

The Oracle of Delphi

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Jenna and Stacie walked along a bubbling stream and approached a blue pool of water nestled in the rocks east of the Delphi temple.

Jenna said, “Oh my God. It’s the Kassotis Spring. I’m going in.”

The bright orange glow of sunrise spilled over the rocky crests of Mount Parnassus. A shroud of morning fog plunged down to a green gorge, then swept upwards to rocky brown hills in distant focus. The cool air carried the sound of calling birds and water gurgling over rocks. A handful of Doric columns stuck skyward like mangled fingers and glinted pink and gray in the early sunlight. Jenna was blonde with gray eyes. Stacie was a redhead with a pug nose.

Stacie grabbed her head. “What are you doing? You’re insane.”

Jenna threw her panties on her pile of clothes. She put her foot into the water. “Jesus, it’s cold.”

“Not so loud.”

Jenna sank into the current, and the water enveloped her. “It’s not bad once you’re in.” Jenna lay back and floated. She took long breaths. Her blonde hair spread on the water like a lily pad.

Stacie broke the trance. “Jenna, let’s not get arrested on our vacation.”

Jenna emerged slowly, her body flushed and dripping. Stacie threw her the towel they’d brought from the hotel.

Jenna patted herself. “I went instantly into meditation. For hundreds of years oracles purified themselves in preparation for Apollo’s divine inspiration.”

“I’m sure it was orgasmic. Thank God no one saw you. I can hear the newscast, ‘Cops picked up a modern day Dionysian Maenad this morning. The woman was naked and suspected drunk.’ By the way, I suggest some all-body tanning work. Your shiny white ass nearly blinded me.”

Jenna smirked.

Jenna and Stacie picked their way along the jagged rocks and scrubby brush to the temple. A large black altar stood at the foot of the temple’s east entrance.

Jenna put her arm around her friend. “The priest brings a supplicant to where we are now. A tethered goat bleats. The priest grabs the animal’s horns and slits its throat. At the far end of the *cella*, a huge ivory and gold cult statue of Apollo looms, dimly lit by oil lamps. A floating mist rises through an opening in the marble floor. Below, the oracle in gilt-edged white sits on a bronze tripod that straddles the fissure source of the vapor.”

Stacie smiled. “Then a voice rings out, ‘Zeus the all seeing grants to Athenian prayer that the wooden walls, only, shall not fall but help you and your children.’ Themistocles builds spear ships, there’s the Battle of Salamis, and Xerxes goes home with his tail between his legs.”

Jenna eyed the red-letter sign in both English and Greek that prohibited entrance into the temple ruins.

“Jenna, no.”

“Hell yes.” Jenna scampered past the rope barrier, up the stone ramp, and onto the temple remains.

“Jenna, the Greeks take their antiquities seriously. This isn’t amusing.”

“Either come on or shush.” Jenna’s head shifted quickly, and her eyes lighted on a gap in the block floor. She disappeared into the hole like a rabbit.

Stacie said, “Oh shit.” She turned and looked around. The site was still empty.

The *adyton* had no steps. Jenna dropped down into a gap in the earth. The space was pitch dark with a silence felt in the teeth. She plopped down onto a cool rock. Her heart pounded. A musky sweet scent rose from the earth. Jenna’s breaths were measured. On exhales her body felt heavy. Her mind hummed like a Tibetan incantation, and she heard the flap of birds’ wings high overhead.

She was shaken by a shout.

“Jenna, what the hell are you doing? I can’t see you. Are you all right?”

“Go away.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“I like it here.”

“Please come out. You’re scaring me.”

“Damn.” Jenna shook her head. “Okay. Help me up.”

Stacie reached down and yanked Jenna into the daylight. She didn’t let go of Jenna’s hand until they were off the prohibited area.

“Stop pulling. Now I know how a newborn feels when it’s yanked out of its mother.”

“The baby didn’t volunteer to go into the womb. Do you intend to act this nuts for the entire trip?”

“I was in the holy of holies. It was transcendental.”

“Does the term ‘narcissistic’ mean anything to you? You go down a wormhole and come out the Maharishi Yogi? Give me a break. Let’s get back to Athens.”

As they walked toward the exit, Jenna said, "I'm not taking the bus."

"What does that mean?"

"I have a bad feeling. No bus."

"Is this the enlightenment you received in your cavelet?"

"You can ridicule if you like. No bus."

"So how do we get back?"

"We hitchhike."

"In a foreign country? Do you think all the crazies live in the States?"

"If the driver gives me the creeps, we won't get in."

"Brilliant."

A driver stopped who spoke English. He had a large black mustache. A red, Communist Party hammer and sickle emblem was stuck on his back window.

"You go to Athens?"

Stacie said, "Great guess. Were you down the rabbit hole with my friend Alice?"

"What?"

"Never mind. What's your name?"

"Giorgos. *Hero polli*."

"I'm Stacie, that's Jenna. Thanks for the ride." They both got in.

Giorgos was in his thirties and worked at Coca-Cola Tria Epsilon.

He said, "*Eufaristo* for visiting Greece. So many tourists are afraid to come."

Stacie in the back said, "We hear snippets in the States about the economic crisis.

What's the real story?"

Giorgos shook his head. “Capitalists squeeze their workers like lemons and shield their obscene profits from tax. The old have their pensions cut; young people see no future. Europe and our politicians throw ashes in our eyes. I don’t know what will become of us.”

Jenna’s face began to glow. She raised her hands. “The tears of the people rise to the firmament. Apollo Delphinus will bless a new hero. Ambrosia and nectar will flow again in the land of Hellas.”

Giorgos did a double take at her.

Stacie sighed. “Jenna, what was that?”

Jenna slumped. “Exhausting.”

Stacie said, “Was that some sort of prophecy?”

“If it walks like a prophecy, and quacks . . . Well, you know.”

“When self-absorption leads to fantasy, it’s time to see a doctor.”

Giorgos said to Jenna, “You’re not well?”

Jenna glared at Stacie. “I’m fine.”

Giorgos dropped the girls at the hotel. He refused gas money. “You’re guests in my country. Hospitality is very important in Greece.”

The Hotel Panorama was in the Plaka, the old part of the city. The girls looked up to see the Acropolis; its gray-white marble sparkled against an intense blue sky.

The owner of the hotel, Mr. Papanikolaou, rushed to them. He had a military bearing and a deep scar from ear to chin.

“Ladies, I’m so glad you’re okay. Have you heard? A tour bus from Delphi had a terrible accident on the National Road. It’s on the news.”

Stacie said, “That’s horrible.”

“Yes it’s a *tragodia*. Many were injured. But someone gave you a ride. That’s good fortune.”

Stacie said, “Is the Red Cross collecting money for victims? We’d like to help.”

Mr. Papanikolaou smiled. It softened his scar. “That’s so kind. I’ll find out.” He walked into the hotel.

Jenna tilted her head at Stacie.

Stacie raised her hand. “Don’t say it.”

“I’m not gloating. People have been hurt.”

“It’s well known psychology that when something occurs that we’ve forecasted, we remember but forget all the times our predictions were wrong.”

“Apollo gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy, but no one believed her.”

“Oh please.”

Jenna stopped short. Her face clouded.

Stacie said, “What?”

“Your mother will call.”

Stacie’s cell phone played her mother’s ring tone.

Stacie’s brow furrowed. She hit “speaker” on the phone.

Her mother’s voice was tense. “Stacie, there’s nothing to worry about, but your father had a little incident.”

“Oh my God. What happened?”

Jenna put her hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“Honey, he had some chest pain. We brought him to the hospital for tests, and he’s had a stent put into one of his arteries. The procedure went well. I didn’t want to call until he was able to speak to you. I’ll put him on.”

Her father's voice was hoarse. "Princess, hi."

"Daddy, are you all right?"

"Just a little tired."

"I'll come home on the next plane."

"No I'm fine. Don't ruin your vacation. You've earned it."

Stacie's eyes were wet. "I want to be with you."

Her father said, "Margaret, speak to her."

Her mother came back on the line. "Stacie, your father's okay. Please don't rush back. We'll call tomorrow. Love you."

"Love you." Stacie hung up. She made a small sob. "He sounded weak."

Jenna hugged her friend's shoulders.

Stacie wiped her eyes. She stiffened and looked at Jenna. "How did you know?"

Jenna shrugged. "I just did."

Stacie stared at Jenna.

Jenna broke the silence. "You look uneasy."

"Don't you think what just occurred was eerie?"

Jenna raised her chin. "I suppose."

"What happened to you in Delphi?"

"It was out-of-body. Like I went back two thousand years."

"Something has changed in you, but I just can't believe . . ." Stacie shook her head.

"Never mind."

"Maybe you don't feel like going out tonight?"

"I'd like a little time alone."

"Use the room, I'll go for a run."

Jenna threw on shorts and a tee shirt and headed toward the forest area near the Acropolis. It was warm, there was a scent of pine, and the cicadas were screaming.

A short woman draped in a white lace veil appeared in Jenna's path.

Jenna jerked back like she'd come to the end of her tether.

The woman raised a bony alabaster finger at Jenna. Her voice was a growl. "Why stand there doomed one? Fly to the world's end. Apollo rides in a speeding chariot and will bring you low. Make haste, and bow your heart to grief."

"Who are you? How did you know I speak English?"

The old woman lowered her arm. "I speak in tongues."

"Why is Apollo displeased with me?"

The woman's voice rose. "You've acquired abilities Apollo never intended. This is blasphemy. Relinquish the gift of prophecy before it's too late."

Jenna raised a hand to her mouth.

The woman said, "Do it."

Jenna held her head. "I meant no harm. Please."

"Do it before Apollo strikes you with a flaming arrow."

Jenna raised her eyes to heaven. "I foreswear the power." There was a break in the clouds. A ray of sunlight shone through.

A hatless Greek policeman, about twenty-five, with blue eyes, dressed in a dark uniform appeared. He looked at the old woman with hands on hips. "Alka, are you bothering this young lady?"

The old woman turned her head with arm raised as if warding off evil. She stayed silent.

The policeman turned to Jenna. "I'm sorry if Alka was bothering you."

Jenna's face cleared. Her breathing and pulse rate slowed. "It's okay."

Alka moved away.

He said, "Alka is an Albanian immigrant. She makes a few coins offering prophecies to tourists. She's harmless, but we keep watch to see that she doesn't make a pest of herself."

"Prophecies?"

"Yes, Alka is one of the homeless people hospitals had to release because of budget cuts. It's a shame."

"She's mentally disturbed?"

"I'm afraid she's as crazy as an optimistic Athenian."

"How so?"

"She thinks she's the Oracle of Delphi."

Jenna's face reddened. "How could anyone believe that?"