightened, afraid of falling off, so I clung tightly to Kurkin's waist. Ahead, the gates appeared, guarded by armed men. They froze in fear, unsure of what to do. Kurkin shouted:

"Get out of the way!" trying to hold the horse steady. The guards jumped aside, either from fear or instinctively understanding Kurkin. Luckily, one gate leaf seemed to be open, and soldiers who had been standing along the square's crowd passed through it. We sped past them. The wind was whistling in my ears. My fear passed, replaced by exhilaration from the fast ride. After taking us to a small olive grove on a hill, the horse stopped. Kurkin jumped off and pulled me down from the saddle to the ground. My legs wobbled a bit, but despite that, my mood became carefree. I even felt relieved that now we wouldn't have to accompany Yorgos and his team to the negotiations. I sincerely didn't want to be part of a military plan, especially pulling my friend Kurkin into such a dubious affair. I immediately remembered the brooch-communicator I had dropped, and a smile left my face. How could I get Kurkin

back to his world now? I had to return to the city urgently to find my precious brooch.

Kurkin, having tied Meteor to one of the trees, turned to me and, crouching slightly, slapped his knees.

"Now that's a horse, huh? What do you say, Kris? Pretty great, right?" he said, smiling and waving his long tail, but when he noticed my furrowed brow, he fell silent in confusion. "If you want, we can go back to them, those... what do you call them, warriors?" he offered uncertainly. I heard the soft tapping of his broad tail on the ground. He clearly didn't want to return. Neither did I, for that matter. But he needed to know the truth about the lost communicator — the only connection between our worlds. And it all happened because of me. With a heavy heart, I told my friend about the communicator I had lost after dropping it in the square.

"In any case, you won't be stuck here alone, in a strange world and in a distant time. You'll return with me to my world," I said in conclusion, afraid to look him in the eyes. To my surprise, Kurkin was happy about the news.

"Wow! It's a pity I can't take the horse with me, he's just too good!" he exclaimed. Then he looked at himself thoughtfully, smoothing the folds of his toga. "I should tidy up these feathers, though; I've been looking pretty messy lately. Or do you think this will do?" He looked at me questioningly, waiting for my response. I noticed his truly ruffled gray feathers on his head, covered in dust, and

the crushed sandals on his feet—how was he not freezing in them? And my heart warmed. I laughed with relief, as I had expected quite a different reaction from Kurkin.

"So, in the worst case, we'll go to our world first, and then we'll figure it out, agreed?" I said.

"Yeah, no problem. Now that's some news!" he joyfully clapped his knees, swinging his tail widely. "What luck!"

I didn't want to think about the fact that it would be nearly impossible for Kurkin to return to his world without communication through the brooch. On the other hand, my boss, Otto Schneider, had plenty of great specialists; they'd come up with something. Worst case, I'd have to find a way to go back to the Cretaceous period, where I had my first meeting with the progenitor of the pteryxes, Curious, and also with my "double," Kris the primate, who had been mistakenly sent into the distant past by Dr. Kurio. These quickly flashing thoughts in my mind calmed me down. Now, I just needed to find the "Eyes of Fate" earrings and return to my time.

I reminded Kurkin of my task.

"By the way, do you have your invisibility cloak with you?" he asked, extending his finger with a long dark nail in my direction. "We'll cover ourselves with it and head off to search!" he enthusiastically suggested.

I sighed sadly.

"I lost it," I replied briefly, a little upset by this.

Kurkin looked at me questioningly, squinting his round black eyes.

"The last time I saw it, it was on Makednos, when the traitor Linos helped him escape. Then, he must have dropped it somewhere on the way. And now, how am I supposed to find it?" I shook my head negatively. "We need to come up with another plan," I suggested.

"And how would you have managed alone here?" Kurkin sighed dramatically. "Let me tell you..." he began, but he didn't finish his sentence, as suddenly several arrows flew over our heads, embedding themselves in the trunks of the trees around us.

"Get down!" Kurkin shouted, jumping towards me. We lay down, pressing our bodies against the cold, damp ground. Meteor, the horse who had been calmly standing, tethered to a tree, neighed loudly, rearing up on his hind legs. Then, he began to bounce, nervously shaking his head, trying to free himself from the rope.

"At least he's not injured," Kurkin whispered for some reason, lifting his head to check on the horse. "Stay still, don't move, I'll try to mount the horse," he continued quietly, beginning to crawl skillfully towards the horse, which was a few meters away. Then, with a strong push of his tail, he was immediately by the tree where Meteor had been tied. After quickly untying the horse, he jumped onto it, lowering his head.

"Come on, over here, quickly!" he shouted to me. I didn't make him wait long, jumping to my feet and running to the horse. Kurkin's strong hand grabbed me, throwing me onto the saddle behind him. Several more arrows whistled past us, fortunately missing. The sound of hooves quickly approaching us became audible. We galloped down the hill we had just been on, anxiously watching as armed horseback riders, shooting arrows, were approaching us from both sides, trying to block our way. Arrows were flying in all directions, but strangely, only the riders on both sides were being hit. I was puzzled by this chaotic exchange of arrows, which seemed completely inappropriate for experienced soldiers. I looked around in confusion. On our right, riders were approaching, with Linos galloping ahead of them. On the other side, leading the horsemen, was Yorgos, riding a bay horse. I immediately understood why the arrows were hitting only the riders, flying high over our heads without harming us. Considering that the traitor Linos was now acting in Makednos' interest, he was most likely not riding with his team to help Yorgos catch us. He just wanted to catch us first, before Yorgos. And now the warring sides were hunting us, simultaneously shooting arrows at each other to cause as much harm as possible to the enemy. This did not look like a peace negotiation. I won't say these thoughts came to me in this exact order, but I quickly came to this conclusion, assessing the situation. Leaning toward Kurkin, I shouted in his ear,

drowning out the thundering hooves and the whistling wind:

"They need us alive, so don't worry!"

By that time, I didn't fully understand why they needed us; after all, they could fight each other just fine. Yorgos, an experienced soldier, surely, after a bit of interaction with us, especially with me, must have realized that we weren't much of a threat. I could feel that I didn't hold any interest for either Yorgos or Makednos with Linos. And that meant they were after my friend Kurkin. But why would they need Kurkin the Third, whom they took for the Griffon? For a journey to the realm of the dead? That was unlikely. Of course, it was hard for me to think calmly, sitting on a galloping horse, bouncing uncomfortably in the saddle. Moreover, I was tightly holding onto Kurkin's waist, afraid of falling off. But I think I managed to convey the gist of the disjointed thoughts that had formed in my head.

Our horse raced toward a small mountain visible ahead. A small ravine separated us from its base. Meteor jumped over it but tripped on a large boulder, losing his balance. With a loud neigh, he fell to the side, bringing both Kurkin and me down to the ground. Quickly jumping back to his feet, he galloped away along a narrow path leading up the mountain. Kurkin and I, still sitting on the ground and rubbing our bruises, looked after him in confusion.

"I hope he finds his way home," Kurkin said sadly.  
"Otherwise, my conscience will bother me."

"He'll find his way, at worst, when he gets hungry," I reassured him. "And we better find somewhere to hide; they're catching up with us," I reminded him of our difficult situation.

Both groups of riders were rapidly approaching us, shouting battle cries and waving swords. Honestly, they looked terrifying. I managed to catch a glimpse of Yorgos's face, twisted in anger. In hindsight, I understood him: we had broken our promise by not participating in the negotiations with Makednos, and we had lost his beloved horse. His anger outweighed the fear of the Griffon-Kurkin. Kurkin, however, didn't waste time. Quickly lifting me onto his shoulders, he began racing up the mountain, skillfully jumping over the rocky bumps.

"Hold on tight, Kris!" he shouted as he ran. "Maybe we'll find the horse too!"

I feared they would catch us, but Kurkin was running very fast, balancing himself with his strong tail. Raising my head, I saw the treetops ahead, forming a picturesque green wall.

"There's a forest ahead!" I shouted to Kurkin.

Kurkin increased his speed, covering the distance to the forest with large leaps. Something whizzed by and fell right behind us. Looking back, I saw it was a large, dense net used by hunters to catch large animals. The narrow, rocky path we were racing up the mountainside could only fit one rider at a time, and that with caution. Therefore, a struggle

had broken out behind us between the two opposing groups of riders, each trying to take control of the path while preventing their enemies from advancing. I heard war cries and the whistling of flying arrows. This exchange of arrows between our pursuers gave us an advantage, which we took. Soon, Kurkin and I were under the cover of a dense fir forest. After moving a bit further in, Kurkin sighed with relief and dropped me from his shoulders, stretching his back and swinging his tail widely.

"I haven't run like that in a long time!" he declared.  
"Feels like my childhood."

Internally, I was glad to see Kurkin's reaction to our "run." After all, I was just sitting on his shoulders. And I must admit, I felt a bit awkward that my friend had to run with eighty kilos of weight on his back. I was filled with gratitude toward him.

"Thank you, Kurkin," I said sincerely. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"Come on, Kris! That's what friends are for!" he replied nonchalantly, sitting down on the ground covered with thick needles. I sat down beside him, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and sank into thought. So far, I had failed to find the emerald earrings—the very reason I had come here, two thousand years into the past.

Of course, I could simply return to my own time and world with Kurkin right now. My fingers brushed against the marker in my inner fur-lined pocket—the device that

established a connection with the time machine set up in the attic of our museum.

My boss would understand that I hadn't found the earrings due to the complicated military situation. On the other hand, I didn't want to give up that easily. I didn't want to be a coward, even in my own eyes. We needed a new plan to get back to Pella without being captured by the soldiers of Yorgos or Makednos from Aegae.

"They'll find us, Kris," Kurkin said thoughtfully. "This is their territory, they know every tree here. And you still have to find those... what were they, ear pendants?"

"I know," I sighed. "But how can we get back unnoticed?"

We both fell silent, considering our situation. Returning down the path we had come up would be too risky. Surely, an ambush had already been set for us on the way to Pella. If only we could find some detour, and then act based on the situation. I didn't have any other plan.

"We need to figure out how to get down from this mountain," said Kurkin, almost as if reading my thoughts. "And honestly, I'm a bit hungry. Well, just a little," he added hastily.

"Let's find another path down," I suggested. "And if we run into an ambush, we'll just escape," I said, tapping my pocket with the marker that could send us back 2,000 years into the future.

I wasn't sure if Kurkin understood what I meant, but he quickly sprang to his feet, showing by his actions that he was ready to follow me.

"This is going to be something to tell when I get back home!" Kurkin announced joyfully, stretching his thin black lips into a smile, making the feathers on his face flutter.

I didn't remind him that without the lost communicator brooch, his return to the world of the pteryxes would be problematic. After all, it's better to solve problems as they arise, rather than all at once.

We began to move away from the path we had used to enter the forest, trying not to venture too deep so we wouldn't get lost. From time to time, Kurkin stopped to lean down and listen closely to the ground.

"I'm listening to see if anyone's approaching," he explained.

After a while, he placed his ear to the ground again and then raised his hand in warning, extending his index finger with its long, dark nail.

"Someone's tapping up ahead. I can't make out what it is," he said.

"Then we'd better keep crawling," I suggested.

We lay down on the ground, covered with sharp pine needles, and began to crawl. Kurkin led the way, skillfully using his elbows and swinging his tail wide, brushing aside the fallen pine needles. I stayed behind him, trying not to

fall behind. Grey feathers from his tail brushed against my nose, and I struggled not to sneeze.

Now I could hear the steady tapping growing louder as we got closer. We stopped and cautiously peeked out from behind the trees, careful not to expose ourselves too much. I spotted two frowning Greeks chopping wood. Not far from them, on the wide path sloping downward, stood a wooden cart loaded with several long logs. I looked around for horses but couldn't see any. Apparently, the cart was being pulled by hand. I remembered reading somewhere that in ancient Greece camels were oddly used for agricultural work, but in all my time here, I hadn't seen a single camel.

"Looks like carpenters," Kurkin whispered.

"Yeah, after the recent attack on the city of Pella by Makednos, they must have a lot of work," I replied.

"But what if they're from Aegis?" Kurkin reasonably pointed out.

"They don't look like warriors, and they're not armed, which is the most important thing," I answered.

"We need to somehow get to the cart without being noticed, what do you think?" Kurkin suggested.

I had already started thinking along those lines. It would be great to negotiate with them peacefully so they'd take us to Pella. But they might get scared of Kurkin, thinking he's a Griffon.

"I'd hide under the tree trunks, and you could pull me along," Kurkin continued, developing his plan.

"The main thing is not to scare them. Maybe they'll take both of us, and we can hide under the logs on the cart," I said.

It wasn't that I didn't want to drag a heavy cart down a rocky road, it just seemed more natural: two lumberjacks returning home from the forest. And we would be hidden under the chopped wood. Too bad I lost my money pouch because of Linos. The gloomy lumberjacks would probably appreciate a small monetary gift from us.

"It's better if you stay in our shelter for now," I said to Kurkin. "Otherwise, they'll be scared of you again, thinking you're a Griffon, and they'll raise a ruckus and cause a panic. I'll pretend to be a local."

"You're right," Kurkin agreed. "But if I see that things aren't going according to plan, I'll come to help you."

I nodded silently and began to slowly move toward the woodcutters, thinking over in my mind how I would address them. To be accepted as one of their own, I'd need to make myself one of them—a woodcutter. Yes, I'd tell them my axe got stuck in a tree, and I'd need to return to the city. Then I'd distract them long enough for Kurkin to hide in their cart. Pleased with this plan, I quickened my pace a little. Smiling broadly to show my friendly intent, I approached the woodcutters, who were still focused on

chopping the tall tree. Raising my hand in greeting, I shouted loudly, drowning out the sound of their axes:

"Rejoice, hardworking woodcutters!"

"What's there to rejoice about, traveler?" One of the woodcutters, stopping to wipe the sweat from his brow, gave me a tired look. He then eyed me carefully. For a moment, there was surprise in his gaze, but it quickly faded. He was probably wondering what I was doing here. It was time to put my plan into action.

"How lucky I am to find you here!" I said, putting an expression of clear relief on my face at meeting them. I decided to abandon the idea of the stuck axe after noticing the strong, calloused hands of the woodcutter standing opposite me. He probably wouldn't believe me if I claimed to be a woodcutter myself. But just to be safe, I hid my hands behind my back. I was saved by his companion, who had put his axe down and was now looking at me with curiosity.

"Lost traveler?" he asked, not directing the question at anyone in particular, but as if thinking out loud. "And where do you come from?"

Considering that the local Greeks are often connected by family ties or a vast network of mutual acquaintances, I decided to tell the truth—or rather, half the truth—by saying I was from some far-off city. Otherwise, they would've immediately caught me in a lie when they asked

about my relatives or pressed me for my exact place of residence.

"I'm here on business, from Thessaly," I said, naming a region bordering Macedonia. To my relief, the woodcutters didn't ask for any further details.

"Well, what do you think, Kyriakos, shall we help the traveler?" the one who had just put down his axe asked his companion. "A break wouldn't hurt us either."

I was very pleased by the woodcutters' friendliness. But now, how could I distract them enough for Kurkin to reach their cart and hide? Then I remembered the horse we had lost, Meteor.

"I need to find my horse, it ran off that way," I said, pointing in the opposite direction from where I had emerged, where Kurkin was waiting in our shelter. I moved ahead of them, stepping further into the forest as if searching for my horse. The woodcutters exchanged glances, then followed, calling for the lost horse and whistling. I quickly looked back and saw Kurkin's figure darting toward the cart.

I took a few more steps, giving Kurkin time to hide under the logs, then spread my arms wide and said:

"I hope it'll come back when it gets hungry."

"Well, sure, what do you think, Kyriakos?" one woodcutter asked the other.

"It'll come back, where else could it go?" Kyriakos replied. "Let's go, traveler, you shouldn't wander through the woods alone."

I was deeply touched by their concern for me. I even felt a little guilty for having deceived them.

We made our way to the cart. I sat down on the logs, and the kind Greeks grabbed the handles of the cart, and we began to move. I hoped that going downhill would make it easier for them to pull the cart. Suddenly, I realized that they hadn't even asked where I needed to go.

"I'm staying in the city of Pella!" I called out to them.

They just nodded silently, continuing to pull the cart with determination.

I tapped lightly on the heavy log I was sitting on. In response, I heard a faint tapping from below—Kurkin was signaling. I sighed with relief, enjoying the view of the landscape bathed in the setting sun. I thought about how fortunate we were to meet such friendly woodcutters. They hadn't even asked where exactly in Thessaly I came from, which was a bit strange for curious Greeks, but I could explain it: tired woodcutters don't have time for idle questions. And it was for the best—there was no need to make up any more stories. I sat on the cart, knowing my friend Kurkin was hidden beneath the wood, and began to reflect. Life is such an interesting thing—random encounters and events often have a great impact on how things unfold. Not only on the course of events but on our

perception of life and others. Just look at these two gruff woodcutters, quietly hauling the heavy cart. We weren't even acquainted, they had been chopping wood for themselves, probably for firewood, a lot of wood, almost reaching the sky, and if you could climb it... The rhythmic rocking of the cart made me drowsy, and, already a bit tired, my thoughts became tangled. Before I realized it, I had dozed off, leaning to one side.

I was woken by loud laughter that sounded right above my ear. Startled, I recoiled and, straightening up, looked around in confusion. Armed horsemen had gathered around us, smirking disdainfully as they examined me. One of them lightly poked me with a spear, and I instinctively recoiled, which only made the men around me laugh even harder. Two woodcutters, who had been diligently pulling the cart, were now standing nearby, shaking their heads in condescension as they watched me. A suspicion stirred within me that they had lured us into a trap.

The logs beneath me shifted, and I lost my balance, jumping down to the ground. Kurkin, hidden beneath the wood, stood up from his hiding place, scattering the logs that had been covering him. They rolled away from the cart, clattering against the hard, cold ground.

For a moment, there was silence. The Greeks who had surrounded us froze, staring at Kurkin, who was sitting on the cart. Kurkin, quickly assessing the situation, leapt off

the wagon and, in a single bound, sprang toward me, hoisting me onto his shoulders. He managed to run just a few steps past the stunned warriors when a warrior's cry rang out, "Ale-alala!" At that instant, a sharp blow from the spear's shaft struck Kurkin in the back, knocking him off his feet, and we both fell.

"The Griffon was hiding under the wood!" shouted one of the woodcutters, a man named Kyriakos, cautiously peeking from behind one of the soldiers. "There! See!"

"We were waiting for you!" boasted the second "woodcutter." "We had our men pretending to be woodcutters all over the forest, and you walked right into our trap!"

We got to our feet, surrounded by a tight ring of armed men.

"Try to distract them somehow, and I'll get my marker," I whispered to Kurkin. "This place is dangerous. It's better we go back to my time."

"Wait a bit," Kurkin whispered back. "Let's at least figure out who caught us—Makednos' men or Yorgos'?"

I wanted to look around to get a sense of where we were—near Pella or Aegae. But I couldn't see because the armed Greeks blocked my view. Kurkin's question made sense. From the fact that both rival factions had been chasing us, it seemed we were needed by both sides. And judging by how they had been firing arrows over our heads during the chase just to scare us, they clearly wanted us

alive. But for what purpose? After all, they weren't as afraid of Kurkin—The Griffon—anymore, not as much as they had been during his sudden appearance. Look, they had even knocked us down without fear of some divine retribution. I decided to ask the question directly.

"For what purpose are you pursuing us?" I asked loudly, addressing the soldier standing before me.

"By my order!" came Yorgos's thunderous voice.

The men around us parted, letting Yorgos through, proudly riding on his bay horse.

"This is no way to treat your friends! A cowardly Griffon, who can only beg for treasures and expensive horses!" His voice trembled with outrage.

"What's he saying?" Kurkin asked me.

"He's calling you a coward and angry about his horse," I translated for him.

At the mention of the horse, Kurkin visibly grew sad.

"Could you apologize for me?" he asked. "I'm ready to go search for it."

"The Griffon is ready to search for the horse you scared off!" I shouted aloud.

Yorgos looked down at us thoughtfully from his high perch on the horse.

"No, no," he murmured. "You are needed for something else. We've managed to fend off Makednos, for now," he clarified. "We'll escort you to the tavern, and don't even think about running away!" he warned us.

"They're taking us to the tavern," I translated for Kurkin, feeling a little relief. Honestly, I had feared they might lock us up in some cellar again.

"But what about the horse?" Kurkin asked anxiously.  
"Who will go look for Meteor?"

When Yorgos heard the name Meteor, he understood Kurkin's concern and replied:

"My horse is already being searched for," he said, emphasizing the word "my."

Surrounded by Yorgos' men, we began heading toward the city of Pella, whose gates were already visible on the horizon in the light of the setting sun. Kurkin walked beside me, deep in thought.

"What do you think, Kris?" he said, his tone more a statement than a question. "I won't be allowed near the horse if it's found, will I?"

I didn't answer, only sighed and nodded my head. We walked the rest of the way in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. The fatigue had also taken its toll, and the idea of spending the evening in a tavern, even surrounded by armed Greeks, seemed far from unattractive.

It was already dark when we reached the city gates. Two guards, seeing us, opened the heavy gates, allowing us to pass. A few more guards, who had been behind the gates, walked ahead of us, lighting the way with flickering torches. We made our way through the familiar streets of

Pella, heading toward the tavern. Outside, standing by the door, was Kreon, the tavern keeper. Upon seeing us, he moved aside the heavy hide that covered the entrance, swung the door wide open, and let us inside into the warm hall. We followed behind Yorgos, who had dismounted from his horse.

The tavern was empty, likely due to the state of martial law the city was under. Only one table was occupied: by Diomedes and his daughter, Alala. Upon seeing us, Alala put aside the parchment and charcoal pencil she had been using, rushed to us, and gave Kurkin a tight hug. I couldn't help but feel a pang, as I had known her for much longer. However, the joy at seeing her soon overshadowed all other feelings.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, smiling and nodding her head. "I have..."

"Diomedes!" Yorgos shouted, interrupting her. "Why is Alala here? How many times have I told you: she should be at home!"

Flustered, Diomedes rose from his seat and began to explain sheepishly:

"Ianta went to Olynthus to care for her sick mother, just for a few days. And I... I've been teaching her to read and write," he spread his arms, pointing to the parchment and pencil.

Sensing that she might be sent to stay with some neighbors for the night, Alala quickly returned to her father.

She sat back at the table next to him, trying to put on an innocent look, her eyes wide open.

Yorgos furrowed his brow, seemingly pondering what to do with her. It was already dark outside, and letting her go alone would be dangerous. Even with adults accompanying her, there was the risk that she might simply run off. That wouldn't do either.

The only sound in the silence was the soft tapping of Kurkin's tail on the stone floor of the tavern.

Seeing Yorgos' indecision regarding Alala, I decided to intervene. Besides, I was eager to find out what she wanted to tell us.

"We, too, can look after the girl," I said. "She trusts us and won't run away. Diomedes can join your military council."

I tried to speak convincingly and confidently, standing tall. I felt Yorgos' underlying dissatisfaction with Kurkin and me, so I made sure to carry myself like a true "messenger of the gods"—Hermes.

Noticing how I straightened up to look more important, Kurkin followed suit. He folded his arms across his chest, swung his tail widely, and raised his head high, looking down at Yorgos. It immediately became apparent how much taller Kurkin was compared to everyone else in the tavern. The soldiers standing nearby instinctively moved a few steps back.

"Fine, Hermes," Yorgos replied, a little flustered, trying to avoid looking at Kurkin. "But don't even think about running! You promised to help us, and promises are not to be broken."

I nodded in agreement, and Kurkin and I headed toward the table where Diomedes and Alala were sitting. The soldiers parted to let us pass, casting cautious glances at us.

I sat next to Alala, across from Diomedes, while Kurkin settled down opposite us. He leaned over the table, smiling at the girl as he clasped his hands. She pushed the parchment toward him, where she had written a few sentences in uneven handwriting, and grinned proudly, hoping for praise.

"You're doing great with your writing!" Kurkin said, studying the unfamiliar letters with curiosity.

"I catch the words and hide them in the paper. Then I can always read them. I like it," Alala explained.

"And you can always read them again," Kurkin responded, as though he understood her well.

"Look, I've caught your name, and now it's with me," she said, bending over the parchment and carefully writing "γρύψοζ."

They both bent their heads together, chatting and somehow understanding each other without my help as a translator.

Meanwhile, I was lost in thought, wondering what Yorgos might have in store for us. Just recently, he and his men had been chasing us, setting up an ambush in the forest where we had been hiding, then bringing us here under guard to the tavern, leaving us sitting calmly in the company of Alala and Diomedes. For what purpose? Why hadn't they made their intentions clear? Perhaps Diomedes knew?

Leaning over Alala's shoulder, I tugged at Diomedes' sleeve, trying to get his attention.

"Hey, Diomedes, why were we brought here? What does Yorgos want from us?" I whispered to him.

Reluctantly, he tore his gaze away from his daughter, raising an eyebrow in confusion as he replied,

"You're Hermes, and he's Griffon, both from another world. So when you're heading back to your own place, take someone with you."

Satisfied that he had given me a sufficient explanation, he turned his attention back to watching Alala, who was demonstrating her "word-catching" skills to the smiling Kurkin.

The situation was to my liking: no one at the table was paying attention to me, so I allowed my thoughts to wander. So, we were going to be asked or persuaded to take someone with us to the "other world"—a place from which no mortal had ever returned. Most likely, it would be one of our enemies, since Yorgos would never want to

leave the world of the living. He wouldn't sacrifice his soldiers without a good reason. The likely candidate was Makednos. That way, he would kill two birds with one stone: rid himself of a powerful enemy who had waged war against him, while also showing that the mighty gods were on his side, punishing his foes harshly. After this, it would be unlikely that the Greeks, who held their myths so dearly, would dare rise up against him.

As I was thinking, plates of food and pitchers of water and wine appeared on the table, brought by Kreon. The mouthwatering scent of stewed meat with herbs hit my nose, and the hunger I had been suppressing pushed all other thoughts to the back of my mind. I pulled the dish toward me and picked out a piece of meat, eagerly bringing it to my mouth. I'll have to ask Kreon for the recipe, I thought, savoring the meal.

"You're a barbarian, Kris," came Kurkin's voice. "You eat real meat!"

I looked at him sheepishly, remembering that in the world of the Pteryxes, they ate synthetic meat, grown on special factories. Eating real meat was almost equivalent to cannibalism there.

"Surely the cheese is very tasty," I suggested, pointing to the plate.

"And the meat, is it also delicious?" he asked, licking his thin lips. "Just curious."

I sensed that he really wanted to try it but wasn't sure if he dared.

"A true traveler always tries the local cuisine," I said. "It's a way of immersing oneself in another culture."

He cautiously brought a piece of meat to his mouth and bit into it. Chewing it with evident enjoyment, he said:

"This is our secret, right, Kris? I'm just getting into it, even if you're barbarians. Besides, our ancestors weren't any better."

While we ate, I didn't notice Diomedes leaving our table to join his companions. Left without her father's watchful gaze, Alala pulled my ear toward her lips and whispered softly,

"Kris, I declare you my guardian!"

I nearly choked in surprise.

"What are you talking about, Alala? You must have mixed up your words—you mean that we're friends."

She shook her head, pressing her lips together.

"Alala is smart. You'll declare me Griffon's wife! Guardians do that. He's kind. And I have fun with him."

It took me a few seconds to process what Alala had just said. I looked over at Griffon—Kurkin—who was happily stuffing his mouth with meat and cheese.

"And smart Alala surely knows that she's still too young for marriage," I replied, in a tone of gentle reproach.

With a conspiratorial glance, she looked around, then pulled a small scroll of old parchment from her clothing pocket.

"Look what I have. I wanted to tell you right away, but didn't manage. It has magical words in it," she said, squinting her eyes meaningfully.

I didn't get a chance to examine the scroll, as she quickly hid it again. I was very curious. Was this scroll connected to her desire to become Griffon's wife, and if so, how?

"What are you two whispering about?" Kurkin asked, popping a piece of cheese into his mouth. "Oh, well, I'll say this: they sure know how to cook here. Even if they are barbarians," he added hastily.

Since I considered Alala's wish to become Kurkin's wife, or Griffon's, as she understood it, to be a serious matter, I decided I should try to dissuade her without hurting her feelings. But this should not be done in the crowded tavern hall, but rather in my room. I hoped we would have time for that.

Kurkin noticed the worried look on my face and asked: "What's wrong, Kris? Is something wrong with Alala?" he asked, concerned.

I nodded and then loudly addressed Yorgos, who was sitting at a table nearby:

"It's already late, and the girl needs to sleep. We should get some rest too. We'll go to my room!"

"Say thank you for the food," Kurkin suggested.

"Griffon is very pleased with the food and thanks you!" I added, causing a ripple of excitement.

"What do they feed you in your world?" asked one of the warriors curiously.

"Is our Kreon better than your divine chefs?" another one chimed in.

Kreon, slightly blushing from the praise, waved his hands, as if asking the conversation partners to be more modest.

"Alright, enough fun, time to be quiet," Yorgos said, hiding a smile in his beard and signaling for everyone to fall silent. Then, addressing us directly, he added: "We'll wake you up early in the morning, before dawn. I'll tell you what you need to do. And don't even think about running away," he warned us. "My guards are posted all over the city, and no otherworldly magic will help you!"

"Why not just tell us right now what you want from us?" I asked reasonably.

"So you won't have time to think of something that could harm our plan."

I pretended to be satisfied with his answer, though, honestly, I didn't see the logic in it. If we wanted to harm Yorgos, for example, by taking him or one of his companions to the "other world" with the help of our "magical button," we would have done so without asking for permission. Or we would have simply disappeared at any moment. Or come up with something else that suited

the behavior of true Griffon and Hermes. We, Kurkin and I, knew we weren't mythical figures, and that the brooch-communicator, or magical button in their terms, had been lost by me, but they didn't know that.

Considering this, I concluded that the ancient Greeks were trying to keep their plans secret until the last minute, so that their allies—in this case, us—would not inadvertently reveal them to enemies or people who weren't involved in these plans.

"We can go upstairs to my room. And they were pleased that we thanked them for the food," I briefly translated for Kurkin what I had discussed with the Greeks.

Kurkin smiled widely, flicking his tail joyfully and scattering the gray feathers that had fallen from it in all directions.

"I figured it out without you," he said, cheerfully lifting the approaching Alala onto his shoulders.

In two quick leaps, he was at the stairs leading up to the room. I lingered for a moment to collect the parchment and charcoal pencil Alala had left behind. As I walked toward the stairs, I noticed the people in the tavern leaning toward the floor to collect the feathers that had fallen from Kurkin's tail, probably to make amulets. After all, when would their fate bring them face-to-face with a real Griffon again?

Smiling slightly, I began climbing the stairs, brushing past the suddenly appearing artist Agapitos, who was rapidly sketching on his drawing board with a pencil. I won't hide it

—it was nice to receive such attention from the usually stern Greeks.

I reached the top to find Alala cheerfully bouncing on the bed, on which Kurkin was sitting. Upon seeing me, she landed next to Kurkin and clapped her hands on the other side of herself, inviting me to join them.

"I've figured everything out," she began without preamble. "I'll learn the Griffon language and become the main Griffonia. Papa says that in the world of Griffons, there's a big river and many treasures. Griffon and I will play and swim in the river, and I'll visit Papa and Ianta, bringing them treasures. What do you say, Kris?"

Honestly, I liked her plan; it seemed quite appealing for a little girl who loved adventure. There was only one "but": it was impossible.

"Listen, Alala," I addressed her, "one day, Griffon and I will have to return to our world, but you will always remain in our hearts," I added sincerely.

"What are you two whispering about?" Kurkin asked curiously.

"Alala wants to return to the world of the Griffons with you and stay there by your side," I sighed, replying. "You'd become her playmate. And yes, she's quite serious about this."

"Well, that's a problem," Kurkin said, scratching the back of his head. "The little one loves adventures, just like I did when I was a child."

"I'll explain to her that the Griffons live in a world where there's no place for living humans. That's how their mythology describes it, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, and also tell her it'll be boring for such a lively girl like her."

Alala sat quietly, listening to our conversation, as if she understood we were talking about her. I fell silent, and she turned to look at me, waiting expectantly.

"Griffon thinks there's no place for you in the world of the dead, and he's right, Alala. Besides, what would your father say? He'd be heartbroken. And one day, you'll grow up, have your own children, and you'll tell them about your friend Griffon."

"I won't bother anyone, I promise! And I'll visit Papa, I told you!" Alala tried to convince us.

I shook my head regretfully.

"Even other gods aren't allowed to enter that world," I tried to reason with her.

"Honestly, Kris?"

"As far as I know."

"But you'll visit me, won't you? Then I'll be Alala — the tamer of Griffons! Isn't that great?"

I didn't want to lie to her by promising we would visit her. Something held me back from making that promise. Perhaps I didn't want to give her something impossible to expect. Instead, I simply hugged her around the shoulders,

pulling her close. It saddened me too that we'd have to leave her in her time.

Alala freed herself from my embrace and pulled out the mysterious scroll of parchment from her pocket. The three of us leaned over it. The parchment looked ancient. How old was it, and how had it ended up with Alala? And why? These questions flashed through my mind, sparking my curiosity. It seemed Kurkin shared these thoughts, because he folded his wide tail over his lap, a sign of some agitation among the Pteryxes.

"What is it?" I asked. "Where did it come from?"

"It's a magical scroll from the Temple of Aphrodite," Alala explained. "It has magical words that are written to bring loved ones back. That's what Ianta said."

"Ianta gave you this scroll?" I asked, incredulously.

"From the Temple of Aphrodite?"

"Oh no," Alala waved her hand dismissively. "This scroll was bought by Demetra, Ianta's neighbor, when she was at the Temple of Aphrodite. Her fiancé disappeared somewhere, and she wants to bring him back. It's a good thing! Everyone says it works for everyone! And do you know how much she paid for it?"

"How much?" I asked absently.

"This much!" she spread her arms wide, showing the size of the payment.

"Alala, you need to return the scroll to Demetra. You know yourself that smart girls don't do things like this," I said.

"Of course, smart girls don't do that. I just borrowed the scroll when Ianta and I visited Demetra. I'll copy everything and return it, I promise. You want us to meet again, don't you, Kris?"

I was deeply touched by Alala's feelings, and of course, I easily believed her that she would return the scroll to Demetra. She would surely find a way to do it without being noticed. Besides, I was filled with great curiosity, just like Kurkin, who was patiently sitting on the bed next to Alala, holding his tail firmly on his lap.

Alala began to carefully unfold the mysterious scroll, holding it on her lap. I had never seen ancient parchment before, especially not from the Temple of Aphrodite. I hadn't even imagined there might be incantations for love on it.

The three of us leaned in closer to the scroll, eager to see something extraordinary. Suddenly, loud shouts and cries came from below, from the tavern hall. Alala flinched in surprise and immediately hid the parchment back in her pocket. I approached the door and opened it to uncover the reason for the sudden commotion. Descending the stairs swiftly, I saw a group of warriors crowding around Yorgos, shouting loudly over one another. I strained to listen, trying to make sense of what was happening. The

only words I could clearly make out were "Neoklos" and "Pydna."

The name Pydna was familiar to me—it was a relatively large city, a few days' march from Pella. It seemed that something had happened to a certain Neoklos from Pydna, something that had greatly unsettled Yorgos' warriors. Kreon approached me and stood by my side, planting his hands on his hips. With a sigh, he said:

"Here's yet another trouble—Neoklos of Pydna has suddenly appeared near our city and is surrounding it. A guard rushed in, saying they intend to lay siege and demand Yorgos' head along with all our spoils from Babylon."

Placing a hand on my shoulder in a confidential manner, he looked into my eyes and added:

"Take this Neoklos, this upstart, with you to your world, where he belongs among the monsters! Do as a true Hermes would!"

His last words were spoken loudly enough to draw Yorgos' attention. Seeing me, Yorgos addressed me directly:

"Hermes, it's time for you and Griffon to repay our hospitality! Makednos and his pack can wait—we now have a much greater foe. But the gods are on our side! We will defend Alexander's capital and all that is rightfully ours!"

Unnoticed, Yorgos' words to me had transformed into a rousing speech meant to lift the spirits of his warriors. While his powerful voice echoed through the tavern, interrupted only by the fierce cries of his men, I turned my thoughts to solving the problem of Alala. Under no circumstances could she be left alone. Who knew what new ideas might spring into her restless mind?

As if reading my thoughts, Diomedes approached me with a concerned expression.

"Listen, Hermes," he began hesitantly, "we've got another problem. I won't be here for some time, and I have no idea what to do with Alala. And Ianta isn't around either. That's the situation."

His forehead creased in worry, his eyes looking at me imploringly. I wouldn't have minded watching over her myself, but Kurkin and I were now part of Yorgos' military plan, and Diomedes knew this. He was likely hoping for a solution from me. I turned to Kreon, the tavern keeper, who was still standing nearby.

"Kreon, we're leaving Alala in your care."

I made sure to speak firmly, as if the decision had already been made, leaving him no room to argue.

"Griffon will be pleased with you," I added for good measure. And I wasn't wrong—the moment I said it, Kreon's eyes gleamed, and a broad smile spread across his face.

"I'll keep an eye on Alala, to the full satisfaction of the noble Griffon," he assured me. Then, glancing at Diomedes, he added: "Your daughter will be well looked after. Now, why are you still standing here? Go to Yorgos—he needs every warrior he has."

Diomedes clapped Kreon on the shoulder gratefully and, reassured, moved away to join his comrades gathered around Yorgos.

Kreon, meanwhile, clasped his hands over his stomach and leaned his head slightly toward my shoulder.

"Ah, Hermes, you too are from the world of the gods. I trust that Griffon, who favors Alala so highly, will duly appreciate my efforts and reward me with gifts from his world—you know what I mean?"

He gave me an expectant look. Of course, I understood him perfectly—he had his eye on a share of the treasures that legend said Griffons guarded.

"You will be rewarded according to your diligence," I answered vaguely. "When we return, we'll ask Alala about your service."

This answer seemed to satisfy Kreon. Taking a jug of goat's milk and a ceramic cup from the table, he headed toward the staircase leading to my room, giving me a conspiratorial wink. I had no doubt that Kreon would handle his task well. He would have looked after Alala even without a reward—it simply wasn't in his nature to neglect an opportunity for profit. Still, the prospect of being

rewarded by Griffon likely made him all the more diligent in his duty.

A moment later, Kurkin joined me, standing beside me and observing the Greeks gathered around the central table.

"The tavern keeper is upstairs with Alala," he said. "Very polite, by the way. He bowed to me and even gestured that I was free to come down to you. I take it he'll keep an eye on her. He respects me."

Kurkin nodded meaningfully, giving a wide sweep of his tail—a clear sign of his satisfaction. I decided to bring him up to speed before he could start asking questions.

Keeping my explanation brief, I laid out the situation.

"Ah, I see," Kurkin nodded several times. "So now warriors from another city want to rob their former comrades-in-arms. What a mess!"

I thought he had summed up the situation quite accurately and concisely.

"And we are needed by Yorgos to intimidate this newly arrived Neoklos from Pydna, taking him away with us—to another world,' as they say. At the same time, we show our strength to Makednos, keeping him from further attacks on Pella," I added my own thoughts.

"Makes sense," Kurkin agreed with Yorgos' plan. "And what are we supposed to do? Where do we put this Neklos, or whatever his name is?"

"Neoklos," I corrected him. "We'll act according to the situation," I suggested.

"Most importantly, stay close to me so we can run away together if things go south."

Having reached a mutual understanding, we fell silent—just in time. Yorgos, having finished discussing the situation with his warriors and sufficiently stirring their spirits, turned to us.

"Griffon, you appeared here to save Alala, the daughter of Diomedes, from Makednos' captivity. And you, Hermes, Griffon's companion, have experienced our hospitality. I even sacrificed my horse—my beloved Meteor—just to please you."

At this point, his voice trembled slightly, and some of his followers sighed and shook their heads.

"They still haven't found the horse," I whispered to Kurkin.

"Neoklos of Pydna forced Makednos to move the treasures taken from Babylon beyond the city of Aegae—at least, that's what my spies report. Normally, I wouldn't care, but now he demands the same from us, having surrounded our city. He has gathered a large, well-armed force. We are unlikely to defeat him."

Yorgos paused, leaning in to listen to a newly arrived soldier—presumably one of the scouts he had mentioned.

"What's he saying?" Kurkin whispered to me.

"Something about Neoklos of Pydna gathering all the spoils taken from Babylon. From what I gather, Makednos isn't even resisting him."

Yorgos raised his right hand, calling for silence.

"We, too, will carry out the chests of treasure beyond the city gates to lull Neoklos into complacency. Then we will ride out to meet him. I will be on horseback, as befits a commander. Hermes and Griffon will follow behind, keeping out of sight. I will draw Neoklos' attention by engaging him in conversation. I will try to get him to dismount. At my signal—when I say, 'As you see fit, Neoklos'—Griffon and Hermes will seize him and, with the help of the magical button, transport him to another world, from which no mortal ever returns."

He studied us carefully, making sure we understood his plan.

"By protecting us, you also protect Alala, the beloved of the gods and Griffons," he added another persuasive argument. "Be ready to move with us as soon as the treasure chests are at the city gates."

Yorgos sat back down at the table and resumed talking with his closest allies, including Diomedes.

Taking advantage of the pause, I relayed the key points of Yorgos' speech to Kurkin.

After listening attentively, he asked:

"But what's the point of making just one enemy disappear, even if he's their leader? Yorgos himself said they outnumber his warriors."

"The disappearance of their commander, taken away by the fearsome Griffon, will throw their ranks into confusion and panic. Don't forget—the Greeks, at least the ancient ones among whom we now find ourselves, believe in their myths. Your sudden appearance here has only reinforced their superstitions. And after Neoklos vanishes, whisked away by Griffon, who else will dare to attack Pella? No one will want to risk the wrath of the gods."

"Yeah, it's a clever plan," Kurkin admitted, scratching the back of his head. "But what do we do with this Neoklos? We can't exactly admit we're not really Hermes and Griffon."

"You know, Kurkin, it's a good thing I still have my marker. If we end up in a no-win situation, we'll just disappear—return to my world." I hesitated, not wanting to alarm him.

"But...?" Kurkin asked, his tail thudding anxiously against the floor. "Something about Alala?"

"Yorgos indirectly hinted that she is, in a way, their hostage. Or maybe I misunderstood, and it's not that serious. But it made me think, you know?" I replied somewhat hesitantly.

"Forget about your marker," Kurkin said. "We'll figure something out. Like you always say—we'll act according to the circumstances."

We fell silent, not wanting to dwell on the topic any further to avoid unnecessary distress or distractions. We would need our full attention now—to properly "act according to the circumstances."

The tavern door opened again, and a soldier appeared in the doorway. He gave Yorgos a meaningful nod and immediately rushed to him, whispering something in a low voice. Yorgos listened intently, then slammed his fist on the table, calling for silence, and began to speak:

"Neoklos has personally arrived at our city gates, expecting our offerings and the surrender of the city. His warriors have surrounded our city, flaunting their numerical advantage. They've even dragged along siege catapults, ready for an attack."

A murmur of discontent and exclamations of outrage interrupted his speech.

Yorgos raised his hand and spoke even louder, overpowering the growing noise:

"And Neoklos' men are searching for Griffon and Hermes—lost in the forest!"

He burst into laughter, and his warriors quickly joined in, echoing:

"Fools! They don't know we found them!"

"They're looking for Griffon! Oh, won't they be in for a surprise!"

"Griffon knows what to do!" Yorgos shouted, giving us a pointed look.

All eyes in the room turned toward us.

"Don't let us down," Diomedes pleaded, looking at us with desperation. "Alala is all I have left!"

"And we have families too!" the other warriors chimed in.

"If only there weren't so many of them, we'd show them!"

Kurkin and I stood there, slightly overwhelmed. If only they knew that my brooch-communicator—or the "magic button," as they called it—was lost! But they were better off not knowing. At least my marker was still intact, though we were unlikely to use it—to cowardly abandon the people of Pella and leave them at the mercy of this Neoklos from Pydna.

And why couldn't they all just stay put? The loot brought back from Babylon was more than enough for them to live comfortably.

I thought of Alala, still in my room under Kreon's care, and sighed. Kurkin, sensing my mood, nudged me gently in the side and whispered:

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out. Just stay close to me."

I nodded in agreement. Act according to the circumstances—yes, exactly. And stick together.

The gathered warriors took my nod as a sign of consent, erupting into chants:

"Ale-ale-Alala!"

Their spirits soared.

"Let Neoklos perish in the realm of the dead, carried there by Griffon! A lesson to all our enemies!" Yorgos proclaimed with fervor. "Now, let's form up as we planned and march out to meet Neoklos. Griffon and Hermes will follow at the rear of the procession, guarded by Diomedes."

Having given his orders, Yorgos, flanked by two guards, headed toward the tavern's exit. We heard the neighing of a horse being brought for him. Behind him, his warriors formed ranks—three lines deep—and began to move. We fell in behind them, accompanied by Diomedes. Placing a firm hand on my shoulder, he quietly reminded me:

"The signal phrase is 'As you see fit, Neoklos.' Don't forget."

His voice carried both tension and unease.

I understood him all too well—Kurkin and I, who the Greeks saw as Griffon, were practically their only hope of defeating Neoklos. He had marched out with a powerful army against the small band of Pella's defenders and its citizens—including little Alala, whom Kurkin and I had grown deeply attached to.

Silently, we followed Yorgos' warriors, lost in thought.

I had no idea how we were going to get out of this situation, where Kurkin and I had suddenly become the key players in Yorgos' grand plan.

Alongside the silent warriors marching behind Yorgos, who sat astride his horse, torchbearers walked, illuminating our path. The familiar road leading to the city gates felt strangely long, perhaps due to the dark thoughts weighing on me. I cast a sidelong glance at Kurkin, who was walking beside me at an uncharacteristically slow pace. Sensing my gaze, he offered an encouraging smile.

"We'll act according to the circumstances, Kris, and we'll figure something out, yeah," he said, shaking his head and flicking his tail—almost knocking Diomedes off his feet. Diomedes wisely chose to keep a bit more distance from us for the rest of the way.

We halted at the gates. Curious about the delay, I peered ahead. Two large chests filled with treasures stood before the entrance, soon lifted by the strong hands of the guards. As the gates swung open, Yorgos rode out, following the guards who carried the chests.

Once we stepped onto the open field beyond the city walls, Diomedes cautiously approached me, carefully avoiding Kurkin's tail, which swayed rhythmically above the cold ground.

"Tell Griffon to lower his head—he mustn't be seen," he whispered in my ear.

“Duck down, Kurkin, stay hidden behind the soldiers,” I urged my friend, the pteryx.

He obeyed, even bending his knees slightly for some reason.

“I wish this would be over soon—this position is really uncomfortable,” he muttered.

“Sit down,” I advised. “It looks like we’re waiting here for the signal.”

“When it’s our turn to act, give me a nudge, and I’ll jump out!” he said.

“Agreed,” I whispered back.

He was right—if he suddenly sprang out from behind the warriors, he would catch the enemy off guard, and from there, we would improvise. I had no better plan myself.

Kurkin sat down, folding his tail onto his lap and gripping it tightly. I immediately realized he was just as tense as I was. Peering past the warriors standing in front of me, I tried to get a better look at what was happening.

A rider approached Yorgos, sitting proudly in his saddle. A thick beard concealed his face, and in the flickering torchlight, his figure cast a shifting, complex shadow on the ground.

“You’ve made a wise choice, Yorgos!” his voice rang out over the hushed ranks. “You always followed my commands when you fought under my banner in Alexander the Great’s army! Good habits should be nurtured,

shouldn't they, Yorgos?" He sneered, then burst into loud laughter.

I tensed, expecting an angry outburst from Yorgos, but he remained motionless in his saddle, allowing himself to be humiliated in front of his warriors.

"Would you care to inspect the treasure we brought from Babylon?" Yorgos asked, his voice trembling slightly as he struggled to contain his anger.

"I will check everything, don't worry about that!" Neoklos replied. "We have already received an offering from Aegae, from Makednos. It's good to have such obedient allies! After all, someone must hold Hellas in their grasp while we wait for Alexander. And who knows when he will return? In the meantime, a firm hand is needed—my hand! And you can't argue with that!"

Even in the dim light of the torches, I saw Yorgos press his lips tightly together, barely restraining his fury. Yet he continued his conversation with Neoklos, trying to lure him down from his horse—so that Kurkin and I would have an easier time seizing him. At least, that was the plan.

Suddenly, the sound of galloping hooves and frantic shouts filled the air. A lone rider raced toward us, ducking to avoid arrows whistling past him—fired by Neoklos' warriors, who guarded the approach to the meeting point.

"Hold your fire!" the rider shouted. "It's me—Linos! I bear urgent news for Neoklos!"

He was already close enough that the archers lowered their bows, unwilling to risk striking their own leader. Ignoring Yorgos entirely, Linos dismounted and, with a servile smile, turned to Neoklos:

“Witness my dedication, Governor of Alexander! I risked my life to bring you this warning. While you are here, Makednos of Aegae has set out toward your city of Pydna, seeking vengeance and intent on reclaiming his share of the Babylonian spoils.”

“What did you say?!” Neoklos roared. “How dare they?”

“If you wish, I can show you the road Makednos and his men are taking toward Pydna. Judge my loyalty for yourself—there is no greater reward I could ask for.”

“A traitor will always be a traitor!” Yorgos could no longer contain his fury. “First he betrayed us, and now he betrays Makednos!”

In a surge of anger, he drew his sword and swung it at the turncoat. Several of his warriors rushed to his aid. Someone seized Linos’ horse by the reins, trying to pull him to the ground. Neoklos’ guards joined the fray, struggling to wrest the bridle from the firm grasp of Yorgos’ men. The soldiers, who had stood in orderly ranks just moments before, now formed a tangled mass, pressing in around Yorgos, hands on their swords, ready for battle. Diomedes, who had been standing behind us, ran forward, unsheathing his weapon as he moved. Kurkin, who had

been sitting on the ground, rose to his feet, peering curiously at the sudden chaos.

"Kris, I don't think this is going according to plan. What's happening?" he asked.

"Linos has turned traitor once again. Now he sides with Neoklos, since he's the stronger one. Yorgos is furious, but I fear he won't be able to hold his ground against such overwhelming numbers," I replied with regret.

Kurkin and I exchanged uneasy glances. Just then, a loud neigh rang out—a horse had thrown Linos from its saddle. Rearing up, it struck the heavy chests of treasure with its hooves, overturning them with a deafening crash. Startled by the noise, the horse tossed its head wildly and kicked out, scattering precious jewels across the ground, preventing anyone from getting near it. Its distress spread to the other horses, which also became restless.

Frozen in place, we watched the chaotic scene unfold—the panicked cries of men mingling with the shrill neighing of their mounts as they struggled to regain control. Suddenly, Kurkin nudged me sharply, pointing toward the hills beyond which lay the fir forest. At first, I saw nothing, but as I focused, a lone horse emerged, galloping swiftly toward us.

"It's Meteor!" Kurkin exclaimed with delight, a wide grin spreading across his face. "He must have heard the other horses and is coming our way!"

Both Yorgos' and Neoklos' warriors were too caught up in their skirmish to notice the approaching stallion—only realizing his presence when he let out a powerful neigh right beside them.

"Meteor!" Yorgos cried, struggling to urge his own steed toward him. He was trapped in the throng, unable to reach the horse immediately.

Neoklos, however, acted faster. Leaping down from his mount, he lunged at Meteor, seizing the reins. With his free hand, he drew his sword and pressed it against the stallion's neck, his voice rising above the tumult:

"Surrender, Yorgos! Or I will not hesitate to sacrifice your horse for your foolishness!"

Kurkin, upon seeing Neoklos' blade so close to Meteor, sprang into action. With a threatening wave of his arms, he bounded forward, closing the distance in two great leaps. Before Neoklos could react, Kurkin grabbed him, hoisted him effortlessly, and slung him across the saddle. Then, vaulting onto the horse himself, he galloped away. It all happened so quickly that for a moment, stunned silence fell over the battlefield, broken only by the uneasy snorting of the remaining horses.

"The Griffon has taken Neoklos!" someone shouted.

Recovering from his shock, Yorgos straightened proudly in his saddle and declared:

"The Griffon has carried Neoklos to the realm of the dead! So shall it be with any who dare rise against us! Hermes himself, the Griffon's ally, will bear witness to this!"

Yorgos' warriors, emboldened by the spectacle, lifted me onto their shoulders and carried me forward. They placed me before our shaken foes, who had lowered their swords in confusion. Raising my right hand high, I spoke in a firm, commanding voice, furrowing my brow to appear more imposing:

"Let this be the fate of any who dare attack Pella, the birthplace of Alexander the Great!"

I crossed my arms over my chest, watching as Neoklos' now-leaderless warriors hesitated, then slowly began retreating.

"Ale-ale-alala!" The triumphant battle cry echoed behind me, soon followed by a burst of laughter at the sight of the enemy scattering across the field.

From atop his horse, Yorgos looked down at me and said:

"Thank you, Hermes! Now I see that the great gods favor us, for they have sent their servants—you and the Griffon—to our aid!"

"I knew it, valiant Yorgos—you could never be defeated!" came an unexpected voice. It was Linos, hiding behind an overturned chest of treasures. "I played my part well, didn't I? Admit it."

He parted his lips in a smile, feigning joy, but Yorgos only cast him a contemptuous glance.

"The people of Pella will judge you, traitor. Take him away from my sight!" he ordered.

Two warriors seized the struggling Linos and led him toward the city gates.

Yorgos issued a few more commands, instructing his men to gather the scattered jewels and to reinforce the guards at the gates. Then we made our way back to the city. Yorgos' warriors surrounded me, bombarding me with questions about Neoklos' fate in the underworld. But I barely registered their words—my thoughts were consumed with worry for Kurkin. From what I had gathered in earlier conversations, Neoklos' allies were searching for us in the forest, unaware that Yorgos' men had already found us. What if Kurkin ran into them? And where would he take the unfortunate Neoklos? That was another pressing question. His return could once again throw Pella's relations with its neighboring cities into turmoil. Lost in these thoughts, I didn't notice Diomedes approaching until he waved his arms, shooing away the curious warriors with their incessant questions.

"Leave him be," he said. "Unless you want to be taken to a place where no one returns from."

We were almost at the tavern when I suddenly stopped, making up my mind to go back beyond the city walls in search of Kurkin.

"Diomedes, keep an eye on Alala. She's probably already asleep. I'll return soon—I need to find the Griffon," I said.

Diomedes blinked in confusion:

"Find him? But... he's in that other world, isn't he?"

"Exactly. And I'm going there," I sighed. "Just to check on things."

"Ah, I see. Well, you know best. I'll be here when you get back, then."

He shrugged off his fur-lined cloak and draped it over my shoulders.

"You'll be walking, after all. Don't want you freezing out there," he explained.

I clasped his hand in gratitude and set off toward the city gates, pushing past the warriors making their way back to the tavern.

The guards recognized me at once and stepped aside respectfully, opening the gates without question.

I had no idea where to even begin looking for Kurkin, who had disappeared into the night with Neoklos on horseback. If only I knew which direction they had gone... We had planned to stick together, but who could have foreseen how events would unfold? Still, Kurkin had acted according to the circumstances, just as we had agreed.

I smirked to myself, recalling the stunned, terrified look on Neoklos' face when he had mistaken Kurkin for the Griffon.

Logically speaking, Kurkin would return to the city through these very gates. So all I had to do was wait. Of course, I could go back to the warmth of the tavern, perhaps even doze for a few hours. But I couldn't bring myself to do it, knowing that somewhere out there, in the dark, Kurkin was galloping through unfamiliar terrain, risking an encounter with Neoklos' searching men. Glancing around, I noticed a group of guards kindling fires on either side of the gate. I approached the ones on the right and asked if I could join them.

"Of course! Come, sit with us," one of the guards replied cheerfully.

"With Hermes himself as reinforcement, no one would dare come near us!" another added with a grin.

"Tell us, then," said the first guard as he settled onto the ground near the crackling fire, "what is the underworld like?"

I sat down beside him, trying to recall the ancient myths that described griffons and their role in them. Since my knowledge was limited, I kept my answer brief, leaving the details to the imagination of my audience:

"Griffons are merely guides, escorting souls to the underworld," I explained to the circle of attentive guards. "What happens to them after that is not for the griffons to decide. Deep beneath the earth, seven rivers flow, and unseen beings determine which river each soul is sent to."

I fell silent, for that was the extent of my knowledge. Not wanting to seem entirely ignorant, I simply shook my head with a knowing look, as though contemplating mysteries beyond mortal understanding.

"To each his own—how else could it be?" said one of the guards, resting his cheek on his hand.

"Exactly," another joined in. "Soon, Neoklos will be ferried across a chosen river, where he'll suffer what he inflicted upon others. After that—Tartarus, or perhaps some meadow, depending on his fate."

"Tell us, Periklos," someone asked, "what are these meadows like? And how does one reach them?"

Periklos, settling himself more comfortably near the fire, continued his tale:

"There are seven rivers in total. They begin here, on earth, but no one knows the place where they disappear into the other world. It is a place of dread, from which there is no escape. The ocean surrounds it on all sides—not an ordinary ocean, but a living one. The moment you step into it, it pulls you under, and what lies beneath is even more terrifying."

His monotonous voice, punctuated only by the occasional sighs and murmurs of his rapt audience, lulled me into drowsiness. I drifted into a dream—an old, unkempt man demanding payment for a ferry ride across the river, seven rivers shimmering with a deep, eerie green, and warm fires burning along their banks, offering

lost souls a moment of respite. But I could not rest. Not before I answered the important questions. Important to whom? To me, perhaps.

A voice called to me—thin, anxious, out of place in such a somber realm.

"Kakris! Kakris, wake up!" The voice pleaded, while at the same time, someone gently tugged at my arm.

"Kakris!"

I woke with a start, shaking off the remnants of sleep. Before me stood Alala, wrapped in a thick fur cloak. I glanced at the pale winter sun rising on the horizon, and a wave of worry crashed over me. How could I have slept for so long? And where was Kurkin?

"Alala, where is the Griffon? And why are you here? You should stay in the city," I said.

Alala pursed her lips and lowered her head, clearly offended.

"I'm here with my father. Ianta will be back soon," she muttered, glancing up at me from beneath her lashes. "And I have magic words to bring the Griffon back. He's not mad at me."

I looked around and spotted Diomedes chatting idly with the guards, occasionally glancing over at Alala.

Guilt prickled at me. I hadn't meant to upset the girl. To make amends, I rose to my feet and ruffled her hair playfully. It was immediately clear that Kreon, the tavern-

keeper, had taken good care of her—she looked well-rested, clean, and neatly groomed.

"What magic words do you have, Alala? Show me," I asked.

Her face lit up with excitement, any trace of offense forgotten.

"Let's move closer to the wall, so Papa doesn't see," she whispered conspiratorially.

We walked along the stone wall that encircled the city, keeping to the shadows to avoid prying eyes.

"Look!" she said, beaming. "I copied it all down properly when Kreon went downstairs. Then I hid it under my pillow."

With a triumphant flourish, she pulled a rolled parchment from beneath her cloak and held it up for me to see.

"This is from the Temple of Aphrodite?" I asked, carefully taking the parchment from her hands.

"Of course! I told you already. And when Ianta comes back, we're going to visit Demetra again, and I'll slip the scroll back without anyone noticing. I know exactly where she hid it," she whispered. "Now read!"

I unrolled the parchment and, as my eyes scanned the lines, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I read it once. Then again. Alala had copied down an enchantment—a love spell. No, I wasn't imagining it. The words were clear:  
*"Two green eyes of fate*  
Gazed through the endless years,

Through the mists of sorcery,  
Your features blurred in tears..."

I read to the end, my lips moving silently, until I reached the signature:

*"This was written by Alala for a friend, so that we may meet again. City of Pella."*

"I added that part so the gods would know whom to bring back and where," she said, jabbing her small finger at her signature and nodding her head rapidly. "My friend Gryffon —back here, to our city."

She looked at me expectantly, clearly waiting for praise for her ingenuity. But I stood frozen in shock. All this time, I had been searching for a grown woman—someone who, for some reason, had been separated from her beloved and, in despair, had written these lines. Lines that had become the foundation of a song well-known in my world and time. A song that had inspired my boss, Otto Schneider, to send me here. And all because the prehistoric pteryx I had rescued from the Cretaceous period turned out to be female—and had laid an egg. An egg that needed to be kept away from the prying eyes of the public and the press.

Had I not come here, I would never have met this extraordinary girl, Alala, nor would I have accidentally summoned Kurkin the Third. And I had summoned him—using my communicator, which I had acquired during my time in the world of the pteryxes. And I had used it in a

moment of despair, when Alala and I were trapped in a basement, prisoners of our enemies. Had Alala not met Kurkin—whom she sincerely believed to be Gryffon, come to rescue her—she would never have gotten the idea to "borrow" the parchment scroll from the Temple of Aphrodite. The scroll that contained those very same verses, meant to summon a lost beloved.

I can't say for sure whether these thoughts ran through my mind in exactly this order, but the essence remained the same: the events of my time in the Cretaceous period and my accidental visit to the world of the pteryxes had set into motion everything that was now unfolding here, in ancient Macedonia.

"Don't be mad, Kakris! I'll return the scroll, I promise!" Alala pleaded, tugging anxiously at my sleeve, misinterpreting my silence. "Just hide it for now, or Papa will see it and scold me."

I slipped the scroll into the wide pocket of my fur-lined trousers and pulled her into a hug, deeply moved. Perhaps my sudden surge of emotion was also due to the knowledge that soon, we would have to part—and I would never see her again, nor know what fate awaited her in these turbulent times.

Suddenly, Alala wrenched herself from my embrace, pointing excitedly into the distance. Bouncing on her toes, she cried out:

"It's working! My magic words are working!"

A lone rider was approaching on a black horse. Even in silhouette, I recognized my friend Kurkin. How could I not? From one side of the horse, his long, thick tail swayed with every movement.

"Griffon has returned! Griffon has returned!"

The guards, who had been keeping their distance, suddenly surged forward, waving their arms in excitement as they hurried to meet Kurkin. One of them ran through the gates into the city, no doubt to spread the news among the people.

Kurkin rode up and skillfully brought his horse, Meteor, to a halt in front of us.

"Well, now! If I ever took a ride, this was the ride of a lifetime!" he said with a broad grin.

With a nimble movement, he swung down from Meteor's back and gave the horse a firm pat on the neck.

Diomedes, who had hurried over, grabbed the reins and led the animal away.

"Just making sure he doesn't run off again," he explained.

I was impatient to find out what had happened to Neoclos—and where on earth Kurkin had been all night. Judging by the eager faces around us, I wasn't the only one burning with curiosity. A growing crowd had gathered, watching Kurkin-Griffon with both fascination and awe. More and more people were pouring out of the city gates, drawn by the news of Griffon's return—without Neoclos.

I had resigned myself to the fact that my questions would have to wait, when Alala suddenly called out loudly:

"Papa, step aside, please! My friend Griffon and I need to whisper about something. I leave you alone when you whisper with Ianta, don't I?"

Diomedes, caught off guard, scratched his head and, amidst the amused chuckles and teasing remarks from the crowd, awkwardly stepped back.

Alala glanced around, then took Kurkin's hand and led him away from the onlookers. I followed as they walked along the fortress wall. Stopping in the shadows, she extended her hand toward me.

"Give me the scroll with the magic words, Kakris," she said. "We need to seal our agreement. It's important."

I handed her the scroll, which she unrolled and held up to Kurkin's eyes, rising onto her tiptoes.

"What's this?" Kurkin asked, narrowing his round eyes as he tried to make sense of the unfamiliar writing.

"These are magic words Alala wrote, so that one day she could meet you again," I explained briefly.

Kurkin, visibly touched, tilted his head to the side, his long tail swishing in a wide arc.

"Tell her that I'll miss her too," he said, patting her head.

She brushed his hand away and matter-of-factly pulled something from a pocket hidden beneath her cloak.

"I found this in the morning, while Kakris was still asleep," she explained. "There were also red stones, but I

picked the green ones—because the magic words mention green eyes.”

She opened her palm, revealing two pairs of emerald earrings—identical to the ones I had been searching for since my arrival. The astonishment on my face must have been obvious, because Alala hastily added:

“If you look around, there are lots of stones scattered about. And if they’re scattered, that means they don’t belong to anyone—so there!”

I understood at once: the jewels spilled from the looted chests last night had not all been recovered. In the dim torchlight, it would have been impossible to find them all. No doubt, the people of Pella would continue stumbling upon them, adding them to their possessions.

While I was lost in thought, Alala wrapped one of the earrings in her parchment with the “magic words” and placed the other in Kurkin’s hand. The parchment immediately cracked in several places, but she paid it no mind.

“This is a sign that you’ll always be my friend, Griffon, and that you won’t forget me,” she declared. “That’s what my father taught me. He always takes one of my little dolls with him when he goes on a campaign. But don’t tell anyone—it’s a secret!” She pressed a finger to her lips, her eyes wide. Then she sighed and looked down at the crumpled parchment in her hands.

“Where should I hide it? If I take it home, someone will definitely find it,” she mused aloud.

Kurkin and I were at a loss for words, staring at her in mute amazement. Alala, however, turned toward the city wall, found a gap between the stones, and tucked her little bundle inside.

“There! It’s done!” she said with satisfaction, brushing her hands against her cloak. Then, looking slightly worried, she turned to Kurkin.

“Just don’t lose your stone, Griffon,” she said, placing her hand over his fist, which held the green earring. “We’ll reunite them when we meet again. It will be our sign!”

Kurkin, seeming to understand her, carefully placed the emerald earring in the inner pocket of his toga. Then, after giving her a brief hug, he mounted the horse, Meteor, once again, lifting her onto his shoulders—to her great delight. We made our way toward the patiently waiting crowd. Diomedes hurried up to us.

“Alala, maybe you should walk beside me? Griffon must be tired,” he suggested.

“Leave her be, Diomedes,” I replied on her behalf. “Griffon is her friend, and he carries her gladly.”

Proud of his daughter, Diomedes quickly relented.

“That’s my girl!” he declared loudly, turning to the crowd and pointing at Alala, who sat beaming atop Kurkin’s shoulders, her arms wrapped around his gray-feathered head.

“Aire, noble Alala, tamer of Griffons!” someone shouted.

Together with the growing throng, we passed through the city gates. I walked beside Meteor, holding onto his reins. More and more people joined our procession, guiding us toward the main square, the Agora.

“It’s almost a shame to leave them,” Kurkin murmured to me. “Maybe we should stay a little longer?”

“Under no circumstances,” I replied, trying to explain. “If we stay even one more day, we risk deepening our emotional ties to these people. They might start seeing us as part of their community, which could distort their natural development. Right now, we are simply mythical figures—beings who, having fulfilled their duty in protecting them, must return to their own world. That’s why they’ve gathered here—to bid us farewell.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Kurkin admitted with a sigh. “But what if we took Alala with us?” He glanced at me, hopeful.

Hearing her name, Alala raised her hand and shouted:

“Ale-Alala! We have won! Papa, walk beside me!”

The crowd took up her cry, their voices ringing out:

“Alala! Doxa ston Gryphonos! (Glory to Griffon!)”

“Are you serious?” I shouted up at Kurkin over the noise. “Look at how they welcome her! Do you really think taking her away would be doing her a favor? She belongs to this city, this time, and these people. And she knows it—that’s why she wrote her ‘magic words,’ hoping that one day, she might see us again.”

Kurkin glanced around, then grinned. “I think these... what do you call them, ancient Greeks? I think they’ve just gained another mythical hero.”

I looked at Alala, radiant with joy as the crowd cheered her name. I didn’t know what her future held, but I was certain that she would never be lost, no matter what hardships lay ahead. And I knew one thing for sure—I was going to miss her.

I spent the rest of the journey lost in thought. In fact, by ending up here, I had inadvertently broken many of the time traveler’s rules: I had actively participated in the events unfolding around me, interacted with the locals, befriended the girl Alala, and even summoned Kurkin the Third from his world of pteryxes by activating the brooch communicator I had secretly smuggled. Otto Schneider, once he finds out, will undoubtedly take strict measures against me, perhaps firing me from my beloved job. And he will find out, because without the brooch communicator, I won’t be able to send Kurkin back to his world, and I’ll have to bring him with me into my world and my time. Honestly, I dreaded facing my boss, but I had no choice: I couldn’t just leave Kurkin here! I would try to convince Schneider of the correctness of my actions—I would justify them...

My thoughts were interrupted by the loud voice of Yorgos, making me start with surprise:

“People of the city of Pella! Thanks to the intervention of the almighty gods, Griffon and his companion Hermes, we were able to repel the attack of our enemies, blinded by greed and stupidity! Doxa ston Gryphonos – Glory to Griffon! Glory to Hermes!”

I didn’t even notice how we had arrived at the square, now filled with a crowd of people. Families stood here, with loud children in tow. It seemed as though the whole city had packed into this square to greet us.

I spotted Kreon standing not far from Yorgos, pushing people aside as they tried to squeeze into the front row.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” Kurkin said, gently lowering Alala from his shoulders. He carefully passed her into the arms of Diomedes, who was standing nearby. Then, nimbly dismounting, he took Meteor’s reins and led the horse toward Yorgos.

The crowd fell silent, watching his actions like some kind of ritual. I, in turn, removed the fur jacket Diomedes had lent me the day before, to keep me from freezing.

“No, no, leave it as a memory of me, Hermes,” he said, smiling. “And thank you for Alala.”

Alala reached out her hands to me. Diomedes set her down, and she ran up to me, hugging me and burying her face in my stomach. I stroked her head, saying:

“It’s time for us to return home, noble Alala. Be a good girl.”

Then, gently pushing her back toward her father, I walked toward Kurkin, who was standing next to Yorgos. Seeing me approach, he asked:

“How do you say ‘thank you, friends’ in their language?”

“Efharisto, agapites fili,” I whispered in his ear. Then I took his hand, pulling out my marker with the other hand.

Kurkin the Third raised one arm high, swung his tail wide, and shouted, “Efharisto, agapites fili!”

“Time to go,” I whispered, running the marker first over his arm, then over mine. The square and the crowd vanished, making way for the launch pad in the attic of our museum.

Out of habit, I closed my eyes during the transition between times. But this time, I also feared opening them, dreading the inevitable confrontation with Otto Schneider. So, with my eyes shut tight, I stood there, breathing in the slightly dusty air of our attic, which had been converted into a time machine chamber. But when I heard a soft “Ah” followed by the loud thud of a falling body, I opened my eyes, startled for my boss. I saw him sitting on the floor, his eyes wide and his mouth agape. Next to me stood Kurkin, still holding his hand in the air as a greeting. His toga was rumpled, and there were muddy brown stains on it. Oddly, I only noticed them now. He began nervously tapping his broad tail on the floor, and a few feathers fluttered off. One of them, soaring through the air, flew a little way before

gently landing on Otto Schneider's leg. He carefully picked it up and brought it to his eyes.

"Kris," he said to me in a quiet, weak voice. "I must be going insane. I'm seeing feathers and a giant Curious - Otto dressed in a toga."

I tried to give him a broad and reassuring smile and said, "Not at all, you're not going mad. My friend and I successfully completed my mission."

Kurkin pulled the emerald earring from his inner pocket and, opening his hand, showed it to Schneider. Schneider craned his neck, trying to get a good look at the earring, then, bracing himself on the floor with his hands, slowly stood up. Carefully approaching us, he picked it up with two fingers and brought it closer to his eyes. Smiling, he said:

"Yes, it's it, no doubt about it."

He nodded several times as though confirming his own words. Then, looking around, he noticed my container standing beside us.

"In it should be smoked meat, prepared according to the ancient Greek culinary traditions," I quickly explained. "And my invisibility cloak is somewhere around here as well. I didn't let it leave the time machine's zone of effect."

Otto Schneider nodded, his gaze fixed on Kurkin, who stood beside me. I felt like a guilty schoolboy standing before a strict teacher, and I decided it was best not to say anything for the moment. To be honest, I didn't even know

where to begin with my explanation. Perhaps Kurkin felt the same, as he lowered his hands with their long black claws along his body and began tapping his tail rhythmically against the floor.

"And who is this? Could it be from ancient Macedonia?" Schneider asked, tilting his head curiously.

"Kurkin the Third, a resident of the city of Cleartown, on the planet Pterra," Kurkin suddenly spoke up.

I was taken aback—after all, I hadn't even thought to ask how the preryxes named their planet. I felt a twinge of embarrassment for this oversight and lowered my head, biting my lip in guilt. Upon hearing Kurkin's voice, Schneider took a step back, still holding the emerald earring in midair. It took him a moment to process what had been said. He moved his lips soundlessly before addressing me:

"I think we need to talk, Kris. I'll expect both of you in my office."

With that, he almost staggered off, his steps shaky as he left our "launch pad."

Kurkin let out a relieved breath and asked:

"So, what now, Kris? Will I get you into trouble?"

I looked at his worried face, his large black eyes staring at me seriously. Smiling to reassure him, I took his hand and pulled him toward our "antechamber" with the disinfectant shower, speaking as we walked:

"Don't worry about me. This was unforgettable, and I'm glad you're here with me."

"And I've been through all that—just fantastic! Right, Kris? From here on, we'll act according to circumstances, as always."

After a quick shower, I changed into my everyday clothes, finding them neatly folded on the bench as usual. As for Kurkin, he had to put on his soiled toga and battered sandals again, though it didn't seem to bother him. He hurried to dress, grinning widely and wagging his tail, splashing me with droplets of water.

"I'm about to see your world—imagine that! I've never been anywhere beyond Cleartown and its surroundings, and now this! First, I was in your past, and now here I am." Kurkin's voice was full of excited joy, and his enthusiasm was contagious.

"But first, we need to explain things. Let's go," I said, heading toward the elevator, with Kurkin following.

We found Otto Schneider standing pensively next to one of his cabinets by the window. The curtains were drawn tightly, blocking out the daylight. Only two floor lamps in the corners and one desk lamp illuminated the room, giving it a mysterious air. When he saw us, he opened the cabinet door and took out a dark bottle with a colorful label.

"I need to sit down," he said, placing the bottle on his desk and pulling three shot glasses from somewhere deep inside the drawers. He settled into his chair, leaning back,

and began studying Kurkin again, his mouth slightly open. Then, as though snapping to attention, he added:

"Well, what are we waiting for? Sit down, both of you."

I had never seen my boss so flustered. Even when he'd told me about the egg-slaying Curious, he hadn't looked so disoriented.

Kurkin and I sat down on comfortable chairs on the other side of the desk, awaiting questions. I thought it was the best tactic for now.

With a trembling hand, Otto Schneider filled the glasses from the bottle and explained:

"One of the finest brandies from my collection. I've been saving it for a special occasion."

I glanced at the bottle and noticed that it was covered in dust and bound with a braided string sealed with a wax stamp. The label, somewhat ornate, read: "Louis XIII." The sharp scent of the dark red liquid filled the air as he poured it.

Downing the contents of his glass in one gulp, Otto Schneider exhaled loudly and turned to Kurkin, asking: "So, you're from Terra, am I right?"

"Our planet is called Pterra, sir... uh..." Kurkin hesitated.

"Just call me Otto or Schneider—no need for 'sir,' resident of Pterra. Oh, I never thought I'd be talking to an alien."

He refilled his glass and offered some to us. Kurkin, taking a sip from his glass, choked and shook his head.

"It hit me right in the nose. But thanks, Otto, I've never had anything like this before," he said.

"I gather your presence here is due to some extraordinary circumstances," my boss began, ignoring Kurkin's comment. "What I'm interested in is this: where is your planet, and what circumstances brought you to our ancient Macedonia?" Schneider clearly emphasized the word "our." "Does this mean your planet, Pterra, is also interested in our past and, possessing a time machine, is sending its people here?"

Kurkin the Third, not used to being addressed formally, also feeling uncomfortable under Schneider's intense gaze, nervously twitched his tail, then folded it across his lap, holding it with both hands. I decided to take the initiative and answer my boss's questions, as I felt solely responsible for what had happened.

"Pterra is our Earth, but in another dimension. There is no Homo sapiens there. In this other dimension, our ancestors stopped evolving, remaining ordinary primates, while the descendants of the pteryxes, represented by our Curious, I mean Otto,, developed into a highly advanced civilization. I've been there; I can vouch for it," I concluded.

"You. There. You've been there? Kris, what is going on?" Schneider's voice almost broke into a shout. "How? What do you do during your time-traveling?"

I fully understood his indignation and knew I needed to explain myself.

"After my time in the world of the pteryxes, I meticulously recorded all the events that happened to me there. I will send you a copy. It will make it easier for you to understand what happened in ancient Macedonia, from which we've just returned," I said. Then I added: "By the way, I was warmly received in the world of the pteryxes, with true hospitality."

Otto Schneider glanced at Kurkin, who had remained motionless in his chair throughout our conversation, and looked a little guilty.

"Please forgive me if I came across as rude. But I need to get to the bottom of this situation; I can't allow chaos in something as important as time travel," he said, his tone now calm.

"I understand," Kurkin replied. "And I'm happy to be here, in the world of advanced primates. Besides Kris, I don't know anyone else like him, well, smart like that."

Schneider smiled at these words.

"Now you're acquainted with two such smart primates," he said.

Noticing the shift in my boss's mood, Kurkin asked: "Please don't call me 'you'—it makes me uncomfortable. Just call me Kurkin. And can I peek out the window?"

"Actually, Kurkin, I've drawn the curtains so no one sees you. But you can peek out cautiously," Schneider switched to a more familiar tone.

In one leap, Kurkin reached the window, raising his tail and swaying it gently. He pulled back the curtain and leaned his face close to the window, curiously peering at the panorama before him. I was reminded of myself, how I had, when I first found myself in the director's office of the Institute of Time, stared with similar curiosity at the streets of Cleartown.

"Amazing things are happening right now," Schneider's voice brought me back to reality. "A parallel world, you say, descendants of Otto. I can't say you haven't piqued my interest. I have so many questions now that I don't even know where to start."

"I'll send you a copy of my notes as soon as Kurkin and I are at my place," I reassured him. "I hope I've laid out the events and my thoughts clearly enough."

"No, you don't understand me correctly. But you and your friend Kurkin can't go home yet. He needs to be hidden. Just imagine what would happen if a talking, intelligent pteryx were discovered! The consequences are too scary to contemplate!"

He fell silent, lost in thought. Deep down, I knew he was right, so I said nothing, silently agreeing with him. Then, after some contemplation, he said:

"You'll go to my guesthouse, and I'll personally take you there. I think it's better if you accompany our guest Kurkin. I'll go through your notes, and in the meantime, you write down in detail—no hiding anything!—what happened in

ancient Macedonia. Don't leave anything out! I'll need to check if your adventures have affected our present."

Suddenly, I remembered my conversation with the curator of the British Museum, where the emerald earring wrapped in ancient parchment was kept. I briefly relayed the conversation to Otto Schneider, summarizing it with the words:

"The earring and parchment were found during excavations long before either of us was born. So my stay in ancient Macedonia helped me establish the cause and circumstances of their appearance."

"It's not that simple," Schneider countered. "You didn't just break the primary code of the time traveler by interfering with the course of events, but somehow, incredibly, you established communication with beings from another dimension! I'll need time to figure all this out and make a decision."

He looked thoughtfully at Kurkin, who was still peering out the window, observing the streets from the office's height. Then he said:

"I never thought about what my prehistoric pteryx Otto would look like if he were intelligent. But now I see it with my own eyes. Quite charming, I must say."

I seized this moment of Schneider's goodwill toward Kurkin to make another argument in my defense. After all, I was risking losing the job I valued so much. I had been honest with myself, and I knew that my impulsive actions

had crossed all acceptable boundaries for a time traveler. Moreover, I had deliberately concealed details about my time in the Cretaceous period, where from I had brought the prehistoric Pteryx Curious, who had been renamed "Otto" by my boss. To this, I could add my intentional silence about the two times I had visited the Mesozoic era. I was certainly not going to avoid punishment, but perhaps I could mitigate it by emphasizing the advantages and future possibilities of the discovery of an alternative intelligent world of pteryxes. I tried to make my voice sound confident as I began:

"Mr. Schneider, thanks to our time machine, we've discovered a parallel universe, differing from ours only in its intelligent civilization. On our Earth, *Homo sapiens* reigns, and we, as representatives of that species, are the same. On the planet Pterra, intelligent pteryxes live, and the primates stagnated in their development." I purposely spoke not in the first person but used the pronoun "we," emphasizing that the discovery of an alternative, or parallel, world was a shared achievement. "Moreover, not only have we discovered this new world, but we also have the ability to visit it and, conversely, host guests from there." At this point, I gestured toward Kurkin, who was still listening to our conversation, standing by the window. I then continued: "In the world of the pteryxes, there is also a time machine, which makes sense, otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to meet Kurkin the Third."

Schneider leaned over the table, curious, and looked at me.

“You saw their time machine?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. I ended up there straight from the Mesozoic era. We share a common past with the pteryxes, then, millions of years ago, our paths diverged, and now...”

“A common past, you say,” interrupted my boss. “This means that this parallel world of the pteryxes only appeared later, when different possibilities for the development of an intelligent world emerged.”

He leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully shook his head a few times. I decided not to interrupt his train of thought. I had a feeling I knew what he was thinking. The idea had crossed my mind too. But I preferred to hear it from him rather than speak it out myself.

“So, you went to this Pteryx world, to the planet Pterra, straight from the Mesozoic era. Am I understanding that correctly?” he finally spoke up.

“That’s right, Mr. Schneider,” I confirmed.

“So, they ‘pulled’ you into their world with their own time machine,” he continued to ponder aloud. “And that means their time machine was set specifically for the time and place you were in during the Cretaceous period. But why was it set that way?” he asked himself. “Because they themselves went there!” he concluded with a triumphant smile.

I smiled back, remaining silent. Let him come to that conclusion himself and retain the glory of figuring it out first.

“Your silence is annoying me, Kris. I don’t like that you kept the facts of your time with the dinosaurs from me. I need to be in the loop about everything that happens to you in the past. Now answer me honestly: did you meet a representative of the intelligent pteryxes during your time in the Cretaceous period?” He leaned forward a little, staring intently into my eyes.

“Yes, I did meet one of them,” I replied briefly. “The details are all in my notes about this trip. And I admit my mistake in hiding this from you. But I was afraid of the consequences and being banned from time travel.”

“That’s no excuse. But on the other hand, through you, we’ve opened contact with a parallel world.”

“Exactly,” added Kurkin, who had come over to us. “This is an opening for us too, I mean our world of the pteryxes.” He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled at Otto Schneider, swishing his tail enthusiastically.

“Simply incredible, the descendant of Otto, right, Kris?”

“Exactly,” I confirmed. “And we wouldn’t have learned about them, about the intelligent descendants of Curious, that is Otto, if I hadn’t visited our shared past in the Cretaceous period.”

“Our shared past, exactly!” Otto Schneider emphasized the word “shared,” clearly highlighting it. “With contact

established, we can even discuss meeting places on our still shared planet. Imagine the possibilities that will open up for us!"

This prospect clearly inspired him, and I too was pleased that my boss had finally arrived at the same idea that I had.

"But first, I need to go over your notes, Kris. Then we can think about our next steps." With that, he stood up from the desk, signaling that the conversation for now was over. He then turned to Kurkin and addressed him: "Welcome to our world of intelligent primates, Kurkin! I'm already looking forward to our conversation after I get to know the details of your introduction to Kris."

"And I'm very glad, uh, Schneider, yes, very much!" Kurkin waved his tail widely and hugged my boss, pressing him against his chest covered in gray feathers. Schneider, a bit taken aback by such a display of friendly affection, patted Kurkin on the shoulder, standing on his toes, then led the way to the elevator, signaling us to follow.

"You have a strict boss," Kurkin whispered in my ear. "But understanding."

We descended in the elevator to the museum's underground garage. The elevator doors opened, and Otto Schneider cautiously peeked out and looked around. Seeing no one else, he quickly approached the black car parked very close to the elevator, opening it as he went. Kurkin and I followed him.

"It would be better if Kurkin sits in the backseat, and you, Kris, sit next to me," he suggested.

Kurkin had to duck his head low to get into the car. After some fumbling, he finally arranged his large tail across his lap.

We drove out of the garage and onto the brightly lit streets, illuminated by artificial lights. Kurkin pressed his wet black nose against the window, gazing with unrestrained curiosity at the passing buildings and pedestrians. I turned around to look at him and smiled, remembering my first trip through the streets of Cleartown in the Pteryx world, in Doctor Kurio's car.

Otto Schneider drove around the central square of our city twice, which was surrounded by ancient buildings with impressive architecture, so Kurkin could get a better look.

"So, how is it, Kurkin? Unusual for you?" he asked, smiling, while looking at him in the rearview mirror. "And in the center of this square, see the fountain? With sculptures of Poseidon and the Nereids, the sea dwellers. Poseidon is the ancient Greek god of the seas."

"Ah, ancient Greece, I see, I just came from there," Kurkin brightened up. "And I thought their gods were griffons. Oh, how they respected me!"

"So, you were a Griffon there, and Kris, surely, was Hermes, right?" Schneider asked, laughing.

“That’s exactly it. Can I get a closer look at the fountain?” Kurkin asked imploringly. “I’ll even put on a hood and try not to wave my tail.”

“Unfortunately, I have to refuse you. Panic and excessive curiosity are not what we need. No matter how hard you try, Kurkin, you’ll be spotted right away.”

“Someday, we’ll establish direct contact with your world, and you’ll have another chance to walk down our streets,” I tried to comfort Kurkin.

We continued driving through the central quarters of our city. Every now and then, Otto Schneider slowed the car down to show Kurkin some special building or an interesting monument.

“Did your friend Kurkin see his ancestor, our primitive pteryx Otto?” my boss whispered to me.

I shook my head negatively. Then, remembering my pet cat Watson, I asked him:

“Mr. Schneider, I have my cat Watson at home. I’d like to take him with me to your country house. He’s never been alone for long—sometimes just a couple of days. I’ll worry about him. And some fresh air wouldn’t hurt him.”

After a brief pause, he replied:

“That’s your cat, Kris, and your responsibility. If you think it’s necessary, take him with you.”

We arrived at my apartment to pick up my laptop, which contained the description of my stay in the Cretaceous period and in the world of the pteryxes, as well as my cat

Watson. Kurkin was very eager to come inside and see my “dwelling,” but my boss firmly stated:

“We’ll stay in the car and wait for Kris. Understand me correctly, but you might run into some neighbors. We need to keep your stay here a secret. For many reasons.”

“I understand. We also hid Kris when he first arrived to us,” Kurkin sighed in response.

Once inside, I quickly grabbed a large travel bag to pack a change of clothes, a couple of sets of underwear, and several packages of cat food. I also placed my laptop inside. After settling the protesting Watson into his carrier, I left the apartment.

We stopped by a grocery store, where I picked up a couple of bags of food for Kurkin and myself.

It was late evening when we arrived at Otto Schneider’s country house.

“Tomorrow you’ll meet your ancestor, Otto,” my boss told Kurkin. “You’ll be free to move around the premises, but don’t leave the property. And you, Kris, write a detailed report about your stay in Ancient Macedonia and send it to me by email.” With these instructions, he bid us farewell, promising to bring a fresh toga for Kurkin so he could change.

After his departure, Kurkin immediately pulled Watson out of the carrier and held him in his arms, happily examining him.

“We’ve met before,” he said to the cat. “We have you too, what a surprise! You belong to Kris, our tamed primate.”

Schneider’s house was a single-story building, but quite spacious. In addition to the office I was familiar with, there was a bathroom with a shower, a modern kitchen, a separate bedroom with a large bed, and a sofa. After inspecting the rooms, we had something to eat, and then I asked Kurkin a question that had been on my mind:

“Tell me, what happened to Neoclos after you took him away on horseback?”

We were sitting on a comfortable sofa in the large office, with Watson cozily settled on Kurkin’s lap.

For some reason, Kurkin smoothed the feathers on his head before beginning his story:

“I was really angry with that Neoclos, who threatened to kill the horse Meteor with a sword. So I quickly grabbed him, threw him on the horse, and off we went. Neoclos was so scared that he dropped his sword. We were galloping along when I suddenly remembered that armed riders were looking for us in the forest on the mountain. I turned the horse around, and we went back the other way. You weren’t there, Kris. We had walked toward the hills and mountains together, but on the other side of the city, it was all green. I even wondered where all this tall, strange grass came from, and it turned out that there were marshes starting. So, I decided to let the horse choose the path. As

you can imagine, it's dangerous to go through the marshes. What if they're deep? And Meteor is still a local horse. He stuck his head out and sniffed. I know horses well, back when I lived with my grandmother in another territory, we even treated them. So, when a horse does this," Kurkin stretched his neck, parted his black lips, and wiggled his nose, demonstrating how horses sniff the air. "That's how they sense water. And Meteor sensed the water, not the swampy kind, but the fresh kind. I thought there must be a river nearby. And as I was thinking about where to take Neoclos, not wanting to bring him back, since he'd start swinging his sword again, I saw the river close by. I thought it'd be good to toss him into the river. By the time he gets out and makes his way back to his people, maybe he'll come to his senses and stop playing at war.

Meteor carried us quickly, jumping over the bumps, it was really fun! I hadn't ridden a horse like that in a long time. And Neoclos kept groaning, 'Ohi, Griffon, ohi, Griffon.' I was surprised, thinking that maybe it wasn't comfortable for him to lie sideways on the horse."

"'Ohi' in Greek means 'no,'" I explained, barely containing my laughter. "But go on, what happened next?"

"I see! So he meant 'No, Griffon, no.' Now it makes sense. Listen to this. We rode for a while, and then I saw a faint light from a torch ahead. The horse neighed loudly and ran even faster. And I spotted the river. The water

looked black, and it was wide," Kurkin spread his arms to show how wide it was. "There was an old man standing there, holding a torch. When he saw me on the horse, he got so scared, he almost dropped the torch. I smiled at him to calm him down. And then I noticed a boat tied up nearby. Without thinking, I threw Neoclos into the boat and gestured for the old man to row him across the river. I thought he was a ferryman, ferrying people to the other shore, or renting out boats. I'm not sure, but the old man quickly nodded his head, untied the boat, and rowed off quickly. Meanwhile, Neoclos was whining even more and started to cry. He yelled, 'Ohi, Charon! Ohi, Charon!' That's how it went. I let the horse rest, gave him some water from the river, and we headed back. By the way, what does 'Charon' mean? Why was Neoclos shouting that?"

"Ah, Kurkin, now I understand why you were gone for so long. I was so worried back then. And Charon is not a 'what,' but a 'who.' According to Greek mythology, old man Charon ferries the souls of the dead across the river Styx into the underworld. So, Neoklos must have thought that it was old man Charon ferrying him, and he got scared. You sure gave him a lesson! Nicely done!"

Kurkin laughed heartily, slapping his knee, which made Watson, startled, jump off the couch.

"Well, what a coincidence! The old man with the torch by the river, the boat nearby, and it was so dark, like in an

underground cave! Poor Neoklos!" Kurkin chuckled through his laughter.

We joked a bit more about the situation, then shifted to reminiscing about our recent adventures in the city of Pella.

"I wonder how Alala's doing," Kurkin sighed. "What do you think, how did her life turn out?"

"I think it went well. She probably had a lot of kids, and then grandkids," I replied, believing it wholeheartedly.

We both felt a bit melancholic, knowing we'd never see that sweet girl again, or learn how her life unfolded.

After chatting a little longer, we decided to sleep, tired from the eventful day.

The next day, closer to noon, Otto Schneider visited us, bringing extra supplies and a couple of richly decorated togas for Kurkin.

"I borrowed them from the opera theater wardrobe; the director's a good friend of mine," he explained.

I noticed my boss didn't look well. For the first time, I saw him with disheveled hair and dark circles under his eyes.

"I didn't sleep all night, reading your memories," he said, almost as if to preempt my question. "Kris, I'm not happy with you. And that's putting it mildly. How could you hide such incredible events from me?"

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

"I don't even know what to do with you. Write up your report on your trip to Macedonia as soon as possible, and we'll see what comes next."

He paused, looking at me tiredly, and I immediately felt guilty. I didn't know how to defend myself, but Otto came to my rescue.

"On the other hand, you made contact with a parallel world. Personal contact! Just imagine the research opportunities we have with them about prehistoric times!" he said excitedly.

His sudden shift in mood worried me a little.

"I've already started working on my written report. I think I'll have it ready by tomorrow evening. You really should rest. You need a clear mind to make decisions," I said.

"You're right, Kris. And you know, I still need to adjust to all this information from you," he replied. Then, glancing around, he asked, "Where's our guest Kurkin?"

"With Curious, I mean Otto. Kurkin took some paper and pencils; I think he's making sketches."

"Please say hello to him for me. I really need to sleep."

After he left, I opened the laptop again, kindly provided by my boss, to continue detailing the events that took place in ancient Macedonia.

I spent nearly two full days on this task, trying to capture every detail. Sometimes Kurkin joined me, adding his insights to my memories, but for the most part, he was out

exploring the vast grounds surrounding the house, making sketches.

"I'll take these with me when I return to my place," he announced. "This will serve as proof of my time with you, reasonable primates!"

Finally, my report was ready, and I sent it to Otto Schneider via email, just as he had asked. According to my calculations, it would take him a few days to analyze everything that had happened to me during my two recent "trips" to the past and put it all together. He'd likely need the help of other specialists since the discovery of a parallel world inhabited by highly developed pteryxes would require thorough study. At least that's what I thought, putting myself in his shoes.

I shared my thoughts on the matter with Kurkin.

"You understand, Kurkin, what this means, don't you?" I mused aloud. "Once, our ancestors lived on the same planet, in the same Universe. But then the Universe split. In one of them, we, the highly developed primates, live, creating and advancing our own civilization. In the other Universe, the intelligent world belongs to you, the pteryxes, while the primates stopped evolving."

We were sitting under a tree on a vast lawn in the enclosure specially set up for our Curious-Otto. From where we sat, we had a clear view of him. He was sitting next to a huge egg, sheltering it with his broad tail. And

beside him sat my cat Watson, who had somehow become friends with Curious. Only he was allowed near the egg.

"Why did the Universe split, though?" Kurkin asked. "We could have stayed in one world, developed together. But now it's all so unclear."

"Apparently, after the global catastrophe over 150 million years ago, only one species of animal was able to survive and evolve. Either mammals, from which we descended, or small dinosaurs that could endure harsh climatic conditions," I explained.

Kurkin fell silent, trying to picture all these circumstances.

"Maybe your ancestors weren't very friendly with mine, and that's why the victorious ones remained, so to speak," he suggested.

"I think you're right," I confirmed his theory. "I suppose our ancestors had equal, or nearly equal, chances. In one case, the dinosaurs—pteryxes—pushed mammals aside and got the chance for further evolutionary development. In the other case, mammals won the fight for survival."

"So, there were two possibilities: either we, the pteryxes, evolve, or you, Kris. Right?" Kurkin asked.

"That's right, Kurkin. And the Universe split, realizing both possibilities."

"What if there were many other possibilities? What if someone else evolved?" he asked.

I suddenly thought of the enormous predatory birds, *Harpactognathus*, from the Cretaceous period, and shuddered, imagining them as intelligent beings.

"Hard to say, Kurkin. If so, I hope they were at least friendly, with peaceful intentions."

"Like us, for example," Kurkin nodded in agreement. "And now we're waiting for your boss, Schneider, to see what he says about all this."

And so, our time passed in conversation and walks, as we waited for news from Otto Schneider. Kurkin enjoyed watching Curious sitting next to his egg, keeping it warm.

"And this is our ancestor, right, Kris? I can't believe it. And Dr. Kurio actually wanted to discover him, from the period you came to us from."

"The Cretaceous period," I corrected him. "A very charming little creature. I liked him right away, and he was as curious as his descendants, the pteryxes."

I enjoyed spending time with Kurkin, but at the same time, I was, of course, anxious, not knowing what decision Otto Schneider would make regarding me. Still, I was sure he wouldn't miss the opportunity to establish contact with the world of the pteryxes. But first, we would need to return Kurkin to his world, and how to do that without the lost brooch-communicator—our only connection to the world of the pteryxes—I had no idea. I was really hoping for help from his tech specialists.

More than a week passed, and there was still no news from Otto Schneider. Could it be that he wasn't interested in discussing the events that had occurred and the situation with Kurkin? After all, Kurkin needed to return to his world, the world of the pteryxes. Several times I thought about sending him a message, but I held myself back. Honestly, what worried me most was Kurkin's fate. After all, it was because of me that he had ended up next to me in ancient Macedonia, in the city of Pella, and it was I who had lost the brooch-communicator—the only link to the world of the pterixes, to Dr. Kurio and his time machine. That was the reason for my anxiety and impatience.

Otto Schneider appeared unexpectedly, finding us in our favorite spot under the tree on the lawn. He pulled up to us in his electric car. Without getting out of the car, he said abruptly:

"Kurkin, Kris, I need to show you something. Get in the car, we're going to the house."

Kurkin and I jumped to our feet and got into his electric car, which immediately set off. Our curiosity was burning, wondering why there was such haste, but we didn't dare ask him about it. After all, we'd find out soon enough.

At the house, Kurkin and I sat down on the sofa, while Otto Schneider settled into a chair opposite us. His face was slightly flushed, his eyes were sparkling, and his lips stretched into a smile. We sat still, waiting for some kind of

surprise. He pulled a small canvas bag from his trouser pocket.

"What do you think this is?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued, "Well, you wouldn't guess without me. And I haven't been wasting time—organized a bit of a search. But let's start from the beginning. I read all your notes about your last two trips, Kris. I only regret that you didn't tell me about this right away, and kept it to yourself. Did you really think I wouldn't appreciate your discovery of a parallel world? Even just the fact that you were there is invaluable experience."

"You would have suspended me from work, and that's a fact," I said in my defense.

"What's in the bag?" Kurkin, who had been quietly sitting beside me on the sofa, his fluffy tail resting on his lap, suddenly asked.

"Well, what is it? Of course, I'll show you this mysterious item, but first, let me say something else. I want to personally thank you, Kurkin, for your help and the friendliness you've shown toward Kris, the representative of our—let's say—human civilization," Otto Schneider smiled at Kurkin, nodding his head a few times. "And for Dr. Kurio, I've prepared a letter. You'll take it with you and deliver it personally."

I looked at my boss in some confusion.

"But you read about what happened to us in ancient Macedonia," I said. "I lost the brooch-communicator, my

only link to the world of the pteryxes. Or did you find another solution? But so quickly?"

"One step at a time, thank me later. I could have taken you straight to the museum, to my office, for this conversation. But, first of all, I wanted to bring you this news as soon as possible," he shook the bag he was holding in his right hand, "and secondly, I have one more request for our guest, Kurkin. I think it's entirely justified, and Kurkin will be happy to fulfill it.

After reading your notes, which made a great impression on me, I activated all my contacts to find one particular item. I searched for it in all the museums with a Greek department. Numerous museum staff searched through all the storerooms based on my description. I won't bore you with the details of the countless phone calls and the photos of similar objects that were sent to me. We were in contact day and night. It was only yesterday morning that I found the very item I was looking for on my desk. The one you lost, Kris."

I jumped up from the sofa in surprise and reached for the canvas bag.

"They found our communicator, right? Incredible!" Kurkin exclaimed.

Otto Schneider carefully took out the round brooch, cracked and weathered, and placed it on his open palm for us to examine.

"And where exactly did you find it?" I asked, still in disbelief. "Did you really find it in the museum?"

Otto Schneider handed me the brooch, then leaned back in his chair, clearly pleased, and began to explain:

"I reasoned this way: in Greece, archaeological excavations are constantly being conducted. There are vast storerooms filled with shards, small figurines, and countless other things. Among them are also items of no particular value, and objects whose purpose is not clearly defined. I thought about the fact that a plain, dark round brooch, without any decoration or special craftsmanship, would be sent somewhere into storage. And how right I was!"

"Unbelievable, our communicator was dug up!" Kurkin shook his head in disbelief. "Who would've thought!"

"What do you say? Kris lost it over two thousand years ago, and I found it. Another reason why nothing should be hidden from me," Otto Schneider said, his smile widening.

"I'm speechless," I replied. "But does it work?"

"I read about how you recharged it using regular batteries. So I thought it wouldn't be too difficult for my lead engineer to fix it. And he had it repaired in just one day. You wouldn't have managed it, Kris, after all, this brooch had been buried for over two thousand years. We were lucky it was dug up at all."

"And when was it found? During the latest excavations or earlier?"

"Much earlier, almost one hundred and fifty years ago."

"So, I had the communicator-brooch when it was still stored somewhere in a museum's inventory," this thought was hard to wrap my mind around.

"Time is a practically unexplored phenomenon, Kris. And it's entirely possible that the discovery of a parallel world will be the first step in studying it."

"And I have a question, Otto," Kurkin spoke up. "How did you manage to review such an enormous number of items to find our communicator? Whether we study time or not, there's no way it would have been possible to find what we needed so quickly."

Otto Schneider smiled indulgently.

"I don't know how things work in the world of the pteryxes, but here, we've entered the list of all museum objects into a computer system. All I had to do was send a description of the brooch-communicator to every museum with a Greek department. And then," he gestured happily, "the director of a museum in Thessaloniki, Greece, responded. They had it listed as 'round object, possibly part of a belt ornament.'"

"Well, I guess it's time for me to go back, but I never really got a chance to explore your city properly," Kurkin said with a tone of regret.

"Don't be upset, Kurkin. Think of yourself as the ambassador of our world. I'm sure we'll meet again. But

before you leave, you'll complete one more task. I'm confident you won't refuse it."

"What task?" Kurkin asked curiously. I was also very interested to hear about it, and I looked at my boss expectantly. He explained:

"As I gathered from the description of the events in the ancient city of Pella, it was for you, Kurkin, that this girl, Alala, wrote poems about 'the green eyes of fate' on parchment, hoping to meet you again one day. I will consider it fair and just if you personally unite the two emerald earrings in the British Museum."

I was pleased with Otto Schneider's decision. This would be a reasonable and logical conclusion to our adventures in Ancient Macedonia, in the city of Pella—Alexander the Great's hometown.

Kurkin smiled broadly, showing his sharp white teeth and for some reason, wiggled his little black nose.

"For little Alala, the Gryphonia, do you remember, Kris?" he nudged me with his elbow, and we both laughed.

"And don't worry about your cat, Kris," Otto Schneider said, once again proving that, as usual, he had thought of everything. "He will be well taken care of in our absence."

We arrived at the British Museum late in the evening, having traveled from our city on Otto Schneider's private plane. Kurkin the Third was wrapped in a wide toga with a hood over his head. The museum had already closed to visitors. At the entrance, we were greeted by the museum

director—a serious man of slim build, wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses. He studied Kurkin with unmistakable curiosity, almost as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Jim MacLaren—director of the museum. Kris—my colleague, Kurkin the Third—representative of the world of pteryxes, and our friend," Otto Schneider introduced us. "I briefed Mr. MacLaren on the events, and he kindly agreed to participate in the development of our joint project with the pteryxes."

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Director," Kurkin said politely. "It seems we'll be collaborating."

Jim MacLaren led us through the empty halls of the museum to the Greek department, stopping at a display case with an emerald earring. He opened the case and stepped aside, addressing Kurkin:

"It's a great honor for me, Mr. Kurkin. Please, go ahead."

Otto Schneider handed Kurkin a small box. Kurkin carefully took out the earring we had brought from the ancient city of Pella and held it up to his eyes. Smiling, he murmured:

"For you, Alala, tamer of the Griffons."

He placed the earring on the display case next to the other one that had already been there. I looked at the yellowed piece of parchment, covered with lines that had become the foundation for a popular song in our time.

"Part of the parchment, as I can see, is missing. Specifically, the words: 'This was written by Alala for a

friend, hoping that we would meet again," I said with some sadness in my voice.

MacLaren smiled at us and said:

"I have something for you. Follow me."

We followed him into a small room behind the exhibition hall, where shelves were lined with numbered archaeological objects. He approached one of the cabinets and pulled out a large vase.

"We've restored this vase. It is with great pleasure, on behalf of my museum and, shall we say, our world of sentient primates, that I present it to you, Mr. Kurkin."

He carefully placed the ancient vase, adorned with Greek patterns and illustrations, on one of the tables in the room. Kurkin and I leaned over the vase, studying the images on it.

"That's us, Kris!" Kurkin exclaimed. "Look, there's Alala on my back!"

I looked closely: a huge Griffon was running somewhere, holding a small girl with black hair and large black eyes on its back, and beside them was me, for some reason holding both hands up. In another illustration, a Griffon on a black horse was holding by the hair a frightened man in warrior armor, presumably Neocles. The third image showed a ceremonial procession with a Griffon, bearing Kurkin's features, sitting on a black horse, and a girl with disheveled hair sitting on his shoulders, surrounded by an ecstatic crowd. I wasn't visible in that

image. Probably, Agapitos (and I was sure it was his work) had decided to depict the most important parts, without focusing on the details.

"Mr. Schneider kindly briefed me on the details of your stay in Ancient Macedonia," Jim MacLaren began explaining to us. "Before, I thought this vase was simply decorated with images of mythical heroes. But then I realized that these are real characters. And Mr. Kurkin is depicted very successfully and recognizably. Thanks to the skill of the unknown artist."

"His name is Agapitos," I said.

"And I remember him, he followed us everywhere," Kurkin added. "So, does that mean I can take the vase with me, I mean, home?"

"It's yours," MacLaren replied with a smile.

After returning to our city, we immediately went to our museum and climbed up to Otto Schneider's office. We already knew it was time for Kurkin to return to his world—the world of the sentient pteryxes.

Kurkin the Third stood on the "launch pad," smiling, eagerly anticipating his return to his world of pteryxes and the chance to vividly recount his adventures in our world. Under his arm, he carried sheets of drawings he had made while staying with me at my boss's country house. Otto Schneider handed him a canvas bag with items that he also needed to take with him.

"Don't forget to deliver my letter to Dr. Kurio, the director of the 'Institute of Time.' In it, I suggest a personal meeting. Now that we have the communicator, it's entirely feasible. Just in case, I also placed one of my mobile phones—what you would call a communicator—into this bag. The vase is also inside—it's a gift for you from the director of the British Museum," Otto Schneider said, handing the bag to Kurkin. "And from me, there's a map of our city. You can hang it on the wall in your room," I added.

Kurkin took the canvas bag with a wag of his tail.

"I won't turn on our time machine right now, so we don't risk accidentally sending you to our past," Otto Schneider explained. "After all, you occurred near Kris, following the signal from your brooch-communicator. So, I'll ask Kris to activate it now. According to my calculations, it should work. Safe travels home, Kurkin the Third!"

The communicator, which had been buried in the earth for over two thousand years, opened surprisingly easily. I went through the familiar steps with it, and Kurkin disappeared, still grinning widely. His words echoed in the air: "We'll meet again, friends!"

I closed the communicator, turning it back into a brooch, and with full hope in my heart, I said:

"See you soon, Kurkin!"

