



GOD'S PLAY

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CHAPTER 1: NEW BEGINNINGS

Sunlight filtered in through the small, square window set high in the barn walls. Daphne wrinkled her nose, turning slightly in her sleep to ignore it. The light stubbornly grew stronger, as if it were some wraith determined to wake her and face its glory. With a grumble she surrendered to its bright will and opened her eyes.

Almost ritualistically, she looked back at the two small forms tucked next to her belly. The little girl was nestled tight against her mother, wedged beside her brother who slept protectively outside of her. Both stirred with her movement but didn't make any further move.

"Come on sleepyheads." Daphne smiled. "It's time to wake. The sun is shining and your Godmother is coming today."

The two came awake, smiling up at her angelically.

"Morning mommy." The girl's voice was soft as rose petals and warm as summer sunshine.

"Morning mom." The little boy spoke after. He already sounded calm as a sheltered pool and steady as a mountain.

"Good morning." Daphne still couldn't believe how mature they were at three weeks. Both could walk (if clumsily at first) by the third day and talk basic sentences by their second week. It was a far cry from a human child, she thought. Yet some things were still the same.

Both children latched onto her full breasts to suckle, the girl on the right and her brother (after waiting for her to choose first) taking the left. The intense feelings of pleasure from their nursing felt heavenly, but the burning love in her heart overshadowed that like a forest fire over a campfire. She stroked their long red hair lovingly as she waited for them to finish.

When their breakfast was done Daphne at last gained her feet and searched for her own meal. The stable her parents bought years ago had been modified now to have a small kitchen. A large fridge now held her favorite chilled water, honeyed bread and rich butter, great water melons, ripe fruits, vibrant berries and, rarely, a chocolate cake.

Selecting some fruit and leftover watermelon from the previous night, she placed her plate on the table to eat.

As she ate, she picked up a tortoise shell brush she'd left there and proceeded to brush her daughter's hair. The filly stood very still while Daphne worked. Even when she finished her plate, Daphne kept brushing. When the girl's hair was done she grabbed a thicker brush to work on her golden coat.

Daphne found herself humming as she worked. The children swayed slightly to the beat, so Daphne obligingly started to sing the words that had come to her in the previous night's dream.

*The world is young again
The wonder has come again
In shades of red, gold and black
Magic has indeed come back.*

*In thundering herd
We shall again be heard
In golden plain and broad vale
All great creatures shall be hale*

*The mighty gods
Shall beat the odds
Will again walk
Where others balk*

*The gods will come again
The gods shall come again.*

Daphne gave the last sweep of her son's coat. Finished with both children, she placed the brushes back.

"There you go Hawkeye, Sunlilly." She smiled.

"Thank you mom!" They chirped. Now more awake, they had the lively energy of eight year olds. Daphne opened the barn door, letting the family walk into the wide fields of her parents property; safely hidden from the world by thick forests and dense hedges. The grass rolled like green water away from her, sprinkled with buttercups and daisies.

"Come on Mom!" Hawkeye shouted. He took off, bounding and leaping as a deer startled from its meal. Sunlilly danced on his heels, giggling.

With a surge of power, Daphne gave chase. Clods of grass flew high into the air as her hooves dug in, the sound sudden and loud in the former quiet of the morning.

She easily caught up to her twins and slapped each lightly on their arm. All three slid to a stop, giggling and laughing.

A car horn honked and Daphne looked to see Velma, Shaggy and Scooby standing next to the fence. Shaggy had his arm through the window. Daphne galloped over with the children by her side.

"Shaggy! Scooby! Velma!" Daphne cried happily.

"Aunt Velma! Uncle Scooby! Uncle Shaggy!" Hawkeye and Sunlilly whooped. The trio halted just on the side of the fence.

“Hey guys.” Velma laughed. Shaggy grinned and Scooby barked happily. With a powerful leap he vaulted the fence and landed next to Sunlilly.

“Rhunlilly!” he licked her face.

She squealed and squirmed away. Then Scooby took off through the field, the kids running after him.

“Rhan’t Ratch Rhe!”

“Old Scoob will keep them busy for a while.” Shaggy winked. He embraced Daphne after Velma.

“They’ll be plenty tired.” She remarked.

“Good.” Daphne chuckled. “Maybe they’ll fall straight to sleep tonight instead of asking for more stories.”

“Good luck with that.” Shaggy spoke dryly. He’d babysat the kids before.

Daphne sighed ruefully. “I suppose you’re right.”

She glanced at the Mystery Machine. The old van looked different somehow from the last time she’d seen it, and she’d wondered what modification Shaggy had done to it now.

The Mystery Machine had undergone radical changes since Fred had driven it. Shaggy turned out to be a surprisingly good mechanic, and had lifted the van slightly for better ground clearance over rough terrain, armored the doors and the entire body, placed a light bar on top and searchlight that was controlled inside, put a sophisticated research and control system in the rear for Velma, including a portable satellite hookup that could connect to a similar model in the stable so they could talk to Daphne, and even placed a weapon’s locker inside.

The weapons were perhaps the worst change, Daphne thought. The gang had always used its wits and clever traps to catch the ghosts and unmask the villain. After the loss of Freddy and what happened to her, the gang had become...less carefree. More aware of the dangers they faced. Now, Velma could hardly be found without her rifle (she was an expert shot and many a bottle had been shattered under her steely gaze), shaggy without his shotgun and both with their brace of pistols. Even Scooby now had a spiked collar and armored vest to give him a fighting edge.

Physically they were different as well. Shaggy still looked thin, but he had ropes of muscles that gave him the look of a weasel, wiry and lightning fast. Velma (who Daphne always thought looked nerdy in her sweatshirt and short heels) traded in her skirt and sweater for a flexible cotton tee and a kaki vest for storage of her myriad gadgets and weapons. Her long, loose pants also had pockets that bulged and her heels morphed into sturdy hiking boots.

To take her mind off her friends, especially the missing one, Daphne asked what had been done to the Mystery Machine now.

“Oh, you noticed?” Shaggy asked, seemingly crestfallen she had seen what wasn’t supposed to be noticed. “I put some cover on the engine to protect it and ran a secret snorkel up to the top to let us get out of tight spots by crossing rivers and stuff. I also put up some sunlight bulbs in the search light and one or two of the light bar lights. You know, like in case we run into vampires or demons.”

He did not sound afraid of the prospect, just determined and grim. It wasn’t like the time he had been trying to impress Crystal and Amber; that had been just posturing. This felt fundamental, a shift in his personality. Daphne felt another pang of loss and sorrow, remembering the happy-go-lucky teen he had been.

Perhaps sensing her mood, Velma asked how the children were doing. She fidgeted slightly as Daphne answered, her eyes straying out to Scooby and the twins racing around divots or other obstacles, watching behind her tinted glasses.

“Hawkeye is so protective of his sister.” Daphne spoke fondly while watching her son. “Whenever she wanders off he’s right there with her, making sure nothing hurts her or scares her. Sunlilly is so shy and retiring though, that I worry about her sometimes.” Her voice lowered. “I wish they had friends to play with. They’ve got to be feeling lonely.”

Velma reached out and squeezed her hand. “I know. I know.”

“It’s so hard, telling them why we can’t meet others. Why they can’t go to libraries, the Malt Shop, see the museums. I-I just don’t know what to say anymore. How do you tell children that they would be feared and hated?”

“We’ll figure this out, you’ll see.” Velma held her hand reassuringly and pretended to take no notice of the tears sliding down her cheeks.

“Thanks Velma.” Daphne sniffed, wiping the tears away.

“So, what brings you out this way so early? The children’s lessons aren’t until noon.”

“We wanted to talk to you about our case first.” Shaggy replied, dropping his voice slightly and coming to lean on the fence to keep from being overheard by the sharp-eared foals.

“The disappearances?” Daphne asked equally softly. Her tail swished nervously behind her.

“They’re getting worse.” Velma worried. “We’re already up to twenty, and the police are no closer to a suspect.”

“What about that vampire ghost? You know, the one that one rumored to be operating near the cannery?”

“We solved that case the other night. It was old man Markin looking to keep people away from his counterfeit operations.” Velma dismissed with a wave of her hand.

“Oh.” Daphne nodded. “Well, what about, you know?” she gestured to Velma’s neck. On a silver chain dangled a golden ring with a green stone cut in the shape of a centaur. It was the same ring that had once turned Velma herself into a centaur.

“It hums at each site we can access.” Velma absently touched it. “I think that means our unfriendly Gods are to blame, or someone is going through a lot of trouble to make it appear so.”

Shaggy snorted. “Like, man. I don’t think anyone else has that kind of power. Especially the kind that the ring can sense.”

“You’re right, Shaggy.” Velma conceded. “But that brings us no closer to a solution to this mystery. We can’t track them if they can vanish or reappear at will.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way, Velma.” Daphne encouraged.

“Thanks.” Velma grunted sourly. “But all my research thus far hasn’t given much hope. The only things I know for sure is that all of them are petty, mercurial, and ruthless. They transform people at will, such as Medusa and Daphne

here. But then they turn right around when their ridiculous tests or challenges are overcome, granting gifts of uncanny speed or strength like Odysseus and Hercules.”

“Odysseus? I thought the Gods hadn’t given him anything.” Daphne asked, startled.

“Do you know anyone who can kill twenty or more fighting men with just a bow or sword?” Velma asked bluntly. “They either gave him speed or strength to do so, or weakened the suitors so he could kill them all. Or maybe even both.”

“Good point.” Daphne leaned back, considering. Her own experiences with the gods gave her some insight into their impulsive and volatile behavior. Especially considering her two children, beget by Zeus on her. Even now, she was unsure how much of their lovemaking had been “influenced” by his power, or if it was something of Centaur stallions they could hold over the females. Without any natural centaurs to investigate, she couldn’t decide.

And it’s better to leave such thoughts alone. That way lies madness, anger and hate. Nothing of which you want to touch your children, her mind whispered.

She acceded to her mind’s thoughts, and turned to considering their next course of actions. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything that could come to mind. After further discussion, they decided to drop the matter until some trick or clue could come up.

Their meeting finished, Daphne called to Hawkeye and Sunlilly to stop playing with Scooby and come sit with their aunt. It would be time for their lessons of geography, history, mathematics, and English.

CHAPTER 2: CASE OF THE GODS

Velma sighed as she waited in the Mystery Machine. The teaching lessons had gone on longer with the kids than she had expected, and now it was sometime around four in the afternoon. She was feeling drained and longed to go back to her lonely house for a shower and a cold drink. Maybe some History Channel narratives would sooth her mind and give her ideas of what to teach the children tomorrow.

She was trying to remember if there was a documentary on the life of Louis Pasteur and his work on pasteurization when the Police scanner in front of her crackled to life.

“bzzzzt...Control, car four-one. We’ve just received reports of a teenager disappearing in the Coolsville Park. Friends say she is overdue and her footprints end on the path. We are on-route to investigate, over.” In the background the siren could clearly be heard.

“Car four-one, this is Control. We copy your report. Vectoring other units to your location now, over.”

“Understood Control. We will advise on situation when we arrive. Car four-one out.”

Shaggy and Velma looked at one another, then Shaggy pressed hard on the accelerator, spinning the van in a complete one-eighty and rocketing down the quiet streets.

“Best get ready, Velms.” He said, never taking his eyes off the road.

“Right.” Velma unbuckled her seatbelt and slid into the back of the van, rolling with the motion of the van as it sped over the smooth road. Fishing the keys from her vest pocket, she pulled Scooby’s collar and vest from the weapon locker. She quickly fitted him and secured the collar with its thread-through buckle. Then she pulled her rifle from its place and checked to see if it was loaded. It was. Then she pulled Shaggy’s shotgun out. After that, she hid both weapons back in the locker and pulled the pistol out. Sliding her Glock into the secret holster under her arm, she reached around to Shaggy and put his 1911 in his holster in his back.

Finished arming, she slid into the chair in front of her command center and buckled in. She quickly typed in the code to unlock her screen and then radioed the farm. Daphne came on the line.

“Daphne, this is Velma. We’re on our way to a crime scene, another disappearance.”

“Who is it?” Daphne asked. Her voice became tightly controlled, as if she were trying to remain calm.

She must have the kids with her. Velma realized. She felt like cursing, this was no conversation for those sweet kids! She had to be careful, and stick to generals. Not that she had much to go on yet.

“Unknown at this time Daphne.” She spoke coolly. Didn’t want to give away her nervousness. “We’ll get there and look for clues when the police are finished.”

“Okay Velma. Be careful and radio me when you find something.” Daphne cut the connection.

I hope she’ll have the kids in bed with her, or elsewhere when that happens. Just the same, Velma would check.

“Fifteen minutes to the park Velma.” Shaggy told her over his shoulder. Scooby was already in the passenger seat next to him, face peering intently out the window.

“Right.” She nodded. She began pulling up plans for the park, seeking hidden escape routes and ambush sites, as well as notes on the cases previously solved in the park in the old days. There were depressingly few, the park was simply too open to operate in easily, and other than passing through, like in the case of the hypnotist Cat-Creature, there simply wasn’t anything to be had. *Until now.*

Coolsville Park was near the center of town, and consisted of twelve acres of green space near the town center. It was mostly grass and small bushes, with several small groves of trees that had been planted when the park opened thirty years ago. They were tall firs now, but so thin were the trunks that they offered no concealment for anyone whatsoever.

When Velma, Shaggy and Scooby pulled up to the scene of the crime, there were already a dozen police cruisers, CSU vans, and television crews already there and set up. CSU techs swept the scene, peering at the ground and snapping pictures, picking up litter and anything else they found. Police uniforms kept the gathering crowd at bay while detectives took notes and interviewed everybody.

When Detective Farnsworth finally got to them, he seemed unsurprised to see them. He looked them up and down and sighed.

“Afternoon, kids.” He spoke agreeably; he knew their reputation for solving the difficult cases, though that reputation had suffered somewhat with the disappearance of Fred and Daphne. Most people assumed that they had finally gone and eloped. It was supported by the parents of Daphne, since Fred had been living on his own since his old man threw him out of the house when he tripped one of Fred’s experimental trap sets.

“Good afternoon Detective Farnsworth.” Velma greeted him in return. She knew he was always a good source of information, and he always let them hear the latest news. He didn’t disappoint.

“Well, you’ll have your hands full with this one, another disappearance, and no sign of the perpetrator, or how he even got her out of the place at all.” He sighed. “You know, I’d hoped we’d figured it out when we caught that old fool playing at being a vampire; he’d have them all hidden away somewhere for ransom or to inflate his ego. Now it doesn’t even look like that’s the case. He broke down in interrogation. Completely fell apart.” He sounded disgusted.

“Like, wow. Talk about a complete wreck!” Shaggy laughed.

Velma didn’t feel like laughing. It irked her that no one had listened to her (except Daphne of course) that the vampire obviously wasn’t involved in the kidnappings. He hadn’t shown up until the fifth one, for instance, and his known haunts were nowhere near the sites of the kidnappings anyway. She sighed. It could be frustrating. She knew Shaggy listened to her, but he’d been hoping that it would prove to be the vampire and not the gods that he’d let himself believe the official line. They knew better now.

“Who was it?” Velma asked.

“A young teen by the name of Sharon Brooks. Five-foot-nothing about a hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet, age seventeen.”

Velma cocked an eyebrow, so far the gods had stayed above the eighteen year limit, this was the first time they'd broken that rule. Then Farnsworth corrected himself.

"Well seventeen until tomorrow, when she turns eighteen. She was actually coming back from a friend's house where she had a small party with her circle of friends. Her younger sister noticed her missing first."

"Her sister?" Velma spoke worriedly, this was the first sibling that they'd heard of, and she worried that the gods wouldn't want to split up the sisters, or perhaps they did if it would amuse them more.

"Yep." Farnsworth nodded grimly. "She's barely six, and had been waiting for her sister to get home all day. According to her, she'd promised to be back by three, and when she didn't show up by four, she snuck out her front door and flagged down a passing patrol car. They escorted her back home, but went out to look for her sister. Her friends told them that she was going to cut through the park on her way home as it was quicker and she didn't want to be late. Obviously, she never made it back."

"The poor little girl." Velma whispered. Shaggy looked grim, and angry.

"Yep. She's with her mother now. Just like before, there's no witnesses, no evidence that we can see, it's just as if she walked off the face of the planet." Frustration tinged his voice.

You're not far wrong, Velma thought.

"Do you know how long it will be before we can look at the scene? Maybe we can find some clues."

Farnsworth laughed. "I would wager it will be quite a while, Velma. The CSU techs are getting a bit miffed that they can't find any trace of what happened to anyone on this damned case. I don't expect them to leave a single blade of grass unchecked and unmarked."

"Okay. We'll wait a bit in the van."

"Perhaps we could get a pizza." Shaggy suggested. He held his hands up defensively. "What?" he whined. "I'm just sayin'. Mysteries don't solve themselves on an empty stomach."

She sighed. "Alright you chow hound. We'll pick up a pizza and come back to solve this case."

They found the crime scene all but deserted when they got back. The CSU techs had gone over everything with a fine tooth comb, looking for the minutest sign but coming up empty. Velma had a feeling they would.

"Alright Shaggy." She said as they walked into the scene. "Let's find the spot where the girl was kidnapped."

They crisscrossed the trail for a few minutes, Shaggy looking for any sign of where the CSU techs had spent the most time, Velma felt the ring on her chest. As she drew close to one point, she fancied she could detect a slight thrumming from the ring. Moving in tighter circles, she soon drew to a point some twelve feet from where Shaggy gave a delighted cry, finding the area where the techs had been the busiest.

"What do you think Velms?" Shaggy asked about the strange discrepancy.

Velma considered the information. "I wonder if that's where she stood, and this is where the gods threw their curse at her." She spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

“Like, I don’t know.” Shaggy said slowly, rubbing his chin. “The last few places we knew where the person had been standing, and the ring reacted then.” He pointed out.

“Hmm. Good point. Scooby, can you find anything?”

The Great Dane smelt around the dirt for a few minutes, sniffing first around Shaggy, then around Velma. Then he scratched the dirt where Velma stood.

“Rhirl rhand rhere.” He announced. He trotted over to Shaggy.

“Rho rhun rhand rhere.” He growled menacingly in his throat. They knew that his pronunciation showed where the gods had stood to turn poor Shannon into a centaur, or whatever. Yet...

“Where are the hoof prints?” Velma asked no one in particular. “There should be hoof prints if the gods were turning them here. But they aren’t. Are they kidnapping them first and turning them at their secret location, or what?”

“Don’t know Velms. We need a breakthrough.” Shaggy admitted.

She sighed. “Well, let’s take some soil samples of our own. Especially here and where the gods were standing. Maybe we’ll get lucky and there’s a clue as to where they’ve been.”

“Like, but won’t that just be Mount Olympus?” Shaggy asked, confused.

“They need to check on their victims at some point. Maybe some evidence got taken along.” Velma growled. She also didn’t think it likely, but it was the only real possibility they had right now.

“Gotcha. Let me get the sample jars out of the Mystery Machine.”

A few minutes later they taped the last lid shut. Placing them back into the van, Velma spoke almost to herself. “I’ll analyze these and get the results on our way home.” She unbuckled her pistol and placed it in the locker alongside Shaggy’s.

“Okay.” Shaggy replied absently as he struggled with Scooby’s vest. “I’ll take it slow.”

“Thanks. I’m sure we’ll find something. It’s a scientific impossibility not to leave some sort of evidence of where you’ve been on ground you’ve been walking on.” But then she muttered almost to herself. “Of course, that doesn’t take magic into account. There’s got to be a loophole, some rules it follows. Something that will reconcile itself with-“ she desisted into near growling.

“All right. We’ll get some sleep and tackle this tomorrow.” Shaggy suggested.

The gang piled into the Mystery Machine and started driving slowly through the town. When they entered the outskirts they turned onto the road that led to their separate flats. Shaggy pulled the van in front of the garage of his house while Velma hopped out. Hers was next door where she and Daphne had stayed. Were staying, she corrected herself. They needed to keep up the appearance that their friends were eloping somewhere.

“Velms,” Shaggy’s voice stopped her before she made it more than a few steps. She turned to look at him.

“Yes Shaggy?” He seemed to be struggling with something.

“Like, it’s kinda dangerous out there, right now.” He broke out in a rush, like he wanted to get it off his chest before he lost his nerve. “Why don’t you stay with Scoob and me? I can sleep on the couch, and Old Scoob can sleep near your door. He’s a much better watchdog now.”

“Rhey! Rhanks a rot!” Scoobs grinned, his tongue lolling out. He knew how afraid he’d been in the past of guard duty.

“We-I’ll be fine.” Velma corrected herself. “I’m sure nothing will happen to us. Good night.”

“Night Velma.” Shaggy said. He shook his head.

A long ways from the city, Daphne finished brushing the last tangle from her daughter’s hair and placed the brush back on the table. Walking to the stall, she lay down carefully on the soft bed of straw she had there. Immediately Sunlilly snuggled next to her, dropping to her belly while her brother placed himself in his customary spot outside of his sister. They placed their heads on their arms and drifted quickly to sleep.

Daphne smiled, running her hand over them. “Good night, my babies.” She whispered. Then she settled in for the night.

CHAPTER 3: BREAKTHROUGH

Velma fixed her breakfast and turned on the news. As the anchorman babbled about the rising cost of corn and its likely impact in the supermarket, she turned over what they'd discovered yesterday (the dirt turned out to be a dead end like she feared).

It seemed obvious that signs of the gods had been detected by CSU and Shaggy, but the girl had stood much further away. CSU got them mixed up. They mixed up where each had stood. Could that mean it was Hera who'd stood there? The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced. She wondered what good it'd do them, however.

Any information is better than none at all! She told herself fiercely.

Spinning her laptop around, she pulled up one of her special programs and inputted the data. From there it processed and hummed, whirring softly to itself before bringing up a map of Coolsville and surround with more than a dozen blinking dots. They were scattered about the city in no apparent order, other than no one happened to be looking at the person at that time. One poor woman had even disappeared in a coffee shop at noon! She simply walked to the backroom for supplies and never came out again.

There had to be a pattern, something that would betray the gods and give them a fighting chance at cracking the case. Yet the swirl of dots meant absolutely nothing to her. No pattern seemed to exist, even connecting the dots showed naught but tangled lines like some bizarre spider's web. She reversed the weave, inverted it, even spun it around but nothing clicked. Then (out of sheer desperation) she tried an old overlay code she had made in freshman year. The knot simply fell apart.

Velma stared: A huge lightning bolt dominated her screen, followed by a delicate crown and many-rayed sun with some points still missing. Tremendous excitement filled her.

"So" she whispered to herself. "It's not just one, but three. Very interesting." She had a feeling she knew who two of the symbols represented, but who was the third? Daphne had the files, so she would go to the farm.

"Apollo." She announced.

"Like, man, isn't that the god of wisdom and the sun?" Shaggy asked. Everyone stared at him in surprise. "Hey, I pay attention too!" he cried, annoyed.

"You're right Shaggy." Velma finally said. "In Greek mythology, Apollo was the god of the sun. He rode across the sky in a fiery chariot of gold pulled by flaming horses of pure light."

"Man, now that's what I call a hot seat." Scooby chortled at Shaggy's joke.

"Oh, be serious you two." Velma growled. "This is important."

"Cool it gang. I know. But something's been bugging me about this whole thing."

“What’s that?” Daphne asked.

“Well, we know the gods have been turning people into centaurs, right?”

“We suspect, but you’re right.” Velma agreed.

“And we know centaurs need a lot of room to run around in and still find plenty of food, right?”

“Right.” Daphne nodded.

“And we know it would have to be somewhere secret and large to hold so many, right?”

“Right, Rhaggy.” Barked Scooby.

“Then where is it? We should be able to find a place like that around Coolsville.”

Velma felt her jaw drop, why hadn’t she thought of that?

“That’s a great idea, Shaggy!” Daphne exclaimed.

“Well, glad I thought of it.” Shaggy replied modestly.

They were interrupted by a call on the radio of another disappearance. This one again in the park.

“Why don’t you guys investigate while I stay here and look at the maps.” Daphne suggested. “I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

“Right.” Velma laughed. “Let’s go.”

The crime scene looked much the same as last night. Police and CSU swarmed over the place, searching for the least clue, collecting multiple samples of grass, tree, earth, water, litter, air, anything they could lay their fingers on. All of them looked angry and upset.

Farnsworth was there again and he stalked up to them, letting some of his anger show.

“Brian McConnelly.” He told them without so much as a good morning. “Twenty-two, worked for the local news agency. The press is having a field day with this one.”

Indeed, mused Velma as she gazed in dismay over the virtual parking lot of news vans, SUV’s and small cars adorned with various news stations and cable channels. Some were from way out of state even. Around the ring of officers surrounding the park was a veritable sea of cameras and reporters, jostling each other for the best view of the efforts.

“I guess we’ll like, come back later.” Shaggy said, eyeing the crowd.

“Probably three or four hours at the least.” Farnsworth agreed. “If you can get in even then. The head of CSU is threatening to leave them out here all night unless they find some clue to unravel all of this.”

Velma felt a small amount of guilt. She had the ring, which could tell them exactly where the person was standing and where the gods had been, but she didn’t dare reveal it yet. No one would believe her for one thing, and fear

she'd gone mad. *Probably lock me up in the sanitarium.* She shuddered. Besides, she reasoned, what could the police do? It wasn't like they were equipped to fight gods!

Back at the farm Velma went to help Daphne while Shaggy and Scooby taught a gym class to Sunlilly and Hawkeye. Velma had been surprised how well he had stepped in to teach them things like volleyball and dance! He seemed as adept at ballet as any professional! When she'd asked, all he would say was that he had some experience teaching a girl's finishing school in the past.

Velma ignored the curiosity at the past of her friend and turned to the task at hand. She had a long way to go in solving this case, and not much time seemed left to her. She quickly bent back over the computer and read the information she entered for errors. Finding none, she hit enter to let the computer sort and consolidate it and churn out charts and maps that Daphne checked. They were particularly interested in demographic data. Armed with that knowledge, they were able to plot the least populated areas of Coolsville. Then they removed the parks and other attractions that would draw people in, as well as well-known hunting grounds. When they finished, only three places stood out.

The first was the Coolsville Shoe Factory, closed since 1940 and standing on a large deserted lot. Velma immediately dismissed that one.

"It lies too close to the city," she pointed out. "Somebody would have seen something."

"Alright." Daphne marked that one off the list. "That leaves Haunted Island and the old Coolsville Mine."

"Umm." Velma chewed her lip.

Between the two, she felt the Haunted Island seemed most likely. It was remote, with vast waters surrounding it, an old crumbling mansion stood in the center of the island, giving some shelter at least, and the legends that surrounded the place were so dark and frightening that people had long given up going there. The last time, she believed, was when the gang had ended up being hijacked with the Harlem Globetrotters and winding up marooned there overnight with ghosts and other hauntings happening. All to keep the Globetrotters from falling asleep and losing the big game the next day (which they had eventually won). Also, in her mind, there was a vicious reef surrounding the island, and sharks circling that would mean no one would be able to just swim off the island. A perfect jail.

"There's a boat at the marina that we could hire." Daphne suggested. "We could go out there and take a look." Her mind was obviously running along the same parallel as Velma's.

"Let's pull up the weather report and see." She suggested.

She opened up a new screen. "Uh, oh." She sighed. "There's a big storm out at sea near the island. We'd never get a boat there until much later in the week."

"Well, in that case, how about the Mine? We could check that and see, and when the weather dies down we could go out to the Haunted Island." Daphne suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea. But first I want a good look at that crime scene, and then we'll check the mine tomorrow."

“Excellent. I’ll have mom and dad watch the kids. I’m not staying out of this.” She warned at Velma’s look. “I’ve got more protection now than you.”

“Yes, and you also have the most to lose.” Velma argued. “If Hera or Zeus turn you back to human, or take you away, what will happen to Hawkeye and Sunlilly?”

“That won’t happen. Remember, they’re Zeus’s children as well. He wouldn’t let Hera hurt those kids.” Daphne shot back.

“That doesn’t mean she won’t try, and what if they succeed in kidnapping them? They could take them and place them with this new herd.”

“Or they won’t. I’ve made up my mind Velms.” Daphne said firmly. “We’re going together.”

Velma covered her eyes. “Oh, brother!”

Before they went up the mountain, Velma wanted to get a good look at the crime scene. “Just in case we can find anything that will help us.” Was all she said. Privately she just had this feeling that something important was at this one, something she had to find.

I wonder if this feeling is a god playing havoc with me? She wondered to herself as she sat in the van on the way to the crime scene. *If it is, just leave me alone! I don’t need or want your help. I can solve this mystery all by myself.* For a moment, she imagined she heard ghostly laughter next to her.

They got out of the van as close to the crime scene as they could. There was still tape up around the scene and Velma was struck by the difference. Inside the line everything was neat and combed. Almost manicured. Outside the line it looked like a blizzard had hit with trampled grass, wrappings for film or digital chips, tire marks, gum wrappers.

“Good grief. This place looks worse than a fast food stand.” Shaggy announced, looking around.

“But Shaggy, you eat all the time at those places.” Velma frowned up at him.

“I didn’t say I didn’t eat there, I just said it looks as messy here as some I’ve seen.”

“Good grief.” Velma rolled her eyes.

They stepped across the line. As one they scanned the ground ahead of them, looking for any sign of their quarry. Shaggy looked up abruptly. “Like, do you have any idea of what we’re looking for?” He asked her.

“Not really.” Velma answered automatically, still searching and not really paying attention to the conversation. “I just think we are going to find something if we look harder. Scooby,” she turned to the dog, “Why don’t you sniff for clues!”

“Rall right Relma.” Scooby barked. He lowered his nose and started sniffing deeply. A puzzled look came to his eyes as he followed the trail. Suddenly, he turned away and walked at a right angle to the trail.

“Hey Scoob, where’re you going?” Shaggy asked, hurrying to catch up. Velma was right behind them.

“He’s found something.” She said excitedly. Her pulse pounded in her veins.

“Reah.” Scooby agreed, his tail wagging excitedly. “Reah, reah.” He reached the shade of the trees, on the outside of the police line. He kept going around several, weaving this way and that, until he came to a tall thin one on the very outskirts of the thicket, its long grasping branches reaching finger-like to the sky.

Velma caught a glint partway up the trunk, overshadowed by a large bole. Frowning, she looked a little closer, trying to make out the edges. It appeared to be camouflaged; some sort of box? The object jumped into focus as she tilted her head a little, and she realized she was looking at a camera.

“Shaggy, look.” She whispered, afraid to move and lose sight of this precious bit of evidence.

“Huh? What?” he asked, clueless. He obviously didn’t see the camera. She pointed it out to him and he squinted.

“Well, I’ll be. It is a camera!” he exclaimed. “Let me just climb up here and get it.”

He agilely climbed the trunk of the tree, not needing much to scamper up to the buckle that held it in place and undo it. A moment later he was down from the tree and standing next to her with the camera.

“Let’s go back to the Mystery Machine and play it.” Shaggy suggested.

At the Mystery Machine, Velma downloaded the device to her computer and opened the files. Her media player popped up and the video began playing automatically.

“We probably won’t get any sound.” Velma was saying when she heard the speakers come to life. “Huh.” She finished lamely as they heard him adjust the camera. “I guess he did have sound.”

“Here we go.” The ghostly voice said. The man stepped back and they got a good look at him. He was fair, light brown hair and broad lips. He had two large eyes with deep blue irises, and a long aristocratic nose. In all, Velma thought she’d never seen a more genteel looking man.

They saw he held a mic loosely in his hand, wireless, which seemed to be how he was capturing the sound. He swiftly hid the mic under his collar.

“He must have built this rig himself.” Velma felt impressed. The ingenuity and man hours that must have gone into such a project!

Brian walked away from the camera, positioning himself near the spot the ring said he disappeared from. A change came over his demeanor. Instead of the quick, excited pace he had been showing; he suddenly hunched his shoulders, slouched as much as possible, and idly twirled a cigarette in his hands as if he were debating on whether or not to search for a light.

He held that pose for a while. “He’s baiting them.” Velma breathed, almost afraid to break the silence.

“Yeah.” Shaggy agreed equally softly. His gaze was fixated on the screen. “Like, that is one brave dude.”

For a few more minutes they waited, then two more people showed up. One moment they weren’t there and the next they were. Even Velma couldn’t explain it. Going through the segment frame by frame didn’t help. They simply appeared in one frame with no fade in, portal, or other sign of arrival. Velma felt disappointed. She’d hoped to catch a glimpse of some familiar landmark or something in a portal that would lead them to the location. Yet the gods were clearly too wily for that. She waited.

They approached Brian on the screen, who gave a start as he noticed them, but slipped back into character almost immediately. He shambled over to them, weaving slightly as if drunk, with a doofy smile on his face.

“Any of you got a light for a poor feller from the hood?” he slurred.

The white-haired man on the left (that had to be Zeus Velma thought) laughed and nudged his companion, who also stood tall and solidly built. His head crowned with golden hair and features fit for an immortal, Velma felt confident that this had to be Apollo, their third god conspirator.

“A fine play, eh?” he chortled. “Worthy of a stage performer at the least. What say you Apollo?”

Velma felt a thrill of excitement, her guess had been confirmed!

“I say we should reward him in his efforts, father.” Apollo’s voice sounded wise beyond the count of years, cold and distant as the knowledgeable stars, with undertones of a fiery temper subdued and slumbering, ready to awaken at the least provocation.

“He has managed to amuse us, and that is no small feat. Let us give him what he wants: to see and learn of the Forerunners.”

“What are these Forerunners? What have you done with the kidnapped people?” His ruse blown, Brian had dropped the cigarette and now eyed the other men closely and warily.

“You are bold, McConnelly.” Zues announced. “I like that. You will do well. And now, I will show you the answer to your questions, though use of that knowledge is reserved for others to use, and not you. Let us go.”

He made a throwing motion, and a bolt of lightning appeared and smote Brian in a flash. The speakers crackled and hissed, then fell silent. When the screen had cleared, it was empty save the grass and distant trees. Velma watched a while longer, then switched the program off.

Shaggy exhaled. “Well.” He said.

“Yes.” Velma agreed.

“What do we do with the camera? It’s like, evidence, after all.”

“I’m not really sure.” Velma gazed thoughtfully at it.

If we give it to the police, they will think it is likely a hoax, or something. If we don’t, we are tampering with critical evidence and go to jail.”

“We should give it to them.” Shaggy said at last. “At least that way they have some idea what’s really happening, and if we disappear they can pick up the thread.”

“All right. We’ll drop it off on our way to the farm. I’ll leave notes outlining the location of all the evidence we’ve accumulated, and our research data for them as well, just in case. That should take them until late tomorrow to gather up. After dropping it off, we’ll sleep at the farm and check out the mine in the morning.”

“That sounds good.” Shaggy agreed. He slid into the driver’s seat and started the van.

About half an hour later they were pulling up in front of the police station. Along with the camera, Velma had a small bag with a thumb drive containing all the pieces of this puzzle they'd amassed, as well as her conclusions. As the van rolled to a stop she hopped out and ran up the stairs. Getting directions to Farnsworth's desk, she found him sitting at his computer, typing reports.

He looked up as she approached. "Velma! What can I do for you?" he sat back, relieved for the interruption.

"We found this camera at the crime scene." Velma said normally as she held up the baggie with the camouflaged box in it.

She might as well have said she had tickets for the World Series and gold in her purse to boot. The entire station froze. Not a sound could be heard but the whirl of the computers and the sound of the water cooler. Farnsworth's eyes bugged out, but Velma wasn't finished.

"Here's all the evidence, information, maps and guesses we've come up with." She showed the USB and put it on his desk next to the camera. She regarded Farnsworth a moment. "There's video, information, and proof locations in there as well of all three events in this mystery so far."

"Three!" Farnsworth looked and sounded surprised.

"Yes. It's all there. USE IT, BELIEVE IT" she said forcefully. "You're going to need it all, and to study the information. You can't just jump in this time."

"You sound as if you don't expect to be coming back to us." Farnsworth said slowly. Around them all eyes and ears watched and listened.

"Once you go through the drive and collect the proof we marked on the map, you'll understand." Velma said.

"Good-bye." She turned and walked quickly out, ignoring his pleas behind her to stop. When she heard a set of footprints hurrying to catch up become a dozen or more, she broke into a run.

Down the steps of the station she raced to the van and leaped into the open door as Shaggy stood on the accelerator. The Mystery Machine peeled out from the station, turning onto a deserted road and streaking off into the night. Velma could see the detectives and patrolmen coming out of the building and staring at their taillights disappearing.

"That went well." Shaggy said dryly.

Velma laughed. The stress, fear, and tension she'd been carrying around for what seemed forever fell away. One way or another, the mystery would be coming to an end tomorrow.

She slid over to the middle as they left the city behind, heading for the farm. A new type of tension coiled in the pit of her stomach, like a spring starting to compress.

"Shaggy, pull over there, will you?" She pointed to a small dirt road that appeared in the dark. Shaggy glanced obliquely at her, but turned and drove up the road a short distance.

When he turned the van off he looked over at her. "What--"

His words were cut off as her lips met his. She could feel him stiffen in shock for a moment before relaxing. His arms snaked around her back and grasped her head, trapping her. Her glasses fell off, reducing everything to a blur. Her body felt on fire, she needed to release the heat.

Her vest practically flew off her as Shaggy released her from the kiss. There was a light in his eyes before he pulled out of her sight that she'd never seen before: it both comforted and unnerved her.

His hands helped take her shirt off as she wiggled into the back. He followed her quickly, stripping his shirt off. The sound of a door opening and closing interrupted them for a heartbeat, but it was only Scooby stepping out.

A moment later her bra fell off, exposing her small, perky breasts to him. At this point Velma felt unsure. She knew she was small compared to other women, and felt embarrassed by her body. But Shaggy lifted one quivering globe in his hands and bent to lay a kiss on her nipple. Velma gasped in surprise. It felt like pure carnal lust burned the air between them at the contact. His other hand went to her lonely breast and kneaded her soft flesh tenderly.

Velma lost all reason and sanity. The only thing that mattered now to her was his mouth and hands there, on her body. She moaned as his head switched, the cold air puckering the wet nipple almost painfully.

Those wonderful sensations were gone in a flash, completely overwhelmed by their bigger sisters as his hand slipped down her belly to the wet entrance of her core. No descriptions or even fragments of thoughts could describe her mind at that point, and she dazedly gasped and moaned to his clumsy attempts to pleasure her, desiring ever more contact. She hissed as he stumbled on her button, winding her body nearly to the breaking point with each rub. She felt ready to explode...in...any...second...

He pulled away. She keened in a haze of loss and unbridled lust. The sound of cloth slipping told her what he was doing, and she shimmied out of her pants and panties, trying to hold on to her peak. Once they were off she lay back; open, wet, and waiting.

Shaggy came over the top of her, like wave over rock, setting himself at her entrance. He pushed in slowly, tenderly as a lover. She gasped at the strange, helmeted head inside her tunnel. Then discomfort became pain. Sanity returned abruptly for a brief spell as she understood he'd found her maidenhead.

The face above her looked so different that for a moment she thought she was under a stranger. Perhaps she was, Shaggy's muscles were knotted with some hidden strain and his chest heaved like a bellows. She realized how much it was costing him not to drive into her, hurting her in the process. Touched, she reached up, brushing her fingers across his face.

"It's all right." She whispered. "I want this."

With a grunt of relief (he seemed beyond words at this point) Shaggy snapped her virginity and took her with one swift stroke. Now all the way inside, his shaft twitched and throbbed in its tight bed. Velma felt the pain quickly pass, leaving only satisfaction, fullness, and a strange longing for something more she couldn't quite define. Then Shaggy stirred.

As he pulled out, the feeling lessened, until he thrust deep into her. The fire from before rekindled into a roaring forest fire, driving her sanity and reason away and leaving only the intense pleasure. Waves of it crashed down on her, buffeting her body this way and that as she moaned, kissed, and screamed her lust into the night.

Shaggy's lips rained kisses on her nose, neck and the tops of her breasts before seizing a nipple and suckling hard before starting the pattern over again. His hands were filled with the soft-yet-firm cheeks of her derriere, pulling her up into each thrust, reaching deeper each time till she thought she'd be split in half.

Abruptly he sped up. Pleasure that had coiled deep in her core became tightly wound, a hairsbreadth from release. She felt so close! Then he slammed deep into her womb and stopped, quivering. His hoarse bellow filled the van with its cry, joining her scream as the warm liquid splashing inside her belly pushed her over the edge into bright oblivion. She pulsed and jerked around him, eyes rolling into her head as darkness came over her. She could barely feel as her limbs flopped against the floor and her body danced like it had been struck with electricity. Her first true orgasm, she numbly realized before she fainted.

When she regained consciousness, Shaggy was cradling her in his arms. She snuggled closer to him in complete contentment, the soft shaft still embedded in her twitching at the movement of its sheath.

“Like, wow man.” Shaggy whispered, brushing her short hair. His hand cupped her butt possessively, keeping her on him.

“Hmha, you liked?” Velma grinned tiredly.

“Like, totally.” Shaggy whispered enthusiastically as he put another kiss on her forehead. In the dark she could hear his smile. Her breasts remained crushed against him, the rosy caps dragging on his skin in delicious friction. A faint stirring inside made her smile. He swelled and grew longer, stretching her once again. She rocked her hips to encourage the growth.

“Tired?”

“Not yet. Give it to me one more time.”

“All right.” He groaned, hardening to his full size as her walls rippled and massaged him.

“Here we go.” And he thrust.

Much later they arrived at the farm. Scooby wagging his tail in the back seat. Velma had given him an entire box of Scooby treats in thanks. He’d been standing guard when she poked her head out from the back, staring at the sky and whispering, “Amber, Roh Ramber!” over and over. His pain nearly broke her heart. At noticing her however, he had very quickly recovered, or at least hidden his pain.

Velma carefully closed the door of the Mystery Machine, hoping not to wake the kids. Shaggy likewise did the same. With tired limbs and aching bodies they made their way to the stables. Sneaking back to the stall, they peered over the top at Daphne lying asleep on the floor, her arm back over the children who pushed so tight against her they seemed to be wanting to become one again.

Quietly, the trio slipped away to the converted tack room that served as their small headquarters now. All the maps, plans, data and supplies they could duplicated and find were scattered about that small room or up on the large screen that dominated the room from the west wall. Velma felt far too tired to worry about going over anything again. She felt sore, satisfied beyond anything she’d felt before, and incredibly tired.

Spying the mattress in the back, she pulled it out a little from the wall and flopped onto it. Barely remembering to take her glasses off, she dimly felt Shaggy spoon behind her before she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4: BATTLE OF THE COOLSVILLE MINE

Daphne woke earlier than her usual wont. She stayed staring down at her babies still sleeping, memorizing every perfect detail, burning in her brain every wonderful aspect. Despite what she had told Velma, she was not at all confident the gods wouldn't try to take her children from her. She trembled at the thought: she would die first? Even if-no! Best not to think of that.

Carefully, she got up. Leading them dreaming, she walked to the door of her headquarters and went inside. Intending to check on the Velma (she expected Shaggy and Scooby to be in the van). She stopped in shock when she caught sight of them.

What is going on in the world today? She marveled. Velma whimpered in her sleep, pushing back harder against Shaggy's rangy body, cooing as his hand tightened possessively on her breast.

It's a good thing the children are still asleep. I knew Velma always had a thing for Shaggy. I'm glad they worked it out. But they definitely need to get ahold of themselves before the kids see this!

Walking over, she bent at the waist and lightly shook Velma. Her friend groaned and open one eye.

"Huh? Wuzzat? What's going on?" She mumbled. Behind her Shaggy stirred at the noise.

"Come on you two. It's time to get up. Shaggy, let go of the Velma before Hawkeye and Sunlilly get up." Daphne murmured. She didn't dare raise her voice.

Velma rolled to her feet after snatching her glasses up, face flushing scarlet as she realized what position Daphne had caught them in.

Shaggy yawned. "I'd better find old Scoob and get breakfast going." He wandered out.

Velma didn't quite meet Daphne's eyes as she hurriedly fixed her hair. When she had finished she began nervously going over the map and supplies. She looked so comic that Daphne could not help but laugh.

"Oh Velma, relax! I'm not one to judge." If anything, that seemed to embarrass her further. She had her face hid as best she could.

Shaking her head, Daphne said "I've got to wake the kids for their breakfast. By the way," she added as she walked out the door, "I think it's wonderful, Velms. You two were always perfect for each other."

Daphne spent extra time feeding the twins, brushing her hair and coats until they shone brilliantly in the light of the barn. She saying to them, told him she loved them, and when at last she could bear the pain and fear no longer, she sent him to play with Scooby while she cloistered herself with Velma.

Velma was in the process of etching arcane symbols on the bullets, gun barrels, and knives. Daphne had discovered the symbols in an old book and felt their power. Whether or not they would work against the gods she did not know, but it would give them a better chance at least of doing some damage. Perhaps, they could even drive them away for good. Several boxes had already been stacked and waited to go, the fruit of Daphne's labors the past few months.

We have been waiting for this day a long time, she thought. *I can barely believe that it's now*. She founded terrifying, and yet a strange optimism remained. They were finally going to be doing something rather than waiting around for it to happen.

"When are your parents coming?" Velma asked her.

Daphne slid another finished bullet into the box. "They'll be here in an hour. They're very punctual."

Velma was silent for a few minutes then; "They still blame you for becoming a centaur?"

"And for having Hawkeye and Sunlilly, yes." Daphne nodded

"That's silly! And very petty of them." Velma began hotly but Daphne forestalled her.

"It's all right. At least they gave me use of the stable and are coming to watch the kids for me."

Daphne tried to smile but failed. The trouble with her parents had gone on for as long as she could remember. In the early days, she had to sneak out of the house to go with the gang on their adventures. When she became older, they seem to give up on her becoming a true Blake and she found it much easier to go with the gang to escape their snide comments and disappointed sighs.

Shaggy came in shortly after with plates of sandwiches. Outside they heard the kids giggling as they chased Scooby around the yard. Daphne wolfed hers down greedily well, nearly nibbled. With all the work actually needed done for weeks, all they were doing at this point was simply make work to cover their nervousness. Eventually, the Velma told Daphne what they had done with the police. Daphne wasn't too sure about this development, she feared what would come of the discovery of the transformees, yet she could see no other choice. If they rolled the dice and lost, then somebody would need to take up the fight. She doubted they would be in any shape or mood to do so.

Precisely at ten they heard car doors slam and Daphne went to greet her parents. Already she braced for the inevitable scolding she was going to receive. She feared however that they had already passed sentence their grandchildren without even meeting them first. That rankled, but she expected no less of them who were too concerned with image and prestige more than family.

On the lawn she found a much older Daphne (when she was human of course) and a silver haired distinguished gentleman standing in front of a poorly parked black limousine, and she realized her father must have driven it in.

Probably terrified of the neighbors finding out about me through James. I'm amazed that he even knew how to drive, or that they would be willing to stoop to such depravity. Indeed, she thought her parents already seemed angry. With a forced effort, she gave a cheerful "good morning".

"Daphne!" her mother waved, every movement proper and prim. "There you are dear! You're looking...um...well."

Daphne raised an eyebrow, this was hardly what she expected, but not wholly unprepared for either. "Thank you mother. You as well. I'm glad you came, I would hardly have called if it wasn't important.

Her father raised an eyebrow. "How can it be important? We've had no words of any events or parties. The season for those hasn't even begun." Yet none of the snobby tone she expected was there. He was simply stating a fact.

Typical. Can't see anything is important unless it has an engraved invitation for it “No, father. You are right. This isn't an event, just another silly little mystery.” She'd always had to refer to them as such. Her parents wanted her to leave her wayward ways and settle with a rich doctor or politician an increase in the family wealth. But she had loved Freddy, and never did.

“Another one? Dear, you simply must stop this nonsense. No Blake should be associated with such low-brow.... Flimflam!” Her mother sniffed.

Her father studied her face, then at her friends standing behind her, then peered at the armored van. He stayed quiet while his wife told what she thought of the nasty little mysteries that were being solved (that was what the police are for dear), then looked at Daphne. She squirmed under those eyes: so old they seemed, appearing to gaze right through her. She'd never seen them like that before.

“This isn't a regular mystery, is it? You are going into something dangerous, aren't you?” Her mother gave him a startled, searching look before swiveling back to her. Strange emotion warred on her face while her father looked to be wearing a stone mask so set had it become

Daphne was too shocked to come up with any sort of like or cover story to tell them. She blurted what was on her mind as soon as it came in.

“I don't expect to die, though something may happen to me or my friends that could delay us. Or someone could come looking for my children I don't want around. That's why I want them watched closely.”

Her father appeared grave. “Then you will stay here with your children, and I will go with your friends.” His voice was stern and his eyes became cold.

There were a chorus of gasps. Daphne's jaw fell slack as he struggled to come to grips with what he had just said. Never had she expected her father to offer to take her place.

“Dad, I have to go.” She managed at last. “I've got the best protection and chance in this fight.”

“Or the worst one, if what I understand is correct.” He returned. “I won't let you put yourself in danger like that.”

“I already have! I was turned and bred without my choice! I love my babies, I truly do. But they could be under their power at any time, they could snatch them away from me just for fun or because they could to gloat over me their power. I won't lose them, I simply will NOT let that happen.” She emphasized each word forcefully, and tearfully.

“And I won't let those children of yours grew up without a mother.” Her father's grim voice unknowingly echoing Velma's earlier argument.

“I don't want anyone else to suffer as I have.” She hugged herself miserably, suddenly aware of how much she had changed since she had been human.

“And what do you want exactly?” Her father asked gently.

“I want to raise my babies in peace.” She admitted. “To not worry they will be taken from me or disappear every time I wake up, at the whim of someone else. To not be terrified of discovery, of being placed in a lab and never see the light of day again as doctors run tests on Hawkeye and Sunlilly. I love them so much.” Her voice broke, she could barely stumble through the last words.

To her surprise, gentle hands touched her face. Blinking away tears, she started to find her mother looking up at her. Conflict warred on her face a little, but compassion won out.

“Daphne,” she said softly. Pain lanced through her voice and hovered in her eyes at some distant memory. “Do you know my biggest regret was never being around to raise you?”

Daphne stiffened. “No. I thought...you all seemed so happy to have Nana raise me, and Shannon, when she was here.”

“No. Don’t get me wrong, I like missus Harp immensely, but it was still she who raised you when I wanted to.”

She took a deep breath, her face a mask of agony and regret.

“I never was there for you, was I?” Now her voice sounded almost like she was talking to herself, the others forgotten. “Either on your birthdays or at your achievements you were always so proud of. Always another affair to go to, another dinner to attend, another social function to host. And then you were grown up and starting to hang out with that Jones boy. I didn’t approve, and I said so, and it drove you away, didn’t it? Another mistake. Another, in an old life full of them. I wasn’t there when you needed me, or wanted me. Even today all I could think about was how others would see us, would think...over...over my own daughter.” Her voice choked.

“Mom!” Daphne cried, hugging her close. For a while all she could feel was her mother in her arms, the wetness on her shoulder, and the tears running down her own face. Her mother’s lilac perfume filled her nose, bringing back memories of when she’d been very little and cut herself with a knife. Her mother had come in then and soothed her, holding her close and kissing the pain away. The scent of lilac covering the smell of fear. When Daphne backed away, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house, but all she could manage to do was beg; “Please watch over them.”

Her father sighed and her mother wept, but both nodded. But her father spoke before she could shout for them.

“Of course we will watch over them. But you have to come back. Promise me, you will come back.”

“I will.” She promised.

She introduced them to Hawkeye and Sunlilly, who were delighted to meet more two-legs beside the rest of Mystery Inc. They remained on their best behavior despite their obvious desire to touch their grandparents.

Her parents seemed very impressed with their restraint, and with their magnificence. Her mother latched onto Sunlilly like a doe with its yearling, remarking constantly on her golden coat and red hair (It’s so lovely dear, do you always keep it brushed out, or do you ever put it up or in a good braid?) while Hawkeye, unsure of how to go to his sister’s aid, stood fidgeting under his grandfather’s intense scrutiny. At last he grunted and offered Hawkeye his hand. The colt took it tentatively, until he got used to the handshake.

“My boy,” said Mr. Blake. “Let’s go inside the stable and leave the women to their own devices. Do you like trains?”

“What are...t...t...trains?” Hawkeye asked as they walked to the stables, Sunlilly and her grandmother close behind.

Her father laughed. “My boy, you have quite an education ahead of you! Trains are how the Blake’s made their fortune. Great steel railroads and...”

The children vanished from sight. Daphne yearned to go with them, but she had one chore to do. One more mystery to solve, before they could be safe. One last trap to spring. She turned to the van, the rest of the gang on her heels.

Daphne grunted as another pothole jounced the Mystery Machine and nearly bucked her into the roof again. Her ears flattened in annoyance, she was sick to death of this road and couldn't wait to be back down it. For once, Daphne was glad for the wheel modification to the van, before Shaggy had gotten ahold of it, she doubted the Mystery Machine could even have made it this far.

"HoW much fArther is It?" her voice sounded strange with each bump and shake.

"Not lOng." Velma replied. She held onto the arm support for dear life as Shaggy navigated the rough road. His eyes were focused intently out the windshield, picking a path through the worst of the debris. He hadn't spoken a word since they found the overgrown entrance to the road.

Well, with such a path as this, I'm almost positive that no one else has ever come this way. This area is extremely isolated. Daphne wasn't sure if it was isolated enough for the gods to risk hiding people here, though. But it would be like them. It's not as if they have actual feelings for the people they play with, beyond how much we can amuse them. It's sickening.

Another few minutes saw them almost to the top of the ridge. From there, according to the map, they would find a shallow bowl maybe half a mile across from the excavation, with the main complex sitting slightly back on the near side of the crater. The shaft was gone, or rather not gone. It was submerged underneath a small lake that had formed when they shut the pumps off and the water level had risen past the mouth of the shaft. So, there would be plenty of water there at least. And after several years the forest had undoubtedly reclaimed much of the bare dirt again. The latest satellite pictures of a couple years ago showed much greenery there, at least. And some smaller trees.

The cover would make it ideal in a way, because airplanes without a reason to look wouldn't see anything moving down there. Despite Velma's belief that the gods had set up Haunted Island as their mark, Daphne felt it much more likely that the Coolsville Mining Complex was the right answer. She couldn't put it in accurate words to convince anybody, leastways herself, but the feeling persisted, and she trusted it. So she had accepted the 1911 pistol given to her by Shaggy. Unfamiliar as she was with the weapon, it did make her feel much bolder. Now all she had to do was keep from doing something clumsy or stupid, and they might even get away with it.

Just as she was thinking that, the nose of the van suddenly dipped dramatically. They'd evidently passed the top of the ridge and were coming into the facility. Daphne looked ahead but could only see the trunks of small trees and thick carpets of fern around their roots. The road remained clear of greenery because the hardpack had defeated the roots of the smaller plants, but already tree roots were eroding the edges. In another few years the road too, would be gone.

Shaggy gave a shout of surprise and fear; they had come around the corner of the road and there in front of them a tree had fallen right across the road. Shaggy hit the brakes and Daphne slid right up to the seat backs before she could stop herself, feet kicking in wild reflex and striking the (fortunately) unadorned armored left wall of the van.

"Like wow. I wonder where that tree came from." Shaggy rubbed the side of his head.

“Isn’t it obvious? It must have fallen over in one of the winter storms.” Velma replied from the passenger seat.

“Fallen nothing. Look” Shaggy pointed at the large end. “That tree’s been chopped down. And like, recently too!”

“Let’s get out and investigate then.” Velma said. She grabbed her rifle from the middle seat while Shaggy snatched his shotgun. Daphne squirmed out the back with Scooby’s help, he being already dressed in his combat vest. Daphne held her handgun and felt very naked and exposed, being the largest one of them.

The tree had indeed been cut. There were fresh axe marks there, barely a day old, if that. Daphne watched as Velma picked at them, holding one up and looking at it closely.

“Very interesting.” Was all she said.

“I don’t like it.” Shaggy said softly, eyeing the tree line. “We’re in perfect ambush country. We need to skidoo.”

“For once I’m with him. Let’s go Velma.” Daphne cried.

“You’re right. Let’s go. But keep your eyes open for any traps or anything suspicious.”

“Like, you don’t have to tell me twice. Let’s go Scoob.”

“Right Raggy!” Scooby kept his nose to the ground, sniffing ahead with his nose as the gang eased their way over the trunk of the tree.

Just as Shaggy’s foot touched the ground there came a snap from the bush and he suddenly jerked sideways and fell straight up! He’d been caught in a trap. Hoarse shouts and yells came from around as Velma dropped to one knee with a curse, hand smoothly operating the bolt action of her rifle. Daphne spun the other way, handgun cocked and ready to fire. Scooby snarled and raced towards the base of the nearby tree, determined to cut Shaggy down.

The sound of hooves thudding up the road from the mine made Daphne turn that way, gun pointing down the path as the first centaur came running around it, golden hair flying behind him as he powered up the slope at a reckless gallop, a large spear in his hands. Daphne squeezed the trigger, the recoil of the gun startling her as her shot went wild!

The bark of a tree next to them splintered out, the bullet striking right in front of the herd. The report of the gun and the spray of the bark pulled them up short. There were a dozen at least, ranging in size from big drafts with heavy muscled torsos and arms to leaner, race horses built for speed and covering much more distance than their bigger friends. And leading them was a blond-haired palomino centaur with average body and a defined torso. A familiar face looked back at them in shock. Daphne felt the gun fall from her fingers in numb shock as she recognized the centaur.

“Freddy!” She shouted hoarsely.

“Daphne, Velma, Shaggy! What are you doing here?” He shouted in surprise and disbelief.

“Oh, just hanging around.” Shaggy answered dryly from above. He had his remaining 1911 in his hand, but not pointed at anyone.

“Where’s Scooby?” Fred asked as he strode up the path, relieved smile coming to his face.

“Oh, about to jump on you from the right.” Shaggy smiled lopsidedly.

Startled, Fred turned to his right and froze. Scooby stood there all right, but it wasn't the same canine that he remembered. Scooby's hackles were up, his teeth were bared in a savage snarl, his eyes gleamed yellow with barely restrained fury, his body was covered in a dark green vest and a deep growl came from his throat. Daphne thought it the most frightening sight she'd ever seen, and Fred clearly agreed with her for he leapt back and reared in fear, front legs flailing out.

Scooby, for his part, simply slid down the embankment with the grace of a hunting leopard, seemingly aloof to Freddy and the other centaurs. He went to the tree and cut Shaggy down, who fell with a loud crash and "oof!"

"What....what happened to him?" Freddy gasped. He rubbed his chest, as if massaging his heart back into beating.

"We've all changed, Fred. You have too, apparently." Velma replied from where she was picking Shaggy up off the ground. Her rifle was held loosely in her hands, but everyone could see her finger still on the trigger. No one doubted she could pull that up faster than a striking cobra and hit her target.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Fred laughed slightly. His eyes strayed back behind them. "I guess I should start at the beg-what happened to my van?!" he gasped.

Shaggy got up. "Like, it's a little different now, that's all." He said calmly.

"A little?! I've never seen it look like that before! It looks ready for war!"

"It is." Shaggy said shortly. "She's armored, armed, and dangerous. Zeus, Hera and the rest of them are in for a nasty surprise when they tangle with us.

Fred looked at Shaggy in new wonder. Daphne wondered what he thought of the lean, defiant teen standing there, so different from the Shaggy of old.

Whatever he thought, Freddy had obviously changed a great deal himself. He seemed...older. More beaten down. His eyes no longer held the same eagerness that'd been there before. Daphne didn't think he looked defeated, not just yet. But the fire in him seemed damped. She briefly wondered what he had seen or endured, then shuddered. When the Greek gods were involved, anything was possible.

"Well, why are you here?" Fred asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"To find you. Well, the missing ones at least." Velma admitted. "We thought you were still a hawk. We've kept an eye out for you, but none of us knew where to start looking."

"Well, I wasn't a hawk for long." Fred told them. "I was turned into a centaur less than a month after being a hawk.

"Why?" Velma asked.

"Didn't know at first. Then when the others started to arrive here, I guess to keep them comforted or something. I came up with a system of traps to keep people out and provide us with some warning of visitors. I even set up some to try and catch the gods, but they just avoid them." He sounded frustrated. "Their....remonstrations have been painful." He rubbed the back of his head. "The last few were given with the warning that I would not like what would happen next time, so I pulled a lot of the closer traps away. They don't work, and a couple of the newer members have gotten caught in a couple of them and hurt." He sounded angry, but more with himself than anyone.

"That's all right Fred." Daphne spoke up for the first time. "Really, it is."

“Daphne! I haven’t seen you in forever. How are you?” Fred asked excitedly.

“I’m fine, Fred.” Daphne laughed. “I’ve had my babies. Twins, Hawkeye and Sunlilly.”

A shadow passed over Fred, and he turned away.

“Oh, that’s good.” He said vaguely. “You guys should go, the gods will be showing up with another member here soon enough.

“We’re not leaving Fred.” Velma said quietly. “We’re here to stop them.”

Fred gave a hollow laugh. “Stop them? Velma, they are extremely powerful. There’s no such thing as ‘stopping them’. They mean to bring back magic in the world, and all that once was myth shall walk under the sun again, and worshipers will flock back to the temples. Do you think this city is the only one they’ve targeted? They mean to take all of Coolsville, that’s true, but also several more cities. Each god has his own domain that they want refilled.”

“We shall have to warn them.” Velma said matter-of-factly. “But you are wrong. They are powerful yes, but they aren’t God. They have their weaknesses. Humility, for one thing. Their very arrogance will be their downfall.”

“Is that right, Miss Dinkley?” came a honeyed voice from behind. Everyone turned to see Hera standing on the roof of the Mystery Machine, clad in a flowing toga with the delicate pink diadem. A slight sneer marred her otherwise perfect face, framed in locks of flowing brown hair.

“Yes.” Velma barked, swinging the rifle in one smooth movement and pulling the trigger. The shot went true, zinging through the air where Hera had stood and hitting the back of a limb. However, instead of simply putting a crater in the limb like Daphne expected, it exploded! A white light burst from the impact and incinerated the tree, turning it completely to ash.

Everyone stared where the tree had been, even Hera who now stood next to Daphne. They heard the slow intake of her breath.

“So.” She managed to say. “You’ve come up with some enchantments to face us at least. This could be...inconvenient.”

A thunderclap interrupted any reply anyone could have made. The earth heaved beneath their feet, tumbling all of them to the ground except Hera. Ears ringing, head pounding, Daphne looked up to see Zeus standing on the fallen tree, clad in a toga with a lightning bolt in one hand. Daphne had never put much stock in the word “smite”, but that was exactly needed here, Zeus looked ready to do some smiting of his own, and Daphne groped for her pistol. The cool butt filled her hand. Yes!

“I will not allow some puny...mortal to interrupt our game!” Zeus thundered. He aimed the bolt at Shaggy and Scooby.

“No, I will!” Daphne shouted as she pulled the trigger, more to distract him than anything else. The gun bucked in her hand, the bullet missed its mark and struck the bolt of lightning. With a flash and a roar, it exploded. The blast impacted the Mystery Machine and made it bounce, but thanks to Shaggy’s armoring frenzy, that was all it did. The tree however, was not so lucky. It had a huge crater that nearly snapped it in too. With a creak and crash, its weight finished the job and it hit the forest floor.

“Raaargh!” Zeus bellowed in surprise.

“HA HA!” Hera laughed. “It looks like your play toy fought back. What do you say to that?”

“I’ll murder her!” He shook with rage. He opened his hand and another bolt formed.

“No!” Velma shouted as Zeus drew back to throw. Daphne struggled to bring her pistol around, but already she knew she wasn’t going to make it.

Hawkeye! Sunlilly! I’m soooooorry! She screamed mentally as she braced for the blast.

“Graaah!” Zeus cried in pain. Scooby had launched himself off the Mystery Machine when no one was looking and latched onto his arm. The bolt fell from his grasp and bright silver blood flowed from around his bite.

“Blood.” Daphne gasped. “So they can bleed!”

“That’s it! Now’s our chance!” Shaggy shouted, grabbing up his pistol and firing. Velma was next to him, and Daphne made the third, pouring fire on where Zeus was busy trying to shake Scooby free. With one powerful jerk, the Great Dane went flying, landing in some distant bushes with a yelp.

“Scooby!” Shaggy shouted, but he held his ground. Firing on.

Several spurts of blood were showing now on the god’s torso from their mark, Velma’s leaving the biggest holes in vital areas (mostly the heart, but one went right between his eyes) the other wounds showing sporadically.

With a hoarse scream of rage, Zeus vanished from sight.

“Yes!” came the collective cry.

“No!” Hera shouted. With a cry, she turned on Velma and Shaggy, launching her attack from a completely unexpected quarter. No one could intercept the spear of purple light it seemed. Shaggy and Velma threw themselves aside, but to slow!

Fred jumped in front of the bolt, rearing in defiance and fright and giving a neighing call. The bolt struck him head on, bathing him in purple light. When it ebbed, he stood there slightly stunned, but otherwise unhurt.

“Transformation blasts!” Daphne shouted. “Watch out!”

“Oh, more than that.” Hera promised grimly. “I’m going to make your friends suffer under their transformations. And the worst part of it is, they’ll enjoy it. Only you, Daphne, will remember who they once were, and I hope you choke on that!”

She vanished and reappeared in another spot, hurling yet another spear of purple light. Again Fred blocked it, and the third Daphne did with her own body. She felt glad she didn’t feel any different when the light faded from her eyes.

Velma and Shaggy stayed behind Fred and Daphne, firing from under their bellies or around them as best they could, constantly ducking behind like archers behind shields. Which in fact they were. Daphne and Fred kept constantly on the move, angling to put their bodies between Hera and their friends.

“Stop moving!” Hera screamed at last, pulling her hand upwards like she was clawing at something. The ground bulged and cracked under Daphne’s feet, sending her and Velma flying. They collided with Shaggy, but Fred had managed to dodge in time.

“Now I have you!” Hera cackled.

“No you don’t!” Fred shouted. He ran towards her, a sapling in his hands he had evidently ripped from the ground.

“You! You and your traps! You and your leadership! Well, your days as leader of this herd are over Fred Jones!” Hera shouted, easily dodging the sapling. She smote him on the temple with a blast of magic. “From now on, this is your life!”

Fred’s voice changed pitch mid-scream, becoming high and feminine. The light disappeared from Fred’s form and Hera laughed with delight.

Daphne gasped. Where Fred had stood was...Fred? A female centaur shivered in surprise. Her hair was yellow, but his coat had turned a deep maroon, which set off his blond tail wonderfully. Her face had some of Fred to them, but they were softer, more feminine, and her chest was full and shapely. She squealed in fright and surprise.

“No!” Shaggy shouted. He tackled Hera who’d ended up standing next to him in her leaping about. They went down in a tangle of limbs. The goddess clearly hadn’t expected that, for she landed with a painful whoosh of air. Shaggy pinned her arms and legs with his own.

“Yay! We’ve got her pinned!” Daphne shouted happily. Velma raced up with her rifle, a relieved smile on her face.

Hera’s cold laugh stopped them. With almost casual ease, she ripped her arms free of Shaggy’s grasp and sent him hurtling backwards, the purple light already enveloping him. When he landed, he stood as a proud centaur. Lean and rangy as before, his body had the proud look of an American Mustang, strong and enduring. Other than that, he seemed mostly unchanged. Except his eyes, which now had a strange intensity about them.

“Well, I can say no other mortal has ever touched me in such a manner. You are now leader of this herd for your courage. And for your affrontery, you have lost much of your silly human foibles. But,” she added as she dodged Velma’s vengeful shot. “You deserve a mare every bit as deserving of you. So, here you go.”

Daphne lunged forward to protect her friend. Velma turned to her, a look of hopelessness on her face. “Not like this.” She whispered. “Don’t let me end like this.” The light enveloped her.

“No!” shouted Daphne. But it was too late. Velma stood there as a strawberry-roan centaur. A good mustang body, with a brown tail to match her hair, and no glasses. She had an uncomprehending look in her eyes. She looked around bemusedly until her gaze fell on Shaggy. Then unbridled lust filled them, and she sauntered coyly over to him. Murmuring softly, though it didn’t seem to be any words that Daphne recognized as such, just strange vocalizations.

“Like I said mortal, this is my idea of revenge for your arrogance in challenging us. Nothing further will I do to you, but Daphne,”

Daphne looked up, tears rolling down her face as she stared at the cold eyes drilling into her.

“Don’t try my patience again. If you do, it’s not you who will physically suffer my wrath, but those brats of yours. Do I make myself clear.”

“No, not my children.” Daphne half-sobbed. “Anything but that!”

“Then don’t make any more trouble, okay?”

Daphne hung her head. "I promise not to make any more trouble for you than I already have." She vowed.

"Very good. Then I suggest you head home, and let Shaggy consolidate his claim over Fredrica and Velma here." The goddess laughed. Daphne raised her eyes in horror, but the Goddess had already vanished.

Daphne looked to see the truth of her words, and winced. Fredrica was standing stock still except for excited shivers as Shaggy, without a trace of human sentience or thought, walked around her stiffly and slowly, pausing to touch her on her breasts or her lips, While Velma hung around the side, eagerly waiting her turn, and occasionally bumping up against Fredrica's other side and rubbing along it.

Daphne turned to run and encountered Scooby standing on the tree, one paw hanging limply in front of him, his eyes horrified.

"Scooby!" She cried. "At least you're all right, except for your paw!" She reached out to take it, and Scooby held it unresisting for her. The wound didn't look bad, there seemed to be no break in it, but she desperately wanted to get him back to town and have her parents take him in to be looked at.

"Raggy, Rone. Relma, rone." Scooby said miserably.

"Yes." Daphne sobbed. "They are Scooby. I can't help them, but you can! You haven't promised the gods anything! It's got to be up to you. But I don't know how." She admitted. "But I've got to get you back to the stable to be looked at." For a moment she looked back at the circling centaurs (the others having vanished when Hera had first appeared), before resolutely turning away. "They'll be fine." She whispered.

Placing Scooby across her back, his injured paw down her flank, she turned and walked away from the Coolsville Mine, pausing to close the doors of the Mystery Machine tightly. As her fingers lingered on the door handle, she had a flash of the van sitting there, rust streaks along its sides, ferns growing higher than the flat wheels, one light cracked, the others sun-faded with the searchlight cocked at a funny angle. The windshield was cracked and mold covered the seats and computer. But when she pulled her hand away, the image vanished, and the van looked like it had before; tough, armored, and ready for action.

"This is the end of Mystery Inc." she whispered. "It's over."

She walked slowly from the defeat of her friends, hiking to the top of the ridge. She didn't even pause when she started down the other side. Along her trail of hoof prints were small bits of mud, scattered here and there from the tear drips of her face.

CHAPTER 5: DEFEAT

Shaggy barely remembered being human. Heck, he barely remembered his friends or his family. All that mattered to him right now was the blond filly in front of him about to become his broodmare. His favorite mare already pranced alongside him, eager to welcome her sister to the herd. Shaggy struggled to remember her name, but it refused to come. It was unimportant after all. She was his, and that was all that needed to be known about her. In fact, he would prove it again after he had finished with this small girl.

The centaurette in front of him was more than ready. The careful strokes on her breasts had told her his intentions, as well as the gentle nips along her neck. Now he was more than ready to make her his. He could feel his erection dangling underneath him, hard and huge. It was time.

With a grunt of effort he reared slightly and stepped forward, pushing his front half onto her back. The blond centaurette gasped at the feel of the unfamiliar weight there, pinning her to him. In moments, she would be unable to move as he spitted her on his iron rod. Shaggy rocked his back legs, but couldn't find the entrance he sought.

Sudden hands on him made him look back to see his prize mare guiding him to the other girl's entrance. With a grumble of gratitude, he stroked into her velvet warmth in one swift motion. The centaur screamed in amazed delight as she changed from filly to mare in the space of a moment. She groaned and moaned at the feel of him in her, joining with Shaggy's cries of contentment. Her sheath pulsed around him in erotic massage, making him bigger if possible, stretching the tight tunnel to its widest point. Soon of course, when the foals began dropping, that tunnel would be much bigger, but for now the sheath had been spread to its maximum girth.

Shaggy pistoned in and out, determined to finish this and get on to his favorite, the wonderful mare that was already playing with the breasts of her sister, trying to get her to reach her height of pleasure. It was wonderful that she was taking such care for her, but really, what did it matter? The small one was learning her rightful place in the hierarchy and it was below her, his favorite!

The thought became interrupted as the little broodmare shook and twisted, the tunnel clamping down so hard on his in-thrust as to hold him in place. The intense feeling made him explode deep inside her, planting his seed firmly in her womb. She was sure to bear him many fine foals, though he expected many more matings before she showed any sign of pregnancy.

Without further ado, the centaur pulled back out of his broodmare, intending now to take the one he longed for. She seemed eager as well, for she met his fiery kiss with one of his own as the broodmare slumped to the ground, overwhelmed by what had happened to her.

His ignored her, focusing instead on his beloved. Raining hot kisses down her throat and breasts, backed by gentle nips to show his feeling and desire for her. She responded eagerly, and he knew he wouldn't hold out long. But for her, he would make every effort to do so.

Knowing her sensitive breasts would make her pleasure mount to its peak, he focused on them. His hands roamed them freely, holding them and playing with the nipples before raising them to his mouth and devouring their rosy caps. She responded exactly as he had hoped, twitching and dancing, her arms enfolding his head and holding him there, forcing him to suckle. He chuckled, his mare was so demanding!

His rod, hard once more, throbbed with impatience, and he feared he would debase himself in her eyes by releasing his precious seed in the dirt. Regretting not being able to bring her peak, he pulled away from her breast and rubbed his body down hers as he strode quickly to her back. She smiled and nickered at him, pulling her tail to the side (not by hand, but her eagerness allowed her great control over it) and offering herself freely.

He took her offer, pushing himself onto her back. She too gasped at his weight, but this was one of welcome; like coming home after being long away. He had no trouble sliding into her moist sheath. She was stovepipe hot and her core muscles stroked him eagerly. She whinnied and moaned, pranced her front feet in her eagerness as his hands pulled her head back to rain more kisses on her exposed throat. His free hand slid down to her ripe breast, cupping the shaking orb. The soft flesh pressed out of his hard fingers as it filled his palm. She shivered in delight at his move. Harder and harder he stroked, striving to keep from finishing his lovemaking until she had hit her peak.

Almost frantically, he slid his other hand to her other breast, teasing the nipple there as he trusted her to keep her head back so his kisses and nips on her neck could continue. She gasped in and out, seemingly so close and yet not quite showing herself to be at the peak.

Just when he thought he wouldn't be able to endure any longer, as he thrust in the last time and his seed flowed and filled her body to capacity, she bucked and gasped under him, screaming her lust and pleasure to the world. At last!

With a tired sigh, he pulled out of his favorite, and she turned around and rubbed herself along her body, placing his hand along her flank. He thought of the seed that might have taken root in there, growing in her body. It was a heady thought, and he rubbed her gently. He kissed her lips and along her freckled cheeks.

A soft cough interrupted him, and he saw his broodmare standing at attention near him, clearly nervous and unsure what to do now. He snorted commandingly, this was no time for laxity in the ranks! There were others about, he could smell them now his ardor had cooled. They had best move further off, he wasn't strong enough to challenge them but he could evade them. And his mares would make him a beautiful herd, his favorite in particular, he would treat well for a long time. The other he would also treat well, but she was his broodmare, not his favorite. She would learn her place in the hierarchy. Oh yes, she would.

Daphne's father stood at the door of the stable as the sun sank again over the horizon. He was deeply worried, there was no doubt about that. It had been five days since his daughter and her friends had driven off. Five days and four nights of long worry and fear, trying to keep their concern away from the children. All had been very quiet with them at least; he'd never met more well-behaved children who seemed desperately anxious to please them. Not that they could do anything but! They were everybody's dream child. Painfully smart and clever, surprisingly nimble and their manners were divine. He noticed an extremely protective streak in the boy over his sister, and he approved wholeheartedly. A man should always defend his family.

A man should always defend his family. Then what are you doing here Bob? You let your daughter go into a dangerous situation while you sat here and played babysitter. You never should have let her go. He muttered at the words, wanting to drive them out, but it was too late. They were exactly what he wanted to say.

"I've got to go looking for her. Tonight." He muttered to himself. "But where do I go? They didn't tell me where they went, and I forgot to ask. Bob, you are a fool."

He made up his mind to go west, in the same direction they had driven off, when he remembered the map he'd seen in the tack room. It had obviously turned into a headquarters of some kind, and on the table there lay a large map of Coolsville and the surround, with two red marks on it.

He went inside to take a look. Yep, there it was. One mark stood on Haunted Island, the other at the old Coolsville Mining complex.

"Hmm, they didn't go to the island. I'm sure of that. They would have had to sneak her past the docks, and that would have been impossible. They must have gone up to the mine. I'll go there, first."

He went in search of his wife. He found her in Daphne's stall. They'd moved some comfortable chairs there as well as a large air mattress so they could sleep with the children. Athena was holding her granddaughter's hand as she hummed an old lullaby. He thought it was "Baby on the Bough" or something like that, but wasn't sure. He didn't have time to ask though.

"Athena, can I speak with you a minute?" He asked calmly. He made up a quick excuse to cover it, something that wouldn't worry the kids. "I've had a talk with our investment banker, and I need your opinion on getting a couple more parcels next to the stable so the kids have more room."

"Sure dear." She stood quickly, passing the brush to Sunlilly with a "Don't go away, sweetheart. We'll be right back."

Outside the stable, he told her what he'd decided in a whispered conversation. She looked gravely for a moment, staring in the dark in the direction of the mountains.

"Your right, Robert. We should have gone a long time ago to help, but now we can't leave the children. Whoever Daphne went to face may come looking for them. We'll have to leave." She decided firmly.

"Where would we go?" Robert asked, frowning.

"I'll have James come up with a truck and trailer. Then we'll drive to the airport and board our private jet tomorrow night. From there, we'll leave a flight plan for our condo in the Bahamas, but instead we'll have Peter take us to Sweden and our lodge there. It's remote enough, I think, that one would have a hard time finding it, and we should be safe enough there."

He nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good idea. Depending on what I find, and when I get Daphne back, we'll join you there. Even if she comes back tonight, we should go there. At least this way, she'll be out of danger for a while."

Her eyes widened. "I think you spoke better than you knew! Look!"

He spun around. There, coming through the gloom, Daphne walked towards them from the road. Her head was bowed, her arms swung robotically at her sides, and on her back a large black shape hung unmoving.

"Daphne!" Robert yelled, running towards them.

"Robert! Don't alarm the children! Bring her inside quickly, I'll put the children to sleep." Athena called gently behind him. He didn't wonder how she would do that (She always carried some of her sleeping pills with her in case she got the case of jitters).

When he caught up with Daphne, he realized she hadn't even heard him. Her eyes never left the road and she walked with grim determination. He doubted she even realized where she was, so determined to reach the stable and her children. It was a little frightening. What was worse was the limp body of that dog, Scooby-Doo, on her back. He didn't seem to be breathing either, and a quick glance back the way they'd come gave no sign of anybody else either.

They've lost their fight. He realized numbly. *And in a very bad way.*

Hurriedly, he grabbed her hand. She started and seemed to notice him for the first time. Placing his fingers to his lips, he hustled her back up the path to the stable.

When he got her in, the drugs had already done their gentle work. Athena came out from the stall, leaving the two sleeping forms behind them.

"Daphne!" She gasped, coming to a stop as she viewed her daughters scratched hide, wearied body and shattered look.

"The kids." She mumbled. "Are the kids all right. Hawkeye, oh Sunlilly, I had to. I had to. Forgive me." She collapsed. Scooby went rolling onto the floor and stirred. He was alive at least, but Bob had no time for him. His concern was all on his daughter. His wife already had swooped down and taken her into her arms. That left him free to check the rest of her for wounds. Other than the scratches that were bleeding slightly, he didn't find anything else horribly wrong.

"The kids. The kids." She kept saying over and over, barely audible in her exhaustion.

"They're fine, honey. They're fine. They're just asleep. They're just asleep. You'll be with them soon, you can sleep with them." His wife's voice sobbed back. He'd never seen her so dangerously close to the edge. "We'll take you somewhere, somewhere safe. You'll see. You'll be safe again."

"Safe. Safe." Daphne muttered, her head drooping. "Yes, safe. Deal made. Others gone. Minds gone. Kids safe. Punishing me. Why? Why?" she asked slowly. "Why do they hate me?"

"I don't know. I don't know." His wife babbled.

With pleading and effort, they managed to get Daphne on her feet long enough for him to doctor her cuts and clean her up to keep from frightening the children. Then they took her into the stall and laid her next to her babies. She immediately laid an arm across both of them, pulling them to her belly and bending her torso around in a display of amazing flexibility. Her tail swished around on the other side, enveloping the twins protectively in her circle.

With that, Bob turned to Scooby to find him gone, the door of the stable opened. He rushed out, but all that was left were paw prints heading towards the forest. He called him for a while, but when nothing was heard he walked back into the barn. Uttering a prayer to God for Scooby's safe deliverance, he focused on the task at hand. His wife was already waiting for him in the tack room.

"We're leaving in the morning." He rumbled.

"Good." She said.

"We'll have James come and get us, and then have Peter meet us at the airport. We'll be airborne and on our way to Sweden in a day."

“Dear, what about this?” She held up a book.

Squinting at the title, he could make out **WARDS OF PROTECTION**. He looked thoughtful.

“Bring it.” He decided. “It could be important. Somebody turned them into centaurs, somebody with magic. Perhaps some wards in the lodge might be a good thing.”

“They just might and dear.”

“Yes dear?”

“If somebody comes after our baby again, or our grandchildren, let’s make sure they never come back again, shall we?”

“That we shall certainly do.”

At police headquarters, Detective Farnsworth stared at the mountain of gold or crap on his desk. All the evidence piled by Mystery Incorporated lay there, as well as Velma’s thumb drive and security camera tapes from the museum and even a slim gold ring suitable for a woman’s hand. That ring frightened him the most, for what it could represent.

All the beat officers and other detectives were gathered around, looking at the empty screen of his computer where the last video had just played. The chief himself looked at it with stunned eyes. Farnsworth would wager his badge that in thirty years on the force the chief had never come across anything like this before.

“Well, what do you think, chief.” One of the younger detectives finally said. Her voice broke the spell that held them captive and there was a massed intake of breath as people remembered to breathe again.

“What do I think?” The chief said. “What do you think? That’s what I want to know.”

“I’d like to say it’s a clever hoax, but I can’t.” the detective said. “There’s just too much that adds up. The incident at the Museum with this ring. That was reported, then an inquiry was made after the gang captured that thief in the basement, and the shattered statue. There were strange marks all over the place that night. I was on the beat at the time, and I swore then it looked like somebody had ridden a horse all over the place. Then the second encounter when Jones and Miss Blake vanished. There was another incident written up in the museum, and right after that O. Pottery left the museum suddenly and mysteriously. No records were found of her at all. And now this.” She pointed to the computer and the evidence.

“Well, I’d like to know a bit more, and find some proof myself before calling it real.” Scoffed another. “Surely it’s just a hoax, and those kids are probably at the bottom of it. Though how they got all the other people to go along with it is beyond me.”

“It’s no hoax.” Farnsworth decided. “I know those kids, they’d never do anything like this. And they were going to try and stop it. That’s why Velma was here and why she ran out. She didn’t want to be stopped by us, but she did want to leave evidence behind. Well, it looks like she succeeded. Now, are we too late to help them? That’s my question.”

“Can we help them?” piped up a beat officer. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t think my .38 is good for going up against a god!” There was a chorus of agreements.

“You’re right about that.” The chief agreed. “And I do believe this text.” He shrugged. “This is out of our abilities and pay grade.”

He looked up at one of the receptionists, his face unusually grave. “Maxine, get me Agent Trigger on the line, will you? He’s at the FBI building in the capitol.”

“Yes sir.” Maxine said quietly, grabbing the telephone and dialing.

“What are you doing sir?” Farnsworth asked quietly.

“I’m calling the Feds in. They’ll be able to handle this, if anyone is.” The chief told him. He went to his office to take the call.

Yeah, the might be. But are they ready to believe? Farnsworth wondered as he looked at the small black thumb drive attached to his monitor.