***Chapter One***

MY FATHER WAS A KING AND THE SON OF KINGS. He was a short man, as most of us were, and built like a bull, all shoulders. He married my mother when she was fourteen and swon by the priestess to be fruitful. It was a good match: she was an only child, and her father’s fortune would go to her husband.

He did not find out until the wedding that she was simple. Her father had been scrupulous about keeping her veiled until the ceremony, and my father had humored him. Of she was ugly, there were always slave girls and serving boys. When at lust they pulled off the veil, the say my mother smiled. That is how they knew she was quite stupid. Brides did not smile.

When I was delivered, a boy, he plucked me from her arms and handed me to a nurse. In pity, the midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me. My mother hugged it. She did not seem to notice a change had been made.

Quickly, I became a disappointment: small, slight. I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing. The best that could be said of me was that I was not sickly. The colds and cramps that sized my peers left me untouched. This only made my father suspicious. Was I a challenging, inhuman? He scowled at me, watching. My hand shook, feeling his gaze. And there was my mother, dribbling wine on herself.

I AM FIVE when it is me father’s turn to host the games. Man gather from as far as Thessaly and Sparta, and our storehouses grow rich with their gold. A hundred servants work for twenty days beating out the racing track and clearing it of stones. My father is determined to have a finest games of his generation.

I remember the runners best, nut-brown bodies slicked with oil, stretching on the track beneath the sun. They mixed together, broad-shouldered husbands, beardless youths and boys, their calves are quickly carved with muscle.

The bull has been killed, sweating the last of its blood into dust and dark bronze bowls. It went quietly to its death, a good omen for the games to come.

The runners are gathered before the dais where my father and I sit, surrounded by prizes we will give to the winners. There are golden mixing bowls for wine, beaten bronze tripods, ash-wood spears tripped with precious iron. But the real prize is in my hands: a wreath of dusty-green leaves, freshly clipped, rubbed to a shine by my thumb. My father has given it to me grudgingly. He reassures himself: all I have to is hold it.

The youngest boys are running first, and they wait, shuffling their feet in the sand for the nod from the priest. They’re in the first flush of growth, bones sharp and spindly poking, against taut skin. My eye catches on a light hand along dozes of dark, tousled crowns. I lean forward to see. Hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold – the circlet of the prince.

He is shorter than others, and still plump with childhood in a way they are not. His hair is long and tied back with leather; it burns against the dark, bare skin of his back. His face, when he turns, is serious, as a men’s.

When the priest strikes the ground, he slips past the thickened bodies of the older boys. He moves easily, his hills flashing pink as licking tongues. Hi wins.

I stare as my father lifts the garland from my lap and crowns him; the leaves seem almost black against the brightness of his hair. His father, Peleus, comes to claim him, smiling and proud. Peleus’s kingdom is smaller than ours, but his wife is rumored to be a goddess, and his people love him. My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me.

“That is what a son should be”.

My hand feel empty with the garland. I watched King Peleus embrace his son. I see the boys toss the garland in the air and catch it again. He is laughing, and his face is bright with victory.

BEYOND THIS, I remember little more than scattered images from my life then: my father frowning on his throne, and cunning toy horse I loved, my mother on the beach, her eyes turned towards the Aegean. In this last memory, I am skipping stones for her, *plink, plink, plink,* across the skin of the sea. She seems to like the way the ripples look, dispersing back to glass.

Or perhaps, it is the sea itself she likes. At her temple a starburst of white gleams like bone, the scar from the time her father hit her with the hilt of a sword. Her toes poke up from the where she was buried them, and I am careful not to disturb them as I search for rocks. I choose one and fling it out, glad to be good at this. It is the only memory I have of my mother and so golden that I am almost sure I have made it up. After all, it was unlikely for my further to have allowed us to be along together, his simple son and simpler wife. And where are we? I do not recognize the beach, the view of coastline. So much has passed since then.

Ravished by Zeus, the king of the gods, himself, disguised as a swan. Nine months later, her womb yielded two set of twins: Clytemnestra and Castor, children of her mortal husband; Helen and Polydeuces, the shining cygnets of the god. But gods were known to be notoriously pure parents, it was expected that Tyndareus would offer patrimony to all.

I did not response to my father’s news. Such things meant nothing to me.

My father cleared his throat, loud in the silent chamber. “We would do we to have her in our family. You will go and put yourself fourth as a suitor”. There was no one else in the hall, so my startled haff of breath was for his ears alone. But I knew better than to speak his discomfort. My father already knew all that I might say: that I was nine, unsightly, unpromising, uninterested.

We left the next morning, our packs heavy with gifts and food for the journey. Soldiers escorted us, in their finest armor. I don’t remember much of the trip – it was overland, trough countryside that left no impression. At the head of the column, my father dictated new orders to secretaries and messengers who rode off in every direction. I looked down at a leather reins, smoothed their nap with my thumb. I did not understand my place

***Chapter two***

I WAS SUMMONDED TO THE KING. I REMEMBER HATING THIS, the long walk up the endless throne room. At the front, I knelt on stone. Some kings choose to have rugs there for the knees of messengers who had long news to tell. My father preferred not too.

“King Tyndareus’ daughter is fimally ready for marriage”, he said.

I knew the name. Tyndareus was king of Sparta and held huge tracts of the ripest southern lands, the kind my father coveted. I have heard of his daughter too, rumored to be the fairest woman in our countries. Her mother, Leda, was said to have been here. It was incomprehensible, as so much of what my father did was. My donkey swayed, and I swayed with him, glad for even this disrtuction.

We are not the first suitors to arrive at Tyndareus’ citadel. The stables were full of horses and mulls, busy with servants. My father seemed displeased with the ceremony afforded us: I saw him rub and hang over the stone of the hearth in our rooms, frowning. I had brought a toy from home, a toys whose legs could move. I lifted one hoof, then the other, imagined that I have ridden him instead of the donkey. A soldier took pety on me and lent me his dice. I clattered them against the floor until they

“Do not disgrace us”, he said.

I heard the great hall before I saw it, the sound of hundreds of voices banging against stone walls, the clatter of goblets and armor. The servants thrown open the windows to try to dampen the sound; they had hung tapestries, wealth indeed on every wall. I have never seen so many mem inside before. Not men, I corrected myself. Kings.

We were called forward to council, seated of benches draped with cowhide. Servants faded backwards, to the shadows. My father’s fingers dug into my collar, warning me not to fidget.

There was violence in that room, showed all sixes in one throw.

Finally, a day came in which my father ordered me bathed and brushed. He had me change my tunic, then change again. I obeyed, though I saw no difference between the purple with gold or crimson with gold. Neither hid my knobby knees. My father looked powerful and severe, his black beard slashing across his face. The gift that we were presented to Tyndareus stood ready, a beaten gold mixing bowl embossed with the story of the princess Danae. Zeus had wooed her in a shower of golden light, and she had borne his Perseus, Gorgonslayer, second only to Heracles among our heroes. My father handed it to me.

awe I understood. Heracles was the greatest of our heroes, and Philoctetes has been the closest of his companions, the only one still living. His hair was gray, and his thick fingers were all tendon, the sinewy dexterity that marked and archer. Ad indeed, a moment later he held up the largest bow, I had ever seen, polished with yew wood with a lionskin grip. “The bow of Heracles”, Philoctetes named it, “ given to me at his death.” In our lands a bow was mocked as the weapon of cowards. But no one could such a thing about this bow; the strength it would take to draw it humbled us all.

The next man, his eyes painted as a woman’s, spoke his name.

with so many princes, and heroes, and kings competing for a single prize, but we knew how to ape civilization. One be one their introduce themselves, these young men, showing off shining hair and neat waists and expensively dyed clothing. Many were the sons or grandsons of gods. All had a song or two, or two, written of their deeds. Tyndareus geered each in turn, accepted their gifts in a pile at the center of the room. Invited each to speak and present his suit.

My farther was the oldest among them, except for the man who, when his turn came, named himself Philoctetes. “A comrade of Heracles”, the man besides us whispered, with an “Idomeneus, King of Crete”. He was lean, and his long hair fell to his waist when he stood. He offered rare iron, a double-headed ax. “The symbol of my people”. His movements reminded me of the dancers that my mother liked.

And then Menelaus, so of Atreus , seated beside his hulking, bearlike brother Agamemnon. Menelaus’ hair was a startling red, the color of fire-forged bronze. His body was strong, stocky with muscles, vital. The gift he gave was a rich one, beautifully dyed cloth. “Though the lady needs no adornment”, he added, smiling. This was a pretty bit of speech. I wished I had something as clever to say. I was

saw a stray dark curl peek from from beneath the bottom of her veil. Helen is light haired, I remembered. So that one was not Helen. O have ceased to listen to the kings.

«Welcome, Menotius». The speaking of my father's name stratled me. Tynadareus was looking at us. «I am sorry to hear of the death of her wife».

«My wife lives, Tyndareus. It is my son who comes today to wed her daughter». There was a silence in which I knelt, dizzied by the spin of faces around me.

«Your son is not yet a man». Tyndareus's voice seemed far away. I could detect nothing in it.

the only one hear under twenty, and I was not descended from a god. Perhaps, Peleus' blond-haired son would be equal to this, I thought. But his father had kept him at home.

Man after man, and their names began to blur on my head. My attention wandered to the dais, where I noticed, for the first time, the three veiled women seated at Tyndareus' side. I stared at the cloth over their faces, as if I might be able to catch some glimpse of the woman behind it. My father wanted one of them for my wife. Three sets of hands, prettily adornered with bracelets, lay quite in their laps. One of tge women was taller than the other two. I thought I

«He need not to be. I am a man enough for both of us.» It was the sort of jest of our people loved, bold and boasting. But no one laughed.

«I see», said Tyndareus.

The stone floor dug into my skin, yet I did not move. I was used to kneeling. I had never before been glad of the practice in my father's throne room.

My father spoke again, in the silence. «Others have brought bronze and wine, oil and wool». I bring gold, and it is only a small portion of may stores». I was aware of my hands of the beautiful bowl, touching the story's figures: Zeus appearing from the streaming sunlight, the startled on one leg, a seamed that stitched his dark brown flash from heel to knee, wrapping around the muscles of the calf and burying itself in the shadow beneath his tunic. I looked like it had been a knife, I thought, or something like it, reaping upwards and leaving behind feathered edges, whose softness belied the violence that must have caused it.

My father was angry. «Son of Laertes, I do not remember inviting you to speak».

The man smiled. «I do not invited. I interrupted. But you need not fear my interference. I have no vested interst in the matter. I speak only as an observer. A small movement from the princess, their coupling.

«My daughter and I grateful that you have brought as such as worthy gift, though paltry to you». A murmur, from the kings. There was humalitation here that my father did not seem to understand. My face flushed with it.

«I would my Helen the queen of my palace. For my wife, as you know well, is not fit to rule. My wealth exceeds of all these young men, and my deeds speak for themselves».

«I thought the suitor was your son».

I looked up at the new voice. A man who had no spoken yet. He was the last in line, sitting at ease on the bench, his curling hair gleming in the light of the fire. He had jagged scar

thought that Tyndareus would ask me to speak. I stood and carried the bowl to the pile of gifts, placed it where it would not topple. I turned and walked back to my bench. I had not disgraced myself with trembling or tipping, and my words had not be foolish. Still, my face burned with shame. I knew how I must look to these men.

Oblivious, the line of suitors moved on. The man kneeling now was huge, half again as taller as my father, and broad besides. Behind him, two servants braced an enormous shield. It seemed to stand with him as part of his suit, reaching from his heels to his crown; no ordinary man could have carried it. And it was no decoration:

scarred and hucked edges bore witness to the battles it had seen. Ajax, son of Telamon, this giant named himself. His speech was bljnt and short, claiming his lineage from Zeus and offering his mightly size as proof of his great-grandfather's continuing favor. His gift was a spear, supple wood beautifully cut. The fire-forged point gleamed in the light of the torches.

At last it was the man with the scar's turn. «Well, son of Laertes?» Tyndareus shifted in his seat to face him. «What does a disinterested obsever have to say to these proceedings?».

The man lened back. «O would like to know how you are going to stop the losers from declaring war on you. Or on Helen's lucky new husband. I see half a dozen men hear ready to leap at each other's throats».

«You seem amused».

The man shrugged. I find the folly of men amusing».

«The son of Laertes srons us!» This was the large man, Ajax his clenched first as big as my head.

«Son of Telamon, never».

«Then what, Odysseus? Speak you mind, for once. Tyndereus' voice as sharp as I'd heard it.

Odysseus shrugged again. Thus was a dangerous gamble, despite the treasure and renown you have won. Each of these man is worthy, and

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«All this have said to me in private».

My father stiffened beside me. *Conspiracy.* He was not the only angry face in the hall.

«True. But know I offer you a soultuion.» He held up his hands, empty. «I have brought no gift and do not seek to woo Helen. I am a kind, as has been said, of rocks and goats. In return for my solution, I seek from you the prize that I have alredy named.»

«Give me your solution and you shall have it». Again, this slight movement, from the dais. One woman's hand had twiched against her companion's dress.

«Then, here it is. I believe that we

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«Then, here it is. I believe that we should let Helen choose.» Odysseus paused, to allow the murmurs of disbelief; women did not have a say in such things. «No one man fault you, then. But she must choose now, at this very moment, so she will not be said to have taken council or instruction from you. And.» He held up a finger. «Before she chooses, every man here must swear on oath: to uphold Helen's choice, and to defend her husband against a who would take her from him.»

I felt the unrest in the room. *An oath?* And over such an unconventional matter as a woman choosing her husband. The men were suspicious.

«Very well.» Tyndareus, his face unreadable, turned to the veiled women. «Helen, do you accept this proposal?»

Her voice was low and lovely, carrying to every corner of the hall. «I do.» It was all she said, but I felt the shiver go through the men around me. Even as a child I felt it, and I marveled at the power of this woman who, though veiled, could electify a room. Her skin, we suddenly remembered, was rumored to be gilded, her eyes dark and shining as the slick obsidian that we traded our lives for. At the moment she was worth all the prizes in the center of the hall, and more. She

dais drew my eye. One of the veiled figures had stirred.

«What does he mean?» My father was frowning. «If he is not nere for Helen, then for what? Let him go back to his rocks amd his goats.»

The man's eyesbrows lifted, but he said nothing.

Tyndareus was also mild. «If your son is to be a suitor, as you say, then let him present himself.»

Even I knew it was my turn to speak. «I am Patroclus, son of Menoitius.» My voice sonded high, amd scratchy with disuse. «I am here as a suitor for Helen. My father is a king and a son of kings.» I had no more to say. My father had not instructed me; he had not poimted to Odysseus. Even a nine-year-old saw how fitting this was. Already Odysseus had shown himself too clever by half. Our ragged alliances prevailed obly when no human was allowed to be much more powerful than other. Around the room I saw smirks and satisfaction among the kings: he would not be allowed to escape his own noose.

Odysseus' mouth quirked in a half-smile. «Of course. It is my pleasure». But I guessed that it was not so. During the sacrifice I had watched him lean back into the shadows, as if he would be forgotten. He rose now, moved to the altar.

«Now Helen» - Odysseus paused,

was worth our lives.

Tyndareus nodded. Than I decree that it is so. All those who wish swear, will do so now.»

I heard muttering, a few half-angry voices. But no man left. Helen's voice and the veil, gently fluttering with her breath, held us all captive.

A swiftly summoned priest led a white goat to the altar. Here, inside, it was a more propotious choice than a bull, whose throat might splash unwholesomely upon the stone floor. The animal died easily, and the man mixed its dark with the cypressash from the fire. The bowl hissed, loud in the silent room.

«You will be first.» Tyndareus

his arm half-extended to the priest – «remember that I swear only in fellowship, not as a suitor. You would never forgive yoursef if you were to choose me.» His words were teasing, and drew scuttered laugher. We all knew it was not likely that one so luminous as Helen would choose the king of barren Ithaca.

One by one the priest summoned us to the hearth, making our wrists with blood ash, binding as chains. I chanted the words of the oath back to him, my arm lifted for all to see.

When the last man had returned to his place, Tyndareus rose. «Choose now, my daughter.»

«Menelaus.» She spoke without hesitation, startling us all. We had suspected suspense, indecision. I turned to the red-haired man, who stood, a huge grin cracking his face. In oursize joy, he clapped his silent brother on the back. Everywhere else was anger, disappointment even grief. But no man reached for his sword; the blood had dried thick on our wrists.

“So be it.” Tyndareus stood also. “I am glad to welcome a second son of Atreus to my family. You shall have my Helen, even as your worthy brother once claimed my Clytemnestra.” He gestured to the tallest woman< as though she might stand. She did not move. Perhaps she had not heard.

“What about the third girl?” This shout from a small man, beside the giant Ajax. “Your niece. Can I have her?’

The men laughed, glad for an easing in the tension.

“You’re too late, Teucer” Odysseus spoke over the noise. “She’s promised to me.”

I did not have to chance to hear more. Mt father’s hand seized my shoulder, pulling me angrily off the bench. “We are finished here.” We left that every night for home, and I climbed back on my donkey, thick with disappointment: I had not even been allowed to glimpse Helen’s fabled face.

My father would never mention the trip again, and once home the events twisted strangely in my memory. The blood and the oath, the room full of kings: they seemed distant and pale, like something a bard had spun, rather than something I lived. Had I really knelt there before them? And what of the oath I had sworn? It seemed absurd even to think of it, foolish and improbable as a dream is by dinner.

***Chapter Three***

I STOOD IN THE FIELD. IN MY HANDS WERE TWO PAIRS OF dice, a gift. Not from my father, who’d never think of it. Not from my mother, who sometimes did not know me. I could not remember who had given them to me. A visiting king? A favor- currying noble?

They were carved from ivory, inset with onyx, smooth under my thumb. I was late summer, and I was panting with my run from the palace. Since the day of the races I had been appointed a man tom train me in all our athletic arts: boxing, sword-and-spear, discus.

But I had escaped him, and glowed with the giddy lightness of solitude. It was the first time I had been alone in weeks.

Then the boy appeared. His name was Clysonymus, and he was the son of a nobleman who was often at the palace. Older, larger, and unpleasantly fleshy. His eyes had caught the flash of the dice in my palm. He leered at me, held out his hand. “Let me see them.”

“No.” I did not want his fingers on them, grubby and thick. And I was the prince, however small. Did I not even have this right? But these noble sons were used to me doing what they wished. They knew my father would not intervene.

“I want them.” Ye didn’t bother to threaten me, yet. I hated him for it. I should be worth threatening.

“No.”

He stepped forward. “let me have them.”

“They’re mine.” I grew teeth. I snapped like the dogs who fight for our table scarps.

He reached to take them, and I shoved him backwards. He stumbled, and I was glad. He would not get what was mine.

“Hey!” He was angry, I was so small; I was rumored to be simple. If he backed down now, it would be a dishonor. He advanced on me, face red. Without meaning to, I stepped

I am making excuses. It was also a land of rocks.

His head thudded dully against stone, and I saw the surprised pop of his eyes. The ground around him began to bleed.

I stared, my throat closing in horror at what I had done. I had not seen the death of as human before. Yes, the bulls, and the goats, even the bloodless gasping of fish. And I have seen it in paintings, tapestries, the black figures burned onto our platters. But I had not seen this: the rattle of it, the choke and scrabble. The smell of the flux. I fled.

Sometime later, they found me by the gnarled ankles of an olive tree. I

back.

He smirked then. “Coward”.

“I am no coward.” My voice rose, and my skin went hot.

“Your father thinks you are.” His words were deliberate, as if he were savoring them. “I heard him tell my father so.”

“He did not.” But I knew he had.

The boy stepped closer. He lifted a fist. “Are you calling me a liar?” I knew that he would hit me now. He was just waiting for an excuse. I could imagine the way my father would have said it. *Coward.* I planted my hands on his chest and shoved, as hard as I could. Our land was one of grass and wheat. Tumbles should not hurt.

was limp and pale, surrounded by my own vomit. The dice were gone, lost in my flight. My father stared down angrily at me, his lips drawn back to show his yellowing teeth. He gestured, and the servants lifted me and carried me inside.

The boy’s family demanded immediate exile or death. They were powerful, and this was their eldest son. They might permit a king to burn their fields or rape their daughters, as long as payment was made. But you did not touch a man’s sons. We all knew the rules; we clung to them to avoid the anarchy that was always a hairsbreadth away. *Blood feud.* The servants made the sign against evil.

My father had spent his life scrabling to keep hiss kingdom, and would not risk losing it over such a son as me, when heirs and the wombs that bore them were so easy to come by. So he agreed: I would be exiled, and fostered in another man’s kingdom. In exchange for my weight in gold, they would rear me to manhood. I would have no parents, no family name, no inheritance. In our day, death was preferable. But my father was a practical man. My weight in gold was less than the expense of the lavish funeral my death would have demanded.

This was how I came to be ten, and orphan. This is how I came to Phthia.

TINY, GEMSTONE-SIZED PHTHIA was the smallest of our countries, set in a northern crook of land between the ridges of Mount Othrys and the sea. Its king, Peleus, was one of those men whom the gods love: not divine himself, but clever, brave, handsome, and excelling all his peers in piety. As a reward, our divinities offered him a seanymph for a wife. It was considered their highest honor. After all, what mortal would not want to bed a goddess and sire a son from her? Divine blood purified our muddy race, bred heroes from dust and clay. And this goddess brought a greater promise still: the Fates had foretold that her son would far surpass his father. Peleus’ line would be assured. But, like all the gods’ gift, there was and edge to it; the goddesss herself was unwilling.

Everyone, even I, had the story of Thetis’ ravishment. The gods led Peleus to the secret place where she liked to sit upon the beach. They had warned him not to waste time overtures – she would never consent to marriage with a mortal.

They warned him too of what would come once he had caught her: for the nymph Thetis was wily, like her father, Proteus, the slippery old man of the sea, and she knew how to make her skin flow into a thousand different shapes of fur and feather and flesh. And though beaks and claws and teeth and coils and stinging tails would flay him, still Peleus must not let her go.

Peleus was a pious and obedient man and did all that the gods had instructed him to do. He waited for her to emerge from the slate-colored waves, hair black and long as a horse’s tail. Then he seized her, holding on despite her violent struggles, squeezing until they were both exhausted, breathless and sand-scraped. The blood from the wounds she had given him mixed with the smears of boy, never for any other reason, and never for long. The rest of the time the child was raised by tutors and nurses and overseen by Phoinix, Peleus’ most trusted counselor. Did Peleus ever regret the gods’ gift to him? An ordinary wife would have counted herself lucky to find a husband with Peleus’ midness, his smile-lined face. But of the sea-nymph Thetis nothing could ever eclipse the strain of his dirty, mortal mediocrity.

I WAS LED through the palace by a servant whose name I had not caught. Perhaps he had not said it. The halls were smaller than at home, as if restrained by the modesty of the

lost maidenhead on her thighs. Her resistance mattered no longer: a deflowering was as binding as marriage vows.

The gods forced her to swear that she would stay with her mortal husband for at least a year, and she served her time on earth as the duty it was, silent, unresponsive, and sullen. Now when he clasped her, she did not bother to writhe and twist in protest. Instead she lay stiff and silent, damp and chilled as an old fish. Her reluctant womb bore only a single child. The hour her sentence was finished, she ran out of the house and dove back into the sea.

She would return only to visit the kingdom they governed. The walls and floors were local marble, whiter than was found in the south. My feet were dark against its pallor.

I had nothing with me. My few belongings were being carried to my room, and the gold my father sent was on its way to the treasury. I had felt a strange panic as I was parted from it. It had been my companion for the weeks of travel, a reminder of my worth. I knew its contents by heart now: the five goblets with engraved stems, a heavy knobbed scepter, a beaten-gold necklace, two ornamental statues of birds, and a carved lyre, gilded at its tips. This last, I knew, was cheating. Wood was cheap and plentiful and heavy and took up space that should have been used for gold. Yet the lyre was so beautiful no one could object to it; it had been a piece of my mother’s dowry. As we rode, I would reach back into my saddlebags to stroke the polished wood.

I guessed that I was being led to the throne room, where I would kneel and pour out my gratitude. But the servant stopped suddenly at a side door. King Peleus was absent, he told me, so I would present myself before his son instead. I was unnerved. This was not what I had prepared myself for, the dutiful words I’d practiced on donkey-back. Peleus’ son. I could still remember the dark wreath against his bright features fine as a girl’s. It struck from me a sudden, springing dislike. I had not changed so much, nor so well.\

He yawned, his eyes heavy-lidded. “What’s your name?’

His kingdom was half, a quarter, an eighth the size of my father’s, and I had killed a boy and been exiled and still he did not know me. I ground my jaw shut and would not speak.

He asked again, louder: “What’s your name?”

My silence was excusable the first time; perhaps I had not heard him. Now it was not.

“Patroclus.” It was the name my father had given me, hopefully but injudiciously, at my birth, and it tasted hair, the way his pink soles had flashed along the track. *That is what a son should be.*

He was lying on his back on a wide, pillowed bench, balancing a lyre on his stomach. Idly, he plucked at it. He did not hear me enter, or he did not choose to look. This is how I first began to understand my place here. Until this moment I had been a prince, expected and announced. Now I was negligible.

I took another step forward, scuffing my feet, and his head lolled to the side to regard me. In my five years since I had seen him, he had outgrown his babyish roundness. I gaped at the cold shock of his beauty, deep-green eyes, of bitterness on my tongue. “Honor of the father,” it meant. I waited for him to make a joke out of it, some witty jape about my disgrace. He did not. Perhaps, I thought, he is too stupid to.

He rolled onto his side to face me. A stray lock of gold fell half into his eyes; he blew it away. “My name is Achilles.”

I jerked my chin up, an inch, in bare acknowledgment. We regarded each other for a moment. Then he blinked and yawned again, his mouth cracked wide as a cat’s. “Welcome to Phthia.”

I had been raised in a court and knew dismissal when I heard it.

I DISCOVERE THAT AFTERNOON that I was not the only foster child of Peleus. The modest king turned out to be rich in cast-off sons. He had once been a runaway himself, it was rumored, and had a reputation for charity towards exiles. My bed was a pallet in a long barracks-style room, filled with other boys tussling and lounging. A servant showed me where my things had been put. A few boys lifted their heads, stared. I am sure one of them spoke to me, asked my name. I am sure I gave it. They returned to their games. *No one important.* I walked stiff-legged to my pallet and waited for dinner.

We were summoned to eat at dusk by a bell, bronze struck from deep in the palace’s turnings. The boys dropped their games and tumbled out into the hallway. The complex was built like a rabbit warren, full of twisting corridors and sudden inner rooms. I nearly tripped over the heels of the boy in front of me, fearful of being left behind and lost.

The room for meals was a long hall at the front of the palace, its windows opening onto Mount Othrys’ foothills. It was large enough to feed all of us, many times over; Peleus was a king who liked to host and entertain. We sat on its oakwood benches, at tables that were stratched from years of clattering plates. The food was simple but plentiful – salted fish, and thick bread served with herbed cheese. There was no flesh here, of goats or bulls. That was only for royalty, or festival days. Across the room I caught the flash of bright hair in lamplight. *Achilles.* He sat with a group of boys whose mouths were wide with laughter at something he’d said or done. *That is what a prince should be.* I stared down at my bread, its coarse grains that rubbed rough against my fingers.

After supper were allowed to do as we liked. Some boys were gathering in a corner for a game. “Do you want to play?” one asked. His hair still hung in childhood curls; he was younger than I was.

“Play?”

“Dice.” He opened his hand to show them, carved bone flecked with black dye.

I started, stepped backwards. “No,” I said, too loudly.

He blinked in surprise. “All right.” He shrugged, and was gone.

That night I dreamed of the dead boy, his skull cracked like an egg against the ground. *He has followed me.* The blood spreads, dark as spilled wine. His eyes open, and his mouth begins to move. I clap my hands over me ears. The voices of the dead were said to have the power to make the living mad. *I must not hear him speak.*

I woke in terror, hoping I had not screamed aloud. The pinpricks of stars outside the window were the only light; there was moon I could see. My breathing was harsh in the silence, and the marsh-reed ticking of the matters crackled softly beneath me, rubbing its thin fingers against my back. The presence of the other boys come for their vengeance regardless of witness.

The stars turned, and somewhere the moon crept across the sky. When my eyes dragged closed again, he was waiting for me still, covered in blood, his face as pale as bone, of course he was. No soul wished to be sent early to the endless gloom of our underworld. Exile might satisfy the anger of the living, but it did not appease the dead.

I woke sandy-eyed, my limbs heavy and dull. The other boys surged around me, dressing for breakfast, eager for the day. Word had spread quickly of my strangeness, and the younger boy did not approach me again, with dice or anything else. At breakfast, my fingers pushed bread between my lips, and my throat swallowed. Milk was poured for me. I drank it.

Afterwards we were led into the dusty sun of the practice yards for training in spear and sword. Here is where I tasted the full truth of Peleus’ kindness: well trained and indebted, we would one day make him a fine army.

I was given a spear, and a callused hand corrected my grip, then corrected it again. I threw and gazed the edge of the oak-tree target. The master blew out a breath and passed me a second spear. My eyes traveled over the other boys, searching for Peleus’ son. He was not there. I sighted once more at the oak, its bark pitted and cracked, oozing sap from punctures. I threw.

The sun drove high, then higher still. My throat grew dry and hot, scratched with burning dust. When the masters released us, most of the boys fled to the beach, where small breezes still stirred. There they diced and raced, shouting jokes in the sharp, slanting dialects of the north.

My eyes were heavy in my head, and my arm ached from the morning’s exertion. I sat beneath the scrubby shade of an olive tree to stare out over the ocean’s waves. No one spoke to me. It was easy to ignore. It was not so very different from home, really.

THE NEXT DAY was the same, a morning of weary exercises, and then long afternoon hours alone. At night, the moon silvered smaller and smaller. I stared until I could see it even when I closed my eyes, the yellow curve bright against the dark of my eyelids. I hoped that it might keep the visions of the boy at bay, our goddess of the moon is gifted with magic, with power over the dead. She could banish the dreams, if she wished.

She did not. The boy came, night after night, with his staring eyes and splintered skull. Sometimes he turned and showed me the hole in his head, where the soft mass of his brain hung loose. Sometimes he reached for me. I would wake, choking on my horror, and stare at the darkness until dawn.

***Chapter Four***

MEALS IN THE VAULTED DINING HALL WERE MY ONLY relief. There the walls did not seem to press in on me so much, and the dust from the courtyard did not clog in my throat. The buzz of constant voices eased as mouths were stuffed full. I could sit with my food alone and breathe again.

It was the only time I saw Achilles. His days were separate, princely, filled with duties we had no part of. But he took each meal with us, circulating among the tables. In the huge hall, his beauty shone like a flame, vital and bright, drawing my eye against my will. His mouth was a plump bow, his nose an aristocratic arrow. When he was seated, his limbs did not skew as mine did, but arranged themselves with perfect grace, as if for a sculptor. Perhaps most remarkable was his unselfconsciousness. He did not preen or pot as other on the boys around him. Though how he was, I could not imagine: they crowded him like dogs in their eagerness, tongues lolling.

I watched all of this from my place at a corner table, bread crumpled in my fist. The keen edge of my envy was flint, a spark away from fire.

On one of these days he sat closer to me than usual; only a table distant.

His dusty feet scuffed against the flagstones as he ate. There were not cracked and callused as mine were, but pink and sweetly brown beneath the dirt. *Prince,* I sneered inside my head.

He turned, as if he had heard me. For a second our eyes held, and I felt a shock run through me. I jerked my gaze away, and busied myself with my skin prickled as if before a storm. When, he had turned back to his table and was speaking to the other boys.

After that, I was craftier with my observation, kept my head down and my eyes ready to leap away. But he was craftier still. At least once a dinner he would turn and catch me before I could feign indifference. Those seconds, half seconds, that the line of our gaze connected, were the only moment in my day that I felt anything at all. The sudden swoop of my stomach, the coursing anger. I was like a fish eyeing the hook.

IN THE FOURTH WEEK of my exile, I walked into the dining hall to find him at the table where I always sat. my table, as I had come to think of it, since few others chose to share it with me. Now, because of him, the benches were full of jostling boys. I froze, caught between flight and fury. Anger won. This was mine, and he would not push me from it, no matter how many boys he brought.

I sat at the last empty space, my shoulders tensed as if for a fight. Across the table the boys postured and prattled, about a spear and a bird that that died on the bench and the spring races. I did not hear them. His presence was like a stone in my shoe, impossible to ignore. His skin was the color of just-pressed olive oil, and smooth as polished wood, without the scabs and blemishes that covered the rest of us.

Dinner finished, and the plates were cleared. A harvest moon, full and orange, hung in the dusk beyond the dining room’s windows. Yet Achilles lingered. Absently, he pushed the hair from his eyes; it had been here. He reached for a bowl on the table that held figs and gathered several in his hands.

With a toss of his wrist, he flicked the figs into the air, one, two, three, juggling them so lightly that their delicate skins did not bruise. He added a fourth, then a fifth. The boys hooted and clapped. More, more!

The fruits flew, colors blurring, so fast they seemed not to touch his hands, to tumble of their own accord. Juggling was a trick of low mummers and beggars, but he made it brought the one he had thrown me to my lips. Its burst of grainy sweetness filled my mouth; the skin was downy on my tongue. I had loved figs, once.

He stood, and the boys chorused their farewells. I thought he might look at me again. But he only turned and vanished back to his room on the other side of the palace.

THE NEXT DAY Peleus returned to the palace and I was brought before him in his throne room, smoky and sharp from a yew-wood fire. Duly I knelt, saluted, received his famously charitable smile. “Patroclus,” I told him, when he asked. I was almost accustomed to it now, the bareness of my

something else, a living pattern painted on the air, so beautiful even I could not pretend disinterest.

His gaze, which had been following the circling fruit, flickered to mine. I did not have time to look away before he said, softly and slightly warm. I was aware of the boys cheering.

One by one, Achilles caught the remaining fruits, returned them to the table with a performer’s flourish. Except for the last, which he ate, the dark flesh parting to pink seeds under his teeth. The fruit was perfectly ripe, the juice brimming. Without thinking, I name, without my father’s behind it. Poleus nodded. He seemed old to me, bent over, but he was no more that fifth, my father’s age. He did not look like a man who could have conquered a goddess, or produced such a child as Achilles.

“You are here because you killed a boy. You understand this?”

This was the cruelty of adults. *Do you understand?*

“Yes,” I told him. I could have told him more, of the dreams that left me bleary and bloodshot, the almost-screams that scarped my throat as I swallowed them down. The way the stars turned and turned through the night above my unsleeping eyes.

“You are welcome here. You may still make a good man.” He meant it as comfort.

LATER THAT DAY, perhaps from him, perhaps from a listening servant, the boys learned at last of the reason for my exile. I should have expected it. I had heard them gossip of others often enough; rumors were the only coin the boys had to trade in. still, it took me by surprise to see the sudden change in them, the fear and fascination blooming on their faces as I passed. Now even the boldest of them against me: bad luck could be caught, and the *Erinyes,* our hissing spirits of vengeance, were not always particular. The boys watched from a safe distance, enthralled. *Will they drink his blood, do you think?*

Their whispers choked me, turned the food in my mouth to ash. I pushed away my plate and sought out corners and spare halls where I might sit undisturbed, except for the occasional passing servant. My narrow world narrowed further: to the cracks in the floor, the carved whorls in the stone walls. They rasped softly as I traced them with my fingertip.

“I HEARD YOU WERE HERE.” A clear voice, like ice-melted streams.

My head jerked up. I was in a storeroom, my knees against my chest, wedged between jars of thick-pressed olive oil. I had been dreaming myself a fish, silvered by sun as it leapt from the sea. The waves dissolved, became amphorae and grain sacks again.

It was Achilles, standing over me. His face was serious, the green of his eyes steady as he regarded me. I pickled with guilt. I was not supposed to be there and I knew it.

“I have been looking for you,” he said. The words were expressionless; they carried no hint of anything I could read. “You have not been going to morning drills.”

My face went red. Behind the guilt,

We knew what this meant. Punishment was corporal, and usually public. A prince would never be whipped, but I was no longer a prince.

“You are not ill,” he said.

“No,” I answered, dully.

“Then that will not serve as your excuse.’

“What?” In my fear I could not follow him.

“Your excuse for where you have been.” His voice was patient. “So you will not be punished. What will you say?”

“I don’t know.”  
“You must say something.”

His insistence sparked anger in me. “You are the prince,” I snapped.

anger rose slow and dull. It was his right to chastise me, but I hated him for it.

“How do you know? You aren’t there.”

“The master noticed, and the spoke to my father.”

“And he sent you.” I wanted to make him feel ugly for his tale-bearing.

“No, I came on my own.” Achilles’ voice was cool, but I saw his jaw tighten, just a little. I have come to see if you are ill.”

I did not answer. He studied me a moment.

“My father is considering punishment,” he said.

That surprised him. He tilted his head a little, like a curious bird. “So?”

“So speak to your father, and say I was with you. He will excuse it.” I said this more confidently than I felt. If I had spoken to my father for another boy, he would have been whipped out of spite. But I was not Achilles.

The slightest crease appeared between his eyes. “ I do not like to lie,” he said.

It was the sort of innocence other boys taunted out of you; even if you felt it, you did not say it.

“Then take me with you to your lessons,” I said. “so it won’t be a lie.”

His eyebrows lifted, ad he regarded me. He was utterly still, the type of quiet that I had thought could not belong to humans, a stilling of everything but breath and pulse – like a deer, listening for the hunter’s bow. I found myself holding my breath.

Then something shifted in his face. A decision.

“Come,” he said.

“Where?” I was wary; perhaps now I would be punished for suggesting deceit.

“To my lyre lesson. So, as you say, it will not be a lie. After, we will speak with my father.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Why not?” He watched me, curious. *Why not?*

When I stood to follow him, my limbs ached from so long seated on cool stone. My chest trilled with something I could not quite name. Escape, and danger, and hope all at once.

WE WALKED IN SILENCE through the winding halls and came at length to a small room, holding only a large chest and stools for sitting. Achilles gestured to one and I went to it, leather pulled taut over a spare wooden frame. A musician’s chair. I had seen them only when bards came, infrequently, to play at my father’s fireside.

Achilles opened the chest. He pulled a lyre from it and held it out to me.

“I don’t play,” I told him/

His forehead wrinkled at this. “Never?’

Strangely, I found myself not wishing to disappoint him. “My father did not like music.”

“So? Your father is not here.”

I took the lyre. It was cool to the touch, and smooth. I slid my fingers over the strings, heard the humming almost-note; it was the lyre I had seen him with the first day I came.

Achilles bent again into the trunk, pulled out a second instrument, and came to join me.

He settled it on his knees. The wood was carved and golden and shone with careful keeping. It was my mother’s lyre, the one my father had sent as part of my price.

Achilles plucked a string. The note rose warm and resonant, sweetly pure. My mother had always pulled her chair close my father would scowl and the servants would whisper. I remembered, suddenly, the dark gleam of her eyes in the firelight as she watched the bard’s hands. The look on her face was like thirst.

Achilles plucked another string, and a note rang out, deeper than the other. His hand reached for a peg, turned it.

*That is my mother’s lyre,* I almost said. The words were in my mouth, and behind them others crowded close. *That is* my *lyre.*but I did not speak. What would he say to such a statement? The lyre was his, now.

I swallowed, my throat dry. “I t is beautiful.”

“My father gave it to me,” he said, carelessly. Only the way his fingers held it, so gently, stopped me from rising in rage.

He did not notice. “You can hold it, if you like.”

The wood would be smooth and known as my own skin.

“No,” I said, through the ache in my chest. *I will not cry in front of him.*

He started to say something. But at that moment the teacher entered, a man of indeterminate middle age. He had callused hands of a musician and carried his own lyre, carved of dark walnut.

“Who is this?” he asked. His voice was harsh and loud. A musician, but not a singer.

“This is Patroclus,” Achilles said. “He does not play, but he will learn.”

“Not on that instrument.” The man’s hand swooped down to pluck the lyre from my hands. Instinctively, my fingers tightened on it. It was not as beautiful as my mother’s lyre, but it was still a princely instrument. I did not want to give it up.

I did not have to. Achilles had caught him by the wrist, midreach.

“Yes, on that instrument if he likes.”

The man was angry but said no more. Achilles released him and he sat, stiffly.

“Begin,” he said.

Achilles nodded and bent over the lyre. I did not have time to wonder about his intervention. His fingers touched the strings, and all my thoughts were displaced. The sound was pure and sweet as water, bright as lemons. It was like no music I had ever heard before. It had warmth as a fire does, a texture and weight like polished ivory. It buoyed and soothed at once. At few hairs slipped forward to hang over his eyes as he played. They were fine as lyre strings themselves, and shone.

He stopped, pushed back his hair, and turned to me.

“Now you.”

I shook my head, full to spilling, I could not play now. Not ever, if I could listen to him instead. “You play,” I said.

Achilles returned to his strings, and the music rose again. This time he sang also, weaving his own accompaniment with a clear, rich treble. His head fell back a little, exposing his throat, supple and fawn-skin soft. A small smile lifted the left corner of his mouth. Without meaning to I found myself leaning forward.

When at last he ceased, my chest felt strangely hollowed. I watched him

rise to replace the lyres, close the trunk. He bid farewell to the teacher, who turned and left. It took me a long moment before I came back to myself, to notice he was waiting for me.

“We will go see my father now.”

I did not quite trust myself to speak, so I nodded and followed him out of the room and up the twisting hallways to the king.

***Chapter Five***

ACHILLES STOPPED ME JUST INSIDE THE BRONZE-STUDDED doors of Peleus’ audience chamber. “Wait here,” he said.

Peleus was seated on a high-backed chair at the room’s other end. An older man, one I had seen before with Peleus, stood near as if the two had been in conference. The fire smoked thickly, and the room felt hot and close.

The walls were hung with deep-dyed tapestries and old weapons kept gleaming by servants. Achilles walked past them and knelt at his father’s feet.

“Father, I come to ask your pardon.”

“Oh?” Peleus lifted an eyebrow.

“Speak then.” From where I stood his face looked cold and displeased. I was suddenly fearful. We had interrupted; Achilles had not even knocked.

“I have taken Patroclus from his drills.” My name sounded strange on his lips; I almost did not recognize it.

The old king’s brows drew together.

“Who?”

“Menoitiades,” Achilles said. *Menoitius’ son.*

“Ah.” Peleus’ gaze followed the carpet back to where I stood, trying not to fidget. “Yes, the boy the arms-master wants to whip.”

“Yes. But it is not his fault. I forgot to say I wished him for a companion.”

*Therapon* was the word he used. A brother-in-arms sworn to a prince by blood oaths and love. In war, these men were his honor guard; in peace, his closest advisers. It was a place of highest esteem, another reason the boys swarmed Peleus’ son, showing off; they hoped to be chosen.

Peleus’ eyes narrowed. “Come here, Patroclus.”

The carpet was thick beneath my feet. I knelt a little behind Achilles. I could feel the king’s gaze on me.

“For many years now, Achilles, I have urged companions on you and you have turned them away. Why this boy?”

The question might have been my own. I had nothing to offer such a prince. Why, then, had he made a charity case of me? Peleus and I both waited for his answer.

“He is surprising.”

I looked up, frowning. If he thought so, he was the only one.

“Surprising,” Peleus echoed.

“Yes.” Achilles explained no further, tough I hoped he would.

Peleus rubbed his nose in thought. “The boy in an exile with a strain upon him. He well add no luster to your reputation.”  
“I do not need him to,” Achilles said. Not proudly or boastfully. Honestly.

Peleus acknowledged this. “Yet other boys will be envious that you have chosen such a one. What will you tell them?”

“I will tell them nothing.” The answer came with no hesitation, clear and crisp. “It is not for them to say what I will do.”

I found my pulse beating thickly in my veins, fearing Peleus’ anger. It did not come. Father and son met each other’s gaze, and the faintest touch of amusement bloomed at the corner of Peleus’ mouth.

“Stand up, both of you.”

I did so, dizzily.

“I pronounce your sentence. Achilles, you will give your apology to Amphidamas, and Patroclus will give his as well.”

“Yes, Father.”

“That is all.” He turned from us, back to his counselor, in dismissal.

OUTSIDE AGAIN ACHILLES was brisk. “I will see you at dinner,” he said and turned to go.

An hour before I would have said I was glad to be rid of him; now, strangely, I felt stung.

“Where are you going?”

He stopped. “Drills.”

“Alone?”

“Yes. No one sees me fight.” The words came as if he were used to saying them.

“Why?”

He looked at me a long moment, as if weighing something. “ My mother has forbidden it. Because of the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?” I had heard of this.

“That I will be the best warrior of my generation.”

It sounded like something a young child would claim, in make-believe. But he said it as simply as if he were giving his name.

The question I wanted to ask was, *And are you the best?* Instead I stutered out. “When was the prophecy given?”

“When I was born. Just before. Eleithyia came and told it to my mother.”

Eleithyia, goddess of childbirth, rumored to preside in person over the birth of half-gods. Those whose nativities were too important to be left to chance. I had forgotten. *His mother is a goddess.*

“is this known?” I was tentative, not wanting to press too far.

“Some know of it, and some do not. But that is why I go alone.” But he didn’t go. He watched me. He seemed to be waiting.

“Then I will see you at dinner,” I said at last.

He nodded and left.

HE WAS ALREADY SEATED when I arrived, wedged at my table amid the usual clatter of boys. I had half-expected him not to be; that I had dreamed the morning. As I sat, I met his eyes, quickly, almost guiltily, then looked away. My face was flushing. I was sure. My hands felt heavy and awkward as they reached for the food. I was aware of every swallow, every expression on my face. The meal was very good that night, roasted fish dressed with lemon and herbs, fresh cheese and bread, and he ate well. The boys were unconcerned by my presence. They had long ago ceased to see me.

“Patroclus.” Achilles did not slur my name, as people often did, running it together as if un a hurry to be rid of it.

Instead, he rang each syllable: *Pa-tro-clus.* Around us dinner was ending, the servants clearing the plates, I looked up, and the boys quieted, watching with interest. He did not usually address us by name.

“Tonight you’re to sleep in my room,” he said. I was so shocked that my mouth would have hung open. But the boys were there, and I had been raised with a prince’s pride.

“All right,” I said.

“A servant will bring your things.”

I could hear the thoughts of the staring boys as if they said them. *Why him?* Peleus had spoken true: he had often encourage Achilles to choose his companions. But in all those years,

Achilles showed no special interest in any of the boys, though he was polite to all, as befitted his upbringing. And now he had bestowed the long-awaited honor upon the most unlikely of us, small and ungrateful and probably cursed.

He turned to go and I followed him, trying not to stumble, feeling the eyes of the table on my back. He led me past my old room and the chamber of state with its high-backed throne. Another turn, and we were in a portion of the palace I did not know, a wing that slanted down towards water. The walls were painted with bright patterns that bled to gray as his torch passed them.

His room was so close to the sea that the air tasted of salt. There were no wall pictures here, only plain stone and a single soft rug. The furniture was simple but well made, carved from dark-grained wood I recognized as foreign. Off to one side I saw a thick pallet.

He gestured to it. “That is for you.”

“Oh.” Saying thank you did not seem the right response.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“No.”

He nodded, as if I had said something wise. “Me neither.”  
I nodded in turn. Each of us, warily polite, bobbing our head like birds. There was a silence.

“Do you want to help me juggle?”

“I don’t know how.”

“You don’t have to know.” I’ll show you.”

I was regretting saying I was not tired. I did not want to make a fool of myself in front of myself in front of him. But his face was hopeful, and I felt like a miser refuse.

“All right.”

“How many can you hold?”

“I don’t know.”

“Show me your hand.”

I did, palm out. He rested his own palm against it. I tried not to startle. His skin was soft and slightly sticky from dinner. The plump finger pads brushing mine were very warm.

“About the same. It will be better to start with two, then. Take these.” He reached for six leather-covered balls, the type that mummers used. Obediently, I claimed two.

“When I say, throw one to me.”

Normally I would chafe at being bossed this way. But somehow the words did not sound like commands in his mouth. He began to juggle the remaining balls. “Now,” he said. I let the ball fly from my hand towards him, saw it pulled seamlessly into the circling blur.

“Again,” he said. I threw another ball, and it joined the others.

“You do that well,” he said.

I looked up, quickly. Was he mocking me? But his face was sincere.

“Catch.” A ball came back to me, just like the fig at dinner.

My part took no great skill, but I enjoyed it anyway. We found ourselves smiling at the satisfaction of each smooth catch and throw.

After some time he stopped, yawned. “It’s late,” he said. I was surprised to see the moon high outside the window; I had not noticed the minutes passing.

I sat on the pallet and watched as he busied himself with the tasks of bed, washing his face with water from a wide-mouthed ewer, untying the bit of leather that bound his hair. The silence brought my uneasiness back. *Why was I here?*

Achilles snuffed out the torch.

“Good night,” he said. “Good night.” The word felt strange in my mouth, like another language.

Time passed. In the moonlight, I could just make out the shape of his face, sculptor-perfect, across the room. His lips were parted slightly, an arm thrown carelessly above his head. He looked different in sleep, beautiful but cold as moonlight. I found myself wishing he would wake so that I might watch the life return.

THE NEXT MORNING, after breakfast, I went back to the boys’ room, expecting to find my things returned. They were not, and I saw that my bed had been stripped of its linens. I checked again after lunch, and after spear practice and then again before bed, but my old place remained empty and unmade. So. *Still.* Warily, I made my way to his room, half-expecting a servant to stop me. None did.

In the doorway of his room, I hesitated. He was within, lounging as I had seen him that first day, one leg dangling.

“Hello,” he said. If he had shown any hesitation or surprise, I would have left, gone back and slept on the bare reeds rather than stay here. But he did not. There was only his easy tone and a sharp attention in his eyes.

“Hello,” I answered, and went to take my place on the cot across the room,

SLOWLY, I GREW USED TO IT; I no longer startled when he spoke, no longer waited for rebuke. I stopped expecting to be sent away. After dinner, my feet took me to his room out of habit, and I thought of the pallet where I lay as mine.

At night I still dreamed of the dead boy. But the I woke, sweaty and terror-strick-en, the moon would be bright on the water outside and I against the shore. In the dim light I saw his easy breathing, the drowsy tangle of his limbs. In spite of myself, glittered, drew eyes. There was a glamour to him, even on waking, with his hair tousled and his face still muddled with sleep. Up close, his feet looked almost unearthly: the perfectly formed pads of the toes, the tendons that flickered like lyre strings. The heels were callused white over pink from going everywhere barefoot. His father made him rub them with oils that smelled of sandalwood and pomegranate.

He began to tell me the stories of his day before we drifted off to sleep. At first I only listened, but after time my tongue loosened. I began to tell my own stories, first of the palace, and later small bits from *before*: the pulse slowed. There was a vividness to him, even at rest, that made death and spirits seem foolish. After a time, I found I could sleep again. Time after that, the dreams lessened and dropped away,

I learned that he was not so dignified as he looked. Beneath his poise and stillness was another face, full of mischief and faceted like a gem, catching the light. He liked to play games against his own skill, catching things with his eyes closed, setting himself impossible leaps over beds and chairs. When he smiled, the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled like a leaf held to flame.

He was like a flame himself. He skipping stones, the wooden horse I had played with, the lyre from my mother’s dowry.

“I am glad your father sent it with you,” he said.

Soon our conversations spilled out of the night’s confinement, I surprised myself with how much there was to say, about everything, the beach and dinner and one boy or another,

I stopped watching for ridicule, the scorpion’s tail hidden in his words. He said what he meant; he was puzzled if you did not. Some people might have mistaken this for simplicity. But is it not a sort of genius to cut always to the heart?

ONE AFTERNOON, as I went to leave him to his private drills he said, “Why don’t you come with me?” his voice was a little strained; if I had not thought it impossible, I might have said he was nervous. The air, which had grown comfortable between us, felt suddenly taut.

“All right,” I said.

It was the quiet hours of late afternoon; the palace slept out the heat and left us alone. We took the longest way, through the olive grove’s twisting path, to the house where the arms were kept.

I stood in the doorway as he selected his practice weapons, a spear and a sword, slightly blunted at the tip. I reached for my own, then hesitated.

“Should I-?” He shook his head. *No.*

“I do not flight with others,” he told me.

I followed him outside to the packed sand circle. “Never?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know that…” I trailed off as he took up a stance in the center, his spear in his hand, his sword at his waist.

“That the prophecy is true? I guess I don’t.”  
Divine blood flows differently in each god-born child. Orpheus’s voice made the trees weep, Heracles could

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I stood in the doorway as he selected his practice weapons, a spear and a sword, slightly blunted at the kill a man by clapping him on the back. Achilles’ miracle was his speed. His spear, as he began the first pass, moved faster than my eye could follow. It whirled, flashing forward, reversed, then flashed behind. The shaft seemed to flow in his hands, the dark fray point flickered like a snake’s tongue. His feet beat the ground like a dancer never still.

I could not move, watching. I almost did not breathe. His face was calm and blank, not tensed with effort. His movements were so precise I could almost see the men he fought, ten, twenty of them, advancing on all side. He leapt, scything his spear, even as his other hand snatched the sword from its sheath. He swung out with them both, moving like liquid, like a fish through the waves.

He stopped, suddenly. I could hear his breaths, only a little louder than usual, in the still afternoon air.

“Who trained you?” I asked. I did not know what else to say.

“My father, a little.”

A little. I felt almost frightened.

“No one else?”

“No.”

I stepped forward. “Fight me.”

He made a sound almost like a laugh. “No. Of course not.”

“Fight me.” I felt in a trance. He had been trained, a little, by his father. The rest was – what? Divine? This was more of the dogs than I had ever seen in my life. He made it look beautiful, this sweating, hacking art of ours. I understood why his father did not let him fight in front of the others. How could any ordinary man take pride in his own skill when there was this in the word?

“I don’t want to.”

“I dare you.”

“You don’t have any weapons.”

“I’ll get them.”

He knelt and laid his weapons in the dirt. His eyes met mine. “I will not. Do not ask me again.”

“I will ask you again. You cannot forbid me.” I stepped forward, defiant. Something burned hot in me now, an impatience, a certainly. I would have this thing. He would give it to me.

His face twisted and, almost, I thought I saw anger. This pleased me. I would fight me then. My nerves sang with the danger of it.

But instead he walked away, his weapons abandoned in the dust.

“Come back,” I said. Then louder: “Come back. Are you afraid?”

That strange half-laugh again, his back still turned. “No, I am not afraid.”

“You should be.” I meant it as a joke, an easing, but it did not sound that way in the still air that hung between us. His back started at me, unmoving, unmovable.

*I will make him look at me,* I thought, my legs swallowed up the five steps between us, and I crashed into his back.

He stumble forward, falling, and I clung to him. We landed, and I heard the quick huff of his breath as it was driven from him. But before I could speak, he was twisting around beneath me, he seized my wrists in his hands. I struggled, not sure what I had meant to do. But here was resistance, and that was something I could fight. “Let me go!” I yanked my wrists against his grip.

“No.” In a swift motion, he rolled me beneath him, pinning me, his knees in my belly, I panted, angry but strangely satisfied.

“I have never seen anyone fight the way you do,” I told him. Confession or accusation, or both.

“You have not seen much.”

I bridled, despite the mildness of his tone. “You know what I mean.”

His eyes were unreadable. Over us both, the unripe olives rattled gently.

“Maybe. What do you mean?”

I twisted, hard, and he let go. We sat up, our tunics dusty and stuck to our backs.

“I mean-“ I broke off. There was an edge to me now, that familiar keenness of anger and envy, struck to life like flint. But the bitter words died

***Chapter Six***

OUR FRIENDSHIP CAME ALL AT ONCE AFTER THAT, LIKE spring floods from the mountains. Before, the boys and I had imagined that his days were filled with princely instruction, statecraft and spear. But I had long since learned the truth: other than his lyre lessons and his drills, he had no instruction. One day we might go swimming, another we might climb trees. We made up gamed for ourselves, of racing and tumbling. We would lie on the warm sand and say, “Guess what I’m thinking about.”

The falcon we had seen from our window.

The boy with the crooked front tooth.

Dinner.

And as we swam, or played, or talked, a feeling would come. It was almost like fear, in the way it filled me, rising in my chest. It was almost like tears, in how swiftly it came. But it was neither of those, buoyant where they were heavy, bright where they were dull. I had known contentment before, brief snatches of time in which I pursued solitary pleasure: skipping stones or dicing or dreaming. But in truth, it had been less a presence than an absence, a laying aside of dread: my father was not near, nor boys. I was not hungry, or tired, or sick.

even as I thought them.

“There is no one like you,” I said, at last.

He regarded me a moment, in silence. “So?”

Something in the way he spoke it drained the last of my anger from me. I had minded, once. But who was I now, to begrudge such a thing?

As if he heard me, he smiled, and his face was like the sun.

This feeling was different. I found myself grinning until my cheeks hurt, my scalp prickling till I thought it might lift off my head. My tongue ran away from me, giddy with freedom. This and this, I said to him. I did not have to dear that I spoke too much. I did not have to worry that I was too slender or too slow. This and this and this! I taught him how to skip stones, and he taught me how to carve wood. I could feel every nerve in my body, every brush of air against my skin.

He played my mother’s lyre, and I watched. When it was my turn to play, my fingers tangled in the strings and the teacher despaired of me. I did not care. “Play again,” I told him. And he played until I could barely see his fingers in the dark.

I saw then how I had changed. I did not mind anymore that I lost when we raced and I lost when we swam out to the rocks and I lost when we tossed spears or skipped stones. For who can be ashamed to lose to such beauty? It was enough to watch him win, to see the soles of his feet flashing as they kicked up shoulders as he pulled through the salt. It was enough.

IT WAS LATE SUMMER, over a year after my exile had begun, when at last I told him of how I had killed the boy. We were in the branches of the courtyard oak, hidden by the patchwork leaves. It was easier here somehow, off the ground, with the solid trunk at my back. He listened silently, and when I had finished, he asked:

“Why did you not say that you were defending yourself?”

It was like him to ask this, the thing I had not thought of before.

“I don’t know.”

“Or you could have lied. Said you found him already dead.”

I started at him, stunned by the simplicity of it. I could have lied. And then the revelation that followed: *if had lied, I would still be a prince.* It was not murder that had exiled me, it was my lack of cunning. I understood, now, the disgust in my father’s eyes. His moron son, confessing all. I recalled how his jaw had hardened as I spoke. *He does not deserve to be a king.*

“You would not have lied,” I said.

“No,” he admitted.

“What would you have done?” I asked.

Achilles tapped a finger against the branch he sat on. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine it. The way the boy spoke to you.” He shrugged. “No one has ever tried to take something from me.”

“Never?” I could not believe it. A life without such things seemed impossible.

“Never.” He was silent a moment, thinking. “I don’t know,” he repeated, finally. “I think I would be angry.” He closed his eyes and rested his head back against a branch. The green oak leaves crowded around his hair, like a crown.

I SAW KING PELEUS often now; we were called to councils sometimes, and dinner with visiting kings. I was allowed to sit at the table beside Achilles, even to speak if I wished. I did not wish; I was happy to be silent and watch the men around me. *Skops,* Peleus took to calling me. Owl, for my big eyes. He was good at this sort of affection, general and unbinding.

After the men were gone, we would sit with him by the fire to hear the stories of his youth. The old man, now gray and faded, told us that he had once fought beside Heracles. When I said that I had seen Philoctetes, he smiled.

“Yes, the bearer of Heracles’ great bow. Back then he was a spearman, and much the bravest of us.” This was like him too, these sorts of compliments. I understood, now, how his treasury had come to be so full of the gifts of treaty and alliance. Peleus was the exception: a man of modesty. We stayed to listen as the servants added one log, and then another, to the flames. It was halfway to dawn before he would send us back to our beds.

THE ONLY PLACE I did not follow was to see his mother. He went late at night, or at dawn before the palace was awake, and returned flushed and smelling of the sea. When I asked about it, he told me freely, his voice strangely toneless.

“It is always the same. She wants to know what I am doing and if I am well. She speaks to me of my reputation among men. At the end she asks if I will come with her.”

I was rapt. “Where?”

“The caves under the sea.” Where the sea-nymphs lived, so deep the sun did not penetrate.

“Will you go?”

He shook his head. “My father says I should not. He says no mortal who sees them comes back the same.”

When he turned away, I made the peasant sign against evil. *Gods avert.* It frightened me a little to hear him speak of a thing so calmly. Gods and mortals never mixed happily in our stories. But she was his mother, I reassured myself, and he was half-god himself.

In time his visits with her were just another strangeness about him that I became accustomed to, like the marvel of his feet or the inhuman deftness of his fingers. When I heard him climbing back through the window at dawn, I would mumble from my bed, “Is she well?”

And he would answer. “Yes, she is well.” And he might add: “The fish are thick today” or “The bay is warm as a bath.” And then we would sleep again.

ONE MORNING of my second spring, he came back from his visit with his mother later than usual; the sun was almost out of the water and the goat-bells were clanging in the hills.

“Is she well?”

“She is well. She wants to meet you.”

I felt a surge of feat, but stifled it. “Do you think I should?” I could not imagine what she would want with me. I knew her reputation for hating mortals.

He did not meet my eyes; his fingers turned a stone he had found over and over. “There is no harm in it. Tomorrow night, she said.” I understood now that it was a command. The gods did not make requests. I knew him well enough to see that he was embarrassed. He was never so stiff with me.

“Tomorrow?”

He nodded.

I did not want him to see my dear, though normally we kept nothing from each other. “Should I – should I bring a gift? Honeyed wine?” We poured it

over the altars of the gods on festival days. It was one of our richest offerings.

He shook his head. “She doesn’t like it.”

The next night, when the household slept, I climbed out of our window. The moon was half full, bright enough for me to pick my over the rocks without a torch. He had said that I was to stand in the surf and she would come. No, he had reassured me, you do not need to speak. She will know.

The waves were warm, and thick with sand. I shifted, watched the small white crabs run through the surf. I was listening, thinking, I might hear the splash of her feet as she approached.

A breeze blew down the beach and, grateful, I closed my eyes to it. When I opened them again, she was standing before me.

She was taller than I was, taller than others woman I had ever seen her black hair was loose down her back, and her skin shone luminous and impossibly pale, as if it drank light from the moon. She was so close I could smell her, seawater laced with dark brown honey. I did not breathe. I did not dare.

“You are Patroclus.” I flinched at the sound of her voice, hoarse and rasping. I had expected chimes, not the grinding of rocks in the surf.

“Yes, lady.”

Distaste ran over her face. Her eyes were not like a human’s; they were black to their center and flecked with gold. I could not bring myself to meet them.

“He will be a god,” she said. I did not know what to say, so I said nothing. She leaned forward, and I half-thought she might touch me. But of course she did not.

“Do you understand?” I could feel her breath on my cheek, not warm at all, but chilled like the depths of the sea. *Do you understand?* He had told me that she hated to be kept waiting.

“Yes.”

She leaned closer still, looming over me. Her mouth was a gash of red, like the torn-open stomach of a sacrifice, bloody and oracular. Behind it her teeth shone sharp and white as bone.

“Good.” Carelessly, as if to herself, she added, “You will be dead soon enough.”

She turned and dove into the sea, leaving no ripples behind her.

I DID NOT GO straight back to the palace. I could not. I went to the olive grove instead, to sit among the twisting trunks and fallen fruits. It was far from the sea. I did not wish to smell the salt now.

*You will be dead soon enough.* She had said it coldly, as a fact. She did not wish me for his companion, but I was not worth killing. To a goddess, the few decades of human life were barely even an inconvenience.

And she wished him to be a god. She had spoken it so simply, as if it were obvious. A god. I could not imagine him so. Gods were cold and distant, far off as the moon, nothing like his bright eyes, the warm mischief of his smiles.

Her desire was ambitious. It was a difficult thing, to make even a half-god immortal. True, it had happened before, to Heracles and Orpheus and Orion. They sat in the sky now, presiding as constellations, feasting with the gods on ambrosia. But these men had been the sons of Zeus, their sinews strong with the purest ichor that flowed. Thetis was a lesser of the lesser gods, a sea-nymph only. In our stories these divinities had to work by wheedling and flattery, by favors won from stronger gods. They could not do much themselves. Except live, forever.

“WHAT ARE YOU thinking about?” It was Achilles, come to find me. His voice was loud in the quiet grove, but I did not startle. I had half-expected him to come. I had wanted him to.

“Nothing,” I said. It was untrue. I guess it always is.

He sat down beside me, his feet bare and dusty.

“Did she tell you that would die soon?”

I turned to look at him, startled.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

The wind blew the gray leaves above us, and somewhere I heard the soft *part* of an olive fall.

“She wants you to be a god,” I told him.

“I know.” His face twisted with embarrassment, and in spite of itself my heart lightened. It was such a boyish response. And so human. Parents, everywhere.

But the question still waited to be asked; I could do nothing until I knew the answer.

“Do you want to be –“ I paused, struggling, though I had promised myself I wouldn’t. I had sat in the grove, practicing this very question, as I waited for him to find me. “Do you want to be a god?”

His eyes were dark in the half-light. I could not make out the gold flecks in the green. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I don’t know what it means, or how it happens.” He looked down at his hands, clasping his knees. “I don’t want to leave here. When would it happen anyway? Soon?”

I was at a loss. I knew nothing of how gods were made. I was mortal, only.

He was frowning now, his voice louder. “And is there really a place like That? Olympus? She doesn’t even know how she will do it. She pretends she knows. She thinks if I become famous enough…” He trailed off.

This at least I could follow. “Then the gods will take you voluntarily.”

He nodded. But he had npt answered mu question.

“Achilles.”

He turned to me, his eyes still filled with frustration, with a sort of a angry bewilderment. He was barely twelve.

“Do you want to be a god? It was easier this time.

“Not yet,” he said.

A tightness I had not known was there eased a little, I would not lose him yet.

He cupped a hand against his chin; his features looked finer than usual, like carved marble. “I’d like to be a hero, though. I think I could do it. If the prophecy is true. If there’s a war. My mother says I am better than Heracles was.”

I did not know what to say to this. I did not know if it was motherly bias or fact. I did not care. *Not yet.*

He was silent a moment. Then turned to me, suddenly. “Would you want to be a god?”

There, among the moss and olives, it struck me as funny. I laughed and, a moment later, he did too.

“I do not think that is likely,” I told him.

I stood, put down a hand for him. He took it, pulled himself up. Our tunics were dusty, and my feet tingled slightly with drying sea salt.

“There were figs in the kitchen. I saw them,” he said.

We were only twelve, too young to brood.

“I bet I can eat more than you.”

“Race you!”

I laughed. We ran.

***Chapter Seven***

THE NEXT SUMMER WE TURNED THIRTEEN, HIM FIRST, and then me. Our bodies began to stretch, pulling at our joints till they were aching and weak. In Peleus’ shining bronze mirror, I almost did not recognize myself – lanky and gaunt, stork legs and sharpening chin. Achilles was taller still, seeming to tower above me. Eventually we would be of a height, but he came to his maturity sooner, with a startling speed, primed perhaps by the divinity in his blood.

The boys, too, were growing older. Regularly now we heard moans behind closed doors and saw shadows returning to their beds before dawn. In our countries, a man often took a wife before his beard was fully fledged. How much earlier, then, did he take a serving girl? It was expected; very few mean came to their marriage beds without having done so. Those did were unlucky indeed: too weak to compel, too ugly to charm, and too poor to pay.

It was customary for a palace to have a full complement of nobly born women as servants for the mistress of the house. But Peleus had no wife in the palace, and so the women we saw were mostly, and so the women we saw were mostly slaves. They had been bought or taken in warfare, or bred from those who were. During the day they poured wine and scrubbed floors and kept the kitchen. At night they belonged to soldiers or foster boys, to visiting kings or Peleus himself. The swollen bellies that followed were not a thing of shame; they were profit: more slaves. These unions were not always rape; sometimes there was mutual satisfaction and even affection. At least that is what the men who spoke of them believed.

It would have been easy, infinitely easy, for Achilles or me to have bedded one of these girls ourselves. At thirteen we were almost late to do so, especially him, as princes were known for their appetites. Instead, we watched in silence as the foster boys pulled girls onto their laps, or Peleus summoned the prettiest to his room after dinner. Once, I even heard the kind offer her to his son. He answered, almost diffidently: *I am tired tonight.* Later, as we walked back to our room, he avoided my eyes.

And I? I was shy and silent with all but Achilles; I could scarcely speak to the other boys, let alone a girl. As a comrade of the prince, I suppose I would not have had to speak; a gesture or a look would have been enough. But such a thing did not occur to me. The feelings that stirred in me at night seemed strangely distant from those serving girls with their lowered eyes and obedience. I watched a boy fumbling at a girl’s dress, the dull look on her face as she poured his wine. I did not wish for such a thing.

ONE NOGHT WE had stayed late in Peleus’s chamber. Achilles was on the floor, an arm thrown beneath his head for a pillow. I sat more formally, in a chair. It was not just because of Peleus. I did not like the sprawling length of my new limbs.

The old king’s eyes were half-closed. He was telling us a story.

“Meleager was the finest warrior of his day, but also the proudest. He expected the best of everything, and because the people loved him, he received it.”

My eyes drifted to Achilles. His fingers were stirring, just barely, in the air. He often did this when he was composing a new song. The story of Meleager, I guessed, as his father told it.”

“But one day the king of Calydon said, ‘Why must we give so much to Meleager? There are other worthy men in Calydon.’”

Achilles shifted, and his tunic pulled tight across his chest. That day, I had overheard a serving girl whispering to her friend: “Do you think the prince looked at me, at dinner?” Her tone was one of hope.

“Meleager heard the words of the king and was enraged.”

This morning he had leapt onto my bed and pressed his nose against mine. “Good morning,” he’d said. I remembered the heat of him against my skin/

“He said, ‘I will not fight for you any longer.’ And he went back to his house and sought comfort in the arms of his wife.”

I felt a tug on my foot. It was Achilles, grinning at me from the floor.

“Calydon had fierce enemies, and when they heard that Meleager would no longer fight for Calydon-“

I pushed my foot towards him a little, provokingly. His fingers wrapped around ,y ankle.

“They attacked. And the city of Calydon suffered terrible losses.”

Achilles yanked, and I slid half out of the chair. I clung to the wooden frame so I would not be pulled onto the floor.

“So the people went to Meleager, to beg him for his help. And – Achilles, are you listening??

“Yes, Father.”

“You are not. You are tormenting our poor Skops.”

I tried to look tormented. But all I felt was the coolness against my ankle, where his fingers had been, a moment before.

“It is just as well, perhaps. I am getting tired. We will finish the story another evening.”

We stood and wished the old man food night. But as we turned, he said, “Achilles, you, might look for the light-haired girl, from the kitchen. She has been haunting doorways for you, I hear.”

It was hard to know if it was the firelight that made his face look so changed.

“Perhaps, Father. I am tired tonight.”

Peleus chuckled, as if this were a joke. “I’m sure she could wake you up.” He waved us off.

I had to trot, a little, to keep up with him as we walked back to our rooms. We washed our faces in silence, but there was an ache in me, like a rotten tooth. I could not let it be.

“That girl – do you like her?”

Achilles turned to face me from across the room. “Why? Do you?”

“No, no.” I flushed. “That is not what I meant.” I had not felt so uncertain with him since the earliest days: “I mean, do you want-“

He ran at me, pushed me backwards onto my cot. Leaned over me. “I’m sick of talking about her,” he said.

The heat rose up my neck, wrapped fingers over my face. His hair fell around me, and I could smell nothing but him. The grain of his lips seemed to rest a hairbreadth from mine.

Then, just like that morning, he was gone. Up across the room, and pouring a last cup of water. His face was still, and calm.

“Good night,” he said.

AT NIGHT, IN BED, images come. They begin as dreams, trailing caresses in my sleep from which I start, trembling. I lie awake, and still they come, the flicker of firelight on the neck, the curve of a hipbone, drawing downwards. Hands, smooth and strong, reaching to touch me. I know those hands. But even here, behind the darkness of my eyelids, I cannot name the thing I hope for. During the days I grow restless, fidgety. But all my pacing, singing, running does not keep them at bay. They come, and will not be stopped.

IT IS SUMMER, one of the first fine days. We are on the beach after lunch, our backs to a sloping piece of driftwood. The sun is high, and the air warm around us. Beside me, Achilles shifts, and his foot falls open against mine. It is cool, and chafed pink from the sand, soft from a winter indoors. He hums something, a piece of a song he had played earlier.

I turn to look at him. His face is smooth, without the blotches and spots that have begun afflict the other boys. His features are drawn with a firm hand; nothing awry or sloppy, nothing too large – all precise, cut with the sharpest of knives. And yet the effect itself is not sharp.

He turns and finds me looking at him. “What?” he says.

“Nothing.”

I can smell him. The oils that he uses on his feet, pomegranate and sandalwood; the salt of clean sweat; the hyacinths we had walked through, their scent crushed against our ankles. Beneath it all is his own smell, the one I go to sleep with, the one I wake up to. I cannot describe it. It is sweet, but not just. It is strong but not too strong. Something like almond, but that still is not right. Sometimes, after we have wrestled, my own skin smells like it.

He puts a hand down, to lean against. The muscles in his arms curve softly, appearing and disappearing as he moves. His eyes are deep green on mine.

My pulse jumps, for no reason I can name. he has looked at me a thousand thousand times, but there is something different in this gaze, an intensity I do not know. My mouth dry, and I can hear the sound of my throat as I swallow.

He watches me. It seems that he is waiting.

I shift, an infinitesimal movement, towards him. It is like the leap from a waterfall. I do not know, until then, what I am going to do. I lean forward and pour lips land clumsily on each other. They are like the fat bodies of bees, soft and round and giddy with pollen. I can taste his mouth – hot and sweet with honey from dessert. My stomach trembles, and a warm drop of pleasure spreads beneath my skin. *More.*

The strength of my desire, the speed with which it flowers, shocks me; I flinch and startle back from him. I have a moment, to see his face framed in the afternoon light, his lips slightly parted, still half-forming a kiss. His eyes are wide with surprise.

I am horrified. What have I done? But I do not have time to apologize. He stands and steps backwards. His face has closed over, impenetrable and distant, freezing the explanations in my mouth. He turns and races, the fastest boy in the world, up the beach and away.

My side is cold with his absence. My skin feels tight, and my face, I know, is red and raw as a burn.

*Dear gods,* I think, *let him not hate me.*

I should have known better than to call upon the gods.

WHEN I TURNED THE CORNER onto the garden path, she was there, sharp and knife-bright. A blue dress clung to her skin as if damp. Her dark eyes held mine, and her fingers, chill and unearthly pale, reached for me. My feet knocked against each other as she lifted me from the earth.

“I have seen,” she hissed. The sound of waves breaking on stone.

I could not speak. She held me by the throat.

“He is leaving.” Her eyes were black now, dark as sea-wet rocks, and as jagged. “I should have sent him long ago. Do not try to follow.”

I could not breathe now. But I did not struggle. That much, at least, I knew. She seemed to pause, and I thought she might speak again. She did not. Only opened her hand and released me, boneless, to the ground.

A mother’s wishes. In our countries, they were not worth much. But she was a goddess, first and always.

When I returned to the room, it was already dark. I found Achilles sitting on his bed, staring at his feet. His head lifted, almost hopefully, as I came to the doorway. I did not speak; his mother’s black eyes still burned in front of me, and the sight of his heels, flashing up the beach. *Forgive me, it was a mistake.* This is what I might have dared to say then, if it had not been for her.

I came into the room, sat on my own bed. He shifted, his eyes flicking to mine. He did not resemble her the way that children normally look like a parent, a tilt of chin, the shape of an eye. It was something in his movements, in his luminous skin. Son of a goddess. What had I thought would happen?

Even from where I sat I could smell the sea on him.

“I’m supposed to leave tomorrow,” he said. It was almost an accusation.

“Oh,” I said. My mouth felt swollen and numb, too thick to form words.

“I’m going to be taught by Chiron.” He paused, then added. “He taught Heracles. And Perseus.”

*Not yet,* he had said to me. But his mother had chosen differently.

He stood and pulled off his tunic. It was hot, full summer, and we were accustomed to sleeping naked. The moon shone on his belly, smooth, muscled, downed with light brown hairs that darkened as they ran below his waist. I averted my eyes.

The next morning, at dawn, he rose and dressed. I was awake; I had not slept. I watched him through the fringes of my eyelids, feigning sleep. From time to time he glanced at me; in the dim half-light his skin glowed gray and smooth as marble. He slung his bag over his shoulder and paused, a last time, at the door. I remember him there, outlined in the stone frame, his hair falling loose, still untidy from sleep. I closed my eyes, and a moment passed. When I opened them again, I was alone.

***Chapter Five***

BY BREAKFAST, EVERYONE KNEW HE WAS GONE. THEIR glances and whispers followed me to the table, lingered as I reached for food. I chewed and swallowed, though the bread sat like a stone in my stomach. I yearned to be away from the palace; I wanted the air.

I walked to the olive grove, the earth dry beneath my feet. I half-wondered if I was expected to join the boys, now that he was gone. I half-wondered if anyone would notice whether I did. I half-hoped they would. *Whip me,* I thought.

I could smell the sea. It was everywhere, in my hair, in my clothes, in the sticky damp of my skin. Even here in the grove, amidst the must of leaves and earth, the unwholesome salty decay still found me. My stomach heaved a moment, and I leaned against the scabbed trunk of a tree. The rough bark pricked my forehead, steading me. *I must get away from this smell,* I thought.

I walked north, to the palace road, a dusty strip worn smooth by wagon wheels and horses’ hooves. A little beyond the palace yard it divided. One half ran south and west, through grass and rocks and low hills; that was the way I had come, three years ago. The other half twisted northwards, towards Mount Othrys and then beyond, to Mount Pelion. I traced it with my eyes. It skirted the wooded foothills for some time before disappearing within them.

The sun bore down on me, hot and hard in the summer sky, as if it would drive me back to the palace. Yet I lingered. I had heard they were beautiful, our mountains – pears and cypress and streams of just-melted ice. It would be cool there and shaded. Far away from the diamond-bright beaches, and the flashing of the sea.

*I could leave.* The thought was sudden, arresting. I had come to the road meaning only to escape the sea. But the path lay before me, and the mountains. *And Achilles.* My chest rose and fell rapidly, as if trying to keep pace with my thoughts. I had nothing that belonged to me, not a tunic, not a sandal; they were Peleus’ all. *I do not need to pack, even.*

Only my mother’s lyre, kept in the wooden chest within the inner room, stayed me. I hesitated a moment, thinking I might try to go back, to take it with me. But it was already midday. I had only the afternoon to travel, before they would discover my absence – so I flattered myself – and send after me. I glanced back at the palace and saw no one. The guards were elsewhere. *Now. It must be now.*

I ran. Away from the palace, down the path towards the woods, feet stinging as they slapped the heat-baked ground. As I ran, I promised myself that if I ever saw him again, I would keep my thoughts behind my eyes. I had learned, now, what it would cost me if I did not. The ache in my legs, the knifing heaves of my chest felt clean and good. I ran.

Sweat slicked my skin, fell upon the earth beneath my feet. I grew dirty, then dirtier. Dust and broken bits of leaves clung to my legs. The world around me narrowed to the pounding of my feet and the next dusty yard of road.

Finally, after an hour? Two? I could go no farther. I bent over in pain, the bright afternoon sun wavering to black, the rush of blood deafening in my ears. The path was heavily wooded now, on both sides, and Peleus’ palace was a long was behind me. To my right loomed Orthys, with Pelion just beyond it. I started at its peak and tried to guess how much farther. Ten thousands paces? Fifteen? I began to walk.

Hours passed. My muscles grew wobbly and weak, my feet jumbled together. The sun was well across the zenith now, hanging low in the western sky. I had four, perhaps five, hours until dark, and the peak was as far as ever. Suddenly, I understood: I would not reach Pelion by nightfall. I had no food, nor water, nor hope of shelter. I had nothing but the sandals on my feet and the soaked tunic on my back.

I would not catch up to Achilles, I was sure of that now. He had left the road and his horse long ago, was now moving up the slopes on foot. A good tracker would have observed the woods beside the road, could have seen where a boy had made a path. But I was not a good tracker, and the scrub by the road looked all the same to me. My ears bussed dully – with cicadas, with the shrill calls of birds, with the rasp of my own breath. There was as ache in my stomach, like hunger or despair.

And then there was something else. The barest sound, just at the limit of hearing. But I caught it, and my skin, even in the heat, went cold. I knew that sound. It was the sound of stealth, of a man attempting misstep, the giving way of a single leaf, but it had been enough.

I strained to listen, fear jumping in my throat. Where had it come from? My eyes tracked the woods on either side. I dared not move; any sound would echo loudly up the slopes. I had not thought of dangers as I ran, but now my mind tumbled with them: soldiers, sent by Peleus or Thetis herself, white hands cold as sand on my throat. Or bandits. I knew that they back. A moment passed, and it came to me that the knees were not so very heavy and were placed so that their pressure did not hurt.

“Patroclus.” *Pa-tro-clus.*

I did not move.

The knees lifted, and hands reached down to turn me, gently, over. Achilles was looking down at me.

“I hoped that you would come,” he said. My stomach rolled, awash with nerves and relief at once. I drank him in, the bright hair, the soft curve of his lips upwards. My joy was so sharp I did not dare to breathe. I do not know what I might have said then. I’m sorry, perhaps. Or perhaps something more. I opened my mouth.

waited by roads, and I remembered stories of boys taken and kept until they died of misuse. My fingers pinched themselves white as I tried to still all breath, all movement, to give nothing away. My gaze caught on a thick clutch of blooming yarrow that could hide me. *Now. Go.*

There was movement from the woods at my side, and I jerked my head towards it. Too late. Something – someone – struck me from behind, throwing me forward. I landed heavily. Facedown on the ground, with the person already on top of me. I closed my eyes and waited for a knife.

There was nothing, nothing but silence and the knees that pinned my

“Is the boy hurt?”

A deep voice spoke from behind us both. Achilles’ head turned. From where I was, beneath him, I could see only the legs of the man’s horse – chestnut, fetlocks dulled with dust.

The voice again, measured and deliberate. “I am assuming, Achilles Pelides, that this is why you have not yet joined me on the mountain?”

My mind groped towards understanding. Achilles had not gone to Chiron. He had waited, here. For me.

“Greetings, Master Chiron, and my apologies. Yes, it is why I have not come.” He was using his prince’s voice.

“I see.”

I wished that Achilles would get up. I felt foolish here, on the ground beneath him. And I was also afraid. The man’s voice showed no anger, but it showed no kindness, either. It was clear and grave and dispassionate.

“Stand up,” it said.

Slowly, Achilles rose.

I would have screamed then, if my throat had not closed over with fear. Instead I made a noise like a half-strangled yelp and scrambled backwards.

The horse’s muscular legs ended in flesh, the equally muscular torso of a man, I started – at that impossible suture of horse and human, where smooth skin became a gleaming brown coat.

Beside me Achilles bowed his head. “Master Centaur,” he said. “I am sorry for the delay. I had to wait for my companion.” He knelt, his clean tunic in the dusty earth. “Please accept my apologies. I have long wished to be your students.”

The man’s – centaur’s – face was serious as his voice. He was older, I saw, with a neatly trimmed black beard.

He regarded Achilles a moment. “You do not need to kneel to me, Pelides. Though I appreciate the courtesy. And who is this companion that has kept us both waiting?

Achilles turned back to me and reached a hand down. Unsteadily, I took it and pulled myself up.

“This is Patroclus.”

There was a silence, and I knew it was my turn to speak.

“My lord,” I said. And bowed.

“I am not a lord, Patroclus Menoitiades.”

My head jerked up at the sound of my father’s name.

“I am a centaur, and a teacher of men. My name is Chiron.”

I gulped and nodded. I did not dare to ask how he knew my name.

His eyes surveyed me. “You are overtired, I think. You need water and food, both. It is a long way to my home on Pelion, too long for you to walk. So we must make other arrangements.”

He turned then, and I tried not to gawk at the way his horse legs moved beneath him.

“You will ride on my back,” the centaur said. “I do not usually offer such things on first acquaintance. But exceptions must be made.” He paused. “You have been taught to ride, I suppose?”

We nodded, quickly.

“That is unfortunate. Forget what you learned. I do not like to be squeezed by legs or tugged at. The one in front will hold on to him. If you feel that you are going to fall, speak up.”

Achilles and I exchange a look, quickly.

He stepped forward.

“How should I - ?”

“I will kneel.” His horse legs folded themselves into the dust. His back was broad and lightly sheened with sweat. “Take my arm for balance,” the centaur instructed. Achilles did, swinging his leg over and settling himself.

It was my turn. At least I would not be in front, so close to that place where skin gave way to chestnut coat. Chiron offered me his arm, and I took it. It was muscled and large, thickly covered with black hair that was nothing like the color of his horse half. I seated myself, my legs stretched across that wide back, almost to discomfort.

Chiron said, “I will stand now.” The motion was smooth, but still I grabbed for Achilles. Chiron was half as high as a normal horse, and my feet dangled so far above the ground it made me dizzy. Achilles’ hands rested loosely on Chiron’s trunk. “You will fall, if you hold so lightly,” the centaur said.

My fingers grew damp with sweat from clutching Achilles’ chest. I dared not relax them, even for a moment. The centaur’s gait was less symmetrical than a horse’s, and the ground was uneven. I slipped alarmingly upon the sweat-slick horsehair.

There was no path I could see, but we were rising swiftly upwards through the trees, carried along by Chiron’s sure, unslowing steps. I winced every time a jounce caused my heels to kick into the centaur’s sides.

As we went, Chiron pointed things out to us, in that same steady voice.

*There is Mount Othrys.*

*The cypress trees are thicker here, on the north side, you can see.*

*This stream feeds the Apidanos River that runs through Phthia’s lands.*

Achilles twisted back to look at me, grinning.

We climbed higher still, and the centaur swished his great black tail, swatting files for all of us.

CHIRON STOPPED SUDDENLY, and I jerked forward into Achilles’ back. We were in a small break in the woods, a grove of sorts, half encircled by a rocky outcrop. We were not quite at the peak, but we were close, and the sky was blue and glowing above us.

“We were here.” Chiron knelt, and we stepped off his back, a bit unsteadily.

In front of us was a cave. But to call it that is to demean it, for it was not made of dark stone, but pale rose quartz.

“Come,” the centaur said. We followed him through the entrance, high enough so that he did not need to stoop. We blinked, for it was shadowy inside, though lighter than it should have been, because of the crystal walls. At one end was a small spring that seemed to drain away inside the rock.

On the walls hung things I did not recognize: strange bronze implements. Above us on the cave’s ceiling, lines and specks of dye shaped the constellations and the movements of the heavens. On carved shelves were dozens of small ceramic jars covered with slanted markings. Instruments hung in one corner, lyres and flutes, and next to them tools and cooking pots.

There was a single human-sized bed, thick and padded with animal skins, made up for Achilles. I did not see where the centaur slept. Perhaps he did not.

“Sit now, he said. It was pleasantly cool inside, perfect after the sun, and I sank gratefully onto one of the cushions Chiron indicated. He went to the spring and filled cups, which he brought to us. The water was sweet and fresh. I drank as Chiron stood over me. “You will be sore and tired tomorrow,” he told me. “But it will be better if you eat.”

He ladled out stew, thick with chunks of vegetables and meat, from a pot simmering over a small fire at the back of the cave. There were fruits, too, round red berries that he kept in a hollowed outcropping of rock. I ate quickly, surprised at how hungry I was. My eyes kept returning to Achilles, and I tingled with the giddy buoyancy of relief. *I have escaped.*

With my new boldness, I pointed to some of the bronze tools on the wall. “What are those?”

Chiron sat across from us, his horse-legs folded beneath him. “They are for surgery,” he told.

“Surgery?” It was not a word I knew.

“Healing. I forget the barbarities of the low countries.” His voice was neutral and calm, factual. “Sometimes a limb must go. Those are for cutting, those for suturing. Often by removing some, we may save the rest.” He watched me starting at them, talking in the sharp, saw-toothed edges. “Do you wish to learn medicine?”

I flushed. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“You answer a different question than the one I asked.”

“I’m sorry, Master Chiron.” I did not want to anger him. *He will send me back.*

“There is no need to be sorry. Simply answer.”

I stammered a little. “Yes. I would like to learn. It seems useful, does it not?”

“It is very useful,” Chiron agreed.

He turned to Achilles, who had been following the conservation.

“And you, Pelides? Do you also think medicine is useful?”

“Of course,” Achilles said. “Please do not call me Pelides. Here I am – I am just Achilles.”

Something passed through Chiron’s dark eyes. A flicker that was almost amusement. “Very well. Do you see anything you wish to know of?”

“Those.” Achilles was pointing to the musical instruments, the lyres and flutes and seven-stringed kithara. “Do you play?”

Chiron’s gaze was steady. “I do.”

“So do I,” said Achilles. “I have heard that you taught Heracles and Jason, thick-fingered though they were. Is it true?”

“It is.”

I felt a momentary unreality: he knew Heracles and Jason. Had known them as children.

“I would like you to teach me.”

Chiron’s stern face softened. “That is why you have been sent here. So that I may teach you what I know.”

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON LIGHT. Chiron guided us through the ridges near the cave. He showed us where the mountain lions had their dens, and where the river was, slow and sun-warm, for us to swim.

“You may bathe, if you like.” He was looking at me. I had forgotten how grimy I was, sweat-stained and dusty from the road. I ran a hand through my hair and felt the grit.

“I will too,” Achilles said. He pulled off his tunic and, a moment after, I followed. The water was cool in the deaths, but not unpleasantly so. From the bank Chiron taught still: “Those are loaches, do you see? And perch. That is a vimba, you will not find it father south. You may know it by the upturned mouth and silver belly.”

His words mingled with the sound of the river over its rocks, soothing any strangeness there might have been between Achilles and me. There was something in Chiron’s face, firm and calm and imbued with authority, that made us children again, with no world beyond this moment’s play and this night’s dinner. With him near us, it was hard to remember what might have happened on the day by the beach. Even our bodies felt smaller beside the centaur’s bulk. How had we thought we were grown?

We emerged from the water sweet and clean, shaking our hair in the last of the sun. I knelt by the bank and used stones to scrub the dirt and used stones to scrub the dirt and sweat from my tunic. I would have to be naked until it dried, but so far did Chiron’s influence stretch that I thought nothing of it.

We followed Chiron back to the cave, our wrung-dry tunics draped over our shoulders. He stopped occasionally, to point out the trails of hare and corncrakes and deer. He told us we would hunt for them, in days to come, and learn to track. We listened, questioning him eagerly. At Peleus’palace there had been only the dour lyre-master for a teacher, or Peleus himself, half-drowsing as he spoke. We knew nothing of forestry or the other skills Chiron had spoken of. My mind went back to the implements on the cave’s wall, the herbs and tools of healing. *Surgery* was the word he had used.

It was almost full dark when we reached the cave again. Chiron gave us easy tasks, gathering wood and kindling the fire in the clearing at the cave’s mouth. After it caught, we lingered by the flames, grateful for their steady warmth in the cooling air. Our bodies were pleasantly tired, heavy from our exertions, and our legs and feet tangled comfortably as we sat. We talked about where we’d go tomorrow, but lazily, our words fat and slow with contentment. Dinner was more stew, and a thin type of bread that Chiron cooked on bronze sheets over the fire. For dessert, berries with mountain-gathered honey.

As the fire dwindled, my eyes closed in half-dreaming. I was warm, and the I sat up, all drowsiness gone.

Achilles’ voice swung carelessly in the dark. “Did she say why?”

“She did not.”

I closed my throat, rusty and suddenly dry. “I am sorry,” I heard myself say. “It is not Achilles’ fault”. I came on my own. He did not know that I ground beneath me was soft with moss and fallen leaves. I could not believe that only this morning I had woken in Peleus’ palace. This small clearing, the gleaming walls of the cave within, were more vivid than the pale white palace had ever been.

Chiron’s voice, when it came, startled me. “I will tell you that your mother has sent a message, Achilles.”

I felt the muscles of Achilles’ arm tense against me. I felt my own throat tighten.

“Oh? What did she say?” His words were careful, neutral.

“She said that should the exiled son of Menoitius follow you, I was to bar him from your presence.”

would. I did not think – “ I stopped myself. “I hoped she would not notice.”

“That was foolish of you.” Chiron’s face was deep in shadow.

“Chiron –“ Achilles began, bravely.

The centaur held up a hand. “As it happens, the message came this morning, before either of you arrived. So despite your foolishness, I was not deceived.”

“You knew?” This was Achilles. I would never have spoken so boldly. “Then you have decided? You will disregard her message?”

Chiron’s voice held a warning of displeasure. “She is a goddess, Achilles, and your mother besides. Do you think so little of her wishes?”

“I honor her, Chiron. But she is wrong in this.” His hands were balled so tightly I could see the tendons, even in the low light.

“And why is she wrong, Pelides?”

I watched him through the darkness, my stomach clenching. I did not know what he might say.

“She feels that-“ He faltered a moment, and I almost did not breathe. “That he is a mortal and not a fit companion.”

“Do you think he is?” Chiron asked. His voice gave no hint of the answer.

“Yes.”

My cheeks warmed. Achilles, his jaw jutting, had thrown the word back with no hesitation.

“I see.” The centaur turned to me. “And you, Patroclus? You are worthy?”

I swallowed. “I do know if I am worthy. But I wish to stay.” I paused, swallowed again. “Please.”

There was silence. Then Chiron said, “When I bought you both here, I had not decided yet what I would do. Thetis sees many faults, some that are and some that are not.”

His voice was unreadable again. Hope and despair flared and died in me by turns.

“She is also young and has the prejudices of her kind. I am older and flatter myself that I can read a man more clearly. I have no objection to Patroclus as your companion.”

My body felt hollow in its relief, as if a storm had gone through.

“She will not be pleased, but I have weathered the anger of gods before.” He paused. “And now it is late, and time for you to sleep.”

“Thank you, Master Chiron.” Achilles’ voice, earnest and vigorous. We stood, but I hesitated.

“I just want –“ My fingers twitched towards Chiron. Achilles understood and disappeared into the cave.

I turned to face the centaur. “I will leave, if there will be trouble.”

There was a long silence, and I almost thought he had not heard me. At last, he said: “Do not let what you gained this day be so easily lost.”

Then he bade me good night, and I turned to join Achilles in the cave.

***Chapter Five***

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE TO THE SOFT SOUNDS OF Chiron getting breakfast ready. The pallet was thick beneath me; I had slept well, and deeply. I stretched, startling a little when my limbs bumped against Achilles, still asleep beside me. I watched him a moment, rosy cheeks and steady breaths. Something tugged at me, just beneath my skin, but then Chiron lifted a hand in greeting from across the cave, and I lifted one shyly in return, and it was forgotten.

That day, after we ate, we joined Chiron for his chores. It was easy, pleasurable work: collecting berries, catching fish for dinner, setting quail snares. The beginning of our studies, if it possible to calm them that. For Chiron liked to teach, not in set lessons, but in opportunities. When the goats that wandered the ridges took ill, we learned how to mix purgatives for their bad stomachs, and when they were well again, how to make a poultice that repelled their ticks. When I fell down a ravine, fracturing my arm and tearing open my knee, we learned how to set splints, clean wounds, and what herbs to give against infection.

On a hunting trip, after we had accidentally flushed a corncrake from its nest, he taught us how to move silently and how to read the scuffles of tracks. And when we had found the animal, the best way to aim a bow or sling so that death was quick.

If we were thirsty and had no water-skin, he would teach us about the plants whose roots carried beads of moisture. When a mountain-ash fell, we learned carpentry, splitting off the bark, sanding and shaping the wood that was left. I made an axe handle, and Achilles the shaft of a spear; Chiron said that soon we would learn to forge the blades for such things.

Every evening and every morning we helped with meals, churning the thick goat’s milk for yogurt and cheese, gutting fish. It was work we had never been allowed to do before, as princess, and we fell upon it eagerly. Following Chiron’s instructions, we watched in amazement as butter formed before our eyes, at the way pheasant eggs sizzled and solidified on fire-warmed rocks.

After a mouth, over breakfast, Chiron asked us what else we wished to learn. “Those.” I pointed to the instruments on the wall. *For surgery,* he had said. He took them down for us, one by one.

“Careful. The blade is very sharp. It is for when there is rot in the flesh that must be cut. Press the skin around the wound, and you will hear a crackle.”

Then he had us trace the bones in our own bodies, running a hand over the ridging vertebrae of each other’s backs. He pointed with his fingers, teaching the places beneath the skin where the organs lodged.

“A wound in any of them will eventually be fatal. But death is quickest here.” His finger tapped the slight concavity of Achilles’ temple. A chill went through me to see it touched, that place where Achilles’ life was so slenderly protected. I was glad when we spoke of other things.

At night we lay on the soft grass in front of the cave, and Chiron showed us the constellations, telling their stories – Andromeda, cowering before the sea monster’s jaws, and Perseus poised to rescue her; the immortal horse Pegasus, aloft on his wings, born from the severed neck of Medusa. He told us too of Heracles, his labors, and the madness that took him. In its grip he had not recognized his wife and children, and had killed them for enemies.

Achilles asked, “How could he not recognize his wife?”

“That is the nature of madness,” Chiron said. His voice sounded deeper than usual. He had known this wife.

“But why did the madness come?”

“The gods wished to punish him,” Chiron answered.

Achilles shook his head, impatiently. “But this was a greater punishment for her. It was not fair of them.”

“There is no law that gods must be fair, Achilles,” Chiron said. “And perhaps it is the greater grief, after all, to be left on earth when another is gone. Do you think?

“Perhaps,” Achilles admitted.

I listened and did not speak. Achilles’ eyes were bright in the firelight, his face drawn sharply by the flickering shadows. I would know it in dark or disguise, I told myself. I would know it even in madness.

“Come,” said Chiron. “Have I told you the legend of Aesclepius, and how he came to know the secrets of healing?”

He had, but we wanted to hear it again, the story of how the hero, son of Apollo, had spared a snake’s life. The snake had licked his ears clean in gratitude, so that he might hear her whisper the secrets of herbs to him.

“But you were the one who really taught him healing,” Achilles said.

“I was.”

“You do not mind that the snake gets all the credit?”

Chiron’s teeth showed through his dark beard. A smile. “No, Achilles, I do not mind.”

Later Achilles would play the lyre, as Chiron and I listened. My mother’s lyre. He had brought it with him.

we collected wood for winter fires, or salted meat for preserving. The animals had not yet gone to their dens, but they would soon, Chiron said. In the mornings, we marveled at the frost-etched leaves. We knew of snow from bards and stories; we had never seen it.

One morning, I woke to find Chiron gone. This was not unusual. He often rose before we did, to milk the goats or pick fruits for breakfast. I left the cave so that Achilles might sleep, and sat to wait for Chiron in the clearing. The ashes of last night’s fire were white and cold. I stirred them idly with a stick, listening to the woods around me. A quail muttered in the

“I wish I had known,” I said the first day, when he had showed it to me. “I almost did not come, because I did not want to leave it.”

He smiled. “Now I know how to make you follow me everywhere.”

The sun sank below Pelion’s ridges, and we were happy.

TIME PASSED QUICKLY on Mount Pelion, days slipping by in idyll. The mountain air was cold now in the mornings when we woke, and warmed only reluctantly in the thin sunlight that filtered through the dying leaves. Chiron gave us furs to wear, and hung animals skins from the cave’s entrance to keep the warmth in. During the days underbrush, and a mourning dove called. I heard the rustle of ground-cover, from the wind or an animal’s careless weight. In a moment I would get more wood and rekindle the fire.

The strangeness began as a prickling of my skin. First the quail went silent, then the dove. The leaves stilled, and the breeze died, and no animals moved in the brush. There was a quality to the silence like a held breath. Like the rabbit beneath the hawk’s shadow. I could feel my pulse striking my skin.

Sometimes, I reminded myself, Chiron did small magics, tricks of divinity, like warming water or calming animals.

“Chiron?” I called. My voice wavered, thinly. “Chiron?”

“It is not Chiron.”

I turned. Thetis stood at the edge of the clearing, her bone-white skin and bright as slashes of lightning. The dress she wore clung close to her body and shimmed like fish-scale. My breath died in my throat.

“You were not to be here,” she said. The scrape of jagged rocks against a ship’s hull.

She stepped forward, and the grass seemed to wilt beneath her feet. She was a sea-nymph, and the things of earth did not love her.

“I’m sorry,” I managed, my voice a dried leaf, rattling in my throat.

“I warned you,” she said. The black of her eyes seemed to sleep into me, fill my throat to choking. I could not have cried out if I’d dared to.

A noise behind me, and then Chiron’s voice, loud in the quiet. ‘Greetings, Thetis.”

Warmth surged back into my skin, and breath returned. I almost ran to him. But her gaze held me there, unwavering. I did not doubt she could reach me if she wished.

“You are frightening the boy,” Chiron said.

“He does not belong here,” she said. Her lips were red as newly spilled blood.

Chiron’s hand landed firmly on my shoulder. “Patroclus,” he said. “You will return to the cave now. I will speak with you later.”

I stood, unsteadily, and obeyed.

“You have lived too long with mortals, Centaur,” I heard her say before the animal skins closed behind me. I sagged against the cave’s wall; my throat tasted brackish and raw.

“Achilles,” I said.

His eyes opened, and he was beside me before I could speak again.

“Are you all right?”

“Your mother is here,” I said.

I saw the tightening of muscle beneath his skin. “She did not hurt you?”

I shook my head. I did not add that I thought she wanted to. That she might have, if Chiron had not come.

“I must go,” he said. The skins whispered against each other as they parted for him, then slipped shut again.

I could not hear what was said in the clearing. Their voices were low, or perhaps they had gone to speak elsewhere. I waited, tracing spirals in the packed earth floor. I did not worry, any longer, for myself. Chiron meant to keep me, and he was older than she was, full grown when the gods still rocked in their cradles, when she had been only and egg in the womb of the sea. But there was something else, less easy to name. A loss, or lessening, that I feared her presence might bring.

It was almost midday when they returned. My gaze went to Achilles’ face first, searching his eyes, the set of his mouth. I saw nothing but perhaps a touch of tiredness, he threw himself onto the pallet beside me. “I’m hungry,” he said.

“As well you should be,” Chiron said. “It is much past lunch.” He was already preparing food for us, maneuvering in the cave’s space easily despite his bulk.

Achilles turned to me. “It is all right,” he said. “She just wanted to speak to me. To see me.”

“She will come to speak with him again,” Chiron said. And as if he knew what I thought, he added, “As is proper. She is his mother.”

*She is a goddess first,* I thought.

Yet as we ate, my fears eased. I had half-worried she might have told Chiron of the day by the beach, but he was no different towards either of us, and Achilles was the same as he always was. I went to bed, if not at peace, at least reassured.

She came more often after that day, as Chiron had said she would. I learned to listen for it – a silence that dropped like a curtain – and knew to stay close to Chiron then, and the cave. The instruction was not much, and I told myself I did not begrudge her. But I was always glad when she was gone again.

WINTER CAME, and the river froze. Achilles and I ventured onto it, feet slipping. Later, we cut circles from it and dropped lines for fishing. It was the only fresh meat we had; the forests were empty of all but mice and the occasional marten.

Snows came, as Chiron had promised they would. We lay on the ground and let the flakes cover us, blowing them with our breath till they melted. We had no boots, nor cloaks other than Chiron’s furs, and were glad of the cave’s warmth. Even Chiron donned a shaggy overshirt, sewed from what he said was bearskin.

We counted the days after the first snowfall, marking them off with lines on a stone. “When you reach fifty,” Chiron said, “the river’s ice will begin to crack.” The morning of the fiftieth day we heard it, a strange sound, like a tree falling. A seam had split the frozen surface nearly from bank to bank. “Spring will come soon now,” Chiron said.

It was not long after that the grass began to grow again, and the squirrels emerged lean and whip-thin from their burrows. We followed them, eating our breakfasts in the new-scrubbed spring air. It was on one of these mornings that Achilles asked Chiron if he would teach us to fight.

I do not know what made him think of this then. A winter indoors, with not enough exercise perhaps, or the visit from his mother, the week before. Perhaps neither.

*Will you teach us to fight?*

There was a pause so brief I almost might have imagined it, before Chiron answered, “If you wish it, I will teach you.”

Later that day, he took us to a clearing, high on a ridge. He had spear-hafts and two practice swords for us, taken from storage in some corner of the cave. He asked us each to perform the drills that we knew. I did, slowly, the blocks and strikes and footwork I had learned in Phthia. To my side, just at the corner of my vision, Achilles’ limbs blurred and struck. Chiron had brought a bronze-banded staff, and he interposed it occasionally into our passes, probing with it, testing our reactions.

It seemed to go on for a long time, and my arms grew sore with lifting and placing the point of the sword. At last Chiron called a stop. We drank deep from waterskins and lay back on the grass. My chest was heaving. Achilles’ was steady.

Chiron was silent, standing in front of us.

“Well, what do you think?” Achilles was eager, and I remembered that Chiron was only the fourth person to have ever seen him fight.

I did not know what I expected centaur to say. But it was not what followed.

“There is nothing I can teach you. You know all that Heracles knew, and, more. You are the greatest warrior of your generation, and all the generations before.”

A flush stained Achilles’ cheeks. I could not tell if it was embarrassment or pleasure or both.

“Men will hear of your skill, and they will wish for you to fight their wars.” He paused. “What will you answer?”

“I do not know,” Achilles said.

“That is an answer for now. It will not be good enough later,” Chiron said.

There was a silence then, and I left the tightness in the air around us. Achilles’ face, for the first time since we had come, looked pinched and solemn.

“What about me?” I asked.

Chiron’s dark eyes moved to rest on mine. “You will never gain fame from your fighting. Is this surprising to you?”

His tone was matter-of-fact, and somehow that eased the sting of it.

“No,” I said truthfully.

‘Yet it is not beyond you to be a competent soldier. Do you wish to learn this?”

I thought of the boy’s dulled eyes, how quickly his blood had soaked the ground. I thought of Achilles, the greatest warrior of his generation. I thought of Thetis who would take hum from me, if she could.

“No,” I said.

And that was the end of our lessons in soldiery.

SPRING PASSED INTO SUMMER, and the woods grew warm and abundant, lush with game and fruit. Achilles turned fourteen, and messengers brought gifts for him from Peleus. It was strange to see them here, in their uniforms and palace colors. I watched their eyes, flickering over me, over Achilles, over Chiron most of all.

Gossip was dear in the palace, and these men would be received like kings when they returned. I was glad to see them shoulder their empty trunks and be gone.

The gifts were welcome – new lyre strings and fresh tunics, spun from the finest wool. There was a new bow as well, and arrows tipped with iron. We fingered their metal, the keen-edged points that would bring down our dinners in days to me. Some things were less useful – cloaks stiff with inlaid gold that would give the owner’s presence away at fifty paces, and a jewel-studded belt, too heavy to wear for anything practical. There was a horsecoat as well, thickly embroidered, meant to adorn the mount of a prince.

“I hope that is not for me,” Chiron said, lifting an eyebrow. We tore it up for compresses and bandages and scrub cloths; the rough material was perfect for pulling crusted dirt and food.

That afternoon, we lay on the grass in front of the cave. “It has been almost a year since we came,’ Achilles said. The breeze was cool against our skin.

‘It does not feel so long,” I answered. I was half-sleepy, my eyes lost in the tilting blue of the afternoon sky.

“Do you miss the palace?”

I thought of his father’s gifts, the servants and their gazes, the whispering gossip they would bring back to the palace.

“No,” I said.

“I don’t either,” he said. “I thought I might, but I don’t.”

The days turned, and the months, and two years passed.

***Chapter Ten***

IT WAS SPRING, AND WE WERE FIFTEEN. THE WINTER ICE HAD lasted longer than usual, and we were glad to be outside once more, beneath the sun. Our tunics were discarded, and our skin prickled in the light breeze. I had not been so naked all winter; it had been too cold to take off our furs and cloaks, beyond quick washes in the hollowed-out rock that served as our bath. Achilles was stretching, rolling limbs that were stiff from too long indoors. We had spent the morning swimming and chasing game through the forest. My muscles felt wearily content, glad to be used again.

I watched him. Other than the unsteady surface of the river, there were no mirrors on Mount Pelion, so I could only measure myself by the changes in Achilles. His limbs were still slender, but I could see and falling beneath his skin as he moved. His face, too was firmer, and his shoulders broader than they had been.

“You look older,” I said.

He stopped, turned to me. “I do?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Do I?”

“Come over here,” he said. I stood, walked to him. He regarded me a moment. “Yes,” he said.

“How?” I wanted to know. “A lot?”

“Your face is different,” he said.

He paused, and my face grew warm.

“That’s enough,” I said, more abruptly than I meant to. I sat again on the grass, and he resumed his stretches. I watched the breeze stir his air; I watched the sun fall on his golden skin. I leaned back and let it fall on me as well.

After some time, he stopped and came to sit beside me. We watched the grass, and the trees, and the nubs of new buds, just growing.

His voice was remote, almost careless. “You would not be displeased, I think. With how you look now.”

My face grew warm, again. But we spoke no more of it.

“Where?”

He touched my jaw with his right hand, drew his fingertips along it. “Here. Your face is wider than it once was.” I reached up with my own hand, to see if I could feel this difference, but it was all the same to me, bone and skin. He took my hand and brought it down to my collarbone. “You are wider here also,” he said. “And this.” His finger touched, gently, the soft bulb that had emerged from my throat. I swallowed, and felt his fingertip ride against the motion.

“Where else?” I asked.

He pointed to the trail of fine, dark hair that ran down my chest and over my stomach.

WE WERE ALMOST SIXTEEN. Soon Peleus’ messengers would come with gifts; soon the berries would ripen, the fruits would blush and fall into our hands. Sixteen was our last year of childhood, the year before our fathers named us men, and we would begin to wear not just tunics but capes and chitons as well. A marriage would be arranged for Achilles, and I might take a wife, if I wished to. I thought again of the serving girls with their dull eyes. I remembered the snatches of conversation I had overheard from the boys, the talk of breasts and hips and coupling.

*She’s like cream, she’s that soft.*

*Once her things are around you, you’ll forget your own name.*

The boys’ voices had been sharp with excitement, their color high. But when I tried to imagine what they spoke of, my mind slid away, like a fish who would not be caught.

Other images came in their stead. The curve of a neck bent over a lyre, hair gleaming in firelight, hands with their flickering tendons. We were together all day, and I could not escape: the smell of the oils he used on his feet, the glimpses of skin as he dressed. I would wrench my gaze from him and remember the day on the beach, the coldness in his eyes and how he ran from me. And, always I remembered his mother.

I began to go off by myself, early in the mornings, when Achilles still slept, or in the afternoons, when he would practice his spear thrusts. I brought a flute with me, but rarely played it. Instead I would find a tree to lean against an breathe the sharp drift of cypress-scent, blown from the highest part of the mountain.

Slowly, as if to escape my own notice, my hand would move to rest between my things. There was shame in this thing that I did, and a greater shame still in the thoughts that came with it. But it would be worse to think them inside the rose-quartz cave, with him beside me.

It was difficult sometimes, after, to return to the cave. “Where were you?” he’d ask.

“Just –“ I’d say, and point vaguely.

He’d nod. But I knew he saw the flush that colored my cheeks.

THE SUMMER GREW HOTTER, and we sought the river’s shade, its water that threw off arcs of light as we splashed and dove. The rocks of the bottom were mossy and cool, rolling beneath my toes as I waded. We shouted, and frightened the fish, who fled to their muddy holes or quieter waters upstream. The rushing ice melt of spring was gone; I lay on my back and let the dozy current carry me. I liked the feel of the sun on my stomach and the cool depths of the river beneath me. Achilles floated beside me or swam against the slow tug of the river’s flow.

When we tired of this, we would seize the low-hanging branches of the osiers and hoist ourselves half-out of the water. On this day we kicked at each other, our legs tangling, trying to dislodge the other, or perhaps climb onto their branch. On an impulse, I released my branch and seized him around his hanging torso. He let out an *ooph* surprise. We struggled that way for a moment, laughing, my arms wrapped around him. Then there was a sharp cracking sound, and his branch gave way, plunging us into the river. The cool water closed over us, and still we wrestled, hands against slippery skin.

When we surfaced, we were panting and eager. He leapt for me, bearing me down through the clear water. We grappled, emerged to gasp air, then sank again.

At length, our lungs burning, our faces red from too long underwater, we dragged ourselves to the bank and lay there amidst the sedge-grass and marshy weeds. Our feet sank into the cool mud of the water’s edge. Water still steamed from his hair, and I watched it bead, tracing across his arms and the lines of his chest.

ON THE MORNING of his sixteenth birthday I woke early. Chiron had showed me a tree on Pelion’s far slope that had figs just ripening, the first of the reason. Achilles did not know of it, the centaur assured me. I watched them for days, their hard green knots swelling and darkening, growing gravid with seed. And now I would pick them for his breakfast.

It wasn’t my only gift. I had found a seasoned piece of ash and began to fashion it secretly, carving off its soft layers. Over nearly two months a shape had emerged – a boy playing the lyre, head raised to the sky, mouth open, as if he were singing. I had it with me now, as I walked.

The figs hung rich and heavy on the tree, their curved flesh pliant to my touch-two days later and they would be too ripe. I gathered them in a carved-wood bowl and bore them carefully back to the cave.

Achilles was sitting in the clearing with Chiron, a new box from Peleus resting unopened at his feet. I saw the quick widening of his eyes as he took in the figs. He was on his feet, eagerly reaching into the bowl before I could even set it down beside him. We ate until we were stuffed, our fingers and chins sticky with sweetness.

The box from Peleus held more tunics and lyre strings, and this time, for his sixteenth birthday, a cloak dyed with the expensive purple from the *murex’s* shell. It was the cape of a prince, of a future king, and I saw that it pleased him. It look good on him, I knew, the purple seeming richer still beside the gold of his hair.

Chiron, too, gave presents – a staff for hiking, and a new belt-knife. And last, I passed him the statue. He examined it, his fingertips moving over the small marks my knife had left behind.

“It’s you,” I said, grinning foolishly.

He looked up, and there was bright pleasure in his eyes.

“I know,’ he said.

ONE EVENING, not long after, we stayed late beside the fire’s embers.

Achilles had been gone for much of the afternoon – Thetis had come and kept him longer even than usual. Now he was playing my mother’s lyre. The music was quiet and bright as the stars over our heads.

Next to me, I heard Chiron yawn, settle more deeply onto his folded legs. A moment later the lyre ceased, and Achilles’ voice came loud in the darkness. “Are you weary, Chiron?”

“I am.”

“Then we will leave you to your rest.”

He was not usually so quick to go, nor to speak for me, but I was tired myself and did not object. He rose and bade Chiron good night, turning for the cave. I stretched, soaked up a few more moments of firelight, and followed.

Inside the cave, Achilles was already in bed, his face damp from a wash at the spring. I washed too, the water cool across my forehead.

He said, “You didn’t ask me about my mother’s visit yet.”

I said, “How is she?”

“She is well.” This was the answer he always gave. It was why I sometimes did not ask him.

“Good.” I lifted a handful of water, to rinse the soap off my face. We made it from the oil of olives, and it still smelled faintly of them, rich and buttery.

Achilles spoke again. “She says she cannot see us here.”

I had not been expecting him to say more. “Hmmm?”

“She cannot see us here. On Pelion.”

There was something in his voice, a strain. I turned to him. “What do you mean?”

His eyes studied the ceiling. “She says – I asked her if she watches us here.” His voice was high. “She says, she does not.”

There was silence in the cave. Silence, but for the sound of the slowly draining water.

“Oh,” I said.

“I wished to tell you. Because-“ He paused. “I thought you would wish to know. She-“ He hesitated again. “She was not pleased that I asked her.”

“She was not pleased,” I repeated. I felt dizzy, my mind turning and turning through his words. *She cannot see us.* I realized that I was basin, the towel still raised to my chin. I forced myself to put down the cloth, to move to the bed. There was a wildness in me, of hope and terror.

I pulled back the corners and lay down on bedding already warm from his skin. His eyes were still fixed on the ceiling.

“Are you – pleased with her answer?” I said, finally.

“Yes,” he said.

We lay there a moment, in that strained and living silence. Usually at night we would tell each other jokes or stories. The ceiling above us was painted with the stars, and if we grew tired of talking, we would point to them. “Orion,” I would say, following his finger. “The Pleiades.”

But tonight there was nothing. I closed my eyes and waited, long minutes, until I guessed he was asleep. Then I turned to look at him.

He was on his side, watching me. I had not heard him turn. *I never hear him.*  He was utterly motionless, that stillness that was his alone. I breathed, and was aware of the bare stretch of dark pillow between us.

He leaned forward.

Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in, each breath as it came, the soft movements of his lips. It was a miracle.

I was trembling, afraid to put him to flight. I did not know what to do, what he would like. I kissed his neck, the span of his chest, and tasted the salt. He seemed to swell beneath my touch, to ripen. He smelled like almonds and earth. He pressed against me, crushing my lips to wine.

He went still as I took him in my hand, soft as the delicate velvet of petals. I knew Achilles’ golden skin and the curve of his neck, the crooks of his elbows. I knew how pleasure looked on him. Our bodies cupped each other like hands.

The blankets had twisted around me. He shucked them from us both. The air over my skin was a shock, and I shivered. He was outlined against the painted stars; Polaris sat on his shoulder. His hand slipped over the quickened rise and fall of my belly’s breathing. He stroked me gently, as though smoothing finest cloth, and my hips lifted to his touch. I pulled him to me, and trembled and trembled. He was trembling, too. He sounded as though he had been running far and fast.

I said his name, I think. It blew through me; I was hollow as a reed hung up for the wind to sound. There was no time that passed but our breaths.

I found his hair between my fingers. There was a gathering inside me, a beat of blood against the movement of his hand. His face was pressed against me, but I tried to clutch him closer still. Do not stop, I said.

He did not stop. The feeling gathered and gathered till a hoarse cry leapt from my throat, and the sharp flowering drove me, arching, against him.

It was not enough. My hand reached, found the place of his pleasure. His eyes closed. There was a rhythm he liked, I could feel it, the catch of his breath, the yearning. My fingers were ceaseless, following each quickening gasp. His eyelids were the color of the dawn sky; he smelled like earth after rain. His mouth opened in an inarticulate cry, and we were pressed so close that I felt the spurt of his warmth against me. He shuddered, and we lay still. Slowly, like dusk-fall, I became aware of my sweat, the dampness of covers, and the wetness that slid between our bellies. We separated, peeling away from each other, our faces puffy and half-bruised from kisses. The cave smelled hot and sweet, like fruit beneath the sun. Our eyes met, and we did not speak. Fear rose in me, sudden and sharp. This was the moment of truest peril, and I tensed, fearing his regret.

He said, “I did not think – “ And stopped. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to hear what he had not said.

“What?” I asked him. *If it is bad, let it be over quickly.* “I did not think that we would ever-“ He was hesitating over every word, and I could not blame him.

“I did not think so either,” I said.

“Are you sorry?” The words were quickly out of him, a single breath.

“I am not,” I said.

“I am not either.”

There was silence then, and I did not care about the damp pallet or how sweaty I was. His eyes were unwavering, green flecked with gold. A surety rose in me, lodged in my throat. *I will never him. It will be this, always, for as long as he will let me.*

It I had words to speak such a thing, I would have. But there were none that seemed big enough for it, to hold that swelling truth.

As if he had heard me, he reached for my hand. I did not need to look; his fingers were etched into my memory, slender and petal-veined, strong and quick and never wrong.

“Patroclus,” he said. He was always better with words than I.

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke light-headed, my body woozy with warmth and ease. After the tenderness had come more passion; we had been slower then, and lingering, a dreamy night that stretched on and on. Now, watching him stir beside me, his hand resting on my stomach, damp and curled as a flower a dawn, I was nervous again. I remembered in a rush the things I had said and done, the noises I had made. I feared that the spell was broken, that the light that crept through the cave’s entrance would turn it all to stone. But then he was awake, his lips forming a half-sleepy greeting, and his hand was already reaching for mine. We lay there, like that, until the cave was bright with morning, and Chiron called.

We ate, then ran to the river to wash. I savored the miracle of being able to watch him openly, to enjoy the play of dappled light on his limbs, the curving of his back as he dove beneath the water. Later, we lay on the riverbank, learning the lines of each other’s bodies anew. This, and this and this. We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other.

IF CHIRON NOTICED a change, he did not speak of it. But I could not help worrying.

“Do you think he will be angry?”

We were by the olive grove on the north side of the mountain. The breezes were sweetest here, cool and clean as springwater.

“I don’t think he will.” He reached for my collarbone, the line he liked to draw his finger down.

“But he might. Surely he must know by now. Should we say something?”

It was not the first time I had wondered this. We had discussed if often, eager with conspiracy.

“If you like.” That is what he had said before.

“You don’t think he will be angry?”

He paused now, considering. I loved this about him. No matter how many times I had asked, he answered me as if it were the first time.

“I don’t know.” His eyes met mine. “Does it matter? I would not stop.” His voice was warm with desire. I felt and answering flush across my skin.

“But he could tell your father. *He* might be angry.”

I said it almost desperately. Soon my skin would grow too warm, and I would no longer be able to think.

“So what if he is?” The first time he had said something like this, I had been shocked. That his father might be angry and Achilles would still do as he wished – it was something I did not understand, could barely imagine. It was like a drug to hear him say it. I never tired of it.

“What about your mother?”

This was the trinity of my fears – Chiron, Peleus, and Thetis.

He shrugged. “What could she do? Kidnap me/”

*She could kill me,* I thought. But I did not say this. The breeze was too sweet, and the sun too warm for a thought like that to be spoken.

He studied me a moment. “Do you care if they are angry?”

*Yes.* I would be horrified to find Chiron upset with me. Disapproval had always burrowed deep in me; I could not shake it off as Achilles did. But I would not let it separate us, if it came to that. “No,” I told him.

“Good,” he said.

I reached down to stroke the wisps of hair at his temple. He closed his eyes. I watched his face, tipped up to meet the sun. There was a delicacy to his features that sometimes made him look younger than he was. His lips were flushed and full.

His eyes opened. ‘Name one hero who was happy.”

I considered. Heracles went mad and killed his family; Theseus lost his bride and father; Jason’s children and new wife were murdered by his old; Bellerophon killed the Chimera but was crippled by the fall from Pegasus’ back.

“You can’t” He was sitting up now, leaning forward/

“I can’t.”

“I know. They never let you be famous *and* happy.” He lifted an eyebrow. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Tell me.” I loved it when he was like this.

“I’m going to be the first.” He took mt palm and held it to his. “Swear it.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the reason. Swear it.”

“I swear it,” I said, lost in the high for it and stood. He had placed himself between me and the sound. I did not know if I should go to him, stand beside him with my own weapon lifted. In the end, I did not. It had been a soldier’s trumpet, and battle, as Chiron had so bluntly said, was his gift, not mine.

The trumpet sounded again. We heard the swish of underbrush, tangled by a pair of feet. *One man.* Perhaps he was lost, perhaps in danger. Achilles took a step towards the sound. As if in answer, the trumpet came again. Then a voice bawled up the mountain, “Prince Achilles!”

We froze.

“Achilles! I am here for Prince

color of his cheeks, the flame in his eyes.

“I swear it,” he echoed.

We sat like that a moment, hands touching. He grinned.

“I feel like I could eat the world raw.”

A trumpet blew, somewhere on the slopes beneath us. It was abrupt and ragged, as if sounded in warning. Before I could speak or move, he was on his feet, his dagger out, slapped up from the sheath on his thigh. It was only a hunting knife, but in his hands it would be enough. He stood poised, utterly still, listening with all of his half-god senses.

I had a knife, too. Quietly, I reached Achilles!”

Birds burst from the trees, fleeing the clamor.

‘From your father,” I whispered. Only a royal herald would have known where to call for us.

Achilles nodded, but seemed strangely reluctant to answer. I imagined how hard his pulse would be beating; he had been prepared to kill a moment ago.

“We are here!” I shouted into the cupped palms of my hand. The noise stopped for a moment.

“Where?”

“Can you follow my voice?”

He could, though poorly. It was some time before he stepped forward into the clearing. His face was scratched, and he had sweated through his palace tunic. He knelt with ill grace, resentfully. Achilles had lowered the knife, though I saw how tightly he still held it.

“Yes?” His voice was cool.

“Your father summons you. There is urgent business at home.”

I felt myself go still, as still as Achilles had been a moment before. If I stayed still enough, perhaps we would not have to go.

“What sort of business/” Achilles asked.

The man had recovered himself, somewhat. He remembered he was speaking to a prince.

“My lord, your pardon, I do not know all of it. Messengers came to Peleus from Mycenae with news. Your father plans to speak tonight to the people, and wishes you to be there. I have horses for you below.”

There was a moment of silence. Almost, I thought Achilles would decline. But at last he said, “Patroclus and I will need to pack our things.”

On the way back to the cave and Chiron, Achilles and I speculated about the news. Mycenae was far to our south, and its king was Agamemnon, who liked to call himself a lord of men. He was said to have the greatest army of all our kingdoms.

“Whatever it is, we’ll only be gone for a night or two,” Achilles told me. I nodded, grateful to hear him say it. *Just a few days.*

Chiron was waiting for us. ‘I heard the shouts,” the centaur said. Achilles and I, knowing him well, recognized the disapproval in his mountain disturbed.

“My father has summoned me home,” Achilles said, “Just for tonight. I expect I will be back soon.”

“I see,” Chiron said. He seemed larger than usual, standing there, hooves dull against the bright grass, his chestnut-colored flanks lit by the sun. I wondered if he would be lonely without us. I had never seen him with another centaur. We asked him about them once, and his face had gone stiff. “Babarians,” he’d said.

We gathered our things. I had almost nothing to bring with me, some tunics, a flute. Achilles had only a few possessions more, his clothes, and some spearheads he had made, and the statue I had carved for him. We placed them in leather bags and went to say our farewells to Chiron. Achilles, always bolder, embraced the centaur, his arms encircling the place where the horse flank gave way to flesh. The messenger, waiting behind me, shifted.

“Achilles,” Chiron said, “do you remember when i asked you what you would do when men wanted you to fight?”

“Yes,” said Achilles.

“You should consider your answer,” Chiron said. A chill went through me, but I did not have time to think on it. Chiron was turning to me.

“Patroclus,” he said, a summons. I walked forward, and he placed his hand, large and warm as the sun, on my head. I breathed in the scent that was his alone, horse and sweat and herbs and forest.

His voice was quiet. “You do not give things up so easily now as you once did,” he said.

I did not know what to say to this, so I said, “Thank you.”

A trace of smile. ‘Be well.” Then his hand was gone, leaving my head chilled in its absence.

“We will be back soon,” Achilles said, again.

Chiron’s eyes were dark in the slanting afternoon light. “I will look for you,” he said.

We shouldered our bags and left the cave’s clearing. The sun was already past the meridian, and the messenger was impatient. We moved quickly down the hill and climbed on the horses that waited for us. A saddle felt strange after so many years on foot, and the horses unnerved me. I half-expected them to speak, but of course they could not. I twisted in my seat to look back at Pelion. I hoped that I might be able to see the rose-quartz cave, or maybe Chiron himself. But we were too far. I turned to face the road and allowed myself to be led to Phthia.

***Chapter Eleven***

THE LAST BIT OF FUN WAS FLARING ON THE WESTERN horizon as we passed the boundary stone that marked the palace grounds. We heard the cry go up from the guards, and an answering trumpet. We crested the hill, and the palace lay before us; behind it brooded the sea.

And there on the house’s threshold, sudden as lightning-strike, stood Thetis. Her hair shone black against the white marble of the palace. Her dress was dark, the color of an uneasy ocean, bruising purples mixed with churning grays. Somewhere beside her there were guards, and Peleus, too, but I did not look at them. I saw only her, and the curved knife’s blade of her jaw.

“Your mother,” I whispered to Achilles. I could have sworn her eyes flashed over me as if she had heard. I swallowed and forced myself onward. *She will not hurt; Chiron has said she will not.*

It was strange to see her among mortals; she made all them, guards and Peleus alike, look bleached and wan, though it was her skin that was pale as bone. She stood well away from them, spearing the sky with her unnatural height. The guards lowered their eyes in fear and deference.

Achilles swung down from his horse, and I followed. Thetis drew him into an embrace, and I saw the guards shifting their feet. They were wondering what her skin felt like; they were glad they did not know.

“Son of my womb, flesh of my flesh, Achilles,” she said. The words were not spoken loudly but they carried through the courtyard. “Be welcome home.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Achilles said. He understood that she was claiming him. We all did. It was proper for a son to greet his father first; mothers came second, if it all. But she was a goddess. Peleus’ mouth had tightened, but he said nothing.

When she released him, he went to his father. “Be welcome, son,” Peleus said. His voice sounded weak after his goddess-wife’s, and he looked older than he had been. Three years we had been away.

“And be welcome also, Patroclus.”

Everyone turned to me, and I managed a bow. I was aware of Thetis’ gaze, raking over me. It left my skin stringing, as if I had gone from the briar patch to the ocean. I was glad when Achilles spoke.

“What is the news, Father?”

Peleus eyed the guards. Speculation and rumor must be racing down every corridor.

“I have not announced it, and I do not mean to until everyone is gathered. We were waiting on you. Come and let us begin.”

We followed him into the palace. I wanted to speak to Achilles but did not dare to; Thetis walked right behind us. Servants skittered from her, huffing in surprise. *The goddess.* Her feet made no sound as they moved over the stone floors.

THE GREAT DINING HALL was crammed full of tables and benches. Servants hurried by with platters of food or lugged mixing bowls brimming with wine. At the front of the room was a dais, raised. This is where Peleus would sit, beside his son and wife. Three places. My cheeks went red. What had I expected?

Even amidst the noise of the preparations Achilles’ voice seemed loud. “Father, I do not see a place for Partoclus.” My blush went even deeper.

“Achilles,” I began in a whisper. *It does not matter,* I wanted to say. *I will sit with the men; it is all right.* But he ignored me.

“Patroclus is my sworn companion. His place is beside me.” Thetis’ eyes flickered. I could feel the heat in them. In saw the refusal on her lips.

“Very well,” Peleus said. He gestured to a servant and a place was added for me, thankfully at the opposite side of the table from Thetis. Making myself as small as I could, I followed Achilles to our seats.

“She’ll hate me now,” I said.

“She already hates you,” he answered, with a flash of smile.

This did not reassure me. “Why has she come?” I whispered. Only something truly important would have drawn her here from her caves in the sea. Her loathing for me was nothing to what I saw on her face when she looked at Peleus.

He shook his head. ‘I do not know. It is strange. I have not seen them together since I was a boy.”

I remembered Chiron’s parting words to Achilles: *you should consider your answer.*

“Chiron thinks the news will be war.”

Achilles frowned. “But there is always war in Mycenae. I do not see why we should have been called.”

Peleus sat, and a herald blew three short blasts upon his trumpet. The short blasts upon his trumpet. The signal for the meal to begin. Normally it took several minutes for the men to gather, dawdling on the practice fields, drawing out the last bit of whatever they were doing. But this time they came like a flood after the breaking of the winter’s ice. Quickly, the room was swollen with them, jostling for seats and gossiping. I heard the edge in and their voices, a rising excitement. No one bothered to snap at a servant or kick aside a begging dog. There was stirrings and murmurs ceased, utterly. Even the servants stopped. I did not breathe. Beneath the table, Achilles pressed his leg to mine.

“There has been a crime.’ He paused again as if he were weighing what he would say. “The wife of Menelaus, Queen Helen, has been abducted from the palace in Sparta.”

*Helen!* The hushed whisper of men to their neighbors. Since her marriage the tales of her beauty had grown still greater. Menelaus had built around her palace walls thick with double-layered rock; he had trained his soldiers for a decade to defend it. But, for all his care, she had been stolen. *Who had done it?*

nothing on their minds but the man from Mycenae and the news he had brought.

Thetis was seated also. There was no plate for her, no knife: the gods lived on ambrosia and nectar, on the savor of our burnt offerings, and the wine we poured over their altars. Strangely, she was not so visible here, so blazing as she had been outside. The bulky, ordinary furniture seemed to diminish her, somehow.

Peleus stood. The room quieted, out to the farthest benches. He lifted his cup.

“I have received word from Mycenae, from the sons Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus.” The final

“Menelaus welcomed and embassy sent from King Priam of Troy. At its head was Priam’s son, the prince Paris, and it is he who is responsible. He stole the queen of Sparta from her bedchamber while the king slept.”

A rumble of outrage. Only an Easterner would so dishonor the kindness of his host. Everyone knew how they dripped with perfume, were corrupt from soft living. A real hero would have taken her outright, with the strength of his sword.

“Agamemnon and Mycenae appeal to the men of Hellas to sail to the kingdom of Priam for her rescue. Troy is rich and will be easily taken, they say. All who fight will come home wealthy and renowned.”

This was well worded. Wealth and reputation were the things our people had always killed for.

“They have asked me to send a delegation of men from Phthia, and I have agreed.’ He waited for the murmuring to settle before adding, “Though I will not take any man who does not wish to go. And I will not lead the army myself.”

“Who will lead it?” someone shouted.

“That is not yet determined,” Peleus said. But I saw his eyes flicker to his son.

*No,* I thought. My hand tightened on the edge of the chair. *Not yet.* Across

There was a movement at the benches, as men started to rise. But Peleus held up his hand.

“There is more.” He lifted a piece of linen, dark with dense markings. “Before Helen’s betrothal to King Menelaus, she had many suitors. It seems these suitors swore an oath to protect her, whosoever might win her hand. Agamemnon and Menelaus now charge these men back to her rightful their oath and bring her back rightful husband.’ He handed the linen sheet to herald.

I started. *An oath.* In my mind, the sudden image of a brazier, and the spill of blood from a white goat. A rich hall, filled with towering men.

The herald lifted the list. The room seemed to tilt, and my eyes would not focus. He began to read.

*Antenor.*

*Eurypylus.*

*Machaon.*

I recognized many of the names; we all did. They were the heroes and kings of our time. But they were more to me than that. I had seen them, in a stone chamber heavy with fire-smoke.

*Agamemnon.* A memory of a thick black beard: a brooding man with narrowed, watchful eyes.

*Odysseus.* The scar that wrapped his calf, pink as gums.

*Ajax.* Twice as large as any man in the room, with his huge shield behind him.

*Philoctetes,* the bowman.

*Menoitiades.*

The herald paused a moment, and I heard the murmur: *who?* My father had not distinguished himself in the years since my exile. His fame had diminished; his mane was forgotten. And those who did know him had never heard of a son. I sat frozen, afraid to move lest I give myself away.

*I am bound to this war.*

The herald cleared his throat.

*Idomeneus.*

*Diomedes.*

“Is that you?” You were there?” Achilles had turned back to face me. His voice was low, barely audible, but still I feared that someone might hear it.

I nodded. My throat was too dry for words. I had thought only of Achilles’ danger, of how I would try to keep him here, if I could. I had not considered myself.

“Listen. It is not your name anymore. Say nothing. We will think what to do. We will ask Chiron.’ Achilles never spoke like that, each word cutting off the next in haste. His urgency brought me back myself, a little, and I took heart from his eyes on mine. I nodded again.

The names kept coming, and memories came with them. Three women on a dais, and one of them

Helen. A pile of treasure, and my father’s frown. The stone beneath my knees. I had thought I dreamt it. I had not.

When the herald had finished, Peleus dismissed the men. They stood as one, benches scraping, eager to get to Phoinix to enlist. Peleus turned to us. “Come. I would speak further with you both.” I looked to Thetis, to see if she would come too, but she was gone.

WE SAT BY PELEUS’ FIRESIDE; he had offered us wine, barely watered. Achilles refused it. I took a cup, but did not drink. The king was in his old chair, the one closest to the fire, with its cushions and high back. His eyes rested on Achilles.

“I have called you home with thought that you might wish to lead this army.”

It was spoken. The fire popped; its wood was green.

Achilles met his father’s gaze. “I have not finished yet with Chiron.”

“You have stayed on Pelion longer than I did, than any hero before.”

“That does not mean I must run to help the sons of Atreus every time they lose their wives.’

I thought Peleus might smile at that, but he did not. “I do not doubt that Menelaus rages at the loss of his wife, but the messenger came from Agamemnon. He has watched Troy grow rich and ripe for years, and now thinks to pluck her. The taking of Troy is a feat worthy of our greatest heroes. There may be much honor to be won from sailing with him.”

Achilles’ mouth tightened. “There will be other wars.”

Peleus did not nod, exactly. But I saw him register the truth of it. “What of Patroclus, then? He is called to serve.

‘He is no longer the son of Menoitius. He is not bound by the oath.”

Pious Peleus raised an eyebrow. “There is some shuffling there.”

“I do not think so.” Achilles lifted

threaded with trembling veins. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that he had been a warrior, that he had walked with gods.

ACHILLES’ ROOM was as we had left it, except for the cot, which had been removed in our absence. I was glad; it was an easy excuse, in case anyone asked why we shared a bed. We reached for each other, and I thought of how many nights I had lain awake in this room loving him in silence.

Later, Achilles pressed close for a final, drowsy whisper. “If you have to go, drowsy whisper. “If you have to go, you know I will go with you.” We slept.

“You wish me to give them audience.”

“I do.”

There was quiet again. Then Achilles said, “I will not dishonor them, or you. I will hear their reasons. But I say to you that I do not think they will convince me.”

I saw that Peleus was surprised, a little, by his son’s certainty, but not displeased. “That is also not for me to decide,” he said mildly.

The fire popped again, spitting out its sap.

Achilles knelt, and Peleus placed one hand on his head. I was used to seeing Chiron do this, and Peleus’ hand looked withered by comparison,

***Chapter Twelve***

I WOKE TO THE RED OF MY EYELIDS STRAINING OUT THE SUN. I saw cold, my right shoulder exposed to the breezes of the window, the one that faced the sea. The space beside me on the bed was empty, but the pillow still held the shape of him, and the sheets smelled of us both.

I had spent so many mornings alone in this room, as he visited his mother, I did not think it was strange to find him gone. My eyes closed, and I sank again into the trailing thoughts of dreams. Time passed, and the sun came hot over the windowsill. The birds were up, and the servants, and even the men. I heard their voices from the beach and the practice hall, the rattle and bang of chores. I sat up. His sandals were overturned beside the bed, forgotten. It was not unusual; he went barefoot most places.

He had gone to breakfast, I guessed. He was letting me sleep. Half of me wanted to stay in the room until his return, but that was cowardice. I had a right to a place by his side now, and I would not let the eyes of the servants drive me away. I pulled on my tunic and left to find him.

HE WAS NOT IN the great hall, busy with servants removing the same platters and bowls there had always been.

He was not in Peleus’ council chamber, hung with purple tapestry and the weapons of former Phthian kings. And he was not in the room where we used to play the lyre. The trunk that had once kept our instruments sat forlorn in the room’s center.

He was not outside, either, in the trees he and I had climbed. Or by the sea, on the jutting rocks where he waited for his mother. Nor on the practice field where men sweated through drills, clacking their wooden swords.

I do not need to say that my panic swelled, that it became a live thing, slippery and deaf to reason. My steps grew hurried; the kitchen, the basement, the storerooms with their amphorae of oil and wine. And still I did not find him.

It was midday when I sought out Peleus’ room. It was a sign of the size of my unease that I went at all: I had never spoken to the old man alone before. The guards outside stopped me I tried to enter. The king was at rest, they said. He was alone and would see no one.

“But is Achilles –“ I gulped, trying not to make a spectacle of myself, to feed the curiosity I saw in their eyes. “Is the prince with him?”

“He is alone,” one of them repeated.

I went to Phoinix next, the old counselor who had looked after Achilles when he was a boy. I was almost choking with fear as I walked to his stateroom, a modest square chamber at the palace’s heart. He had clay tablets in front of him, and on them the men’s marks from the night before, angular and crisscrossing, pledging their arms to the war against Troy.

“The prince Achilles – I said. I spoke haltingly, my voice thick with panic. “I cannot find him.”

He looked up with some surprise. He had not heard me come in the room; his hearing was poor, and his eyes when they met mine were rheumy and opaque with cataract.

“Peleus did not tell you then.” His voice was soft.

“No.” my tongue was like a stone in my mouth, so big I could barely speak around it.

“I’m sorry,” he said kindly. “His mother has him. She took him last night as he was sleeping. They are gone, no one knows where.”

Later I would see the red marks where my nails had dug through my palms. *No one knows where.* To Olympus perhaps, where I could never follow. To Africa, or India. To some village where I would not think to look.

Phoinix’s gentle hands guided me back to my room. My mind twisted desperately from thought to thought. I would return to Chiron and seek counsel. I would walk the countryside, calling his name. She must have drugged him, or trickled him. He would not have gone willingly.

As I huddled in our in our empty room, I imagined it: the goddess leaning over us, cold and white beside the warmth of our sleeping bodies. Her fingernails prick into his skin as she lifts him, her neck is silvery in the window’s moonlight. His body lolls on her shoulder, sleeping or spelled. She carries him from me as a soldier might carry a corpse. She is strong; it takes only one of her hands to keep him from falling.

I did not wonder why she had taken him. I knew. She had wanted to separate us, the first chance she had, as soon as we were out of the mountains.

I was angry at how foolish we had been. Of course she would do this: why had I thought we would be safe? That Chiron’s protection would be extend here, where it never had before.

She would take him to the caves of the sea and teach him contempt for mortals. She would feed him with food of the gods and burn his human blood from his veins. She would shape him into a figure meant to be painted on vases, to fight against Troy. I imagined left him nothing but eyes, bronze greaves that covered his feet. he stands with a spear in each hand and does not know me.

Time folded in on itself, closed over me, buried me. Outside my window, the moon moved through her shapes and came up full again. I slept little and ate less; grief pinned me to the bed like an anchor. It was only my pricking memory of Chiron that finally drove me forth. *You do not give up so easily as you once did.*

I went to Peleus. I knelt before him on a wool rug, woven bright with purple. He started to speak, but I was too quick for him. One of my hands went to clasp his knees, the other reached upwards, to seize his chin with my hand. The pose of supplication. It was a gesture I had seen many times, but had seen many times, but had never made myself. I was under

his protection now; he was bound to treat me fairly, the law of the gods.

“Tell me where he is,” I said.

He did not move. I could hear the muffled batter of his heart against his chest. I had not realized how closely we would be pressed. His ribs were sharp beneath my cheek; the skin of his legs was soft and thin with age.

“I do not know,” he said, and the words echoed down the chamber, stirring the guards. I felt their eyes on my back. Suppliants were rare in Phthia; Peleus was too good a king for such desperate measures.

I pulled at his chin, tugging his face to mine. He did not resist.

“I do not believe you,” I said.

A moment passed.

“Leave us,” he said. The words were for the guards. They shuffled their feet, but obeyed. We were alone.

He leaned forwards, down to my ear. He whispered, “Scyros.’  
A place, an island. Achilles.

When I stood, my knees ached, as if I had been kneeling a long time. Perhaps I had. I do not know how many moments passed between us in that long hall of Phthian kings. Our eyes were level now, but he would not meet my gaze. He had answered me because he was a pious man, because I had asked him as a supplicant, because the gods demanded it. He would not have otherwise. There was a dullness in the air between us, and something heavy, like anger.

“I will need money,” I told him. I do not know where these words came from. I had never spoken so before, to anyone. But I had nothing left to lose.

“Speak to Phoinix. He will give it to you.’

I nodded my head, barely. I should have knelt again and thanked him, rubbed my forehead on his expensive rug. I didn’t. Peleus moved to stare out the open window; the sea was hidden by the house’s curve, but we could both hear it, the distant hiss of waves against sand.

“You may go,” he told me. He meant it to be cold, I think, and dismissive; a displeased king to his subject. But all I heard was his weariness. I nodded once more and left.

THE GOLD THAT Phoinix gave me would have carried me to Scyros and back twice over. The ship’s captain stared when I handed it to him. I saw his eyes flicking over it, weighing its worth, counting what it could buy him.

“You will take me?”

My eagerness displeased him. He did not like to see desperation in those who sought passage; haste and a free hand spoke of hidden crimes. But the gold was too much for him to object. He made a noise, grudging, of acceptance, and sent me to my berth.

I had never been at sea before and was surprised a how slow it was. The boat was a big-bellied trader, making its lazy rounds of the islands, sharing the fleece, oil, and carved furniture of the mainland with the more isolated kingdoms. Every night we put in at a different port to refill our water pots and unload our stores. During the days I stood at the ship’s prow, watching the waves fall away from our black-tarred hull, waiting for the sight of land. At another time I would have been enchanted with it all: the names of the ship’s parts, halyard, mast, stern; the color of the water; the scrubbed-clean smell of the winds. But I barely noticed these things. I thought only of the small island flung out somewhere in front of me, and the fair-haired boy I hoped I would find there.

THE BAY OF SCYROS was so small that I did not see it until we had swung around the rocky island’s southern rim and were almost upon it. Our ship narrowly squeezed between its extending arms, and the sailors leaned over the sides to watch the rocks slide by, holding their breath. Once we were inside, the water was utterly calm, and the men had to row us the rest of the way. The confines were difficult to maneuver; I did envy the captain’s voyage out.

“We are here,” he told me, sullenly. I was already walking for the gangway.

The cliff face rose sharply in front of me. There was a path of steps carved into the rock, coiling up to the palace, and I took them. At their top were scrubby trees and goats, and the palace, modest and dull, made half from stone and half from wood. If it had not been the only building in sight, I might not have known it for the king’s home. I went to the door and entered.

The hall was narrow and dim, the air dingy with the smell of old dinners. At the far end two thrones sat empty. A few guards idled at tables, dicing. They looked up.

“Well?” one asked me.

“I am here to see King Lycomedes,” I said. I lifted my chin, so they would know I was a man of some importance. I had worn the finest ti=unic I could find – one of Achilles’.

“I’ll go,” another one said to his fellows. He dropped his dice with a clatter and slumped out of the hall. Peleus would never have allowed such disaffection; he kept his men well and expected much from them in return. Everything about the room seemed threadbare and gray.

The man reappeared. “Come,” he said. I followed him, and my heart.

picked up. I had thought long about what I would say. I was ready.

“In here.” He gestured to an open door, then turned to go back to his dice.

I stepped through the doorway. Inside, seated before the wispy remains of a fire, sat a young woman.

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“I am the princess Deidameia,” she announced. Her voice was bright and almost childishly of the hall. She had a tipped-up nose and a sharp face, like a fox. She was pretty, and she knew it.

I summoned my manners and bowed. “I am a stranger, come for a kindness from your father.”

“Why not a kindness from me?” She smiled, tilting her head. She was surprisingly small; I guessed she would barely be up to my chest if she stood. “My father is old and ill. You may address your petition to me, and I will answer it.” She affected a regal pose, carefully positioned so the window lit her from behind.

“I am looking for my friend.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrow lifted. “And who is your friend?”

“A young man,” I said, carefully.

“I see. We do have some those here.” Her tone was playful, full of itself. Her dark hair fell down her back in thick curls. She tossed her head a little, making it swing, and smiled at me again. “Perhaps you’d like to start with telling me your name?”

“Chironides,” I said. *Son of Chiron.*

She wrinkled her nose at the name’s strangeness.

“Chironides. And?”

“I am seeking a friend of mine, who would have arrived here perhaps a month ago. He is from Phthia.”

Something flashed in her eyes, or maybe I imagined it did. “And why do you seek him?” she asked. I thought that her tone was not so light as it had been.

“I have a message for him.” I wished very much that I had been led to the old and ill king, rather than her. Her face was like quicksilver, always racing to something new. She unsettled me.

“Hmmm. A message.” She smiled coyly, tapped her chin with a painted fingertip. “A message for a friend. And why should I tell you if I know this young man or not?”

“Because you are a powerful princess, and I am your humble suitor.” I knelt.

This pleased her. “Well, perhaps I do know such a man, and perhaps I do not. I will have to think on it. You will stay for dinner and await my decision. If you are lucky, I am even dance for you, with my women.” She cocked her head, suddenly. “You have heard of Deidameia’s women?”

“I am sorry to say that I have not.”

She made a moue of displeasure. “All the kings send their daughters here for fostering. Everyone knows that but you.”

I bowed my head, sorrowfully. “I have spent my time in the mountains and have not seen much of the world.”

She frowned a little. Then flicked her hand at the door. “Till dinner, Chironides.”

I spent the afternoon in the dusty courtyard grounds. The palace sat on the island’s highest point, held up against the blue of the sky, and the view was pretty despite the shabbiness. As I sat, I tried to remember all that I had heard of Lycomedes. He was known to be kind enough, but a weak king, of limited resources. Euboia to the west and Ionia to the east had long eyed his lands; soon enough one of them would bring war, despite the inhospitable shoreline. If they heard a woman ruled here, it would be all the sooner.

When the sun had set, I returned to the hall. Touches had been lit, but they only seemed to increase the gloom. Deidameia, a gold circlet gleaming in her hair, led and old man into the room. He was hunched over, and so draped with furs that I could not tell where his body began. She settled him on a throne and gestured grandly to a servant. I stood back, among the guards and a few other men whose function was not immediately apparent. Counselors? Cousins? They had the same worn appearance as everything else in the room. Only Deidameia seemed to escape it, with her blooming cheeks and glossy hair.

A servant motioned to the cracked benches and tables, and I sat. The king and the princess did not join us; they remained on their thrones at the hall’s other end. Food arrived, hearty enough, but my eyes kept returning to the front of the room. I could not tell if I should make myself known. Had she forgotten me?  
But then she stood and turned her face towards out tables. “Stranger from Pelion,” she called, “you will them featly. In spite of myself, I was impressed. Their dresses swirled, and jewelry swung around their wrists and ankles as they spun. They toosed their heads as they whirled, like high-spirited horses.

Deidameia was the most beautiful, of course. With her golden crown and unbound hair, she drew the eye, flashing her wrists prettily in the air. Her face was flushed with pleasure, and as I watched her, I saw her brightness grow brighter still. She was beaming at her partner, almost flirting. Now she would duck her eyes at the woman, now step close as if to tease with her touch. Curious, I craned my head to see the woman she danced with, but never again be able to say that you have not heard of Deidameia’s women. Another gesture, with a braceleted hand. A group of women entered, perhaps two dozen, speaking softly to each other, their hair covered and bound back in cloth. They stood in the empty central area that I saw now was a dancing circle. A few men took out flutes and drums, one a lyre. Deidameia did not seem to expect a response from me, or even to care if I had heard. She stepped down from the throne’s dais and went to the women, claiming one of the taller ones as a partner.

The music began. The steps were intricate, and the girls moved through the crowd of whoite dresses obscured her.

The music trilled to an end, and the dancers finished. Deidameia led them forward in a line to receive our praise. Her partner stood beside her, head bowed. She curtsied with the rest and looked up.

I made some sort of sound, the breath jumping in my throat. It was quiet, but it was enough. The girl’s eyes flickered to me.

Several things happened at once then. Achilles – for it was Achilles – dropped Deidameia’s hand and flung himself joyously at me, knocking me backwards with force of his embrace. Deidameia screamed “Pyrrha!” and burst into tears. Lycomedes, who was not so far sunk into dotage as his daughter had led me to believe, stood.

“Pyrrha, what is the meaning of this?”

I barely heard. Achilles and I clutched each other, almost incoherent with relief.

“My mother,” he whispered, “my mother, she – “

“Pyrrha!” Lycomedes’ voice carried the length of the hall, rising over his daughter’s noisy sobs. He was talking to Achilles, I realized. *Pyrrha.* Fire-hair.

Achilles ignored him; Deidameia wailed louder. The king, showing a judiciosness that surprised me, threw his eye upon the rest of his court, women and men both. “Out,” he ordered. They obeyed reluctantly, trailing their glances behind them.

“Now.” Lycomedes came forward, and I saw his face for the first time. His shin was yellowed, and his graying beard looked like dirty fleece; yet his eyes were sharp enough. “Who is this man, Pyrrha?”

“No one!” Deidameia had seized Achilles’ arm, was tugging at it.

At the same time, Achilles answered coolly, “My husband.”

I close my mouth quickly, so I did not gape like a fish.

“He is not! That’s not true!” Deidameia’s voice rose high, stratling the birds roosting in the rafters. A few feathers wafted down to the floor, she might have said more, but she was crying too hard to speak clearly.

Lycomedes turned to me as if for refuge, man to man. “Sir, is this true?”

Achilles was squeezing my fingers.

“Yes,” I said.

“No!” the princess shrieked.

Achilles ignored her pulling at him, and gracefully inclined his head at Lycomedes. “ My husband has come for me, and now I may leave your court. Thank you for your hospitality.” Achilles curtsied. I noted with an idle, dazed part of my mind that he did it remarkably well.

Lycomedes held up a hand to prevent us. “We should consult your mother first. It was she who gave you to me to foster. Does she know of this husband?”

“No!” Deidameia said again.

“Daughter!” This was Lycomedes, frowning in a way that was not unlike his daughter’s habit. “Stop this scene. Release Pyrrha.?

Her face was blotchy and swollen with tears, her chest heaving. “No!” She turned to Achilles. “You are lying! You have betrayed me! Monster! *Apathes!” Heartless.*

Lycomedes froze. Achilles’ fingers tightened on mine. In our language, words come in different genders. She had used the masculine form.

“What was that?” said Lycomedes, slowly.

Deidameia’s face had gone pale, but she lifted her chin in defiance, and her voice did not waver.

“He is a *man*,” she said. And then, “We are married.”

“What!” Lycomedes clutched his throat.

I could not speak. Achilles’ hand was the only thing that kept me to earth.

“Do not do this,” Achilles said to her. “Please.”

It seemed to enrage her. “I *will* do it!” She turned to her father. “You are a fool! I’m the only one who knew! I knew!” She struck her chest in emphasis. “And now I’ll tell everyone. Achilles!” She screamed as if she would force his name through the stone walls, up to the gods themselves. “Achilles! Achilles! I’ll tell everyone!”

“You will not.” The words were cold and knife-sharp; they parted the princess’ shouts easily.

*I know that voice.* I turned.

Thetis stood in the doorway. Her face glowed, the wite-blue of the flame’s center. Her eyes were black gashed into her skin, and she stood taller than I had ever seen her. Her hair was as sleek as it always was, and her dress as beautiful, but there was something about her that seemed wild, as if an invisible wind whipped around her. She looked like a Fury, the demons that come for men’s flood. I felt my scalp trying to climb off my head; even Deidameia dropped into silence.

We stood there a moment, facing her. Then Achilles reached up and tore the veil from his hair. He seized the neckline of his dress and ripped it down the front, exposing his chest beneath. The firelight played over his skin, warming it to gold.

“No more, Mother,” he said.

Something rippled beneath her features, a spasm of sorts. I was half afraid she would strike him down. But she only watched him with those restless back eyes.

Achilles turned then, to Lycomedes. “My mother and I have deceived you, for which I offer my apologies. I am the prince Achilles, son of Peleus. She did not wish me to go to war and hid me here, as one of your foster daughters.”

Lycomedes swallowed and did not speak.

“We will leave now,” Achilles said gently.

The words shook Deidameia from her trance, “No,” she said, voice rising again. “You cannot. Your mother said the words over us, and we are married. You are my husband.”

Lycomede’s breath rasped loudly in the chamber; his eyes were for Thetis alone. “Is this true?” he asked.

“It is,” the goddess answered.

Something fell from a long height in my chest. Achilles turned to me, as if he would speak. But hos mother was faster.

“You are bound to us now, King Lycomedes. You will continue to shelter Achilles here. You will say nothing of who he is. In return, your daughter will one day be able to claim a famous husband.” Her eyes went to a point above Deidameia’s head, then back.

She added, “It is better than she would have done.”

Lycomedes rubbed at his neck, as if he would smooth its wrinkles. “I have no choice,” he said. “As you know.”

“What if I will not be silent?” Deidameia’s color was high. “You have ruined me, you and your son, I have lain with him, as you told me to, and my honor is gone. I will claim him now, before the court, as recompense.”

*I have lain with him.*

“You are a foolish girl,” Thetis said. Each word fell like an axe blade, sharp and severing. “Poor and ordinary, an expedient only. You do not deserve my son. You will keep your peace or I will keep it for you.’

Deidameia stepped backwards, her eyes wide, her lips gone white. Her hands were trembling. She lifted one to her stomach and clutched the fabric of her dress there, as if to steady herself. Outside the palace, beyond the cliffs, we could hear huge waves breaking on the rocks, dashing the shoreline to pieces.

“I am pregnant,” the princess whispered.

I was watching Achilles when she said it, and I saw the horror on his face. Lycomedes made a noise of pain.

My chest felt hollowed, and eggshell thin. *Enough.* Perhaps I said it, perhaps I only thought it. I let go of Achilles’ hand and strode to the door. Thetis must have moved aside for me; I would have run into her if she had not. Alone, I stepped into the darkness.

“WAIT! ACHILLES SHOUTED. It took him longer to reach me than it should have, I noted with detachment. *The dress must be tangling his legs.* He caught up to me, seized my arm.

“Let go,” I said.

“Please, wait. Please, let me explain. I did not want to do it. My mother – “He was breathless, almost panting. I had never seen him so upset.

“She led the girl to my room. She made me. I did not want to. My mother said – she said –“ He was stumbling over his words. “She said that if I did as she said, she would tell you where I was.”

What had Deidameia thought would happen, I wondered, when she had her woman dance for me? Had she really thought I would not know him? I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world.

“Partoclus.” He cupped my cheek with his hand. “Do you hear me? Please, say something.”

I could not stop imahimimg her skin beside his, her smelling breasts and curving hips. I remembered the long days I grieved for him, my hands empty and idle, plucking the air like birds peck at dry earth.

“Patroclus?”

“You did it for nothing.”

He flinched at the emptiness of my voice. But how else was I to sound?

“What do you mean?”

“Your mother did not tell me where you were. It was Peleus.”

His face had gone pale, bled dry. “She did not tell you?”

“No. Did you truly expect she would?” My voice cut harder than I meant it to.

“Yes,” he whispered.

There were a thousand things I might have said, to reproach him for his naïveté. He had always trusted too easily; he had had so little in his life to fear or suspect. In the almost hated him for this, and some old spark of that flared in me, trying to relight. Anyone else would have known that Thetis acted for her own purposes only. How could he be so foolish? The angry words pricked in my mouth.

But when I tried to speak them, I found I could not. His cheeks were flushed with shame, and the skin beneath his eyes was weary. His trust was a part of him, as much as his hands or his miraculous feet. And despite my hurt, I would not wish to see it gone, to see him as uneasy and fearful as the rest of us, for any price.

He was watching me closely, reading my face over and over, like a priest searching the auguries for an answer. I could see the slight line in his forehead that meant utmost concentration.

Something shifted in me then, like the frozen surface of the Apidanos in spring. I had seen the way he did not. It was the same way he had looked at the boys in Phithia, blank and unseeing. He had never, not once, looked at me that way.

“Forgive me,” he said again. “I did not want it. It was not you. I did not – I did not like it.”

Hearing it soothed the last of the jagged grief that had begun when Deidameia shouted his name. my throat was thick the beginning of tears.

“There is nothing for forgive,” I said.

LATER THAT EVENING we returned to the palace. The great hall was dark, its fire burned to embers. Achilles had repaired his dress as best he could, but it still gaped to the waist; he held it closed in case we met a lingering guard.

The voice came from the shadows, startling us.

“You have returned.” The moonlight did not quite reach the thrones, but we saw the outline of a man there, thick with furs. His voice seemed deeper than it had before, heavier.

“We have,” Achilles said. I could hear the slight hesitation before he answered. He had not expected to face the king again so soon.

“Your mother is gone, I do not know where.” The king paused, as if awaiting a response.

Achilles said nothing.

“My daughter, your wife, is in her room crying. She hopes you will come to her.”

I felt the flinch of Achilles’ guilt. His words came out stiffly; it was not a feeling he was used to.

“It is unfortunate that she hopes for this.”

“It is indeed,” Lycomedes said.

We stood in silence a moment. Then Lycomedes drew a weary breath. “I suppose that you a room for your friend?”

“If you do not mind,” Achilles said, caredfully.

Lycomedes let out a soft laugh. “No, Prince Achilles, I do not mind.” There was another silence. I heard the king lift a goblet, drink, replace it on the table.

“The child must have your name. You understand this?” This is what he had waited in the dark to say, beneath his furs, by the dying fire.

“I understand it,” Achilles said quietly.

“And you swear it?”  
There was a hairsbreadth of a pause. I pitied the old king. I was glad when Achilles said, “I swear it.”

The old man made a sound like a sigh. But his words, when they came, were formal; he was a king again.

“Good night to you both.”  
We bowed and left him.

In the bowels of the palace, Achilles found a guard to show us to the guest and quarters. The voice he used was high and fluting, his girl’s voice. I saw the guard’s eyes flicker over him, lingering on the torn edges of the dress, his disheveled hair. He grinned at me with all his teeth.

“Right away, mistress,” he said.

IN THE STORIES, the gods have the power to delay the moon’s course if they wish, to spin a single night the length of many. Such was this night, a bounty of hours that never ran dry. We drank deeply, thirsty for all that we had missed in the weeks we were separated. It was not until the sky began to blanch what he had said to Lycomedes in the hall. It had been in the hall. It had been forgotten amidst Deidameia’s pregnancy, his marriage, our reunion.

“Your mother was trying to hide you from the war?”  
He nodded. “she does not want me to go to Troy.’

“Why?” I had always thought she wanted him to fight.

“I don’t know. She says I’m too young. Not yet, she says.”

“And it was her idea - ?” I gestured at the remnants of the dress.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have done it myself.” He made a face and yanked at his hair, hanging still in its womanly curls. An irritant, but not a crippling shame, as it would have been to another boy. He did not fear ridicule; he had never known it. “Anyway, it is only until the army leaves.”

My mind struggled with this.

“So, truly, it was not because of me? That she took you?”  
“Deidameia was because of you, I think.” He stared at his hands a moment. “But the rest was the war.”

***Chapter Thirteen***

THE NEXT DAYS PASSED QUIETLY. WE TOOK MEALS IN our room and spent long hours away from the palace, exploring the island, seeking what shade there was beneath the scruffy trees. We had to be careful; Achilles could not be seen moving too quickly, climbing too skillfully, holding a spear. But we were not followed, and there were many places where he could safely let disguise drop.

On the far side of the island there was a deserted stretch of beach, rock-filled but twice the size of our running tracks. Achilles made a sound of delight when he saw it, and tore off his dress. I watched him race across it, as swiftly as if the beach had been flat. “Count for me,” he shouted, over his shoulder. I did, tapping against the sand to keep the time.

“How many?” he called, from the beach’s end.

“Thirteen,” I called back.

“I’m just warming up,” he said.

The next time it was eleven. The last time it was nine. He sat down next to me, barely winded, his cheeks flushed with joy. He had told me of his days as a woman, the long hours of enforced tedium, with only the dances for relief. Free now, he stretched his muscles like one of Pelion’s mountain cats, luxuriant in his own strength.

gossip and maintain the fiction of Achilles as my wife and the king’s ward. Deidameia’s eyes darted eagerly towards him, hoping he would look at her. But he never did. “Good evening,” he would say, in his proper girl’s voice, as we sat, but nothing more. His indifference was a palpable thing, and I saw her pretty face flinch through emotions of shame and hurt and anger. She kept looking to her father, as if she hoped he might intervene. But Lycomedes put bite after bite in his mouth and said nothing.

Sometimes she saw me watching her; her face would grow hard then, and her eyes would narrow. She put a hand on her belly, possessively, as if

In the evenings, though, we had to return to the great hail. Reluctant, Achilles would put on his dress and smooth back his hair. Often he bound it up in cloth, as he had that first night; golden hair was uncommon enough to be remarked upon by the sailors and merchants who passed through our harbor. If their tales found the ears of someone clever enough – I did not like to think of it.

A table was set for us at the front of the hall near the thrones. We ate there, the four of us, Lycomedes, Deidameia, Achilles, and I. Sometimes we were joined by a counselor or two, sometimes not. These dinners were mostly silent; they were for from, to quell to ward off some spell I might cast. Perhaps she thought I was mocking her, flourishing my triumph. Perhaps she thought I hated her. She did not know that I almost asked him, a hundred times, to be a little kinder to her. *You do not have to humiliate her so thoroughly,* I thought. But it was not kindness he lacked; it was interest. His gaze passed over her as if she were not there.

Once she tried to speak to him, her voice trembling with hope.

“Are you well, Pyrrha?”

He continued eating, in his elegant swift bites. He and I had planned to take spears to the far side of the island after dinner and catch fish by moonlight. He was eager to be gone. I had to nudge him, beneath the table.

“What is it?” he asked me.

“The princess wants to know if you are well.”

“Oh.” He glanced at her briefly, then back to me. “I am well,” he said.

AS THE DAYS WORE ON, Achilles took to walking early, so that he might practice with spears before the sun rose high. We had hidden weapons in a distant grove, and he would exercise there before returning to womanhood in the palace. Sometimes he might visit his mother afterwards, sitting on one of Scyros’ jagged rocks, dangling his feet into the sea.

if you go quietly.” He drew this thumb over his spearpoint in theatrical menace.

I did not really think they would hurt me, but neither did I want to be dragged through the halls of the palace. “All right,’ I said.

THE NARROW CORRIDORS where they led me I had never visited before. They were the women’s quarters, twisting off from the main rooms, a beehive of narrow cells where Deidameia’s foster sister slept and lived. I heard laughter from behind the doors, and the endless *shush-shush* of the sun did not come through the windows here, and there

It was one of these mornings, when Achilles was gone, that there was a loud rap on my door.

“Yes?” I called. But the guards were already stepping inside. They were more formal than I had ever seen them, carrying spears and standing at attention. It was strange to see them without their dice.

“You’re to come with us,” one of them said.

“Why?” I was barely out of bed and still bleary with sleep.

“The princess ordered it.” A guard took each of my arms and towed me to the door. When I stuttered a protest, the first guard leaned towards me, his eyes on mine. “It will be better

was no breeze. He had spent nearly two months in them; I could not imagine it.

At last we came to a large door, cut from finer wood than the rest. The guard knocked on it, opened it, and pushed me through. I heard it close firmly behind me.

Inside, Deidameia was seated primly on a leather-covered chair, regarding me. There was a table beside her, and a small stool at her feet; otherwise the room was empty.

She must have planned this, I realized. She knew that Achilles was away.

There was no place for me to sit, so I stood. The floor was cold stone, and my feet were bare. There was a second, smaller door; it led to her bedroom, I guessed.

She watched me looking, her eyes bright as a bird’s. There was nothing clever to say, so I said something foolish.

“You wanted to speak with me.’

She sniffed a little, with contempt.

“Yes, Patroclus. I wanted to speak with you.”

I waited, but she said nothing more, only studied me, a finger tapping the arm of her chair. Her dress was looser than usual; she did not have it tied across the waist as she often did, to show her figure. Her hair was unbound and held back at the temples with carved ivory combs. She tilted her head and smiled at me.

“You are not even handsome, that is the funny thing. You are quite ordinary.”

She had her father’s way of pausing as if she expected a reply. I felt myself flushing. *I must say something.*  I cleared my throat.

She glared at me. “I have not given you leave to speak. “She held my gaze a moment, as if to make sure that I would not disobey, then continued. “I think it’s funny. Look at you.” She rose, and her quick steps ate up the space between us. “Your neck is short. Your chest is thin as a boy’s.” She gestured at me with disdainful fingers. “And your face.” She grimaced.

“Hideous. My woman quite agree. Even my father agrees.” Her pretty red lips to show her white teeth. It was the closest I had ever been to her. I could smell something sweet, like acanthus flower; close up, I could see that her hair was not just black, but shot through with shifting colors of rich brown.

“Well? What do you say?” Her hands were on her hips/

‘You have not given me leave to speak,’ I said.

Anger flashed over her face. “Don’t be an idiot,” she spat at me.

“I wasn’t – “

She slapped me. Her hand was small but carried surprising force. It turned my head to the side roughly. The skin stung, and my lip throbbed sharply where she had caught it with a ring. I had not been struck like this since I was a child. Boys were not usually slapped, but a father might do it to show contempt. Mine had. It shocked me; I could not have spoken even if I had known what to say.

She bared her teeth at me, as if daring me to strike her in return. When she saw I would not, her face twisted with triumph. “Coward. As craven as you are ugly. And half-moron besides, I hear. I do not understand it! It makes no sense that he should –“ She stopped abruptly, and the corner of her mouth tugged down, as if caught by a fisherman’s hook. She turned her back to me and was silent. A moment passed. I could hear the sound of her breaths, drawn slowly, so I would not guess she was crying. I knew the trick. I had done it myself.

“I hate you,” she said, but her voice was thick and there was no force in it. A sort of pity rose in me, cooling the heat of my cheeks. I remembered how hard a thing indifference was to bear.

I heard her swallow, and her hand moved swiftly to her face, as if to wipe away tears. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” she said. “That should make you happy. My father wants me to begin my confinement early. He says it would bring shame upon me for the pregnancy to be seen, before it was known I was married.”

Confinement, I heard the bitterness in her voice when she said it. Some small house, at the edge of Lycomedes’ land. She would not be able to dance or speak with companions there. She would be alone, with a servant and her growing belly.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She did not answer. I watched the soft heaving of her back beneath the white gown, I took a step towards her, then stopped. I had thought top touch her, to smooth her hair in comfort. But it would not be comfort, from me. My hand fell back to my side.

We stood there like that for some time, the sound of our breaths filling the chamber. When she turned, her face was ruddy from crying.

“Achilles does not regard me.” Her voice trembled a little. “Even though I bear his child and am his wife. Do you – know why this is so?”

It was a child’s question, like why the rain falls or why the sea’s motion never cases. I felt older than her, though I was not.

“I do not know,” I said softly.

Her face twisted. “That’s a lie. You’re the reason. You will sail with him, and I will be left here.”

I knew something of what it was to be alone. Of how another’s good fortune pricked a goad. But there was nothing I could do.

“I should go,” I said, as gently as I could.

“No!” She moved quickly to block my way. Her words tumbled out. “You cannot. I will call the guards if you try. I will – I will say you attacked me.”

Sorrow for her dragged at me, bearing me down. Even if she called them, even if they believed her, they could not help her. I was the companion of Achilles and invulnerable.

My feelings must have shown on my face; she recoiled from me as id stung, and the heat sparked in her again.

“You were angry that he married me, that he lay with me. You were jealous,

You should be.” Her chin lifted, as it used to. “It was not just once.”

*It was twice.*  Achilles had told me. She thought that she had power to drive a wedge between us, but she had nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I sad again. I had nothing better to say. He did not love her; he never would.

As id she heard my thought, her face crumpled. Her tears fell on the floor, turning the gray stone black, drop by drop.

“Let me get you father,” I said. “Or one of your women.”

She looked up at me. “Please-“ she whispered. “Please do not leave.”

She was shivering, like something