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Opening extract from

Halo

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Χαπτερ 1

Something was crawling up the beach. It was a turtle, of course, because it was turtle-sized and turtle-shaped and turtles were the only things that ever crawled up this beach. Kyllarus squinted down at it from up on the cliff. The sun, pale golden in the pearly blue dawn sky out to sea, cast its shining path across the water, so smooth now after that wild stormy night. Already it was a little warm on his brown arms and bare chest.

He was meant to be looking for a goat that had wandered off during the night, and he knew his wife, Chariklo, would be waiting: for the goat, for the milk, for Arko to have for breakfast.

Well, who knows? Perhaps the goat had gone down there on to the beach. It was a mad little runaway, always jumping over things and climbing up them.

He peered over the rough cliff edge.

But it was – unlike a turtle. Its movements were wrong, and its shape. And it wasn't the season for turtles to crawl up the beach to lay their soft little eggs in the sand. Nor, for that matter, for baby turtles to crawl back down the beach once they'd hatched.

Plus it was too big to be a turtle.

He decided to go and look.

When he reached the beach, scrabbling slightly over the rocks for which his hooves were *not* designed, he cantered

lightly towards where the turtle was still steadily crawling along.

He stopped and stared.

It was absolutely not a turtle.

For a start it was made of wood. And then, the four legs sticking out were not scaly turtle flippers. They were – well. He wasn't sure what they were. The front two were little arms, like his own, he recognized that – though they were soft and plump and very smooth and pale and very very small. The back two flummoxed him. He had never seen anything like them. They were like the arms, but stronger-looking, and bending differently. He stared and stared, and after a while he sighed deeply.

The not-turtle heard the sigh, and stopped its determined voyage up the sand.

Kyllarus, holding his breath, continued to watch.

The not-turtle pushed itself up on its arms, raised itself – and toppled, flopping over on to its back. As it did so, it let out a wail.

And that, even if he hadn't now seen inside the wooden turtle shell, Kyllarus recognized.

'It's a baby!' he gasped, and he trotted over to it. He picked it up, still in its shell, and began to cuddle it and sing the little song he always sang to his son, Arko, when he fell or bumped into something. He held it against his chest, and he could feel its little limbs moving and kicking against him. *Strong!* he thought with a smile. The baby kept on yelling.

He held it out at arm's length, and got his first look at its face: bright red, furious, howling, with thick black tufty

curly hair flopping wetly over it. Cautiously with his thumb Kyllarus pushed the hair back. There was a small starfish stuck behind one tiny ear.

'By all the nymphs on this beautiful beach,' he said. 'If you are a human baby, then why are you wandering about all alone in a turtle shell?' So he laid it down on the beach and began to unravel it.

The shell, he decided, was some kind of cradle. The child had been strapped in, with a long cloth wrapped round it, which had come loose, and leather straps across the front, which hadn't. 'Well, that's probably saved your life, little turtle,' he murmured as he undid the straps and took out the child. The cloth, sodden, limp and dripping wet sand, fell away, and there it was: a cross little human baby with fish in its hair and a very very wet nappy.

Chariklo, when she saw the baby tucked under Kyllarus's arm, the goat under the other – he'd found it eating figs down by the spring – and the cradle on his head like a helmet as there was no other way to carry it, gave a little shriek and dropped the woollen blanket she had been folding.

'What is that?' she squawked.

'It's a baby!' he said cheerfully. 'I found it on the beach, sea-born like Aphrodite. What do you think?'

'I think it's a human,' said Chariklo, and she came closer to have a look.

Kyllarus dropped the goat (which ran off again, bleating) and took the cradle off his head.

'Here you are,' he said, and he handed the baby to Chariklo.

Chariklo held it in her hands and peered at it. It glared at her with its ferocious green eyes, kicked madly and yelled.

'How lovely!' cried Chariklo. 'Do you think we can keep it?'

'Of course,' said Kyllarus. 'What else? It's clearly clever, and lucky, because it managed to ride the stormy seas in its little cradleboat last night, and then, when it came to land, it turned over and clambered up the sand – so it's strong too. Maybe it's a new hero, like in the old days!'

'It can be a friend for Arko,' said Chariklo. 'It must be hungry, too. Bring some milk, sweetheart. Oh, Mama Demeter, where's that goat now?'

Kyllarus cantered over and grabbed it, just as it thought it had made good its escape. 'Oh no you don't,' he said. 'Come here and be milked for our new baby.'

Chariklo was unwrapping the infant. She took off its sea-sodden nappy. 'It's a girl!' she said. 'Hello, little girl. Oh! Kyllarus – look.'

'What is it?' said Kyllarus, turning to her and squirting a bit of warm smelly goat's milk on his leg as he did so.

Because of the sand and the cloth and the wet hair, Kyllarus had not noticed before what Chariklo now pointed out. Knotted on to a fine leather thong about the baby's neck was a tiny gold amulet.

'Look, it's a little owl.'

'So it is,' he said. 'Look at those big eyes. Well, maybe she belongs to Athena, not to Aphrodite after all.'

Chariklo was wiping the baby's damp, sandy face with a clean cloth.

She gasped. 'Oh – Kyllarus! Look at this!'

'What now?' said Kyllarus. 'This baby is full of surprises.'

Kyllarus looked, and gave a little gasp himself.

'What in all Hellas can that mean?' he asked.

It was not surprising that he hadn't seen it before, for her face had been very dirty and the mark was fine and delicately done. But it was unmistakable. Across her forehead was a small, feathery, blue-black symbol, right between her brows, looking almost as if it were part of them. A down stroke, and two semicircles crossing it, the lower, wider one cradling the smaller upper one, lying as it were on their backs, like two new moons speared to the ground by an arrow; or a tree with four wide, symmetrical branches; or a four-armed woman spinning in a dance, her hands held out and up in joy.

'It doesn't come off,' said Chariklo, wiping at it.

'How odd!' said Kyllarus. 'To tattoo a baby! It must mean something, but Zeus only knows what.'

Chariklo gazed at it a while longer. 'It's not a symbol I've ever seen,' she said. 'It doesn't even look Greek, does it?'

'Maybe our baby is foreign,' said Kyllarus.

'Maybe she is,' said Chariklo. 'She'll have a foreign mother somewhere, weeping and sighing because she has lost her baby . . .'

'Well, maybe,' said Kyllarus, and Chariklo bit her lip, and said, 'Oh – yes, I suppose . . . Well, wherever she's from, she still needs her breakfast.' Without thinking, Chariklo put the baby on the floor.

The baby promptly fell over, and squawked indignantly.

'Oh no!' cried Chariklo, who, being accustomed to

Centaur babies, hadn't realized that human babies couldn't walk. Centaur babies can stand up on their slender little foal legs soon after being born – though their human torsos are still quite soft and weak. They don't start galloping about until they are around a year old, and then they get into all sorts of trouble, because their horse legs are quick and strong to take them into situations their human toddler heads aren't wise enough to deal with.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' she squeaked, and hurriedly scooped the baby up again. 'Are you all right? Oh dear . . . I wonder how you're meant to carry her,' she said to Kyllarus. 'It can't be like this,' she mused, holding the baby in both hands, 'or human parents would never get anything done . . . Oh! I know!' She had an idea, and slipped the baby on to her hip, just where her human torso met her horse flank. 'There. That's better,' she said, holding the baby in place with her left arm and feeling the little legs wrapping round her waist. She strolled across and filled a basin with water from their well. 'I wonder how old she is,' she said.

'Hard to tell with a human,' said Kyllarus.

The baby, meanwhile, had discovered Chariklo's hair, which was long and curly and dark red, and fell down her back in some rather untidy plaits, one of which the little one was now chewing. Chariklo disentangled her, put her in the basin and poured fresh water over her. She made sure there was no sand left in the creases of her knees and neck, and no more fish in her hair. Then she rubbed olive oil all over her, and poured some of the warm goat's milk into the little clay bottle she used for giving water to Arko. She put

the cloth teat over its spout, and she cradled the little turtle-child in her arms to feed her. *How strange*, she thought, *to be able to hold your whole baby!* It was rather nice – cuddlier than a Centaur foal baby. *She's quite normal*, she thought, *if you don't look below her middle.* Chariklo peeked again at the funny little human legs, smooth and soft and pinky-gold. She started giggling.

'She's really nothing like a turtle,' she said. 'We could call her after one of the sea nymphs. Amphitrite, or Halosydne, or Amathea – Oh! Is that Arko?'

A cry had caught her ear. It was indeed Arko, waking up in the open vine-covered arbour where they all slept in the summer. 'Fetch him, darling, would you?' she asked, and Kyllarus brought him over, holding his hand, as he wobbled on his long baby legs.

'You feed him and I'll feed her,' said Kyllarus, and they folded their legs under them and sat in the shade together, the four of them, as the sun rose higher up the sky, and the babies gulped their milk.



Χαπτερ 2

There are two tribes of Centaur: the Sons of Ixion, who were wild and bad, and the Sons of Cronus, who were wise and kind. In the dawn of time Ixion, who was a human, had a mad passion for Hera, the Queen of the Gods. Her husband, Zeus, the most powerful God of all, made a fake Hera out of clouds to trick him, and Ixion got the cloud-Hera pregnant, and the result was the wild Centaurs. They lived in Thessaly, in Greece, but after getting drunk and trying to steal the bride from a wedding they had to leave there. Those that weren't killed in the fight wandered off into the woods, and some of them died, and some, it is said, turned into bandits, and some, it is said, turned into horses.

One of them, though, was lucky enough to meet one of the wise Centaurs, a young daughter of Cronus, descendant of Chiron, the wisest Centaur of all, who trained Asclepius, the God of medicine, and the heroes Heracles and Jason and Achilles. Well, the two young Centaurs fell in love, and after a bit of fuss with her family they got married, and he came back to live with her herd. Soon after, the whole herd, in search of peace and quiet, emigrated, leaving Thessaly, crossing the forests and mountains, swimming the deep channel by moonlight to the beautiful and fairly empty island of Zakynthos – but that's another story.

Those two were the great-great-great-great-great-great-

great-grandparents of Kyllarus, and nobody in his herd ever forgot that his family had wild and naughty blood.

So when Arko's two big sisters, Pearl and Lucy, the lovely twins, came prancing into the *agora*,[1] chatting about their new human baby sister, a couple of old ladies said, 'If you'd asked me which family would adopt a human, I could have told you it would be that lot.' Pearl and Lucy didn't care. They carried on about how she was so sweet and lovely and they were going to teach her all the ancient stories and how to plait her hair and oil her skin and read and write and weave and dance and hunt and use the bow and arrow and make honey baklava[2] and perfume out of roses.

The leader of the herd, who was also called Chiron, sent Lucy and Pearl back to get their parents. The whole family came: Kyllarus, Chariklo, Lucy, Pearl, Arko and Grandma. And the baby.

'Chariklo,' asked Chiron. 'What is this?'

Chariklo said, keeping a straight face, 'It's a baby, Chiron.'

'Thank you, Chariklo,' he said. 'I know it's a baby. What is it doing here?'

'Dad thought it was a turtle!' said Pearl.

'It was all rolled up in a cloth with its legs sticking out!' said Lucy.

'We've been thinking probably it fell off a ship,' said Kyllarus, 'during the storm. But somebody loved it. Her, sorry. She had a very nice cloth wrapped round her, and a golden owl round her neck. She wasn't . . . you know . . .'

The Centaurs all went quiet. They knew what he meant. He meant – abandoned.

Sometimes, when humans had too many children, or when they didn't want a girl baby, or they thought the baby was too weak or had something wrong with it, they would just leave it outside, on the hillside, to die.

Several of the Centaurs shivered at the thought. They were kind creatures. In the old days, before the time of Homer the Poet, the Centaurs had quite often taken in abandoned human children. But most of the Centaurs of Zakynthos had never even seen an actual human, and if they had, it was safely far away, at sea, on a boat.

Chiron looked at the baby. She looked back at him – not the furious glare now, because she was clean and dry and full of goat's milk, and furthermore Pearl and Lucy had been tickling her tummy with their long hair, so she was happy. She gave Chiron a big smile with six little teeth in it, and waved her arms at him, and burped.

He smiled back.

'We should have a vote,' he said. 'Put the word out, and we'll vote tonight. And that means everyone!'

'But what's the vote between?' said Chariklo anxiously. 'I mean, what's the alternative? I mean, if the vote says we can't keep her, then . . .'

'We have to have a vote, you know that,' said Chiron. 'It's the law. No one can join the herd without being accepted.'

'But she's an orphan!' said Kyllarus. 'She has nowhere to go. And how would she get there if she did? We can't put her back in her turtle shell and send her back out to sea . . . What's the law on orphans?'

Chiron thought. 'I don't think we have one,' he said.

'Well, why don't we have a vote on that?' said Chariklo. 'A vote to have a law to say we have to look after orphans. And helpless babies.'

'It's our custom, traditionally, after all . . .' said Kyllarus.

That night all the adult Centaurs, after their dinner with their families, came back to the *agora*, and voted without exception to pass a law saying what they all felt in their hearts anyway – that they had to look after orphans and helpless babies.

Halosydne, they decided, would be her name. Pearl and Lucy chose it. It meant 'The Girl Who Was Fed by the Sea', but they thought of it more as 'Saved by the Sea'. 'With a name like that, the sea can never harm her,' they reasoned. Most people called her Halo, but Kyllarus always called her Chelonakimu – my little turtle – or Little Aphrodite, or some other affectionate nickname: Schnussy because that was the noise she made when she pulled at his earlobes; Owly-baby because of her amulet and her big round eyes; Captain Thumpy when she hit her fists against his chest in fury at being picked up and saved from some childhood peril; Dolly Dolphin when she started swimming underwater; Figling when she fell out of the fig tree.

Arko had lots of different names for her too. 'Pigling', at first, when he was jealous of her and was being mean, because she was pink like a pig, and had no proper glossy chestnut horsehide. But as soon as she could run about she was in the sun all day so she didn't stay pink and plump for long – soon she was a fine golden brown all over. Really all over, because she didn't wear clothes in the summer either

– why would she? Chariklo and the other Centaur women wove cloth for cloaks for the Centaurs to wrap around their shoulders when the north winds came, and for Halo they made a chiton[3] because, as Chariklo's mother said, 'She does seem a lot more naked than us, in that delicate skin. The fine, soft cloth that Halo had been wrapped in they put carefully away. 'It would last no time here,' Chariklo said, so she folded it with lavender flowers and wrapped it in another piece of cloth and put it in the stone barn where they stored their nuts and olives and dried grapes and wine. Only occasionally would Chariklo take it out and tell Halo the story of how she was found – a story which delighted all the young Centaurs. They would often ask for it round the fire on winter nights, along with the ancient stories of the Centaurs, and the tales of the Greeks and the Trojans, the heroes and the Gods.

And so it came about that Halo's first memory – one that stayed with her all her life – was of the deep, dark, star-spattered night sky above Zakynthos. It was so beautiful she could hardly bear to close her eyes to sleep. The night sky above her, cool and velvety, was the same deep blue as the deep sea by day. The stars and constellations hung against it so very bright that the patterns they made were printed on her eyes, and when she woke before dawn she saw them hanging on the other side of the sky. The air was cool and the ground beneath her was hard, but the woolly goatskin she lay on was warm and snug. The faint sweet scent of sea lilies rose up from the distant beach on the cool breeze. The quiet voices of the adults drifted over from the fire, where

they sat late into the evening drinking the dark pink wine, which tasted of sunlight and dust. At her back, for her to curl against, was the warm chestnut flank of Arko, her dear friend, gently rising and falling, safe and warm, fast asleep. So her first memory was of something she felt almost every night of her childhood: that peaceful feeling of looking up at the stars, night and morn, warm and snug, with the cool fresh breeze on her nose and Arko beside her.