



“[A] tour de force debut.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

MAYA DEANE

A NOVEL

WRATH
GODDESS
SING

The gods wanted blood. She fought for love.

WRATH GODDESS SING

A Novel

MAYA DEANE



WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

*For the kallai—
And for Shannon, who taught me the ways of magic.
“We came into being as the food of the gods,
But now we have opened our mouth.”*

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Chapter One

Achilles was still drowning. She was still trapped in the well, kicking against the water, clawing at the slick walls, fighting to break the surface, while Kheiron watched clinically from above, dangling a rope just out of reach.

But then the memory faded and the world regained its solidity. Achilles was safe on Skyros, clutching at the frame of Deidamia's bed. Damia was still tangled up in their shared blankets, her pale chest rising and falling in the soft rhythms of wine-soaked slumber. Last night must have been fun, but Achilles could not remember.

Tense, barely able to breathe, Achilles stalked out into the terrace garden. The western horizon was still a blur of dark blue seas and dark blue sky, so she ascended the stairway from the women's terrace and climbed the palace watchtower that looked out toward the mainland. She had befriended the watchmen months ago. As far as they were concerned, she was a noble lady from Aiolia, a pleasant, quiet girl with a sad smile and a fondness for staring out to sea at odd hours. If they thought she was looking for anything in particular, it was probably the sails of some lover or friend, some kinsman she longed to see.

The sun inched up. A few familiar fishing boats were out, small craft with unmarked sails in the distinctive style of the Sporades—boats from Skopelos and Skyros. Longships from the mainland would mean danger. Sails embroidered with the six-legged ant of Phthia would mean Kheiron and the Myrmidons had found her.

The wind shifted. "No ships will come today," said Dolops, the older of the watchmen. "Storm's coming off Euboia."

That was a relief. Though Achilles prided herself on despising superstition, she always watched the sea more closely after a flashback, hands clenched at her sides.

Dark clouds were indeed massing in the west, driven by a southwest wind. It was too far to discern the waters at the stormhead, but she could imagine them: swells of gray as deep as the eyes of the owls in her dreams, their violence still held in reserve, while the wind picked up and the clouds thickened and the first flash of lightning sheeted across the southwest sky.

“What do you see?” asked Lykourgos, the younger watchman.

Achilles narrowed her eyes. Until he had spoken, she did not realize she was focusing on anything in particular, but now she made out a tiny speck of white just above the line of the horizon, the sail and mast of a distant longship. Her body tightened. And then—

Brrrrmmmmmm. Distant thunder shuddered through her body, and she braced herself against the stone turret, straining to see. The harder she stared, the clearer the speck became: a longship surging up the crest of a swollen gray wave, riding the peak, and sliding down into the trough. She could almost taste the cold salt spray on her skin, in her nostrils, could almost hear the rumble of the boat’s drum, the grunts of the rowers, the strain of the sail. Fools or unlucky, to be out in a storm like this. They would never reach Skyros in time.

Or so she hoped.

“A longship,” she said. “Just ahead of the storm.” Her throat burned with sudden bile. She couldn’t make out the sail clearly, but a thousand fears and plans stormed through her brain regardless. If it was a Myrmidon ant sail, she would hide herself in the caves below the palace, or out in the forest, or in Skorpia’s farm village down the coast. She would stay there for weeks, until it was safe to come out.

I will never let them find me. I will never go back alive.

“They’ll drown.” Dolops seemed resigned. “Do you know what it’s like to drown, Lady Red?”

“Unfortunately, no.” It was easier to lie. Better to hear him explain again how the body died in water than to tell him what it really felt like, the way her lungs had burned in air, then in water, then in what felt like subtle fire. “Maybe they won’t drown.”

But it would be easier for her if they did.

The longship had risen up out of the trough, mast taut on the wind, sail jerking like a living thing. The ship raced ahead of the black clouds, fleeing toward the shoals of Skyros.

It seemed to her that she could see even better now, her eyes impossibly keen. The tiny black speck was alive with struggling men, straining oars, flapping sail, while in her ear the morning breeze sighed and Dolops droned softly on about a watery death.

The longship leapt, battered by wind and sea, but kept together, knifing down the shallow slope of the next wave and immediately slicing up the next. Now Achilles could see the sail clearly: not the black ant of Phthia, but a seven-branched tree. Relief washed over her . . . and then terror for the sailors.

A man clung to the bow, shaking his fist in the air as if shouting defiance at the sea. Magnificent he was, slashing the air with his hand. The oars rose and fell on his signal, and the sails billowed, warped and twisted by sailors clinging to the ropes. Thunder echoed again.

"I see it now," said Lykourgos. "They'll never make it." The waves were rising nearer, and the sea was black, and the storm from the mainland was quickly closing in. "They're probably praying to half the gods in the world right now."

"Gods won't help them." Achilles gripped the stone turret ledge. She could not look away, but the idea that she would watch them die was too cruel. Still, she stood frozen, staring.

The man on the longship shouted to his crew and the boat turned as it picked up speed, cutting up the next wave at an angle, down the next one even sharper still, finding the safest heading. The sail tightened again and Achilles gasped. They knew exactly what they were doing. Lightning flashed, and the longship skimmed nearer, seconds ahead of the storm.

"I don't believe it," Dolops exclaimed.

"I've never seen such sailing," said Lykourgos. "They'll be here by noon."

"So will the storm." But not the storm she was dreading. Her flashbacks were just memories, not prophecies. Kheiron was not coming. She was still safe.

A little before noon, Achilles went down to the women's quarters and asked Damia to come down with her to the docks and to lend her an umbrella.

Damia's umbrella was enormous, set up on a stand in the middle of her bedchamber, covering her makeup bench in a grand wood-and-hide canopy hung with dangling charms of bronze and silver, magical talismans from Assur, and a long cedar handle carved in Nineveh with scenes of tranquility to appease the Lord of Thunder. The umbrella was a gift from the Great King of Assur to Damia's father, who had given it in turn to his firstborn daughter.

"Why do you want to take my Assyrian royal umbrella to the docks in the middle of a downpour?" Damia was still in bed, hair tousled, knotted up in her blankets. "I don't feel well."

"A ship came in ahead of the storm. I've never seen such sailing. I want to meet these madmen."

Damia looked grave. "The Earthshaker is not to be trifled with. And shouldn't you be *avoiding* outsiders?" But she writhed free of the blankets and stood out on her tiptoes, stretching toward the ceiling. A slow yawn traveled up from her belly to her fingertips. Something like tenderness caught in Achilles's throat, and her eyes breathed in Deidamia's lines, her slim curvature, the particular way her belly rose and fell with each breath, the lofty carriage of her neck and head—

She had never thought that Damia would love her back. She had never thought any woman she loved *could* love her back, not in the same way she loved them. She swallowed, choking down a sudden irrational impulse to cry or fling her arms around Damia's neck.

"I see I've used up my questions for the day." Damia turned to frown down at Achilles. "The things I do for you. But if I don't like your reckless mystery sailors, I'll fling them back to the sea."

The first droplets were falling from a still-clear sky as they rushed down the Mese, the broad paved road that descended through the terraces of Skyros. The tiny paving stones were smooth under Achilles's feet, and Damia's sandals flapped a step behind her. Past the weaving hall they ran, and the spinners called out greetings; they ran past the smokehouses and the bakeries, and the women waved; they ran past the tanners' and carpenters' halls, where the men called, "Damia! Red! Not so fast in the rain!" Finally they reached the docks.

At the end of the longest pier, the island-rigged longship rolled with the waves, tied in place now, sails furled, safe from the gathering storm. The magnificent man who had stood at the prow now stood on the dock, in a

hooded cloak of waxed wool. He was as splendid as she thought he'd be: full-armed and deep-chested as only a skilled sailor was, his elegant face stern and composed, his dark eyes difficult to read. He looked the girls over, then bowed. "Greetings. I am Diomedes of Argos, and in a moment—when he finishes tying the sails—you will meet Odysseus of Ithaka. We request the hospitality of King Lykomedes in the name of the Silent One and the Queen of Kings."

"We welcome you in the name of Athena and Hera." Damia opened the umbrella just as the rain began to come down in earnest. She pushed the pole into Achilles's hands, and Achilles held it, grateful that Damia and her umbrella would absorb this man's attention and allow her a chance to study him. "I grant hospitality in my father's place. I am Deidamia, and this is Pyrrha. Shelter with us under this awning."

Diomedes joined them under the umbrella. A moment later, another man sprang down from the ship, less elegant than Diomedes, with a hairy chest, a rough beard, a mop of curly hair, and bright darting eyes. Odysseus of Ithaka stepped under the umbrella uninvited, pushing his waterlogged curls away from his forehead. "What a wonderful idea. A portable roof! From the Hittites?"

"From the Assyrians," Damia said placidly. She pointed up the Mese toward the palace. "Come. In the name of the gods we will wash your feet and welcome you. Even on Skyros we know the name of Diomedes of Argos, hero of Thebai."

"But not the name of Odysseus," said Odysseus with a grin. "Only the worst people know *my* name." When Damia offered Diomedes her hand to guide him up the Mese, Odysseus drew closer to Achilles, marveling at the little hinges that held the umbrella struts in place. "Such tiny bronze fittings!" Before they had passed the Fisherman's Gate, Odysseus offered to carry the umbrella, for surely, he said, she too was royalty.

She handed him the umbrella, not disabusing him of the notion. "Why did you come here in such a storm, Odysseus of Ithaka?"

"We travel under the protection of the Silent One," Odysseus said boldly. "She taught me to sail like that. Let the Earthshaker do his worst!"

Damia stiffened, giving Odysseus a sidelong look. Everything about her face said, *Do not trust this one, he will bring down divine judgment.*

But Achilles grinned. She liked a man who wasn't afraid of the gods. "What if I said there was no Earthshaker, Odysseus of Ithaka, only wind

and waves?”

Odysseus’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The stories speak of thunderbolts that shattered mountains, shouts that leveled hills, walls of water higher than the highest peaks.” Achilles thrust her hand through the watery curtain of rain that ran off the umbrella. “Here I am—with the Earthshaker’s enemies!—and you are still alive. Either the gods are powerless or imaginary.”

“Are all the women here such radical intellectuals?” Odysseus had a light in his eye that softened the condescension of his words. His face fell a little. “I mean that question sincerely. I am told my greatest flaw is how much I love to talk to women.”

“His greatest flaw?” murmured his companion, who had been walking silently next to Deidamia. “He loves to talk. Don’t encourage blasphemy, old man.”

“I love to *listen*,” said Odysseus. His fox eyes darted back to Achilles. “Are you from here?”

“I’m a mainlander,” Achilles said. “Women come to Skyros from all over. For the climate. Why are *you* here?”

Odysseus leaned closer to her, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial murmur. “We were sent here by Athena the Silent One to find her son Achilles, prince of Phthia. Have you seen him?”

The jolt came again. For a moment, nothing was real but the icy tightness in her lungs and belly. Achilles let her face lie for her. She had a lifetime of practice not reacting to her name pronounced in the masculine gender, *Akhillewos* instead of *Akhilleas*. Hopefully he had not seen her flinch.

She frowned as if considering the question and glanced sidelong at Damia.

Damia was talking to Diomedes in a low voice and did not seem to have heard, but Diomedes was exchanging glances with Odysseus every few dozen steps. So, they were a practiced team.

“I would know if any princes had come to Skyros,” Achilles said. “Is he handsome?”

“Scrawny as a spider, they say.” Odysseus frowned, keeping his voice low. “He is a cross-dresser and may have come to this island disguised as a woman, but I’m sure he couldn’t fool the ladies here.”

Achilles gave Odysseus a sharp look. He seemed sincerely not to realize he was talking about her, not to realize this was an unforgivable insult,

something she would have challenged with a spear back in Phthia—and gotten herself thrown down a well. *Your final lesson, faggot—here’s a rope, but it’s only for Akhillewos.*

Deidamia was frowning too. “Customs are different in Skyros,” Damia said. “Such women—like *me*—are known as kallai here, and we are welcomed as sisters.” They were nearing the palace, and the gates were creaking open. “If your Prince Achilles is here, *she* may be here to stay.”

They passed into the great antechamber, where enormous braziers filled with coals warmed the whole room, and a porter took the royal umbrella to be dried.

“I meant no offense to you, Lady Deidamia,” said Odysseus. “But *he* is a prince with duties. We need *him*.”

“Why do you need this Achilles?” Damia asked, frowning, her expression suddenly very intent. “Did he say, Red?”

“No.” Achilles kept her face coolly neutral. “I am curious myself.”

Odysseus ran his fingers through his wet curls, trying to squeeze the water out of his hair. “I have an untrustworthy face, and everyone assumes from it that I am some sort of deceiver, but in fact I am absentminded. I have news from the mainland that concerns everyone here, and Prince Achilles is part of that news.”

“Odysseus is in fact a great deceiver,” Diomedes said softly. “But in this he tells the truth.”

“I am *not* a great deceiver,” Odysseus said. He leaned toward Achilles. “Lady Red, I think you may be trying to protect Prince Achilles. But he does not need your protection. He is a deadly fighter trained by Kheiron. If he is your kinsman or your lover or betrothed—”

“—or my pet—”

“—or your pet—I mean him no harm. But he is a man and has the duties of a man.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. He would not be standing so close to her if he thought she were a man, nor look so friendly. Nothing felt real but the coldness in her stomach and the dread, and the way she could not stop smiling like some simpering chieftain’s daughter, too afraid to let her fear reach her face. “Skyros is not a large place,” she said. “If a prince is hiding in our midst, he must be very crafty.”

Odysseus’s eyes glinted, and he seemed to be mulling a reply, but at that moment a servant came to usher the visitors into the guest wing for the

hospitality rites, and Achilles and Damia went up to the women's wing to dress for supper.

When Achilles first came to Skyros the year before, she had looked utterly different: gaunt from the overland and sea voyages, hollow-cheeked with the starvation she had used to stave off manhood, and feverish with a terrible, foolish hope that on Skyros everything would change, that on Skyros she would become everything she longed for. Girls like her were safe on Skyros—so said the herbalist of Phthia. And the temple whores of Tempe who fed her thick temple-beer when she swooned outside their sanctuary.

So she had come to this island, a wild spider of a boy-girl with a shocking mass of red hair that fanned out about her head like flames, and sat numbly at the threshold of the palace until Deidamia had come to investigate and recognized her face from long ago, when they had met in Aiolia as children and played together without a care.

Achilles would never forget Deidamia's radiance, even in later days when she wished she could close the eyes of her memory against the taunt of Damia's beauty, the openness and the caution of her eyes, the kindness and the worry of her face. And of course there was no way to unsee the first glimmer of unsettledness and despair, the first signs that Achilles herself was a sort of poison that she had brought to Skyros for Deidamia to drink.

It began on the first night of their friendship, when Achilles stared with guileless envy at the Skyrian princess, marveling over her soft arms and full breasts and swelling hips.

Damia was fair, tall, and slim, with delicate curves and long pale hair, for here on Skyros, the kallai had herbs and medicines to prevent beard and stink and muscle and rough skin, and Damia had never known the fear of growing up into a man. The gods Achilles did not believe in had been kind to Deidamia of Skyros, and grateful Damia made offerings to the Triad every day. Whenever Achilles told her that the gods had gone away, or died, or else had never existed, Damia only laughed in her face. Anywhere else in Achaia, she would have been forced to live as a prince, a warrior, a man; but here Damia was a princess.

That this was even possible struck Achilles as the most wonderful miracle, and she begged for the secret: How had Deidamia grown into such

a woman? What medicines permitted such a thing? Achilles begged for Damia's aid, and Damia offered it freely.

As Achilles blossomed, they became fast friends, running along the mountain paths of Skyros together, watching the sheep in the high pastures and plucking burrs from their soft gray wool, splashing through streams in the forest, offering prayers to Aphrodite, the Queen of Heaven, hunting birds with slings. Damia liked her well in those days and called her "my little Red," or "skinny Red," or "subtle Red," or "Red as red as fire," which was a pun in the island dialect.

But later—*When was it? When did the first signs show?*—something began to change. Perhaps it was the reminders of their difference as Achilles grew fuller under the influence of the Skyrian medicines of womanhood, moonweed and licorice. She regained her grace, no longer clumsy and coltish, darting through the forests twice as fast as Damia could sprint. She could swim like a salmon up the forest streams; she could creep up on birds and pluck them from their nests; she found a fierce and restless pride in the movements of her body. More and more often, she glimpsed Damia looking at her with a brooding intensity.

Still, it had been Achilles who seduced Deidamia. She had realized that what smoldered in Damia's eyes was part desire and was so relieved by the idea that she never stopped to ask herself what else flickered there. One night in a grove dedicated to the Queen of Heaven, patron goddess of the kallai, Achilles arranged her limbs in just such a way that she could feel Damia's eyes on her, and then—ever so slowly—she came closer and closer to the Skyrian princess until they were touching, and their lips met, and they breathed each other in.

Because Achilles was young, she assumed that the passion between them was love, and that it was enough. She did everything with Damia—walked with Damia, ran with Damia, sang with Damia, wove and sewed with Damia, swam with Damia, lay with Damia, whispered in Damia's ear, kissed Damia's throat and breasts and belly, and eventually, as their passion grew more creative, found ways to please Damia, and overcame her discomfort to allow Damia to return the favor. The story she told herself was that they were like Kastor and Polydeukes of Sparta, twin warriors hatched from a single egg, inseparable, yearning to be one.

She never fully understood what stories Damia told herself, and so she missed the first signs of their separation. She was content to tell herself

there were no gods, that peace could last forever, that industry was enough and suffering a choice, and that love—or what she thought was love—was all that she needed.

“**Y**ou look different tonight.” Deidamia’s voice had a strange, distant quality. They were dressing in front of Damia’s cloudy copper mirror, belting long dresses below their breasts, and Achilles was pulling hers painfully, defensively tight, to make her curves unmistakable. “Yes,” Damia murmured again. “You look different.”

Achilles could not see it. “I look like a wild animal. Perhaps a lion—only I’ve gotten fatter.”

“Rounder and softer,” Damia mused, “like a well-fed bride. I wish my hips were as wide.”

“I am as sterile as you,” Achilles objected. “A couple of kings come to kidnap me and you start sizing up my hips for childbearing?” The words were supposed to come out light and teasing, but they were ugly words and muddled her meaning. Damia frowned; Achilles frowned back.

“They said you were the son of the Silent One,” Damia said softly. “I thought your mother was Thetis, queen of Phthia.”

Achilles’s throat tasted sickly sweet, and her hands felt numb. She had told Damia of the horrific childbirth that still haunted Phthia, the pit-grave in Alope, the way her mother’s toothless jawbone had felt under her fingers—but she had not told her of the rumor Father started. “A myth to justify my faggotry,” she sneered. “Father told everyone the goddess had inhabited my mother, that I am a demigod marked for greatness. It didn’t protect me.”

Damia let this blasphemy silently pass. Then she shrugged. “What if they find you out?”

“How?” Achilles narrowed her eyes. She lifted her hair to expose her long neck, examining herself in the mirror for signs that could betray her.

“Not from your body. The goddess sent them, they *said* so.” Damia narrowed her eyes. “Don’t say it. Someone could have told them who you were.”

“I’m not going anywhere with them.” Achilles tossed her head, fluffing out her wild curls. “I like it here.” But a dark mood was stealing over her, and she studied Damia’s face in the mirror. If Damia thought the gods commanded it, perhaps Damia would betray her.

“I liked your hair up,” Damia said after a while. She took a magnificent copper comb set with tiny chips of malachite arranged in a floral pattern, then bent toward Achilles, pulling her hair up and pinning it with the comb. “No blasphemy tonight, Red. Not in front of guests.”

Achilles turned away. The frescoed walls had a magnificent scene on them of dolphins and ships bearing purple cloth from Kna'an. She had always liked this fresco: no gods, no monsters, nothing but reality. “I will be as silent as a mouse,” she said, “unless I am challenged.”

Damia laughed a short, sharp laugh. The supper gongs began to ring from the towers, calling the people of Skyros palace into the great hall, and the guilds below into their meeting halls to eat together, the tanners with the tanners, the smiths with the smiths, the bricklayers with the bricklayers. “That will have to do, I suppose.”

Chapter Two

They went down to the great hall and took their places halfway down King Lykomedes's table, with Diomedes seated opposite Deidamia and Odysseus opposite Achilles. Following the etiquette of the royal court, brass wine flagons shaped like two-headed rams were passed down the table, and Deidamia and Achilles poured and mixed the wine for their neighbors before pouring smaller cups for themselves, dedicating the first drops of each to the Triad.

"Pyrrha," Odysseus said warmly, "you look like a meteor. I saw one last week from my ship: a fiery comet with a tail like your red hair that trailed halfway across the sky. It was beautiful and deadly, like so many women."

"Is this flirtation?" Achilles murmured. "It won't work."

"I am old enough to be your very youthful father," Odysseus said blandly, sipping from his cup.

"Possibly my son," Achilles countered softly.

Odysseus gasped, then roared with laughter, wiping wine from his beard. "Wit is the eternal enemy of table manners. I would give half of Ithaka for such a witty mother."

"Is your mother not witty?"

The Ithakan's eyes narrowed. "Not witty in the same ways," he countered, "but wise as the Sphinx, which is better."

"You can only praise your mother by contrasting her wisdom with my wit?"

"By the Silent One," Odysseus exclaimed, "what did I ever do to you?"

"If you are invoking the Silent One," Achilles said, "should you use so many words?"

Fatted calf was brought out from the kitchen. For a time, conversation and drinking ceased, and everyone concerned themselves with a double fold of fat-wrapped meat, the food of gods as well as kings, spiced with nettle smoke and rosemary and charred pomegranates and salted with dried seafoam. Achilles quietly marveled at the terrible secret that was meat: the flesh of some other creature not unlike herself, charred until the muscles relaxed and gave up their juices, seared to a fiery crust, wrapped around a bone heavy with fatty, salty marrow, a sacrament of carnage that drove away her terror and filled her with angry, combative strength.

Once the meat had been eaten, a stew of millet and beans was brought out. As they began to eat it, Odysseus said, "So you're from the mainland."

"The mainland has nothing for me but tears."

"The mainland has nothing for anyone but tears. Diomedes would disagree, but he is the reason for half the tears." Odysseus was watching her for her reaction, and no wonder: most people knew of the hero's exploits.

But it pleased Achilles to feign ignorance. "Should I have heard of him?"

"He led the second Theban siege five years ago." When Achilles only opened her eyes wider, Odysseus blinked. "He's one of the Seven Against Thebai! Haven't you heard the poem? 'When purple-robed Tydeus breathed his bloody last / and the rattle of death filled his neck / his shadow broke free of his feet with a cry / seeking his son in the Islands.'"

"I know there was a siege or two near Thebai," Achilles said. "I assume he is a famous warrior. But I am more interested in peace than war. War seems like a wonderful way to make everyone poor and miserable, to increase the share of orphans, to promote superstitions, to waste a lot of good bronze that could be used for tools, to ruin the soil, to kill perfectly good cart-horses pulling chariots, and so on." Father had given the same speech once word for word, when she told him she wanted to grow up to be a great warrior and kill a million people. Despite everything, the wisdom of the speech had stayed with her.

"Undoubtedly war is waste and carnage," Odysseus agreed. "It is only wise if it serves some noble end or provides unusual profit—a city without walls is begging to be plundered, for instance—"

"I am familiar with piracy."

Odysseus smirked. Then his expression became deadly serious. "The war of our times is different. You cannot imagine a cause further from piracy."

"International gift-giving?" Achilles said drily.

“The salvation of our world,” Odysseus said.

Achilles frowned, resenting her own sudden interest. “Explain.”

In that moment she realized that the table had been silent for some minutes; all eyes were on them, from King Lykomedes at the head all the way down to the porters and grooms at the foot. Damia was looking at Achilles; everyone else watched Odysseus.

The Ithakan chuckled for a moment, then rose to his feet. “I understand that ‘the salvation of our world’ is quite a claim to make,” he said, “but I do not make it lightly. I will fill everyone in. King Lykomedes, thank you for your gracious hospitality. I will direct my statement to you and also state my business on your lovely island.”

Damia’s father nodded quietly. He was a quiet man, one who managed the affairs of Skyros with placid care, issuing most of his orders in writing. “Speak,” he said softly.

Odysseus tugged at his beard, pulling it into two slender forks—fashionable in the islands, but also an interesting nervous tic. Perhaps he used it to stall for time, or perhaps he liked the roughness of it sprouting from his chin. Then he spread his hands officiously and began to speak in excellent diplomatic Achaian, using the Mykenanian prestige accent that everyone who was anyone learned to imitate.

“By now, all who have ears have heard the story of how the line of Minos lost the favor of the gods and how Klytaimestra Mino’o wed Great King Agamemnon of Mykenai and brought peace to the seas. The gods began to return, offering signs and portents of their favor. Meteors raced across the sky. The doors of the horizon were opened. In Hattusa, the wife of Great King Tudhaliyas fell pregnant and, after six long months, delivered a giant golden egg and died.”

Odysseus made an expansive gesture, indicating that the egg was over six feet tall. As he spoke, it seemed to Achilles that she could see the egg in her mind’s eye, perfectly smooth and burnished to a mirror sheen, and inside it, some ancient, horrible mystery. She frowned.

“It is said that the beauty of Klytaimestra is like the beauty of the stars at night, but from the golden egg erupted a baby of legendary majesty who grew into a woman even lovelier than Klytaimestra: Helen, jewel of the Hittites, prize of Assuwa. The beauty of Helen is like the fire of the sun at noon, and countless princes went to Hattusa to buy her from Tudhaliyas, for

on this mother could a race of such kings be sired as has not been seen in generations.”

Odysseus wandered along the length of the table, gesturing as he spoke, and his fingers flickered as if conjuring an ancient world. “The greatness of Egypt first arose when Great King Sneferu bought for himself the radiant Hetepheres, daughter of Apollo and primordial Ouraneia. Sneferu spread out Hetepheres beneath him like all the kingdoms of the world, and on her he made the glorious Kheops, half god and half man, who spread his rule from Thraki to Akkad to Aithiopia, a kingdom that comprises three-quarters of the universe. The greatest kings are always made by great queens.”

Everyone stared at him; everyone waited on his words; even Achilles felt herself being lulled, drawn in by the image of the glory of Egypt, of the ancient race of kings from long-ago stories whose descendants still ruled the world from faraway Pi-Ramesses. Odysseus grinned, seeing that he had the room’s rapt attention, and then glided to the foot of the table and turned to face King Lykomedes.

“Knowing this, Great King Agamemnon increased the glory of the Achaians by wedding Helen of Hattusa to Menelaos Atreidai, his glorious brother, in exchange for peace with Hattusa and a tribute of two hundred pounds of gold, one thousand pounds of silver from Athenai, ten thousand pounds of copper from Alashiya, a thousand pounds of tin from distant Tuli, a thousand head of fine cattle, five hundred unblemished horses, and one thousand robes of rich cloth woven in the islands.

“Now Klytimestra and Helen ruled as queens in Mykenai and Sparta, Great Queens for our great empire. Even the ambassadors from Pi-Ramesses and Babylon and Assur and Hattusa exclaimed that no more beautiful brides could be found in Egypt or Mesopotamia or Assuwa. A golden age began in Mykenai and Sparta, centered on the person of Helen, whose half-divine breasts poets call the Apples of the Sun.

“For seventy years the gods had not blessed us with their full presence, but I was at the marriage feast, and in the skies above us, gazing down on all of us with unimaginable radiance from the Couch of Heaven, breasts bared to nourish us with the milk of divine favor, was Hera, Queen of Kings, smiling down on us for the first time in a generation.

“This was five years ago. In summer and at harvest, the crops were richer in Achaian lands than for sixty years, and the winters grew warm. On Ithaka, we have not had snow since.”

The warm summer air blew in through the curtains, filling the great hall with the salt of the sea and the sweetness of the garden terraces, and Odysseus basked for a moment in the image he had conjured. Then someone coughed, and the spell was broken.

The room felt colder. Odysseus frowned and turned, looking Achilles in the eye. She fought the impulse to look away from him, schooling herself to an implacable calm. She was suddenly conscious of Damia's comb tugging at her scalp.

"I will not dress this next part up in poetry," Odysseus said grimly. "Late last year, Alaksandu, a Hittite prince of absolute corruption and potent sorcery, went into the palace of Menelaos and cast a spell on Helen, striking her mute and carrying her away. In that way, also, he sought to frame her as an adulteress, since no one heard her cry out. She was carried off across the sea to Wilusa in Taruisa—a city of great walls and armies, where Alaksandu and his father, Piyama the Sorcerer, hold Helen as their prize. Apollo smiled on the theft, and Tudhaliyas of Hattusa himself gave the theft his blessing, forgetting Agamemnon's gifts and vows. We should never have trusted the treacherous Hittites."

Odysseus began to move again, stalking up the far side of the table, still staring at Achilles, his eyes bright and dangerous. "With Apollo of the Plagues protecting him, Alaksandu grows richer and more powerful every day. His armies swell. He mounts Helen to fill her with his ugly Hittite spawn. She cries each night, unable to speak because of the spell cast on her tongue, mutely begging for Menelaos. Now Menelaos and Agamemnon, King of Kings, are gathering a great army to descend on Wilusa and rescue the stolen queen.

"But our war is hopeless unless we can find the son of the Silent One, Achilles, son of Peleus and Athena, whose spear alone can pierce Alaksandu and shatter his spell on Helen." Odysseus let the words hang in the air, looking away from Achilles and letting his bright gaze sweep the hall, taking in every face in turn. "And Achilles is hiding on Skyros."

Something stabbed Achilles's palms, and she nearly winced with the pain. It was her own fingernails, clenched so tightly the skin was beginning to break. Suddenly it felt as if everyone was staring at her—but no, they were still looking at Odysseus.

Everyone but Deidamia, who met her eyes and glanced away.

“Therefore, King Lykomedes,” Odysseus concluded, “I ask leave to search for Achilles. The goddess herself told me that he is here, disguised as a woman. I know that the custom of your island protects women born into malformed shapes, women in the bodies of half men, women in the bodies of boys, and all other such, but Achilles is the son of a goddess and has duties.”

There was silence in the banquet hall. Only Damia knew the name Achilles belonged to Red, of course; but in that moment, Achilles read strange, shifting confusion on her face and knew she could not trust her. Damia would betray her for the gods.

“I am loyal to the Great King,” Lykomedes said softly. “If you can find Achilles on Skyros, Achilles will leave Skyros with you.”

Afterward, Achilles barely remembered how supper had ended. Probably with gossip from across the sea and music—she vaguely recalled a lyre and a young man’s chanting ballad—but it had been all she could do to keep fending off Odysseus’s questions with mocking laughter, and in the end she had offered to be his guide the next day, so he could search Skyros for his undutiful, cross-dressing prince.

Now she was in the garden on the highest terrace that opened directly onto the women’s quarters. Damia had asked her to come to bed, and she had said, “In a few minutes. I must think.” But that had been hours ago. The moon was high overhead, and the stars glittered like knife-points.

Of course Damia would betray her. Her first loyalty had always been to the gods. Even though they were not real, the gods had always exerted a malign influence on Achilles’s life. For a moment she caught herself wishing that they *were* real, that a divine neck would appear before her hands and she could crush its divine windpipe.

Once, her violent impulses had horrified her, evidence of a manhood that would inevitably consume everything she loved about herself. But on her journey to Skyros and here on the island, she had met her share of violent women and knew better.

“She has not betrayed me yet,” Achilles told herself, walking among the trellises, running her hands along thick ropes of leafy vines heavy with water. She had time to prepare for the betrayal. It would come soon, when Damia finally persuaded herself that duty to family and island and gods outweighed duty to a lover of no particular talents. And then—

Achilles stopped at the edge of the terrace, looking out over the island and the sea. The final betrayal would come from the original traitor, her own body. Odysseus would not dare strip a woman to prove her a boy, but once Damia revealed her, she would no doubt be held down and stripped of her tunic and underclothes, and the miserable dangling appendage that no treatment of herbs could remove would be her undoing. Odysseus's pleasant ignorance would be more deadly than Kheiron's cruelty. On the journey to Agamemnon's army, she would have none of the herbs that had spared her the indignities of manhood, and the process would resume. Hair would sprout on her chest and shoulders and back as it had on Odysseus; a beard would follow; she would lose the fiery curls on her head; she would stink like a bull; her skin would roughen and bulge with veins; it would be worse than death.

And it would be death—the death of her self, the inexorable corrosion of her soul, until even her name was forgotten and nothing was left but the shell of a man she never was.

Or she could leap. From here, it would be far enough. She would bounce on the rocks below, fall into the sea, and be forgotten. Damia would not understand, but Damia was a fool and a traitor.

Achilles covered her face with her hands and slumped down on her haunches. The vines dripped night-dew on her body. Most of the time she did not realize how quickly she could lurch into despair. It only happened when the shocks came on suddenly, when there was no one to trust but herself.

So it had been two years ago. At times like now, when she was entirely alone in the world, she was still at the bottom of the well, still surrounded by water, her lungs and limbs still burning as she fought to breathe. Maybe she would always exist in that last moment when the fight had left her and she had opened her mouth to the sweet water and let it burst into her lungs. The moment had seemed to last forever.

It was easy to distrust. But Damia might not betray her after all. She had lived a soft and easy life, accepted as a woman despite the flap of skin between her legs, but surely she was still capable of understanding what fate awaited Achilles if these foreigners took her.

Or perhaps she would simply pack supplies of the herbs Achilles relied upon and send her forth to fight as a woman. The Skyrians sometimes forgot how little respect the rest of Achaia had for women like their

princess. It was exhausting, this uncertainty, draining in ways most people could not imagine. It was so hard to breathe.

Even before she opened her eyes, Achilles knew she was dreaming. It was the quality of the light through her eyelids that told her she was not in the world of the living: gray light, a gradient from pale silver to deep charcoal that barely altered when she forced her eyelids open. She reeled, twisted, and scrambled upright, her feet unsure against a floor of loose, crumbling tile. Only—

It was not tile. She bent and scooped up a flat white cracked thing from the ground, turning it over in her hands, wondering at its strange triangular shape and unexpected lightness; it looked like stone, but felt like dead, porous wood. There were more beside it; she was standing on a pile of such tiles. Some were linked by twisted knobs to longer, thinner sticks, stalks, or tubes of—

Bone.

She dropped the human scapula and it fell soundlessly away.

Something crunched behind her. She turned.

On a toppled wall—no, on the spine of some primordial monster—sat an owl with gray eyes. The owl tilted her head and regarded Achilles with blank fascination. *Shhhrrrrrk. Shhhrrrrrk. Shhhrrrrrk.* The sound was talons on bone as the owl sharpened her claws.

Achilles stepped toward her, wary of her footing. She picked her way toward the spine and the owl, bonemeal crunching under her toes and bonedust filling her lungs. The owl never moved, never looked away, and never seemed to grow nearer. The ground sloped downward, so Achilles broke into a run.

It did not occur to her to speak.

As she ran toward the owl, the distance grew, and the creature swelled to fill the sky. The ground changed again and again—leathery scales, then colorless feathers that dissolved into dust when her feet came down, then the shells of enormous tortoises, which cracked and broke beneath her, then a sea of eggshells—and the owl rose up before her as vast as the mountains above Aiolia, where the gods lived.

Finally Achilles stopped, staring up into the owl's silver eyes. "Athena," she cried. "Why am I here?"

The owl's eyes flashed, and the world of bones took on a different shape. It was Skyros, but made of bones; she stood on the garden terrace, but all the plants were dead, withered to grasping skeletal hands. The seas were dust, filled with the skeletons of monsters.

In place of the owl, a woman stood beside her—but she was no woman. No woman's eyes were so unnaturally large, too enormous to turn in their sockets—owl's eyes. She had no beak, but her thin gray lips skinned back to show her teeth, row after row of small white points exposed in a half-moon smile. “My daughter,” she purred. Her low, strange voice sounded like tidewater on shingle, rough and raspy in one dimension, soft and sinuous in another. “It is easier to see you every night. You are beautiful, but you will become so much more beautiful when the fire inside you grows. This dull red of your hair will heat to a burning gold and the blood in you will boil. Your skin will be as molten metal, and even the gods will fear you.” The Silent One's tongue flickered out, sliding along the margins of her thin-lipped mouth, as if the idea itself were nutritive. “Then your nickname—Pyrrha—will be prophetic, and the flames of your hair will consume this world.”

Achilles stared at her. “Of course I would dream Athena as a monster.”

The gray-eyed owl-woman tilted her head to one side. “That is humor, yes? I remember humor. Wit. Verbal irony. A playful juxtaposition of uncollapsed possibilities. The sudden withdrawal of a threat. Laughter comes from the sound that our animal ancestors made to signal that the predators had all gone away. Are you trying to reassure yourself?”

The dreams had never been so talkative before. Achilles stared into the silver eyes of the Silent One, and the Silent One stared back. “I was working up the nerve to jump.”

Athena surged forward and suddenly was standing between Achilles and the edge of the terrace. “Do not. Your body is not strong enough yet to survive. I would lose you.”

“You do not *have* me,” Achilles objected, “unless you are madness.” She rose to her feet. She might as well kill herself in the dream, for practice. “I will not be carried away from here and turned into a man.”

“My little fox will not turn you into a man unless *I* permit it,” said the Silent One. “I own him, as I own you.”

“I am not about to discuss my future with an imaginary dream-goddess,” Achilles said. She approached the edge and realized that she was naked.

Flushed with anger, she covered her groin, though it was futile to try to hide her penis from a figment of her own imagination.

“If you hate it so much, cut it off.” Athena handed her an enormous piece of flint. “It will only hurt for a moment. The other women will find you and stop the bleeding. Odysseus will of course locate you in the morning, but at that point he cannot very well force you to be a man, can he?”

Achilles supposed this idea must be lurking somewhere in her own mind. Before Skyros, she had thought about it constantly, but Kheiron’s combat training had included a number of lectures on bleeding out and the enormous arteries in the groin, and it had never been the most appealing way to die. Now, with discovery at hand, she was obviously rethinking it.

“Or,” the Silent One whispered, gliding closer to her, “I can make it go away. All you have to do is ask, fire-daughter, and I will reshape you.” Her hand shot out, taloned, striking Achilles in the lower belly, sending cold shooting through her. “You will have a womb.”

For a moment, Achilles was whole; her body was complete, pulsing with life, with blood—no, with *fire* instead of blood; her skin was like metal, and she spread great wings and roared back at the goddess. Flame burned in her womb, in her belly, between her legs; she was grounded to the world, exalted, raising a spear at the heavens . . .

She forced the vision away, jerking back from the edge, back from the owl-goddess. “Ask?” she spat. “I already *asked* you every night for three thousand nights, from the ages of six to fourteen, on my knees beside my cot. ‘Goddess,’ I pleaded, ‘make me a woman!’ But you never did. Because you aren’t real.”

“Pyrrha,” purred Athena, “don’t play this game. I can feel your will gathering. I can feel you *wanting*. The sun is coming up soon and I must leave you, but today I will answer your three thousand prayers, and you will call me mother. Or you will kill yourself.” The woman shrugged, but her silver eyes followed Achilles, never blinking. “Whatever it is, it will happen before the next moonrise.”

Then the owl-goddess was gone, and Achilles was standing among the vines, blinking crusts out of her eyes. She had been sleepwalking and, from the footprints in the soil, had been standing, asleep, right at the edge of the cliff.

She dressed that day for battle. The underclothes she wore were tighter than usual, formfitting around her waist and under her groin, holding everything crushed flat to preserve her dignity until she was inevitably betrayed. A giddy nausea cramped her belly, tightening the muscles of her pelvis like wires. Deidamia offered her the comb again, but she refused it, braiding her hair into one enormous red mass like a boar's-tusk helmet of fiery curls. She pinned her tunic carefully, to once again emphasize her full chest and narrow waist, and also for dignity's sake. When they finally humiliated her, let them see what they were destroying.

It would be easy to die when the time came. They wanted her for a warrior. Even in the worst scenarios she would have weapons, and she knew how to let out enough blood that no one could stop her. The idea made her smile so savagely that Damia asked if she was going to kill Odysseus.

"No."

"You seem—well, upset. Red, speak to me. I can help you. I can talk to Father—"

"Don't you dare. I'll deal with them myself."

"What does that *mean*?" Damia looked at once confused and angry, and Achilles supposed she was being cruel by telling her so little.

"It means I have a plan. Everything will be perfect." Achilles tried to smile less toothily.

"You still look like you're going to murder someone."

"Maybe I'll murder Prince Achilles." Achilles shrugged. "I never ask for anything, but I ask for this: Give me today to deal with these men. Don't stand in my way; don't tell them anything; just give me today."

Damia parted her lips. Her eyes looked brittle, wet. She swallowed. "Of course. You're frightening me, Red. I trust you, but please be safe." When she said, "I trust you," her voice trembled. It was impossible to tell whether this was the sign of a lie or a frightened lover, so Achilles kissed her forehead and then descended from the women's quarters in search of the mainlanders.

She had lied. She did not exactly have a plan. But she did have a knife concealed in her tunic just in case, and a vague idea of perhaps leading them to some isolated cliff, telling the truth, and holding herself hostage. Maybe they could tell King Agamemnon she had died. Maybe she would kill herself after all.

It was good not to overthink these things.

Chapter Three

Odyseus had changed clothing. He wore an enormous brown cloak with a big hood—Diomedes had a matching cloak, hood lowered—and both of them carried bulging knapsacks that clinked when they moved. Achilles paused in the doorway to their guest room, peering at them in confusion. “Are you in disguise?”

“Yes,” Odysseus said blandly. “If Prince Achilles is concealed among the commoners, it would be best not to walk around like royalty. Introduce me as a traveling peddler bearing trinkets. Tell them I want to trade for leather goods, dried fish, textiles, whatever seems best. Tell them I speak bad Achaian; tell them I’m from up north, and to speak slowly and loudly. I will observe, and together we will snoop out the prince.”

“We never just talk to people,” Diomedes sighed. “This man makes everything complicated.”

Odysseus nodded sagely. “When I wooed Penelope—”

“—his wife—”

“—there was an entire ruse involving geese, falsified accounting forms, the Assyrian ambassador—”

“Also he stole her father’s longship.” Diomedes shrugged elaborately. “He gave it back; he just had to prove he could. Pyrrha, beware this inveterate fox.”

Achilles snorted and motioned them to follow her. “We’ll go guildhouse to guildhouse, then to the villages. Skyros isn’t much of a place. I assume you mean to bribe everyone for leads?”

“I mean to peddle trinkets,” Odysseus scoffed. “How dare you impugn my character. I heard that the women of Skyros make excellent craft goods,

and incidentally I am carrying a message from home for some fiery-haired young Phthian stallion named Achilles. His father will pay me handsomely if I deliver it, and I will pay handsomely in turn.”

“You see what I mean,” Diomedes said, sighing again.

The first three hours passed quietly enough. They went from the spinners’ guild to the woodworkers’, from the tanners’ to the ropers’, from the weavers’ to the potters’, from the wheelwrights’ to the boatbuilders’, and Achilles introduced the head of each household. At each guildhouse, Odysseus muttered and gestured, and Achilles introduced him as a northern tinker who was looking to barter and also looking to deliver a message to a male version of herself. Not that anyone would have known from the description. She had come to Skyros scrawny and bedraggled, looking nothing like royalty.

Surprisingly, Odysseus seemed intent to take his time and barter, eagerly trading brass rings and necklaces for leather and cloth and dried fish. He had bronze knives that were passably well-made and traded several of them for a small jar of high-grade olive oil. “We grow terrible olives on Ithaka,” he lamented.

“Is he here to shop or spy?” Achilles asked Diomedes.

The handsome foreigner only smiled. “Perhaps he has a lead and is taking his time. With him, who knows?”

This was either alarming or reassuring; Achilles could not decide which. Either Odysseus was on the wrong trail entirely, or he had suspected her from the beginning. She kept stealing suspicious glances at the back of Odysseus’s hood, but to no effect.

After a while, they stopped to lunch—bartered-for bread, dried fish, and olive oil—and sat in the sun on the pier. Odysseus dropped his absurd fake accent and told a long story about how he had made friends with a pod of dolphins as a boy, and how kind they were to him, and how they sometimes followed his ships around the sea. He chattered like a dolphin, clicking and whistling, to demonstrate his mastery of their speech.

“You must think me a very young girl indeed,” Achilles said mildly.

“All virgins who dwell in these parts secretly love dolphins,” Odysseus said. “I am simply trying to charm you so you will help me find my missing prince.”

Achilles finished her bread and licked her fingers. “He can’t be more than, what, seventeen?”

“Nineteen.”

“Forgive me. I find it difficult to believe that the armies of the Achaians depend on the aid of a nineteen-year-old boy.”

“I was nineteen when I led the Seven against Thebai,” Diomedes said quietly. “They say I was indispensable.” He shouldered his knapsack, which still clinked with metal; unlike his companion, he had not bartered.

“Herakles was nineteen when he conquered Nemea.” Odysseus stood up too, shouldering his own pack. “History is full of indispensable nineteen-year-old boys.”

It hardly seemed worth arguing. In Achilles’s experience, men of any age were dangerous and fickle creatures, as likely to throw you down a well as to be of any use, but she only shrugged and led them down the coastal road to the second village of the island, Theseoptosi. About a mile down the road she had to stop and clutch her stomach. A dull ache had begun to radiate out from her lower belly, cramping and spasming. Usually the dried fish was safe, but perhaps the olive oil had soured. She said so, frowning.

“Perhaps you lost track of the moon,” Diomedes said. “My girl lost track of the moon once, during the War of the Seven. We woke up absolutely covered in blood.” He laughed.

“Ahem,” Odysseus said. “The lady may not want to imagine being absolutely covered in blood.”

Achilles gritted her teeth and pressed on, and the pain faded. By early afternoon they came to Theseoptosi, where Skorpia grew rice on the small plateau above the beach.

“What are those wet fields?” Odysseus asked in wonderment. “Are they grain?”

“After a fashion.” Skorpia had come out of her hut to see her visitors. She towered over all of them, well over six feet high, with thick auburn braids and a deep strong voice and arms Achilles had often admired. She squinted at the two men, then at Achilles. “Who are they, Red?”

“Peddlers,” said Achilles. “They have copper and brass wares, and some bronze knives.”

“And a sword, if you want one,” Diomedes said.

Skorpia cocked her head to one side, planted a hand on her hip, and nodded. “Let me see it.” She held out her other hand, and Odysseus took out a rather fine specimen of a bronze blade, extending it hilt-first. At first it looked familiar—and then Achilles recognized it.

It was hers.

Patroklos had given it to her when he left for Egypt. The handle was covered in wrought ivory bound together with green copper wire, and the guard was formed in the shape of two enormous ants, their bronze antennas curling outward to protect the wielder's hands. The blade was stamped with her name as her father's smiths had insisted on inscribing it: AKHILLEWOS.

Luckily for her, Skorpia gawked at it, reaching out with both big hands to take it and then turning it over in her fingers, grinning with delight. "I love swords!" She then flicked it into a guard position, testing its balance. "This is a really good sword." She let the weapon glide back and forth, swishing it against the breeze. "Can I pay in rice?"

Odysseus was staring intently at Skorpia. When he spoke, his fake accent was even thicker than ever. "Tell me more about this *rice*," he said, but his eyes darted between Skorpia and Diomedes, and suddenly Achilles wanted to laugh. They thought *Skorpia* was Prince Achilles!

Skorpia waved the sword at the terraced rice fields as she explained the glutinous starch—useless as grain, but excellent glue, and very effective as a poultice to stanch wounds—and Diomedes and Odysseus watched her intently, looking more and more confused.

The two men exchanged significant glances, and then Diomedes said, "Fair lady, I wonder if I can ask you a sensitive question?" He looked somehow younger and handsomer than usual. Skorpia peered at him with interest.

Achilles stood perfectly still. Her stomach was hurting again, but she had to know how they would do it: how they would actually try to prove she was a man when the time came.

"I know Skyros is home to many foreign women who come because it is a hospitable refuge in a cruel world," Diomedes said. "Where did you learn to use a sword?"

Skorpia blinked at him. "I'm from around here."

"Pardon us," Odysseus said, enunciating his false accent with entirely too much care. "Perhaps you keep track of—ahem—other women like you? We are looking for one from Aiolia."

Skorpia's eyes widened a little more and darted to Achilles. Then she began roaring with laughter. "That's the most roundabout way anyone has ever asked me if I have a penis," she chortled. "I'm not interested in you,

old man, but if the boy wants to come find out—” She grinned at Diomedes, then nodded in the direction of her hut. “Well? Coming?”

Diomedes flushed, and Odysseus retreated deeper into his hood, scowling. Achilles couldn’t help from grinning, though the stabbing in her lower belly had grown worse than before. Skorpia stared down Diomedes a moment longer, then shrugged. “If you aren’t interested, plenty of girls round here have what you’re looking for. Pity, though. You’re nicely formed.” She gave Diomedes his sword back, smacked his buttocks—“Firm as granite!”—and walked away.

“She has three sons,” Achilles said. “Just so you know. She was pregnant last year.”

They continued on their way, Odysseus and Diomedes quieter and more brooding. The road turned to follow the mountain, and, as the sun settled into the glare of afternoon, Achilles led them inland. Toward the lumberyards, and the hunting preserves, and the king’s vegetable farms and vineyards. As she walked the ache was getting worse, a dull throbbing on either side of Achilles’s pelvis where the muscles attached, as though some subtle poison had made its way deep into the sockets of her thighbones and set everything to swelling and scraping.

“You have no idea where to find him, do you?” Achilles said. “Is the plan just to wave nice swords around until you run into someone who gets hard? ‘Oh, swords, I love swords, let me show you my meat sword’?”

“Not exactly,” Odysseus said. “We came here with a lead.”

Achilles gritted her teeth and kept moving. Her body had relaxed for a while, seeing the absurdity of their interaction with Skorpia, but— “Why drag me around playing nursemaid to a couple of fake peddlers?”

They had reached the harder part of the inland road, where it cut through the thin forests, ascending hillsides along log paths, crossing brooks on rickety wood bridges. It was getting harder to maintain the pace, much less to stay a few steps ahead of these long-legged men.

“You have the most unmistakable Aiolian accent,” said Diomedes, “and from the looks of you, you’re royalty.”

Achilles stopped, putting her hands on her hips.

“But,” said Odysseus, “Prince Achilles would be nineteen by now, a head taller if he takes after his kinsmen, downy-cheeked at least and likely full-bearded—and a lot less plump. And no man has a voice like yours.”

“They said in Phthia that he was spider-thin,” Diomedes confirmed. “So we had a mystery to investigate.”

They were far enough away that she could reach her knife before they reached her. “Stop. Stay where you are. If you try to touch me, I’ll—”

Their footfalls ceased. Leaves rustled in the wind.

“Are you a eunuch?” Diomedes asked. “That would explain why you have the semblance of a woman.”

“I *am* a woman.” Achilles gritted her teeth. She did not want to move, but slowly, slowly, she took a step away from them and began to turn. The throbbing in her stomach was unbearable. It was all she could do to stand upright. “Did you *poison* me? Was that your plan, to make me helpless and then *kidnap* me?”

“We should have.” Odysseus sounded sheepish. “That would have been smart. The goddess told me *you* were Achilles. But like a fool, I doubted. Everyone in Aiolia swore that Achilles was no woman, and my eyes told me you were most distinctly no man, so—wait—why do you think we *poisoned* you?”

Clutching her belly, Achilles turned. The pain ripped through her, seared deep up into her belly. Her pulse hammered in her ears. *THUD*. A purple spot beaded the front of her tunic, then grew. *THUD THUD*. She fell to her knees. *THUMP thud THUMP thud THUMP THUMP THUMP*—

Blackness chewed the edges of her vision. The two men stood over her looking horrified. Above them, the trees swayed, the sky shimmered, and the colors drained from the world. Over everything she heard the thunder of her heart. Something vast flew overhead on silent wings.

She stood abruptly, crashed into a dense mat of thatch, bellowed an oath, blindly lashed out with her fists. Something big and powerful caught her by the wrists and held her down. She stopped struggling as a ruse—feign weakness, then break free!—and cracked open her eyes.

Skorpia was staring down at her, brow furrowed. “Pyrrha. *Stop*. You’re in my hut. Those men of yours are outside. You’re bleeding all over my floor. I didn’t know it was your time of the month. I didn’t know you *had* a time, actually; I thought you were like Damia.”

“I’m bleeding to death,” Achilles hissed. “They poisoned me. I’m dying.” She tried to struggle, but Skorpia sat on her, shaking her head.

“Stop it. It’s just blood! You look perfectly fine to me.” Skorpia partially withdrew her weight, frowning. “Promise you won’t start thrashing again?”

Something about her tone of voice—half-confused, half-amused—calmed Achilles, and she nodded assent. The bigger woman lifted off her and stepped back. “Your clothes are ruined. Have you really never bled before?”

Achilles looked down and felt suddenly faint. She peeled back her bloody tunic. Brown and purple smudges smeared her groin and knotted in her pubic hair, but—that was it. *It* had vanished. She reached down and grabbed for *it*, but— “Ow!”

“Maybe don’t claw yourself?” Skorpia still looked perplexed. “It’s not even that much blood, you’re just a wild animal. Calm down.”

This was, of course, impossible. It was ridiculous. It was absurd. It was—

Skorpia handed her a ceramic basin with a sponge. “Clean up. You can have my spare tunic, I’ll get it later. Those foreigners of yours were screaming like little girls. Turns out they’re nobles, not peddlers, and the young one’s Diomedes, who fought at Thebai. You’d think he would be taller. And a *lot* more used to blood.”

Achilles cleaned herself numbly, trying to make sense of what she was seeing, what she was touching—and what she *wasn’t* seeing or touching. She put on Skorpia’s spare gray tunic and tied some old rags around her waist to catch the blood. Then she drank some water, thanked Skorpia numbly, and stumbled outside. The two Achaian men sat in front of the hut. As she came out, they looked up at her, as uncertain as she was.

“What is going on?” Achilles hissed. “What have you done?”

“We did nothing!” Diomedes objected. “I’m sorry about your manhood. The goddess must have confiscated it.”

“*What?*” Achilles stared at him as if he had sprouted a second head. *There are no gods*— The words died on her lips, and she felt giddy again. Three thousand nights she had begged the goddess. Three thousand prayers. *But why now, after all these years?* She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to find her balance. “You spoke to Athena?”

“*I did,*” said Odysseus. He stood up, putting an arm around her shoulder. “In my dreams last night. She told me you were her *daughter*, but I did not believe it. I thought I had misunderstood her message. She said Achilles would join us if it pleased you, so my cunning scheme today was to get to

know you better and see how you would react under pressure. I did not expect—”

“Let’s take her home,” said Diomedes. “Poor thing.” He stood on the other side of her, sheltering her from the evening breeze.

Achilles shivered. She suddenly felt very cold, and the men’s cloaks and arms were warm. It was, of course, impossible to trust them, but it was also impossible to trust anyone.

She had to talk to Damia. Damia would know what to do.

The sacred grotto of immortal self-created Aphrodite was beneath the women’s quarters, accessible by a long ladder through a hole in the floor of Damia’s bedroom. In ordinary times the hole was covered, but twice a year, the women reserved to Aphrodite gathered in Damia’s room and stripped off their clothes, showing that they had been born unlike other women. They showed the scars where their shame had been cut away, or, if they had not yet submitted to that ritual, they stood naked, and for a moment their shame was a badge of honor that showed what they had survived. Everywhere else they had been outsiders, but in that room they were kallai, the beautiful ones. Twice a year, the kallai descended the ladder into the cave, which rumbled as waves crashed against the roots of the mountain, and in the dark, lit blue by a sacred species of glowworm, they told their stories and shared the signs by which the goddess had called them.

Achilles had never fully participated in this ritual. Twice now she had stayed in Damia’s room above, listening to the echo of her sisters’ muffled stories, self-exiled from the mysteries. She had thought that, perhaps, when the time came for Damia to cut her own body into a new shape, she could pretend to believe, and join Damia, so they would stay matched.

Now she lay in Damia’s bed, shivering with cold, still exhausted from the journey back and numb with wonder, wrapped in Damia’s blanket. She had put Damia’s comb in her hair again, arranging her curls around the malachite flowers, to expose her long neck just as Damia liked it.

In her dream, Athena had promised her a womb. Now everything she hated was gone, and she was bleeding. Three thousand nights of prayer ached in her bones and stung her eyes. Dizzy and feverish, Achilles waited, but for a long time, Damia did not come.

The sunlight died in the western windows. Under the blanket, Achilles shook all over. She had touched the bones of Thetis with her hands. She had

felt the toothless jaw, pocked with mute evidence of abscesses, and wept bitterly at her father's lie. Her mother had been a mortal, not Athena the Screech-Owl. Now everything seemed to be melting like bronze in a crucible, all the solid facts flowing together, ready to cast fresh.

She slid her hand slowly down her belly, bracing herself for the inevitable shock of her penis, but it never came. Her fingers slid over the curve of her stomach and down the sudden turn inward. The skin was raw and irritated, smarting to the touch, slick and dense with tiny flaps and folds, and then curved sharply in. *It was gone.* Everything was new, yet more familiar than she could ever have imagined.

"I did not believe you," she whispered. Her voice was small in her ears. "Mother? How is this possible?" She stood, and the cold night air flowed around her. She walked to the window. The moon was just visible over the sea, and its reflection rippled in the waters. She closed her eyes, trying to see again the face of the owl from her dreams, and silently mouthed a prayer:

Mother, I have not known you until now. You came to me in my dreams and I thought you were the voice of all that was broken inside coming back to torture me with my own brokenness. But now I see that the bliss of the gods is not just a story, and I thank you for your gift. Tell me what I must do, Mother, and I will do it.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She opened her eyes, and the moon still hung low over the water. The tide groaned on the shingle. Far below in the town, someone was playing a flute.

"Red?" Damia's voice came from behind her. "I heard you took sick—but they haven't spoken to Father yet. The foreigners are eating with the men. Did your plan work?"

Suddenly Achilles's eyes burned and everything blurred. Now that Damia was here, she was eager to show her, but she hesitated. Maybe it would be better to tell her first, to explain that she had been wrong about everything. Yes—

"I have been a fool, Deidamia. You told me to pray to the gods, and I refused. You told me to pray to immortal Aphrodite, and I denied her. You told me to pray to my mother, Athena, and I said that I was not Athena's daughter, that the gods were a lie. I have been a fool—"

"What are you saying?" Damia's voice came from a few steps nearer, but Achilles could feel her hesitation, her confusion. "You believe in the gods

now?”

“How could I not?” Achilles turned, baring her body to Damia, and for an instant their eyes met—then Damia’s eyes hardened and slid away, averted from Achilles’s nakedness.

“Please put on a robe,” Damia said, pointing to the linen chest. Her voice was suddenly empty.

Achilles moved sideways toward Damia’s gaze, and Damia’s eyes slid away again, refusing to look at her.

“Look at me! My mother answered my prayers. I’m even bleeding.”

“Put on a robe.” Damia turned her head away from Achilles, walked to the linen chest, pulled out a white robe. She tossed the folded wad of cloth over her shoulder. “You are naked.”

Achilles caught it. “We’re always naked with each other.”

Damia’s shoulders tightened, and her hands bunched. “I always told myself that this might happen, but in my weakness I never truly believed.”

Achilles slid into the robe in confusion. “Why won’t you look at me? You told me to worship the gods. For a year now you told me to believe. Now I am *proof*—”

Damia spun suddenly. Her eyes flashed. “Yes! *You* are proof. *I* have to be Deidamia.”

It made no sense. It was not fair. “I *prayed* tonight,” Achilles said. “Why are you angry? If it’s envy, I can pray for you too, and my mother—”

Damia stepped back as if struck. “I am not a goddess’s daughter,” she snapped. “I am a mortal. The gods destroy those who demand too much. The best I can hope for is the knife, and it will reshape me only a little. I’ll bleed once. Thanks, flint. Thanks, immortal Aphrodite. Mortal Damia can only hope so much.”

Suddenly all Achilles could do was stare at Damia’s face, cataloging the minute details of her expression. Damia had stuck her chin out in that truculent way she sometimes had, set her jaw, narrowed her eyes—which were wet but also hot with an intensity that hardly matched the stoical set of her features. A vein throbbed in Damia’s throat. She was *angry*.

She was angry?

Rage surged up in Achilles, drying her throat and curdling her stomach. She felt her lips curl back from her teeth and—too late—felt the hate reach her eyes. “I thought,” Achilles said coldly, “that I was beautiful in your

eyes, but I see now that I was only beautiful when we were mirrors of each other.”

“That is correct,” Damia said, equally icy, drawing herself up to her full height and looking down at Achilles with haughty emptiness. “We were twinned in an egg, but we were not the same. The gods chose you to be like them; they chose me to worship them. Rejoice, Achilles. You have been given what we all pray for. You are not kallai. You are kunai now, a woman like the rest.”

“Then I am sorry,” Achilles said, keeping her voice steady and hard as flint, “for intruding. I know that this room is the threshold of the sacred cave of the kallai. I would not want to infringe on your kind.”

“No, it would be best if you did not.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. “I suppose I must leave Skyros.”

“If that is the gods’ will,” Damia said. “And it seems it is.”

“Perhaps you will pray for me as I go,” said Achilles. She made her voice light, almost flippant. “If the Silent One is my mother, then the Earthshaker may wish me dead. Do you wish me to drown as I cross the sea?”

“No.” Damia’s eyes were wet, but no moisture reached her cheeks. “I loved you. As Poseidon Earthshaker is my witness, I beg his protection over you.”

“That is good,” Achilles said, letting a mocking smile work across her lips. “For my part, I will pray to my mother to bless you as she has blessed me. For all your kindness and the kindness of your kind.”

“Do not taunt me,” Damia said. “I will give you gifts and make sacrifices for your journey. But leave me alone now. There is spare bedding in the women’s cottage; do not bleed on mine.”

Assembling her face into the coldest and most condescending mask she could manage, Achilles put her hands to Damia’s comb in her hair. “You’ll want this back. Sorry for defiling it.”

Damia shook her head. “Keep it. It would remind me of you.”

That stung like a slap, but Achilles lowered her hands, letting her lip curl into a sneer. “May you never be reminded of me, then.” She stepped past Damia and through the doorway, and suddenly her limbs felt charged with a terrible grace, and she knew that Damia was staring after her. *Let me look as beautiful in her memory as she in mine*, she thought, *and let the memory of my beauty sting her like a cut that never heals*. It was horrible to feel this rage, horrible to think that the person who had loved her most at sunrise

was her enemy at moonrise. “Perhaps,” Achilles said in parting, “I’ll pray for you anyway.”

Damia said nothing, and Achilles descended through the palace, shaking with anger. It would be hard to spend another night on Skyros, but no sailor would go to sea by starlight.

On her way to the women’s cottage she found Lykandra, a young girl she had sometimes sent to fetch seashells for Damia, and told her to carry a message to Diomedes and Odysseus. “They’re with the men, so tiptoe in quietly, but tell them Achilles will meet them on the pier at dawn, and tell them to bring the sword.”

“But, Red,” said Lykandra, “who is Achilles?”

Achilles smirked. “I suppose we’ll find out.”

Chapter Four

In the witching hour, Achilles rose from her bed in the women's cottage. She was no longer bleeding. She had heard from the witches in Tempe that the length of blood flow was an index to the health of the body: shorter flow was a sign of a robust body, but no flow at all or only clotted blood were signs of illness. *So I'm not going to die*, she thought with a grim smile. It was said that miracles were dangerous gifts, that the gods were cruelest to the ones they blessed, but it seemed she was favored instead. She had envied even the most wretched women before, slaves and servants, those afflicted with cancers of the womb and agonizing internal cysts, and despised herself for envying their misery. But now she was whole. She had cursed the gods and they had blessed her, and not even poisoned their gift with cancer or distemper. Now *she* was envied.

She walked outside so as not to disturb the others—she didn't know them well—and stood on the platform by the Mese, gazing up at the sky with its thick band of stars set in purple and blue.

Achilles had wondered how large the sky was, how far the stars. They seemed so small, and yet no matter how high she climbed, whether in Skyros or in the mountains of Aiolia, the stars never grew closer. They must have been very far away and vast, jewels of glittering ice embedded in the darkness of the night sky, each greater than a city or a mountain. The stars must have been so cold that a hand that touched them would freeze and shatter.

Achilles longed to bathe in their icy light and freeze.

She had never felt quite this full of life—this strong—and it was a meaningless and empty thing. She descended the Mese to the harbor,

thinking to wait by the mainlander ship for dawn. But the water was dark blue like translucent dye, and in the pulse of the surf she imagined she might feel the cold of the stars. She leapt off the pier into the water. Frigid waves surged past and under her, lifting her up, but she dove under their crests and glided into deeper waters, swimming until she had gained a little distance from the pier.

Perhaps, if there were gods, Poseidon would come for her now. “Drown me, Earthshaker, if you can,” she said, though on three sides the rocky harbor would protect her from his wrath. “If Athena lives, so do you. Show me a sign.”

The surf rumbled in the dark, but the god of the open sea did not appear. Perhaps gods could only show their faces in dreams, and the small rumbling of the water was the one response the god had at his disposal.

She laughed, then drew in deep breaths, until her lungs filled to the brim, and swam down toward the bottom of the harbor. By now her eyes had adjusted to the darkness and the salt, and the starlight and moonlight dimly penetrated into the deeper part of the sea. Something glittered at the bottom, something metal.

Two Euboian ships had gone down here, one two years ago, the other eighteen, and divers had picked them clean, even retrieving most of the timber, but perhaps they had missed something. Either way, something compelled Achilles to swim deeper. Her limbs began to burn from the exertion, but she could hold her breath for some time yet. She paused to exhale a few bubbles, watching them rise toward the surface—strange, dancing things that used to be her breath. Then she descended further.

In plain sight, where no diver could have missed it, was a small golden knife in a golden sheath. Achilles took it without thinking and began kicking her way back to the surface. When her head broke the water she breathed, but there was no desperation, only an easy rotation of air into her lungs. She kicked closer to the pier and finally came to rest against its side on an underwater ledge. Anyone on the pier would not see her; she could survey her find in private.

She held up the dagger to the moonlight, marveling at the fishscale pattern on the sheath, at the bands of blue metal and brass that zigzagged the handle, and the pommel of clear rock crystal that sparkled like a star. When she unsheathed it, the blade was black metal, not bronze. When she tested its edge against her thumb, it parted the skin with ease. She winced

and sheathed the dagger, then shoved her thumb into her mouth, tasting hot, salty metal. What a marvelous weapon.

She examined the hilt more closely. Underneath the rock crystal was the image of a golden disc, and from that disc emanated rays with hands. The craftsmanship was not Achaian or Hittite or Assyrian or old Mitanni. The dagger could only be from Egypt. And none of the shipwrecks in Skyros harbor had been Egyptian, not for centuries, so the dagger must have been brought by the sea.

“Thank you, Earthshaker,” Achilles whispered after a while. She did not know what to make of this present from the sea, but she remembered her manners. “I accept this hospitality gift and will not harm you when I travel through your domains. Your quarrel with the Silent One does not concern me, and I will consider us at peace.”

Half an hour before dawn she heard men on the pier. She recognized the footsteps of Odysseus and Diomedes when they mounted their longship, Diomedes heavier and more certain, Odysseus more delicate and cautious. She could hear rope being pulled and coiled, sailcloth flapping in the wind, creaking timber. Soon she heard their voices too.

“Are we ever,” said Diomedes, “going to talk about her?”

“Achilles? I like her.” Odysseus sounded pleased, and that pleased Achilles.

“I like her too. She is clever and strong. But she’s doomed.”

“Why is that?”

“The Hittites will kill her.”

“Nine-tenths of combat is mind,” Odysseus objected, “and she moves like one with training.”

“In any case, Achilles is not the *her* I meant.” There was a grim edge in Diomedes’s voice. “I meant Iphianassa.”

“Best not to,” said Odysseus. “The Silent One advises we forget.”

“The Silent One speaks to me too,” Diomedes said quietly. “Ever since Aulis. She says the same thing to me. But I cannot forget what I saw, and I want to talk of it now.”

“Now is a bad time,” said Odysseus.

“Now is the only time,” said Diomedes. “Before we lead another bright-eyed child to Agamemnon and the Queen of Kings.”

“They wouldn’t dare hurt Achilles.” Yet Odysseus’s voice did not ring with certainty. It was hard to tell without a glimpse of his face, but he sounded—angry. Stifled. Worried. “I will obey the Silent One, and stay silent.”

Achilles felt a smile twist across her lips. Something in her had been knotted up since yesterday’s discovery, and it now loosened. Her breathing felt easier than ever. Danger—mistrust—certain betrayal—these were comforting certainties. Armored by them, she found herself looking forward to the journey. There was more than Kheiron waiting for her at Aulis. Odysseus and Diomedes had *secrets*, and she would ferret them out one by one. The Silent One had secrets too—the gods had all the secrets. And this Agamemnon was dangerous? Perfect. And there had been another “child,” a girl named Iphianassa? Very interesting.

It was impossible not to be happy. There was a game to play, and the stakes were high. Let Damia have her peaceful life here, her loving sister, the admiration of her people. Let her choke on them. Achilles would have adventure and fame.

She swam round to the other end of the pier and crept ashore. Her clothes were wet, but no matter; let them conclude she had been bathing on the other side of the island. The longship made a magnificent sight anyway, approached from the Mese. Handsome Diomedes and clever Odysseus stood like heroes by the mast, and their sailors had raised their oars like a forest of spears. The effect was delightful.

Achilles leapt onto the ship. “Take me away from here,” she told the Achaians. “Bring me to Agamemnon. I’m told it’s not maidenly, but I’ve always wanted to fight in a war.”

By midday the sun flashed on the waters, gleamed through the translucent bulk of the slow swells, shone on the scales of countless fish, on dancing dolphins, and sometimes on the silhouettes of sharks. The waters were so beautiful with life that for several hours Achilles was content. Let the men tend the sails, adjust course with the oars, call out to each other in island sailors’ jargon, Diomedes as fluent as Odysseus, though he was a mainlander. Achilles was lost in contemplation of the sea.

On the ship to Skyros last year, she had been preoccupied with hiding her body from the men, with not looking too much like a boy *or* too much like a girl, with her starving belly, with the pain of existence in a poisoned body—

with everything but the *sea*. And now she was seeing it for what might have been the first time.

It was like a great bowl filled with wine. It rippled in the breath of the wind, rippled when the sides of the bowl were tested by careless hands or earthquakes. Ripples propagated from one side to the other, waves that lifted boats and dashed them on the rocks—but the ripples went far deeper than the surface, stirring the dregs, moving drowned things along the seafloor. And so it was, perhaps, with her Egyptian dagger, which she had concealed on the inside of her sash next to Damia's comb. She thought of flinging the comb into the waves, but her rage had cooled, and it was still a fine comb. Treasure looted from the enemy.

Diomedes sat down next to her on the stern. "Your sword." He offered her the ant-antenna blade. "You any good?"

Achilles hefted the sword. It felt a little heavier than she was used to, but the balance was still fine. Her muscles would remember. "What did they tell you in Phthia?"

"Nothing I can trust." Diomedes smiled tightly.

"Kheiron must have told you I was a weakling," Achilles said with a cold laugh. "Some kind of extravagant catamite."

Diomedes reddened. "He said you were a demon with a blade. But—also the other."

Achilles laughed. "You don't like that word? Catamite. There are more. Some are Aiolian, so tell me if I need to translate. There's *proktos* and *porni* and *malaka*, which means you can't get it up—I used to get that all the time."

Diomedes flushed redder still. "Princess," he said, "this is inappropriate. I just wanted to know if you can swing a sword."

"Of course I can swing a sword." Achilles stood. Her legs had learned the trick on the last voyage, and she rose and fell with the ship, steady on her feet. "I beat every one of my cousins at sword and spear," she said, "except Patroklos, and he was my teacher. One on one, no one could outfight me." She held up the sheathed ant-antenna sword, lazily bringing it through a few arcs. "They didn't *think*. I'm not *good* with a sword. I just pay attention and wait for an opening."

"You're left-handed," Diomedes said suddenly, leaning forward.

Achilles tossed the sword to her left hand, nodding. Not many noticed when she used her right, but she knew her tells. It was the way she carried

her neck and something about her hips. “So is Patroklos. He’s in Egypt—”

Diomedes frowned at her. “No, he’s leading the Myrmidons at Aulis. Are you on good terms?”

A shock of relief swept through her. Then Kheiron would not be in command. It took her a moment to realize how little she had *actually* told Diomedes about her Myrmidon kinsmen from Phthia, the rough men who loved her father and marched under the sign of the ant—she had only told him that they had called her a bottom and a whore. “I adore Patroklos. When did he come back from Egypt? What did he say about me?”

Diomedes settled back onto the stern bench. A shadow passed across his face, and then it softened. “He said not to go looking for you. That you were probably happy where you were. He has an Egyptian wife. She smells like spices and perfume.”

Achilles sat back down, resting the sheathed sword across her thighs. Her eyes stung suddenly. Stray sea spray, maybe. Patroklos would be at Aulis. She would recognize him by the wild masses of red curls, by the big, deep laugh, by the subtle gleam of his eyes and the broadness of his smile. The others would be there too, and she would have to teach them respect. But Patroklos! He was the only one who had ever understood her, the first to call her *Pyrrha* and not *Pyrrhos*, the first to say her name *Akhilleas* and not *Akhillewos*, the first to teach her spear tricks, the only man who had ever held her when she cried.

Diomedes cleared his throat. “I hope I did not say something wrong.”

“This is good news.” Achilles turned her head away. Best not to let the hero of Thebai see her cry. He already knew she was a woman, with a woman’s heart and mind, and while men of his sort *liked* women, they secretly thought women weak. She would have to prove herself to a great many men soon. If not for Athena’s miracle manifested in her body, she might have doubted herself. Instead, she was eager. Let Kheiron marvel, and then, let him fear her. “Did Patroklos give you my sword?”

He nodded. “And the rest of your panoply. He said if we did convince you to come, you would come ashore in armor.”

That was accurate. Two years had passed, and much had changed, but evidently Patroklos still knew her, and perhaps—perhaps when he saw her

No. Best not to have expectations of their meeting. Perhaps Egypt had hardened him, taught him the wisdom of Kheiron’s abuse. He could predict

her as well as ever, but that did not mean he would be happy to see her. Best to fortify herself so that nothing could hurt her.

As for the gods, what did *they* want?

As the sun drifted westward and began to dim, Achilles sank into a quiet, brooding contemplation. Some said it was deadly to be noticed by the gods, a distinction best avoided. Maybe that was the case. She knew so little of them, only fragments from her dreams. Yet the Silent One had worked miracles to bring her out of Skyros and draw her into the war against the Hittites, and the Earthshaker had favored her with a second divine gift. She was caught in the weave of the gods now. Whatever their plan for her in the war and beyond, it would shape the rest of her life.

She frowned, trying to follow the threads of the divine plan. There had been another girl called Iphianassa who had also been claimed by the gods, and whatever Odysseus and Diomedes were hiding from her, it too was part of the divine plan.

Mother, she whispered without words. Screech-Owl, Silent One, what do you want? Why did the Earthshaker give me this knife, and who am I to cut with it? What will be my fate when I reach Aulis?

I have heard of Aphrodite-Astarte-Asherah, self-created mother of all things, Queen of Heaven.

I have heard of Hera-Rhea, Queen of Kings.

I have heard of the Butcher, the Bear-Goddess, Queen of Forests, Artis-Artemis-Melissa, Bringer of Honey, Mother of the Amazons.

I have heard of the Great Serpent, the Poison King, Phoibos-Phobos-Apollo, Destroyer, Poisoned of Breath, Devourer of the Sun, Brother of the Amazons.

And the Male Triad: Ares the Despised, Father of Fear and Terror, worshipped by the women of Skythia; Hephaistos the Cunning, worshipped as Paistos by the Sminthians and Ptah in Egypt; and the Great Lord of Thunder himself, Zeus, whom the Hittites call Taru, Lord of the Universe, Destroyer of Worlds.

And there are others who are not worshipped in Phthia or on Skyros, the Ten Thousand Gods we appease with the sacrifice of bulls and doves, the blood-drinkers, the flesh-eaters, devourers of the aroma of burnt meat—and all of them are real, and I am chosen for their plans.

Mother Athena, who are the gods, and what do they want from me? Tell me, before it is too late.

Chapter Five

They rounded the southern tip of Euboia in the night, passing close to its tree-covered peaks and bouldered beaches. The settlements on the island's southern tip glowed with a hundred fireflies of candle- and oil-light. They passed close to the horned rock altar of Krios, which jutted out over the sea, lit by a permanent bonfire. The songs of the priest of Krios carried eerily out onto the waters, songs in the ancient warbling musical modes of the children of Minos, accompanied by a soft, reedy flute. By the time the sky over Boiotia had begun to purple and gray and the stars had faded along the western mountains, the hymns of Krios had been replaced with another sound, a low rumbling far to the north and west.

Three horned towers began to show themselves against the darkened shores of Euboia. "Eretria," Odysseus said. "We're close."

On the western, Boiotian side, a town became visible against the boulder-strewn slopes of a small mountain, the buildings painted red and yellow, surrounded by a wooden palisade. In front of the biggest house was a golden lion standard hung with streamers of purple, white, and bloodred, flashing in the sunrise. This was the double lion of the Sons of Atreus, Great King Agamemnon and his brother Menelaos.

As they drew closer to the village, the sun lifted higher—how rapidly it moved, and how vast and red. As the sky brightened, plumes of smoke rose from the horizon, first dozens and then hundreds, and the stench of cooking meat wafted across the waters, and the faint reek of pitch and straw and sweat and piss.

"That smell," said Achilles, smirking at Diomedes. "The vaunted glory of the Achaians? Do you think I will fit in, or will I need to smear myself in

blood first?”

“What, again?” Diomedes said drily.

Achilles felt herself flush, but she stared him down.

After a moment, Diomedes shrugged. “Camp hygiene is underrated. During the first siege of Thebai, the Seven were defeated not by the tactical genius of Melanippos but by dysentery. We won the second time because I told my soldiers where not to shit.”

“Agamemnon knows that,” said Odysseus, pointing at the village. In a small harbor below bobbed the masts of thirty ships, each lion-prowed, with a great swooping stern covered by a small roof. Tents were drawn up outside the village in neat rows, and further along the slope, carefully set away from the village and the tents and by a short earth wall, was a row of wooden outhouses. “He’s using your system.”

Diomedes grunted. “Guess he *was* listening.” He muttered something else to Odysseus, and the Ithakan king replied, but as Achilles focused on the town, their voices faded away.

Her eyes hurt; everything seemed to grow brighter. By degrees she could see further and further into the town. The brushed plaster of the houses grew more distinct, and the rich reds and yellows of the fresco bands on the walls, and the goats picking their way through the dirt streets, and the men sitting on their porches smoking hemp—no women on the streets, not surprising given the encampment just outside and the royal standard over the town. Chickens squawked and pecked about the outskirts. Heat shimmered off the rooftops.

And then she saw *him*. He was climbing up from the main house onto the roof, broad shoulders and deep hairy chest rippling with the force of the ascent, bull neck lifting a magnificent bearded head. In a single motion he surged upright, a man of powerful arms and a slim waist, clad in a white kilt that half-covered his muscled thighs. His belt glinted golden as he stood, shoulders back, surveying town, tents, ships, water—*her*. His eyes were as green as the shallows. As he saw her, his lip curled into a smile.

“Who is that man?” Achilles pointed toward the main house of the village, perhaps a thousand yards away. “Under the double lion.”

Diomedes squinted, and Odysseus joined him, shading his eyes with his hands. A moment passed, and then Odysseus held his hand in front of his eyes and made a slit with his fingers, squinting through. “You have a god’s eyes, girl.”

“Well? Who is he?”

“Great King Agamemnon Atreidai, of course,” said Odysseus. “We will land at your camp first, but you should meet him today, tomorrow at the latest. Patroklos permitting.”

Diomedes grunted. “She outranks Patroklos. She’ll take command. Right?”

Take command. The words summoned up images less pleasing than Agamemnon’s powerful torso and sea-green eyes. All her Myrmidon cousins would be there, not just Patroklos. She would have to make an example. Suddenly her mouth felt dry and her pulse rang in her ears. If she needed to summon anger, she could just think of the fucking well. Maybe she would kill Kheiron on the spot, or die trying.

Either way, she’d be done worrying about him.

“I am sure she will,” said Odysseus. “But she’ll have a capable adviser in Patroklos.”

“Gentlemen,” Achilles snapped, “*she* is still right here.” She stepped away from the prow of the ship and stalked back a step, forcing them to turn to face her. “Stop speculating about my command structure. You don’t know my family. Where’s my panoply?”

The armor that Patroklos had stowed for her was not the larger set that had been made for her seventeenth birthday, heavy plates of bronze overlapping to form an impenetrable cuirass. This cuirass was two years older and substantially smaller, a hauberk of bronze fishscales sewn to cowhide fastened with laces. A kind choice, and a wise one—even though she had filled out, she was slighter than before, and the plates would have weighed her down.

On each shoulder she strapped a pauldron of banded bronze inlaid with lapis stars. Her greaves—mercifully small, easily fastened to her calves—gleamed with lapis stars also. The shield Patroklos had sent was round, medium-size, a bronze outer frame protecting a black-dyed surface of stretched cowhide hardened with a Kretan formula against arrow points.

All this metal was heavy, but she laced it tight and resolved to show no weakness. The smell of leather was difficult to reaccustom herself to, and if it rained she would smell like death.

Fitting in so many ways.

Finally, to complete the panoply, there was a helm of boar's tusks set in four tightly sewn rows and a bronze nose guard inlaid with another lapis star—*mine is a fine nose and should be preserved*—and a spear, Tooth-of-the-Dragon, an heirloom of her Aiakid family: an eight-foot shaft of black mountain ash bound with a braided hemp grip, heeled with a bronze butt-spike, terminating in a foot-long bronze point.

She hefted the weapon, and the memory of countless hours of training flowed back into her hands and arms, into her thighs and hips, into the way her feet bit the timber of the deck.

It was marvelous to hold a spear again. She had always loved them more than any sword—the flow, the surge of spear-fighting, the infinite potential for feint and riposte, the way *method* mattered above all, the way timing and cunning and prediction outweighed strength and size.

And *this* spear was a pleasure in her hands, an elegant heirloom of a weapon. It was a hundred years old. In Aiakos's hands, it had seen service against Minos at Knossos, and in Egypt had served Great King Sethos. In his youth, old Peleus had taken it to Kadesh. In Phthia, the weapon was kept in a shrine in the armory, and it was said to be inhabited by the ghosts of the thirty-five warriors it had killed.

Tooth-of-the-Dragon was never supposed to be the weapon of a woman. So many times, Kheiron had told her that: *Act like a man, or you'll never be worthy of the spear. No half woman can carry the dragon's tooth!*

Now it is mine all the same.

Holding the mountain ash spear, she felt like a new person: no longer the frightened girl who had scanned the sea for Myrmidon sails, but hungry, angry, eager to sink her dragon's tooth in the necks of her enemies, to make them *see* her as someone to be feared. Would Kheiron be scared when he saw her now, reshaped into a weapon of the gods? She found herself beginning to grin.

The island-rigged longboat approached a rock-ringed, deep-water port, the Greater Harbor. Here the sand was covered in beached longships, and the water was thick with masts. The stench of smoke filled the air, and men coughed, and birds did not sing. But Odysseus guided his longboat past the Greater Harbor and about half a mile further up the beach, where the stench was weaker. A stretch of marsh intervened, and then a small inlet and a sheltered cove.

Longships covered the sand here too. A dozen had the heads of dolphins, and the sail of one was stretched out for mending, embroidered with a seven-branched olive tree. The remainder—oh, the dragon’s heads on their prows were unmistakable, and even though their sails were furled, Achilles knew well the symbol embroidered on each: a black, six-legged ant, emblem of the Myrmidons of Phthia.

A man leapt up from the deck of a longboat and rushed toward the water, waving his hands. His voice came echoing across the waves, deep and loud and full of joy: “Achilles! Achilles, over here! Come ashore! Achilles!” The voice of Patroklos, big and booming and devoid of lies, and her name on his lips—always right, always *Akhilleas*, never *Akhillewos* . . .

Her heart leapt into her throat, and she ran to the prow, waving back at him.

“Patroklos! Get in the water and swim to me! That’s an order!” She laughed, but he kept running closer and leapt into the surf, slipped beneath the water, and—a few moments later—erupted from the water, hoisting himself up the side of the ship.

She threw out her hand and Patroklos grabbed it, pulling himself over the railing, then flung his wet arms around her, armor and all, and suddenly she was crushed against him, and the smell of salt and his hair and his beard were all around her, and his laugh surrounded her, and she had to laugh back. When they drew apart, still holding each other by the forearms, he sized her up, grinning.

Patroklos had grown a beard as red and curly as his hair, which was shorter than she remembered and a little higher up his forehead, but his smile was the same, and his eyes were as bright as ever. “By all the gods. You look so *beautiful*. Still an unbeliever, little Red?”

“No,” she said, smiling back. It was impossible not to smile at Patroklos. “You were right.”

“I can’t say I’m happy it took a war to bring us face-to-face again,” said Patroklos, “but—you were well on Skyros?”

Best not to think of Damia, not to think of Skyros at all, only to smile. “I was. But here’s to war, and to us. Together again. Diomedes says you have an Egyptian wife? Is she here?”

Patroklos nodded. “She is in town. I do not want her to know our family too well or she might return to Egypt.” He said it deadpan, eyes twinkling, but perhaps the joke had some truth to it.

Achilles hefted Tooth-of-the-Dragon. “I’ll teach them manners.”

Patroklos’s smile faded a little. He looked her over thoughtfully, then grunted. “You’ll have to. Don’t kill anyone, but if you do pick a fight, thrash Aktor or Akastos. They’re out of shape, and I doubt they’ve trained since you left. Aktor got fat. Kheiron got meaner.” Patroklos pointed, and Achilles turned to the shore.

Her heart sank. There they were on the shore, all her *favorite* cousins, all in black kilts and bare-chested, hairy and strong and glowering out at her. Aktor *had* gained a belly, but his arms were still thick. Akastos was carefully not looking her way. There was Eudoros; there was Menesthios grilling a spitted chunk of meat, and Automedon picking his teeth, and Peisander and Alkimedon off to one side, combing out their hair and plaiting it in warrior’s braids. Old Phoinix was off by himself, sharpening an axe, one eye on the others and the other on Achilles’s ship. Kheiron, her *particular* teacher, was gray-bearded and grim as ever, standing stone-faced on the shore.

The whole gang was here, crouching on the beach, waiting to see what she would do.

In the end, she did not wait for the ship to reach the sand. She did not engineer a strategy for the encounter. She did not give the matter appropriate thought. She told herself to do all these things in the instant before her body began to move, but by then, it was too late.

She seized the railing and flung herself over the side. The weight of the armor—oh, she could feel it, and she struck the water with enough force to knock the air from her lungs, but she let it rush out, let her weight carry her feet to the bottom, and then kicked off the sand and lunged through the water, charging up the beach, bursting through the surf, pulling in a vast breath and exhaling it in a roar.

Her limbs burned, her head swam, the world throbbed around her, and she charged. The Myrmidons shrank back—all but Kheiron, who had flung her into the well.

She rushed up on him, throwing back her arm, choking up her grip on Tooth-of-the-Dragon as she charged—then stopped all at once, three paces short. The spearpoint shot out like a viper—and stopped an inch from Kheiron’s face.

He stared at her.

She stared back, holding his eyes, then withdrew the spear and let a slow, insolent smile twist her mouth.

The expression on the old man's face was strange: Shock, for the Achilles in front of him was certainly not the Achilles he remembered. Fear—he had had a spearpoint close enough to smell the salt water on the bronze. Chagrin. Anger, underneath the shock—but wary, pregnant with sudden respect.

“Hello, old Kheiron,” Achilles said sweetly. “Hello, Myrmidons! I’ve come to take command, as you always knew I would.”

“What about Patroklos?” Aktor said bluntly. He always spoke his mind. He had called her *malaka* more times than she could remember, and every other word for faggot in six or seven languages.

“He’ll be my right-hand man. I thought that was obvious.”

“But—” They stared at her, sizing her up. She had never been as big as them, and now, even in full armor, she was curved enough, soft-faced enough, that even they had to see it.

“But what?” Achilles said sweetly. “My *mother* sent me to command you. Don’t you want to raid the Hittites? Don’t you want to go to war? Think of the glory! Praise Athena, praise Patroklos, praise Peleus—and while you’re at it, get used to praising Achilles.” It was all bluster, so far as she could tell—all but the part about Athena—but it sounded true. And so maybe it was.

She stared them down for a few moments longer, then turned on her heel and stalked back down the beach to help Diomedes and Odysseus pull the longship onto the sand. If she was the daughter of Athena, she should do as she pleased.

Patroklos was waiting for her in the surf, having anticipated her next move. They caught the guide ropes together and began to pull.

Once Odysseus’s longship had beached, he broke away to tend to his camp, and Diomedes took off along the beach to find his own ships further up the coast. Patroklos helped Achilles out of her armor, though she held on to Tooth-of-the-Dragon and kept her helmet on, so no one got ideas. Then he took her on a tour of the camp. She could feel the eyes of the Myrmidons on her back, the chagrin of some, the curiosity of others—*Not often that a scrawny weakling comes back a princess*, she thought grimly, *so I can’t*

blame them for staring—but they would not meet her eyes, no matter how fiercely she stared them down.

Patroklos had set up a model camp. She had never paid much attention to the logistics of war, which were far less interesting than the visceral cunning of personal combat or the wiles of battlefield tactics, but Patroklos had, and it showed. The ground around the tents had been leveled off and cleared, and the tents were in neat rank and file, arranged in a pattern that Patroklos said was standard Egyptian doctrine. The chariots were disassembled for cleaning, and the horses were under guard on the hillside, picking through the brown grass. As the sun rose toward the heights of noon, Achilles became restless with the endless lists of supplies Patroklos had gathered. “You have done well,” she said, after he explained the three kinds of horse fodder he had stored. “I’ll leave the logistics to you. I want to get out of the sun. Take me to meet your wife.”

“Wait.” Patroklos led her up the slope toward the horses, pointing to the summit. “Before we left Phthia, your father called me into his room. He said he had a message for you that would involve no words, but that you would understand perfectly.”

Her father. It was strange how little thought she could give to old Peleus, months and months without remembering the man’s lined face, his querulous voice, his shock of white hair, the way he had sometimes made her so proud to be *his* daughter, with his tales of Kadesh and Kna’an and the crown wars of Hattusa—months and months without remembering his shame, his disgust, the way he had looked away and said, *But I have no daughter*, as if her very existence was a confusion.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy his message,” Achilles said acidly.

Patroklos pointed up to the summit. The sun blazed down, and Achilles had to squint to see. She saw the guard first, a bare-chested Myrmidon with a staff. Then she saw the horses.

Balios was white, spotted with flecks of red, a strange and unmistakable coat no other horse had ever had, with a mane as red as her own hair: an enormous horse, seventeen hands high, who snorted and looked away, framed in profile against the rising sun. Arrogant thing, he would not look at her, but she knew he could scent her.

Xanthos stood next to his brother, but he turned to face Achilles, tilting his head to peer at her with one narrowed eye. His nostrils flared, and he took a step closer, and then another, taking long, careful diagonal

switchbacks down the slope. Golden Xanthos was a clever, prancing thing, honey-blond from mane to tail, and childishly affectionate. He came to her, snorting and bending down. She held out her hand, and he nudged at it, sniffing at her. His head rose and fell, and she knew that Xanthos was pleased.

Leaving them behind had been hard, but she had shut them from her thoughts. Now the memories came crashing back. The hard foaling, the way she had slept by them during those first dangerous nights to keep them warm, the stories she had whispered in their ears of dragons and glory, the training she had tried to give. Huge horses they were, a chariot team of preternatural coordination, and cunning, inseparable friends.

Peleus had been proud of the care she took of them; he had praised her for that, if for nothing else in those last few years at Phthia. If *they* were her father's message—

Her eyes stung again. "He means me to have them?"

"No matter your past differences, you are the leader of the Myrmidons now, and it is your blood-duty to lead us in war. When this war is over and you come home, I think he'll finally understand." Patroklos smiled, pointedly looking away from red-spattered Balios on the crest of the hill. "I suppose Balios will give you the silent treatment for a while. They say when you left he sulked for months."

Achilles smirked. "Xanthos will get all my love for now, until jealousy brings Balios to me." Xanthos let her run her fingers through his rich golden mane and flicked his tail with pleasure. Balios turned away, descending the far slope until he was just out of sight.

Achilles blinked away the tears. She let Xanthos go, entrusting him to the Myrmidon groom, and turned back to Patroklos. "Thank you. I don't need Father to understand. But I do need my horses."

Patroklos clapped her on the shoulder. "We have an Egyptian chariot for you too. It was one of my wedding gifts, but it's more your style. Come, let's meet Meryapi."

It was a short walk to Aulis along the ridgeline, and they managed to pass by the main camp without incident, though the sheer mass of ships and men and horses and stench turned Achilles's stomach. It was a hard walk, and they were silent for much of it, but on the easier stretches, Patroklos told her about Meryapi.

Meryapi was twenty-one years old, of royal descent, versed in seventeen musical instruments and fluent in the dialects of Egypt and Kush, the tongues of Amurru and Kna'an, old Akkadian, Assyrian, Imperial Hittite, Hurrian, the tongues of Kreté and the Amazons, Achaian, and even the Dorian tongue of the Thracian hill tribes. She spoke Achaian with Patroklos and did not even have an accent. She could read the seven scripts of Egypt, international cuneiform, and Minos's Kaphtorite glyphs, and had even studied the hieroglyphs of the mythical kingdom of the Huan River, where people flew about on dragons.

She was clever, witty, excitable; she was playful, keenly observant, insatiably inquisitive; she was clumsy and absentminded. She sometimes called the Great King of Egypt Grandpapa and forgot to use his royal name of Osymandias, which was apparently pronounced U-ser-mat-ra Se-te-pen-ra in Egyptian. (This Patroklos pronounced with a frown, saying that Egyptian was too difficult, so he had done his diplomacy in Hittite.)

When the sun reached its zenith, they reached Aulis. The gate was guarded by a pair of kilted Boiotians with their hair in topknots who tried to cool themselves with reed fans and hid in the shadow of the gateway to escape the heat. They saluted Patroklos but blinked at Achilles, confused to see a woman with a spear.

If all the warriors she met felt the same way, she could use it to her advantage.

Patroklos led her to a low plastered house painted green and red and hung with loose linen in the windows. The instant they ducked into the dark doorway, the heat vanished, replaced by a still coolness that washed over Achilles's body like a northern breeze, wicking away sweat and heat and the dusty feeling of travel. Suddenly her nostrils were full of soft floral scents: orange blossom, rosewater, lily of the valley.

As Achilles's eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw that they were not alone. A woman sat on the floor, smaller than Achilles, with a pointed nose and huge, black-rimmed eyes and thick black hair full of tiny gold bees. Enormous gold earrings hung from her ears, and a collar necklace shaped like an enormous gold-and-lapis hawk covered her neck and chest. More gold and lapis in the form of bangles adorned with beetles, six rings that looked like guardian snakes with emerald eyes, a signet ring with mysterious magical Egyptian symbols, anklets and bracelets and toe rings, and even a ring pierced through her left nostril. Achilles tried not to stare,

but everything about Meryapi was bejeweled, and her simple linen gown was so fine it shimmered.

Meryapi stared directly at her, wide-eyed. “A woman with a spear,” she said, “in a helmet! You must be Achilles. I am Meryapi, daughter of Henuttawy, daughter of Great King Usermaatra Setepenra the Eternal, and I am honored deeply to be in the lands of your people, and to have Patroklos Menoitios for my husband, and can I get you some wine? Grapes? Figs? Please sit, you must be thirsty. I’ll have your feet washed. Tell me if I get any of the customs wrong! I don’t want to offend your gods.”

Achilles took a breath after that rush of words, then set her spear against the wall and sat down next to Meryapi. She noted the cuneiform stick in Meryapi’s hand, a half-written clay tablet on a wood block next to her, and a toe ring on Meryapi’s foot that looked like a lotus. “I’m not picky. What are you writing?”

Meryapi blushed a little, looking over the clay tablet as if embarrassed. “I am corresponding with Uncle Khaemweset. Each day, I try to learn something new and send the knowledge home. This one is about dolphins.”

“Don’t they have dolphins in Egypt?”

Meryapi shook her head. “Only on the coast, and they are small and unfriendly. Your Achaian dolphins are playful, and do tricks, and beg for fish. I learned a song from Kreté that is sung to dolphins, and one of the soldiers told me about a dolphin who used to meet him to throw a ball back and forth when he was a boy. Perhaps I will be able to meet a dolphin myself and compose a report on the dolphin language.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. “I am not so sure dolphins have a language. They are still fish, no matter how clever.”

Meryapi frowned. “No, that is not true. Everyone tells me they speak a tongue of clicks and whistles, like the men who live in the forests south of Punt. I hypothesize that this may be an ancestral tongue once spoken by all beings, a language even older than Ran Kumat. Pardon me—a language older than Egyptian.”

Achilles leaned forward to object. “That makes no sense. Why would men in the southern forests and dolphins in the Sea of Aigaia speak the same language? Were the dolphins once forest-men, or were the forest-men converted from dolphinhood by the schemes of some god?”

Meryapi clapped her hands and a servant came in, an Achaian woman in a white tunic. “Bring us wine and figs, Glyke. Achilles, you mock my

hypothesis, but it is said that long ago, humans and animals could communicate by speech. Even now, there are wise men who know how to talk to monkeys, who are a species of hairy half men who live in the forests *north of Punt.*”

“I’ve never heard of these monkeys,” Achilles said, “but they sound grotesque.”

“No,” Meryapi said sternly, “do not slander monkeys.”

Achilles found herself frowning. She had apparently insulted Meryapi’s friends. “Well,” she allowed, “I’ve never met one.”

“I have,” said Meryapi. “In Swenet. They were shy people, but kind and thoughtful.”

They were off to a great start. Achilles felt herself beginning to flush with embarrassment. It would have been better to talk less and listen more, but the flawless Egyptian was a challenge she could not ignore.

Glyke returned with two huge cups of watered wine and a bunch of desiccated brown fruit that looked entirely unappetizing. Achilles accepted a cup and a few of the fruits, planning to eat one for politeness’s sake and wash it down with wine. She bit into it, and the tiny crunchy seeds burst across her tongue. It was sweet. The wine was good as well, if somewhat bitter.

“Animals used to talk to us,” continued Meryapi. “So which is more likely: That animals were struck dumb by some calamity, or that humans stopped learning their languages?”

Patroklos had settled down next to them, and Glyke returned momentarily with a cup for him. He was watching them with a bemused smile. Perhaps the conversation was already too ridiculous for him, or perhaps he wanted to watch it play out. Either way, he was no help.

“I suppose it is more likely that humans stopped speaking animal languages,” Achilles said grudgingly. “If we ever spoke those tongues.”

“The gods would know,” said Meryapi. “I was wondering if you could ask them? They are very old, and you are the first mortal I have met who has a goddess for a mother.”

Achilles glanced at Patroklos. “You *told* her?”

Patroklos shrugged. “Was it secret?”

Meryapi smiled and sipped at her wine. “I asked about all the kings and princes of the Achaians when I got here. Patroklos answered my endless

questions, and now I know everyone's genealogies. You are the only one born directly of a goddess. Is the wine good?"

Achilles drank stiffly. She had made a fool of herself arguing with the Egyptian, and for no obvious reason. Maybe part of her was territorial about Patroklos. He had always been *her* cousin, and now this overeducated Egyptian highborn had a better claim on him. Jealousy was an ugly thing, so she pushed it away and drank more wine. "Yes. I'm just thirsty and argumentative. Don't they have gods in Egypt?"

Meryapi nodded. "The gods travel and seldom stay anywhere long. Grandpapa met Djehuty in his youth, whom you call Apollo. They quarreled over the Hittite war." Her wine cup was already half-empty. She must have been a prodigious drinker.

Not to be outdone, Achilles sipped again. The wine was beginning to hit her—quick stuff, wine—and she felt her frown starting to soften. Meryapi was very pretty, in a sparkling-eyed way, and she gestured with her hands when she spoke, setting her jewelry clattering and glinting. Now Achilles wished she had started with small talk. "How did you meet Patroklos?"

Meryapi laughed. "I asked him to teach me Achaian, and the more I learned to talk to him, the more I liked his thoughts." Suddenly her face grew very serious and she reached out, catching Achilles by the hand. "It is hard to find a *good* man anywhere. You are lucky to have grown up with Patroklos."

"You have no idea how lucky," Achilles said.

Meryapi raised an eyebrow. "He told me about you—your cleverness, your speed, your cunning with weapons—and I wanted to meet this woman warrior. We have warrior goddesses in Egypt, but no warrior women for many years."

So he never told her—about me. Achilles shot Patroklos a questioning glance, but Patroklos only shrugged, apparently confused. He had always seen her, and perhaps he had long ago forgotten how unusual that was. It was strangely moving to think that he had talked of her in Egypt as *herself*, not as Akhillewos the prince. She squeezed Meryapi's hand back. "It's good to meet you, Meryapi of Egypt."

Meryapi beamed at her. "It is good to meet you, Achilles of Phthia. Is it the Achaian custom to reintroduce yourself once friendly feelings are kindled?"

Achilles laughed. "It's the Achilles custom. Patroklos has not told you how unlike my people I am." She drained her cup and set it down. "I love all your jewelry. I didn't want to gawk like a peasant, but we never get to see the latest styles, and everything you have is so beautiful. What are those beetles? And bees? Are those symbols magic writing?"

Meryapi smiled mysteriously. "Writing is magic." Her smile widened suddenly, and she drained her cup. "Glyke! More wine! We will drink through the night and become best friends by morning." Once the fresh wine was poured and she had taken an enormous gulp, she leaned suddenly in. "I know I am repeating myself, but it is a very exciting thing to see a woman warrior. Like meeting Neith herself. When I was little, I wanted to be a warrior like Grandpapa. Are there others?"

"No," said Achilles, "only me." She got up, wobbling on her feet, and retrieved Tooth-of-the-Dragon, showing the spear to Meryapi. She told her of its lineage. She said that it was at Kadesh, and Meryapi's eyes went wide.

The room began to swim, and the day began to darken through the windows and the doorway. The smell of wine pervaded everything. Achilles told Meryapi stories of combat practice, and tales of the battles the spear had been in, and tales of training with Patroklos, of Kheiron's cruel instruction, and even about the well. "I climbed out by straddling the well with hands and feet and shimmying up the sides. It took hours. They would never have dared with Patroklos there."

Meryapi was clinging to Achilles's hand with both of hers, her eyes bright with tears. "They must have been jealous. A god's daughter right before their eyes! Patroklos, did you know?"

"Only since we got home." Spots of red were flaring in Patroklos's cheeks, and tears were streaming out of his eyes too. "If I had known, I would not have left."

"No!" said Achilles. "Then you would never have met Meryapi." She tugged Meryapi closer and flung an arm around the Egyptian's smaller shoulders. "We like Meryapi. Drink to Meryapi!"

They drank to Meryapi; they drank to Patroklos; they drank to Achilles. They drank to Agamemnon, King of Men—"But I should sober up before I meet him!"—and to Tooth-of-the-Dragon, and even to the project of dolphin philology. Achilles vowed to help Meryapi meet a dolphin and learn its language, and Meryapi promised to introduce Achilles to a monkey, so that she could see they were fine people.

The world was floating around them now. Senses receded. Achilles lay down on the floor and stared up at the plaster ceiling. She felt Patroklos settling to the right of her, and Meryapi to her left. They laughed, and the ceiling kept spinning, and the room wobbled, and everything was warm.

In drunken dreams, Achilles wandered through Skyros palace. It was midnight black outside and the palace was empty of people, but the smell of Deidamia was everywhere, and she kept hearing Damia's laughter from just around a corner. She searched for her, not agitated but happy. "Keep hiding from me," she said. "I'll find you all the same."

Torchlight flickered in the halls. Achilles descended many flights of stairs, searching in the lower pantries and the kitchens.

In the basement of the palace, she came upon an ancient cave. Never in her time on Skyros had she seen such a cave, but it was here all the same, covered wall to wall in paintings of a style unknown to her, all strange and vivid umbers and ochres. Ancient beasts like giant cows rampaged across the walls, pursued by black stick figures with spears. On the far wall was the image of a woman thick of hips and thin of waist and armed with savage knives, flanked by vicious cats and enormous owls. To her right was a child with an owl perched on her hand. To her left was a child leading one of the giant horned cow-monsters.

And then, abruptly, she was not alone.

"You are dreaming," said a soft, cruel voice from the shadows, sweet like some lilting demon. "You are dreaming, and we are here with you."

"My daughter," breathed the rasping voice of Athena. The Screech-Owl stood before her, wing-cloaked and huge-eyed, taloned and feathered, tilting her head, first to one side and then to the other. "We came to warn you. Meet Hera, Queen of Kings."

The woman who stepped out of the shadows was whiter than unpainted marble, white-armed and white-cheeked and white-haired and gold-eyed. Two golden horns extended in a moonlike crescent on either side of her head, and her body was splendid with jewelry. She too had talons—golden talons—and her smile was cruel and narrow. "Achilles, daughter of Pallasu, heed this warning. If you remember nothing else of this dream, remember this: *Zeus is coming.*"

Then Achilles reeled backward into a stranger dream. The years fell away like chaff, and Achilles fell, spiraling down through time, losing

herself in the memories of another. Now she was Athena, the Silent One, Pallasu, Atana, Aten, Farseer, the Eyes of Night, Designer of Weapons, and the world was young. She flung out her wings into the storm and let out a shrill shriek, diving down through ancient winds toward a memory of the vanished past . . .

Chapter Six

Pallasu-Atana, Aten, the Silent One

Flight is still new to me, and I fly on silent wings across the shallow sea. I fly from my city of Pallasu-in-the-Crags. At first the flight is difficult and I am small, a screech owl, but as I approach the mountainous island set far off into the sea, the power of Great Mother fills the southern horizon like a second sun. My wings grow vast, greater than the wings of any owl or albatross or vulture, and I can see *everything*.

I see her minions on the island, mortals shuddering and chanting, pulsing in time to her every breath, their life itself ebbing and flowing, throbbing and surging, as Sky Mother breathes. I see fish dying in the waters by the millions. Birds fall from the sky. The wind crackles around me, and sound itself bursts in an enormous thunderclap as I fall like lightning toward the island that will one day be called Kreté.

The Eagle has come too. I suppose he is the father, this raptor of a god, this hawk who will one day be called Ra and Kronos, and he too dives like a thunderbolt. His wings too are held together by divine will, his golden feathers charged with the energy of her breath. We land beside each other in deep craters. The earth trembles. The seas swell like Mother's belly. The first of Mother's priestesses drops dead. Human life is so easily sucked out at times like this, and even *my* spark, even *his* spark, are pulled by the vastness of her power. But we are her children, and we do not die.

There is a cave under the mountain—there is always a cave. We must go.

“Pallasu,” he hisses as we rise. The Eagle's eyes are full of hate. I can recognize that emotion still. “You see how easily she takes lives now.”

“So do we.”

“Not by *breathing*.” I cannot tell for certain, but the Eagle sounds frightened. “What will she do with the children?”

“I am to take them,” I say, “and make something of them. She needs mighty hunters.” We walk up the mountain, looking for the entrance to the cave. Screams ring out from belowground. Priestesses are dying with each breath. The colors are being drained out of the world and exhaled back into it. Every tree on the island is leafless, clawing at the sky with skeleton branches.

“She needs mighty hunters? My seed, my children, are just *tools* to her!” The Eagle is furious. His golden wings trail behind him. His talons slash the dirt and the rocks. “We used to be a *family*, Pallasu. You are too young to know what that means. She was our Mother, and we were her *children*. Now she is becoming a dark star.”

I step into the cave, and the Eagle’s rage is immaterial to me. It takes all my power to hold my own form stable as I descend through the labyrinth of caves growing around her form. Twisted human corpses fall to ash and bone around me as I cross the threshold. Finally, I come to the darkness under the mountain where Great Mother lies in childbirth.

Her skin is blacker than night and pregnant with stars. Her eyes blaze like suns. She gasps and pants with the strain of labor, a pain I will not experience for millennia. The last of her priestesses snuff out like feeble torches, and their desiccated bodies mummify in ways no one will ever be able to re-create with natron. I take her hand to guide her through the last delicate steps, following the protocols we designed one hundred years before.

Remember, Great Mother, the birth order is everything.

She screams, and the earth heaves.

The Eagle stands on the threshold, watching. He is useless. It is I, small Pallasu, who must take the Weapons and swaddle them in insulating skins to protect them.

The Firstborn Weapon is the weakest, broken in his limbs, green-skinned, the one who will one day be called the Smith. I wrap him in ox hides and set him aside.

The Secondborn looks like his father: red-skinned, an angry hawk or vulture, screaming his rage as I pull him free of our Mother. I wrap him in donkey skin and set him aside.

The Thirdborn is beautiful like polished bronze, with hair that curls and gleams with subtle fire. There is a challenge in this infant's eyes, and for a moment I am afraid of him. I can see what he could become, and I can see what I must shape him into. He has teeth, and his screams are so *loud*. I wrap him in ram skin and set him aside.

Now it is time for the birth we have been waiting for. In the world above, the sea freezes for a hundred miles in every direction. The air becomes poison. The earthquakes shake something free in the deeps, and the fire mountains erupt. Sky Mother screams and thrashes, arching her back. Blood pours out between her legs, and then in place of blood, *golden light*.

The Apple of the Sun howls as she bursts out into the cave, and her radiance burns us all: the Eagle, and me, and the Great Mother herself. We all cry out together. Our pain throbs even after the golden light fades. Our eyes hurt. Our ears ring.

The Eagle falls against me, Arya, who will one day be Kronos, Elios, Shamash, Koyash, Ra, Lord of Light, King of Noon. For a moment we all huddle together, breathing, as reality stops shaking, as the world regains its stable forms.

Then Great Mother stands with the Apple at her breast. It is a jewel of gold and lightning and infinite calculations. It is a mystical golden orb. It is also an infant, a little girl with golden skin and hair, who begins to suckle ravenously at Great Mother's starry breast, staring at us with hungry yellow wolf's eyes.

Our Mother smiles, baring her teeth. *It is as I planned.*

Pallasu. I have my Great Weapon. Take the lesser weapons and forge them as we discussed. Bring them back when they are old enough to be interesting.

Arya. Go south and bring me a thousand crocodiles to consume. I am so hungry, and this Apple of the Sun is feeding on me. So very hungry, feeding on my body.

Go, children.

I pick up the three swaddled demigods and carry them up out of the cave. They are seared by the birth of their sister. The oldest shivers uncontrollably but does not make a sound. The second growls like some tiny wild thing, and his eyes are red with rage. The third cries softly, in confusion rather than in anger, and I know the things I will have to do to him to make him into the weapon Mother wanted.

“Little Dhios,” I whisper, for I have never held a baby before and I like this third one best. “I will make you so strong and cunning. We will test so many theories. When you know words, I will teach you everything there is to know about dominance, aggression, paranoia, and trauma.”

I rise into the cloudless sky, eager to begin my work.

Zeus will later prove my most important experiment. Diwos, Amun, Tarhunt, Taru, Tor, Indra, Du Pihassassa—many names, all strong, for he will become so strong.

He will become inseparable from his brothers, though he hates them, and they hate him. As for the others? Fasta-Ptah-Hephaistos, Ox and Monkey—builder of armor, crafter of thunderbolts, a weapons designer even greater than I—a specialist. Maras-Heru-Ares, the red-eyed growling thing, still burns from that first searing blast of the Apple. He has found his little ways to share that pain.

They were my first children, Achilles. I have since learned the value of parenting from a distance.

The Great Mother is dead, and what remains of her is *not her*. Ra, who killed her and took the Apple, is dead also, and nothing remains of him at all. The Three killed the Eagle, and for a while they ruled the world—but Zeus ruled the Three.

I drove them out a century ago. Now they are returning to earth, for the Apple of the Sun has returned. She is reborn in the form of golden Helen and has been taken to Wilusa in Taruisa. The Three are coming from the stars to capture the Apple, and when they get her power, they will be able to do anything, rewrite the very rules of creation.

They will kill everything with the spark of divinity, for only then can they be safe.

They will kill me in particular, for they are not grateful for my tutelage. They will kill Hera for other reasons. And they will kill you, Achilles, for you are my daughter and have the blood of a god.

Zeus is coming. You must win the Apple before he does.

Chapter Seven

Achilles cracked open her raw, gummy eyes. Her head pounded like a drum. Her stomach was sour; her nostrils burned with bile; her skin felt slick but stretched, sweaty but desiccated. Someone pressed a cold clay jar into her hands and guided it to her cracked lips, and sweet water poured in. She drank greedily.

“I’m so sorry,” Meryapi whispered in her ear. “I was just so excited to meet you. Now we will both die of hangovers. More water?”

Achilles groaned. “Where’s the nearest lake?” She tried to force herself to stand, but halfway to her feet, her knees buckled. She lay groaning while Glyke brought in jars of water.

Meryapi grumbled as she drank the water. “My brain is bumping around in my skull,” she moaned, and “Why do I even have sinuses?” and “Can I have my guts pulled out, or must I suffer through the shits that are surely to come?”

Finally Achilles flopped onto her back and grabbed another jar, draining it in a single long gulp. It occurred to her that her clothing was a sticky mess, and she checked herself for telltale signs of vomit—no. But her tunic was sweated through, and her undergarment, which had survived the sea trip and the swim to shore and the walk up to Aulis, was now stained purplish-brown. Evidently the initial flow had not been the entirety of her bleeding. It was strange that something she had envied for so long could become such a nuisance. “Can I steal some clothing?”

The Egyptian princess blinked blearily at her. Comprehension dawned slowly, and Meryapi nodded. “That would be wise. I will spend the morning

here and no one will care, but Patroklos said you should meet the Great King.”

Achilles blinked around the dark room, which still felt too bright. “Where is my cousin?”

“He went to the Great King’s command post. He will be back soon.” Meryapi got up and opened a massive trunk, selecting cloth and a series of shiny bronze pins. She made Achilles change into a new tunic of white Egyptian linen and offered her new undergarments of soft brown wool and some rags to line them just in case. Then she retrieved several jars from a special wooden case. “Do not worry. I will make it so you don’t look half as bad as you feel.”

Achilles had never worn any cosmetics more elaborate than the simple styles used on Skyros: a mixture of soot and oil to blacken the rims of the eyes, a dab of pomegranate liquor on the lips to stain them purple, a bit of duckfat to keep the skin supple. Head still pounding, stomach aching prodigiously, she watched in suspense as Meryapi set up a brass mirror and mixed no fewer than six different powders and pastes on a little wooden palette, then set about painting Achilles’s face like she was a statue of a goddess, whispering a blessing in Egyptian.

First, Meryapi applied a paste that stung going on but then soothed Achilles’s skin and made the redness vanish from her cheeks. “This is from Alashiya and very clever,” Meryapi said between chanted blessings. “They drink like demons in Alashiya but have fantastic skin.” She began to rim Achilles’s eyes with subtle black kohl lines. Achilles kept blinking and Meryapi kept pulling her brush away, but she was deft as a spearman, darting in and leaving her mark just before each blink, and soon Achilles was full of amazement at how catlike she looked, with sharp black wings delineating and extending the corners of her eyes just like Meryapi’s. Her lips became less pale and dry; the dark circles under her eyes vanished; Meryapi even had little eye drops to make the redness go away. And the Egyptian woman’s clever ivory comb somehow untangled Achilles’s curls with a deftness that defied all logic.

“I could drink every night and still look like a goddess,” Achilles marveled. “Am I really so beautiful, or is all this magic?”

“Beauty *is* magic,” Meryapi declared with the same firmness she had proclaimed writing magical the night before. She retrieved Achilles’s helmet from under a wine bowl, cleaned off something sticky, and crowned

Achilles with the boar's-tusk helmet. "There. Now you are the most beautiful warrior, daughter of the goddess. What's taking Patroklos so long?"

Achilles stood up. She still felt sick, but she could fake strength now. "No matter—I'll look for him at the command post."

Patroklos was indeed at the command post. As she approached the main house at the top of the town, she glimpsed his face through a window. Their eyes met, and he gave her a look that meant, *I've been covering for you*.

Two Boiotian guards tried to stop Achilles from entering the main house, and then two tall Mykenaiaans with boar's-tusk helms and long red cloaks tried to bar her from the stairs to the second-floor megaron, but she stared each down and said, "I am Achilles of Phthia. I'm late." No one met her stare for long.

Voices echoed as she climbed the single long staircase, and then she stepped into a room swarming with princes and archons and basilei. She followed the edge of the room to Patroklos's side, but from the instant she summited the stair, all eyes were on her.

"Oh, wonderful," grumbled a man with a voice so deep it set something rumbling deep in Achilles's ear. "Now I have to do all the introductions all over again."

"Now one more prince gets to hear your lovely voice, Stentor," said Odysseus. "Just go around the room one more time."

"One more *prince*?" said a tall man near the center of the megaron. He was big, deep-chested and trim-waisted, and looked strangely familiar: not the perfect bull of a man Achilles had glimpsed from the deck of Odysseus's longship, not Agamemnon, but perhaps this was his brother Menelaos, a little younger, with redder hair and a shorter beard and a grim look on his face. "She has Peleus's hair—and his spear—but I can't believe the old man sent a girl. It was bad enough when I was expecting a cross-dresser, but if we're sending our *daughters* to war—"

Patroklos touched Achilles on the arm before she could reply. He shot her a look that said *don't react*, so she assumed a haughty expression and let her glamorous Egyptian cat-eyes serve as her reply.

Whatever else Menelaos was going to say was cut off as Stentor spoke again, and his deep, rumbling voice filled the megaron. As he spoke, Achilles searched the room for Agamemnon, the one man she was actually

interested in meeting. She had heard so much about him already, and she had never met a Great King before. He was not here, but perhaps he was out on the balcony.

Stentor's rumbling voice resolved itself first into familiar words. "Achilles of Phthia and Patroklos of Phthia, here on behalf of Peleus, an ancient friend we helped at Myrionichthya." This was a story Achilles did not know, but it meant something to the men in the room, for half of them nodded.

"Their Aiakid cousin, Aiwas of Salamis." Cousin Aiwas she knew by reputation alone, because there was only one seven-foot-tall giant in the room.

"Askalaphos the Argonaut," Stentor boomed, and an old man with a tight mouth bowed as a polite cheer went round. The Argonauts were still celebrated for their pirate raids into Kolkhis, the land of witches.

"Leontius the Lapith, grandson of King Kaineus." King Kaineus, the legends said, was born a woman. His grandson Leontius, bearded and splendidly muscled, was the only Aiolian prince who had always been polite to Achilles while visiting Phthia.

"Aiwas of Lokris, son of Oileus." This slender, dark-haired prince was no relation to her or her giant cousin, but he *had* called her a faggot once, and she noted with a certain pleasure that his nose was still crooked where she had broken it.

Then came a battery of names already familiar from Phoinix's interminable etiquette lessons:

There was Epistrophos of Phokis, Thersander of Thebai, Elephenor of the Abantes of Euboia, Menestheus of Athenai, Diomedes of Argos, Odysseus of Ithaka, Thoas of Aitolia, Amphimakhos the Epean, Agapenor of Arkadia, old Nestor of Pylos, Idomeneus the grandson of Great King Minos and current lord of Kreté, the much-wronged Menelaos of Sparta—

"—and out on the balcony, much too good for the likes of us, our Great King, King of Men, son of Atreus, grandson of Pelops, great-grandson of Tantalos of Sipylos of the blood of Telepinu, rightful heir to many thrones in Hittite lands and across the seas, Agamemnon, generous in victory, gift-giver, ring-giver, giver of armor, chosen of Hera, Queen of Kings."

"Well over half of those titles also apply to Menelaos," said a deep, soft voice, less massive than Stentor's, but supple and powerful, tinged with wry humor. It was the kind of voice that did not dominate but seduced; a voice

that did not command but *led*. Agamemnon stepped into the megaron from the balcony. “I am sorry I missed Achilles of Phthia’s entrance, but he—” He stopped, met her eyes, and arched an eyebrow. “Oh, that’s what you were trying to tell me, Patroklos. Achilles, daughter of Athena, well-met.”

“Unless this girl brings a contingent of owls,” Menelaos said, still frowning, “it seems in questionable taste to let her tag along and die. Achilles, daughter of Peleus, I mean no disrespect for your old man, but why are *you* here?”

This was a direct challenge, one that could not go unanswered, no matter the look Patroklos was giving her. Achilles supposed she should restrain herself somewhat; this whole war was over Menelaos’s wife being kidnapped, so it would hardly do to kill him. “Diomedes and Odysseus said you need me to win, as does my mother. I’m the best with a spear I’ve ever met. And also . . .”

Menelaos’s frown had hardened into something sterner. “And also?”

“You’re fighting a war over a woman. Get yourself a woman in the war.”

Menelaos looked as if he was about to speak, but Agamemnon touched his arm. “Well said, daughter of Athena. Menelaos, we’ll circle back to your concerns, but first things first. Listen up, boys, a couple notes on the logistics of getting out of here tomorrow . . .”

Agamemnon had made a detailed catalog of the order in which ships should exit the harbors around Aulis, going contingent by contingent, offering detailed head counts and summaries from memory. There were one thousand, one hundred, and eleven ships, he said, each containing between fifty and one hundred and twenty men, for a total of ninety thousand—including rowers and porters and diggers. About one thousand ships carried one or two chariots with teams of horses, for a total of fourteen hundred chariots. Fifteen hundred chariot-riding warriors were enrolled in his catalog of forces, and fourteen hundred drivers. Of fully armored infantry there were twelve thousand, and eighteen thousand light infantry with shields and spears.

This fleet assembled at Aulis was the largest force ever gathered by the Achaians, thrice as large as the Achaian contingent at Kadesh, and epic quantities of provisions had to be gathered and distributed for the invasion.

“. . . which is why you should also call me Agamemnon, King of the Quartermasters,” the Great King concluded with a sardonic smile. “Go to your contingents now, men, and get them ready. There will be a sacrifice on

the heights at nightfall. Attendance is mandatory for all my kings, princes, archons, and basilei, and for their immediate kinsmen. Bathe before coming. Hera will bless us personally tonight, and we'll finally get safe winds for Assuwa. So don't sink the fleet by offending the divine nostrils, you hear? All right, dismissed."

The assembled kings and princes began filing away down the stairs. Some gave Achilles doubtful looks as they passed; some looked at her curiously; but nobody seemed able to walk by her without staring at all. She met the eyes of her giant cousin Aiwas—he seemed merely curious, not unfriendly—and of Diomedes and Odysseus, who smiled as they passed.

Then Agamemnon was standing beside her. He was tall—not vastly taller than her, but tall enough. His broad, muscle-roped shoulders made him seem larger than he was, but so did his confident smile and the way his green eyes stared directly into her, as if he could see deep inside her skull and liked what he saw. "I'm sorry about Menelaos."

"I wasn't offended," Achilles lied. "He was wrong, that's all."

Agamemnon nodded. "Of course. I know you were sent by your mother, and I have nothing but respect for the Silent One. Menelaos has a history with women, unfortunately, and the sudden appearance of a woman in our command center has shaken him."

Achilles narrowed her eyes. "I assume he was produced by a woman. He certainly married one. If he hates us, he should get over it."

"Well, that's the problem." Agamemnon smiled wryly and gestured toward the balcony, and Achilles followed him outside. The Great King looked out over the town of Aulis, and beyond it to the little harbor full of lion-headed ships with lion sails. Bronze gleamed in the morning sun. The stiff salt breeze coming off the water cooled the morning heat and set Agamemnon's thick hair fluttering. "Our mother, Aerope, was exactly the sort of woman our father would marry for love: cruel, unpredictable, bored with her children, restless, with a wandering eye. I won't pretend the gossip is false: she did seduce our uncle Thyestes, and my father did murder our cousins in a vengeful rage. I was nine, and Menelaos was seven. Aerope laughed for weeks, then told us that Thyestes would come for us in turn. Which was true. We grew up under a curse until the Queen of Kings blessed us."

"I'm no stranger to family trouble," Achilles said. It was interesting that this Great King should so casually discuss the rumors about his family. No

jealous guarding of family secrets like she would have expected—I’ve *barely told anyone about Kheiron and the well*—just a calm explanation. “But I’m no Aerope. I’m a warrior.”

“And a shape-shifter, too,” Agamemnon said. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and smiled at what he saw.

Now that his eye was on her, she was conscious of her body, but the old shame was gone, and she met his eyes boldly. “It seems that I am.”

“It happens when gods are involved. There was an old king, Kaineus, a man if I ever met one, given his male form by the Earthshaker. And in Karia, in my grandfather’s day, there was a princess named Salmakis, daughter of Aphrodite and Hermes, whose situation was more like yours. Kaineus and Salmakis were both famous warriors.”

“Not half as famous as I’ll be,” Achilles said flatly. “Tell your brother that.”

“It isn’t that he thinks women are weak,” Agamemnon said, frowning. “Not exactly. He was a difficult, emotional child, prone to outbursts, and Aerope used to threaten to fling him from the walls. Helen was—is—more fragile. Anxious. He wanted to protect her, and look what happened. He *worries* about women.”

The view from the balcony was spectacular. The sun lifted higher in the east, blazing over the mountains of Euboia and the waters of the straits, flashing in a thousand places on the little ripples made by the wind. The Mykenanian longships were being rerigged for island sailing; crews swarmed over them. One ship in particular, larger than the rest, bore a spectacular golden lion on its bow. Grooms were disassembling an enormous golden chariot next to it, stowing the cart piece by piece below the deck of the ship.

“Yours?” Achilles said.

“Built for Tantalos in the Hittite style. Egyptians formed the sun emblems on the sides, and it is fully armored. It takes a team of four horses, each eighteen hands high: Kheops, Ratoises, Khephren, and Mykerinos.”

“A four-horse chariot,” Achilles mused. “Maybe on a vast, flat plain.”

Agamemnon grinned. “Taruisa *is* a vast, flat plain.” He turned to face her, and she turned to mirror him. She wanted to get a better look at his green eyes, but she suspected he knew that, so she looked squarely at his bearded mouth. “You know your chariots.”

“I told you,” Achilles said, “I’m a warrior.” Agamemnon’s was an exquisite beard, not ragged or rough or scraggly but well-groomed, squared

off at the corners and shaped well. She looked back to the ships. “Doesn’t Wilusa have walls?”

“We’ll burn the approaches and draw them into the field,” said Agamemnon. “If they don’t surrender Helen, Tudhaliyas will come with armies, and we’ll meet them on the plain.”

“You want a full-scale war with the Hittite empire?”

Agamemnon shook his head emphatically. “Only a fool *wants* war. But diplomacy has failed, and the Hittites have chosen Alaksandu and Piyama. So we must win decisively.”

“Fair enough,” said Achilles. This made sense. Combat had its own appeal—the ultimate test of one’s ability, the chance to exercise one’s power—but old Peleus had often spoken of the horrors of extended warfare. “I like the sound of winning decisively. The alternative is everyone shitting themselves to death with plague and dysentery, and I don’t like the sound of *that* at all.”

Agamemnon chuckled. “You’ve been talking to Patroklos. And Diomedes. Good. I have your measure, Achilles, and I look forward to fighting beside you.” His voice lowered, and he leaned in conspiratorially. “I may have a solution to the problem of my brother.”

Achilles arched an eyebrow. He was magnificent and close enough to touch, so she hardened her expression. Best not to let him think she could be charmed. “Should I duel him? I thought about it, but it seemed in poor taste.”

Agamemnon laughed again, this time much louder. “Immortal gods. No! You should spar with *me*. Down at the main camp, where everyone can see you. *I* can see your skill by the way you carry your body, but, for the price of some bruises, you can show Menelaos, and the others too.”

“For the price of some bruises?” Achilles smirked. “Great King, I like your confidence. When?”

“Noon.” Agamemnon grinned back at her. His green eyes sparkled in the morning light. “Shake off that hangover and meet me there.” Without another word, he flung himself over the balcony rail and landed catlike on the ground below. He walked off toward his camp, and his red cloak flapped behind him in the morning breeze.

At noon they met on a bouldered ridge overlooking the Greater Harbor. It was close enough to the camp that the reek was overwhelming, and as

Achilles came up the path, she nearly gagged. But war would smell like this, or worse, so she might as well get used to it.

Agamemnon was there already, feet planted, shoulders thrown back, cloak removed. He wore the same white tiered kilt as before, baring the magnificent symmetry of his chest, the corded muscles in his shoulders. Two Mykenaian guards flanked him, each holding a wooden stave and a cowhide shield. As Achilles approached, one guard offered her a pair. "Spear and shield, to the touch."

She took them both, hefted the shield, frowned. It was quite heavy, and she doubted he meant to begin their spar by exchanging javelins or shooting at her with arrows, so she set it down carefully and stood opposite him, holding her staff in her right hand, leaving her left hand free.

Agamemnon arched an eyebrow. "You don't want the shield?"

You have a few inches and fifty pounds on me, Great King. "I'd rather stay nimble."

Agamemnon grunted and took staff and shield, holding the staff spear-grip. "Alright." He knocked his staff against his shield thrice, and Achilles felt the attention of the camp shift toward them. "Daughter of Peleus, are you ready?"

Achilles nodded. She was watching his feet for the first signs of movement, not his hands; he was still outside even lunge range. Sure enough, he took the first lazy step forward, and it was a beautiful thing to watch his sandaled feet find purchase on the uneven rocks, carefully holding the centerline, leaving him loose and uncommitted to a direction. He took a step closer, circling.

She knew he meant to make her back up along the uneven ridge, risking her footing. Instead she went the other way, advancing toward him. Her left was unguarded, but she was ready for him to shift sides; this wasn't a trap she'd fall into.

He grinned, then sidestepped, opening up a little more distance along ground he had already covered, inviting her to line herself up for a bull rush.

She stepped into place, smirking at him.

He began to reverse course and gather himself for the rush. His eyes met hers, searching—he was a clever fighter, focused on the minds of his enemies, so he held himself in check.

She drew her spear further back into a two-handed grip, choking it backward. As long as her spearpoint stayed uncommitted, any charge on his part would be suicide.

He stepped closer instead, sheltering his body behind his tall shield, and then suddenly he was lunging toward her left, jabbing his spear into a probing thrust.

This was what she had been waiting for. She darted left and switched the spear to her left hand, stabbing at his weapon side.

He hissed with delight and struck out with the shaft of his practice spear, trying to tangle her staff up, lunging a step further, thrusting the shield at her so quickly the spots on the cowhide were suddenly rushing toward her face—

But he had failed to catch her spearpoint, and Achilles snarled as she caught her weapon two-handed again, pulling back to free the point, then threw herself leftward out of the line of his shield, beating his spear aside, and thrusting at him from the left, trying for his flank.

Agamemnon let out a gasp of surprise as he ducked back—somehow, his feet found good footing on the pebbles and rocks—but instantly he lunged again, all his force behind his shield now that she had committed to a thrust.

As the shield flashed toward her, she held her ground, angling her practice spear into his exposed flank.

This time his shield *did* hit her, in the face and chest, and something slammed into her hip at the same time. She was flung backward, and the air was crushed from her lungs. She went down, rolling. Something struck the back of her head, and her vision flashed. She gasped for air and rolled sideways to her feet, her staff still somehow in her hand.

Agamemnon had fallen to one knee. His face was contorted with sudden pain. He let go of his shield and touched his right flank. A purple welt had already begun to form on the ribs beneath the thick muscle of his right breast. A spearpoint would have smashed through the gap between the bones and pierced his lung.

He laughed ruefully and levered himself to his feet. “You got me.”

Achilles felt at her left hip. There would be a bruise there, equally deep and massive as the king’s. “And you got me, with the butt of your spear. Spike works as well as point. Where’d you learn to fight lefties?”

“Menelaos,” Agamemnon said with a painful grin. “I grew up dealing with left-handed tricks.” His face settled into a peaceful mask of pain, as if

the hurt in his body were almost an occasion for cheer. “Well-done, daughter of Peleus and Pallas. Go down there. They’ll want to get to know you. Drink plenty of water.”

Achilles dropped the staff and looked down into the Achaian camp. Sure enough, hundreds were watching her. She recognized many of them from the meeting in town. It was good to be seen at last—she thought perhaps she liked it—but it was strange, after being called a catamite, malaka, weakling so many times, to be seen as both a woman and a warrior.

She had never understood why she could not be both, but she had been denied so many times it had seemed impossible. Now she was living proof it could be done. It felt like blood surging back into a withered limb, filling it with the sharp pangs of life. Another prayer answered years too late—but she would take what she could get.

She descended the ridge, and they streamed out to meet her.

First came giant Aiwas, her cousin. He was handsome in an enormous way and held up an equally enormous cup of wine. “Drink, cousin!” he roared. “I haven’t seen you since you were tiny, hardly able to use words! You liked spears even then, and told us to call you *A-ki-we-as*.”

She drank and laughed. “That sounds like me on both counts.”

Leontius of Aiolia appeared a moment later, grinning at her. “I knew it. I knew I’d see you here. You have beautiful form.” He offered her a skin of wine. “Just a sip!”

“Just a sip,” she echoed, and drank deep.

She met them all again, or most of them: the kings of Thebai and Athenai, Elis and Arkadia, and their lords and hangers-on. The kings made her drink more wine; the men told her it was a glory to see her fight. Agamemnon, it seemed, had a reputation as the strongest of the strong; to match spears with him was more of a favor than she had realized.

Just fighting him to a draw had made her name.

Idomeneus, the king of Kreté, handed her a cup of mead and told her to drink of the goblet of the bees.

The king of Pylos, Nestor, a very old man with pale eyes, gave her a cup of water with a drop of wine dissolved in it and said that in his many decades of war and rule he had become very wise, and in particular had discovered that a hangover was an enemy more terrible than an assassin. He said it all so deadpan that Achilles laughed with delight, for he was so dignified and so grave, and yet his eyes twinkled.

Then finally Menelaos stood next to Achilles and took a sip from a two-handled cup of wine, then offered her a sip. She drank, and he bowed his head.

“Daughter of the Silent One,” said Menelaos, “forgive my earlier doubts. I see you are a warrior as surely as any man, and I will fight beside you as if you were Atalanta, or the Silent One herself. Thank you for joining this armada. It means more than you know.”

He seemed so sad, somehow, so thoughtful, that Achilles wanted to cheer him up. Of course, his wife *had* been kidnapped by Hittites, so—

“How did it happen?” she asked him. “The kidnapping.”

Menelaos sighed heavily. “Alaksandu and his brother Hektor were guests in our home. They had made offers for her when we were all competing for her hand, but I never thought they would violate the laws of hospitality. She was fussing over them as she always did, trying to make them happy, doting on them, giving them trinkets and gifts—and they stole her in the night, killed the gate guards, and left without a word.”

“What, without a word?” Achilles was furious. Poor Helen, suddenly stolen like that by vicious Hittite rapists. Only—if she was the Apple of the Sun, as Athena had said, it was worse than just kidnapping. The Hittites worshipped Zeus; maybe it was a plot to curry favor with Zeus by bribing him with Helen. Coherent ideas would not quite form with this much wine in her belly, but Achilles thought she might ask Meryapi for advice. She could trust Meryapi. “If they’re doing this to bribe Zeus,” she told Menelaos, “I’ll teach them a lesson.”

The man looked confused, then sad again, then more confused. “*Zeus* wouldn’t steal my wife. We’re relatives. It was the fucking Hittites. Odysseus and I went to Hattusa, but Tudhaliyas said that Alaksandu was her husband now, and that she loved him and never loved me—but—” Menelaos drank from his wine cup and offered Achilles another sip.

It was getting hard to stand, so they walked arm in arm through the camp, trying not to trip over tent pegs. “She *loved* me, Achilles. Arranged marriages always *start* strange and awkward, but she was so kind, so eager, so easily frightened, and I worked hard to make her comfortable. I won’t pretend I’m not—well—strange and hard to read sometimes, and I run my mouth, but Helen and I *cared* about each other, and she didn’t even *know* that Hittite bastard.”

“That Hittite bastard,” Achilles agreed angrily. “Yes. We’ll save Helen.”

It was starting to get later in the day. Hours had gone by now walking and drinking, and the sun was sinking behind the mountains. Achilles had met all of Menelaos's friends, and most of Agamemnon's, and had told Nestor of Pylos that he reminded her of her father, but wiser and nicer. Now everyone was moving toward the great hilltop overlooking Aulis. Bulls were being led uphill by guards, and Menelaos and Achilles were still walking together. They had left the cup somewhere when it ran dry and were working on their fourth skin of wine.

"Tell me about your brother," Achilles said. "He's, what, thirty-five?"

"Thirty-one. Why, do you like him?"

Achilles felt herself blushing violently. "No! Isn't he married?"

Menelaos sighed. "Not happily. Klytaimestra and Agamemnon used to like each other, and that's how Orestes and Iphianassa were born a year apart, but that was a long time ago. Some royal marriages work out, and others turn ugly."

"So what is Agamemnon like? As a man."

Menelaos scratched his short red beard and shook his head. He smiled—a practiced, subtle smile. "He is our king. Thoughtful. A wonderful listener. He understands everything, and so he is very kind." He frowned. "He can read anyone and learn their nature in minutes, and that's why we're so absolutely loyal. But—he will always choose duty over pleasure."

Menelaos went silent for a moment, looking far away, fixed on something that was not there. "He will always choose the will of the gods over the happiness of family." His smile faded. "He has to. Who would follow a Great King who was just a man, a Great King who rewarded personal friends and placed his people second? He worships justice. He prays nightly to Hera for guidance. I'm told he's an excellent and sensitive lover, if that's what you were asking."

"I was asking no such thing," Achilles said haughtily. "I just wanted to know what kind of Great King is leading us to Hittite country."

"A great one," said Menelaos.

As the sunlight faded, an Achaian princess ascended the summit above Aulis and stood above the horns of an altar as white as bone.

"IPHIANASSA!" roared the assembled Achaians. "IPHIANASSA AGAMEMNONOS, DOUERA HERA!"

Iphianassa, daughter of Agamemnon, slave of Hera!

She was very pale, this Great King's daughter, perhaps thirteen years old. Her hair was more colorless than her father's, and she was attired in a great shroud woven of some fine material like spider's silk, diaphanous and floating, and on her head was a headdress of cow's horns and silver jewels. Her arms were covered in tarnished silver jewelry, in bracelets and bangles and bracers and rings, and her arms were as white as Hera's in the dream.

"Bring forth the bulls," she said in a sweet high voice. "Bring forth the cattle."

Two by two, the bulls were brought before the horns of the altar. She took a knife of black obsidian bound with a silver-and-bone handle and drew it tenderly across their throats. Blood sprayed, and the bulls died without a sound, slowly bleeding out on the altar, splashing the white stone with red blood. Achilles thought of the coat of Balios, splashed with specks of red on white, and shuddered.

Even in her drunken state, she was struck by how cold the air suddenly felt, how her breath was steaming, how the breath of the cows steamed on the summit of the hilltop as each was brought to the altar and exsanguinated. The blood ran down the altar and onto the white stones.

Finally the bulls and the cows were all dead and their bodies heaped around the altar. "Cut from them the meat, and wrap the bones in fat," Iphianassa called out in her sweet lilting voice. "Let the aroma rise to the gods! Let Hera feed on sacrifices! Roast the meat and eat it, and let the winds change to carry us across the sea! Let the Earthshaker leave our ships unharmed; let the Bear-Goddess keep her distance. Let the Achaian fleet set forth at first light under the blessing of Hera, for she will be a standard before the army, and will guard you with her horns, and will protect you by night, and give you triumph when you go forth by day."

The words echoed across the hills, and they were more than words. Achilles could feel the change before it began, the *shift*. Everything was somehow brighter, somehow clearer, somehow richer. The sky was more than sky. The clouds felt like the hangings of the gods. The sea below felt like the rolling home of Poseidon the Earthshaker. The blessing of Hera echoed in the air. The blood of the cattle filled Achilles's nostrils. Something tingled in her hip, and she looked down, pressing at the bruise—but there was no pain. And then there was no bruise. She breathed deep of the charged air, and her head was terribly clear. No drunkenness here, no

waking up sick in the morning—only savage joy, as if it had been to *her* that the aroma was dedicated, to *her* that the sacrifice was fed.

A wind arose in the west, gentle but insistent. No storm wind this, but a steady trade wind, summoned in an hour's sacrifice, in the silent, bloody deaths of cattle.

Gongs and bells and horns from the harbor signaled the call to the ships. It would take hours to get them all into the water, and many hours more to send them on their way across the sea to Wilusa in the land of Taruisa, to rescue captive Helen, the Apple of the Sun.

But the Great King had laid out his plan, and the assembled kings knew what to do. The fleet was ready to sail, and Achilles was ready for war.

Chapter Eight

Achilles opened her eyes to silver moonlight and a beach of tawny sand, and all the stars laid out across the sky in a glittering milky band, and her head on Deidamia's shoulder, and the smell of their hair all around her, mingling with the salt air. Damia's copper-and-malachite comb glittered in Damia's pale hair, and Achilles knew at once that she was dreaming, but she clung to the dream, to the memory of that moment. They had often spent the evening on the Golden Beach of Skyros, carefully placed so that the high tide would, at most, lap their toes.

It was summer, judging from the stars; it was last summer, judging from the way that the Mansion of Zeus burned in the sky, a white star with a faint tinge of red, larger than the others, and somehow more immediate, *nearer*.

"No," Deidamia said, "if we had a son by some witchcraft, I would not name him Zeus. That's blasphemy, even if he's a Hittite god."

"Zeus's mother clearly named *him* Zeus." Achilles laughed. She remembered now the night, and where they were in time, and nuzzled deeper into Damia's shoulder, breathing her in. "Or so the stories say. Was she a blasphemer?"

"What an obscene maiden you are." Damia sighed. "I'll only play this game if you promise not to blaspheme the gods."

"Fine," said Achilles, "no divine honors for our imaginary son. What would you name him?"

Damia yawned. "My grandfather was named Ptolemos. He used to take me up here to hunt sand crabs. Ptolemaia is already named for him, but if I had a son, I'd name him Ptolemos and teach him where to find the best

seafood. We could fish with rods and nets, we could trap lobsters, we could dive for clams and mussels.”

“Ptoleμος means war,” Achilles objected. “You would name our son ‘war’ and teach him to make war on the fishes of the sea?”

“I would,” Damia said. She kissed Achilles’s hair. “No other name is acceptable.”

“He might object to having his great-grandfather’s exact name,” Achilles said. “How would anyone tell them apart? And if you took him to Ptoleμος’s grave—”

“Neoptoleμος, then,” Damia sniffed. “Are you happy?”

But Achilles *was* happy. She was happier than she had been when all of this actually happened, when the beach and the stars were real and this was *now*—and she willed the dream to continue, *please continue, don’t fall apart now, let me stay*—

“What would *you* name a son? Let’s say the same magic gave us two.”

Achilles thought about it. “Oneiros, because the waking world is such a disappointment, and the best things in life are dreams.”

Damia poked her shoulder. “What a depressing name for our nonexistent secondborn. Poor thing will be so confused. ‘Why does Mommy call me “the least disappointing thing in this vile world”? Is she all right?’”

“Oneiros will be happy, and so will Neoptoleμος,” Achilles objected. “How could they not be? They can only exist in a world of miracles, where gods and magic are real and girls like us can become mothers. No such place has ever existed, but ah! If it did, they would be happy.”

Damia sighed. “Why torment ourselves with this game?”

“I like to dream,” Achilles said. “I just don’t believe my dreams are real. We *could* have sons if we were willing to pay the price.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Damia snapped, suddenly half sitting up. “The way you were when you came here, half-crazed and starved, desperate to stave off hairiness and stink—making some other woman pregnant with your baby is hardly worth that suffering.”

“I’d have to kill myself the instant my son was born,” Achilles agreed, putting on a mocking smile, “in the family tradition of mothers dying in childbirth.”

Damia’s eyes flashed. “You wouldn’t *be* his mother.”

“*You* would know I was, and *I* would know I was, even if the other mother didn’t.” Achilles tasted bile in her throat. She had forgotten this

argument, forgotten how the memory soured at the end. She climbed to her feet and stared out over the starlit sea. “I’m sorry.”

“If you want children,” Damia said, “have them. Me, I’ll take the cut and finally feel *safe*, and be aunt to Ptolemaia’s brood. That’s the closest Damia will ever come.”

Achilles sighed. “The closest Achilles will come is being Aunt Damia’s strange Aiolian lover.” The moon had risen over the waters, a crescent like the horns of a celestial cow. An owl hooted from up the beach. “Can’t we lie back down and dream again?”

“We are dreaming,” Damia said flatly.

Achilles turned to stare at her. Damia had gone bone-white. An owl perched on her shoulder and stared back at Achilles with huge gray eyes.

“I am asleep on Skyros, and you are asleep on your ship,” Damia said slowly, as if each word were coming from far away, “and we both dreamed of this memory and came here together. We were alone for a while, but now your mother wants me to give you a warning.”

“Damia?” Achilles leapt toward her to grab her hands, but Damia stepped back out of reach.

“Stay away from Iphianassa,” Damia said. “Stay away from Agamemnon.”

Then the dream convulsed, and Achilles woke with a shudder.

Achilles’s personal longship was named *Delphini*, and the cabin in the stern of the boat belonged to her, to Balios, and to Xanthos, for the two horses were too skittish and too tall to fit below deck. They were calm in their straw-filled hutch, a blessing, but had indigestion, a curse. All the rosewater Meryapi had given Achilles had helped—just enough to let her sleep and dream her nightmare of Damia—but now the cabin just smelled like rose-scented horseshit. She put on a tunic and went out on deck.

A half-crew of rowers were minding the oars while the rest slept, but the sail did the bulk of the work. Old Phoinix was at the steering oar, keeping *Delphini* steady. Achilles sauntered round to the stern and leaned on the rail, watching the wake come off the steering oar. The water was so clear that the polished rocks of sunken mountains glittered in the moonlight a hundred yards below.

The seas swelled. Clouds spread slowly across the sky, blotting out the stars. Slow, massive waves lifted *Delphini* and let her down, then rolled

across the sea, lifting the other Myrmidon ships one by one, then the lion-headed Mykenanian ships behind them, and then the Spartan ships, the Argive ships just emerging from the Straits of Euboia, the islander vessels to the left, and the enormous bull-headed ships of Kreté to the right. The waves moved through the fleet slowly, majestically, their power contained—for now—by the prayers of the Great King's daughter.

Achilles's mood grew darker. Her mother's warning to *stay away from Agamemnon* rankled her. The words rattled jaggedly inside her skull, and their sharp edges opened other wounds. If she was not to trust Agamemnon, how could she trust her *dear* Myrmidon relatives?

Off to the left was the ship of Kheiron. Each of the Myrmidon ships carried a similar reminder of dark times, except *Delphini*, which flew Egyptian-made sails and bore the precious cargo of Patroklos and his wife, newly dear Meryapi. They alone were not her enemies. But the others? Who among them would have treated Achilles with respect if not for the signs of divine favor in her body? She bared her teeth and snarled at the sea, and in the distance a tongue of lightning forked down from the clouds. Moments later, thunder rolled.

Now I am a woman in body and soul, recognized as a woman and a warrior by the men of my warlike people, and all my prayers from childhood are finally answered—years too late. Achilles took the gold-sheathed Egyptian knife from inside her tunic and unsheathed it, exposing the strange black blade. It was still beautiful, still mysterious: not copper or bronze, but an exotic metal that smelled like ancient blood.

She was surrounded by enemies who loved or feared her strength. *If I were still weak, they would rip me apart.*

And now Zeus himself was her enemy, and he was “coming”—coming from where? From far away, surely. “Returning to earth,” the Silent One had said—so perhaps the Thunderer lived in the stars. Perhaps Zeus lived in the Mansion of Zeus itself, the red star that bore his name.

Achilles held the black blade closer. It seemed to her that a spot of red had formed on the metal, and as she looked closer, she saw: where a tiny fleck of seawater had touched the blade, it was changing, blushing red, then flaking orange. This black metal, this strange metal, burned in air—though very slowly.

Sideros. The name came to her like a thought from another mind. *This metal also comes from the stars.* She sighted along the blade, and above her

the stars themselves rearranged beyond the clouds, re-forming into different constellations, brighter and closer together—and then her mind was hurtling through the void of the night sky, through time and darkness.

In the infinite dark of the abyss, a glowing cloud rushed inward, swirling, spiraling, brightening, a maelstrom in three dimensions that swept down into itself and burst into white flame. This was the birth of a star: a monstrous thing further across than a hundred thousand seas, its surface burning a million times more brightly than the sun. Glorious, glorious was its youthful splendor, and every fiber of Achilles vibrated to its ineffable song. The light, the heat—

It lasted for a thousand thousand thousand years. It all flashed in an instant. In the heart of the star, something dark began to grow, a star-within-a-star.

The fire of the star created darkness, and the darkness sank deeper within it. The weight of the star grew terrible, and the heat at its heart increased. Premonitions of mortality flashed across its surface, which burned all the more brightly for a time and expanded to a great size, turning redder, darker, hotter, and finally collapsing inward, only to explode into a still-brighter flame.

Now the darkness was its entire heart, and yet a deeper blackness grew within it, an inner heart more brooding and hotter than before, heavier, tempestuous, certain of its own impending death. The star screamed, expanding outward again, red and throbbing, the universe's animus exposed, and again it collapsed and blazed. Again and again its light created darkness, each denser than the last, heavier and more ruthless, hotter and hotter. No clouds were left, only a hell of molten liquid under ever-increasing pressure, changing to heavier and heavier forms, an inexorable contraction without end.

Then everything rushed downward and inward at once. For an instant the star was made of molten glass, and then it was a star of pure metal, star-metal, signifying the end. It burst, erupting like a trillion volcanos into the abyss. Molten gobbets of blazing ore the size of mountains flew past on every side.

One missile of sideros traveled through the darkness for a thousand thousand years, cooling sometimes to a smooth black orb, heating sometimes to flow and move and warp, and after ten thousand lifetimes, it landed in her hand as a black dagger.

Sideros. The black metal, the star-metal, the death of stars.

Even the gods feared this metal, Achilles realized, the metal of the end.

She tested its point on her fingertip again. A drop of blood welled up and ran down the blade, sizzling against the sidereal metal. The metal turned red in answer, mingling with her blood, and a tiny portion of its surface began to burn away. She sheathed the knife, then waited.

The tiny wound did not heal itself in moments. It *hurt*, so cold and stinging that Achilles began to laugh. When old Phoinix stared, she laughed louder. The Earthshaker's gift was a powerful one.

She climbed on top of her cabin and gazed out over the swelling sea. Thoughts of her knife changed once more to thoughts of her night visit from Damia. The words from her dream echoed in her mind: *Stay away from Agamemnon.*

The advice enraged her. Stay away? She would not. If Zeus himself was her enemy, then let *any* god dare issue Achilles commands.

She stared out across the black water until she saw the lion-headed ship of Agamemnon, the *Leaina Mykenaion*, mounting a great upswell of water. As the flagship began to descend into the trough, Achilles leapt from *Delphini* into the sea and swam.

Chapter Nine

Each enormous wave swelled like a hill beneath Achilles as she floated over the deep, and each enormous wave slid past her. Thunder rolled in the sky and boomed in her ears, and the sweet salt air burned in her lungs, and she laughed each time she slid down the slope of a wave, laughed each time the sea lifted her skyward.

Lightning flashed and illuminated the wave in front of her. The shadows of tiny fishes danced in the water, and the larger, more sullen shadows of greater things, of whales and dolphins and sharks, and of the Achaian longships. Lightning strobed. The lion's head of Agamemnon's flagship flashed further on and she swam for it, diving down into the waves and rising up again, closer and closer with each descent and ascent.

The drums of the rowers thumped in time to the thunder of her heart. The oars cut the water. She slid sideways to approach the vessel from along the hull, searching for the captain's cabin. Built like a megaron of wood on the stern, the cabin of *Leaina Mykenaiion* loomed up suddenly in the darkness, and the steering oar slashed the water next to Achilles's head. She caught hold of the slick side of the ship, hands sliding off sea-slimed wood.

This would not do.

She drew the knife of star-metal and stabbed the cedar, dragged herself up the side, found purchase on a knob in the wood, withdrew the knife, stabbed again higher, caught the rail—and all the while the *Leaina Mykenaiion* was climbing a great wave, and the lion-ship summited the wave just as Achilles caught the rail—

The ship slid downward and her body flew upward. She flung her legs over the railing and vaulted like a bull-leaper of Kreté. Lightning sheeted

the sky. Her ears filled with a thousand sounds: the grunt of the rowers and the throb of drums, the groan of the ship and the creak of the oars, the rumble of waves on waves, the grinding of the ocean on the seafloor, the screaming of seabirds, and the warlike songs of dolphins in the deep, all shrill shrieks like birds of prey and vicious rhythmic clicks and fluttering tails as they hounded some hapless shark.

Dolphins are the wolves of the sea, Achilles thought as she picked herself up off the deck. The shutters of the royal cabin were closed, but she pried one open with her dagger and slid inside.

“Who goes there?” The voice of Agamemnon was as deep now as at Aulis, another rumbling in a sea full of rumbling. “Achilles? Are you half-bird?”

“Half-shark,” she said, bowing.

Agamemnon sat enthroned in the darkness on a simple wooden bed painted bright red. The whole cabin was red, and in the darkness it took on a clotted-blood sheen and smelled of cedar smoke and incense. The Great King regarded Achilles for a long moment and then laughed. “I did expect to see you, and soon, but not here.”

“I swam across the face of the sea to see you,” Achilles said, drawing herself up haughtily. What matter that she was dripping salt water on his cabin floor? “My presence here is tribute to your greatness, Great King Agamemnon. Is it not a great gift?”

Agamemnon grinned at her, and his eyes glittered in the dark. “You mock me with my own title?”

“You are the first Great King I have ever met,” Achilles said. “If I treat you with too much deference, all the others are bound to have their way with me.”

“We can’t have that,” Agamemnon agreed. “You should sit up here with me. There’s room.”

“I’m drenched in seawater.”

“Borrow one of my cloaks.” Agamemnon gestured toward a wooden chest. “They are purple-dyed in the Kretan royal style, gifts from my brother-in-law.”

The ship was rising again, and they with it. Achilles opened the chest and took out a cloak. It was brilliant purple wool, warm to the touch. As she swam here, she had had no plan. Now her body felt full of her own power, and the air was tight and rich with subtle magic. She inhaled the scent of the

wool and the scent of the man who had worn it last, a distinctively male smell, deep and rich. She turned back to Agamemnon. "I like it."

He was staring at her. His emerald eyes were utterly intent.

She stared back. Then she slid out of her tunic and flung it on the cabin floor. Something clinked against the wood. Without thinking, she bent down and pulled her copper-and-malachite comb out of the tunic. The flower pattern glittered in the dark. On an impulse, she twisted it into her hair, pinning it up to expose her long neck, then draped Agamemnon's purple cloak around her shoulders. "Very warm."

The ship fell again beneath them. A subtle smile spread across Agamemnon's lips, and he slid to one side, motioning for her to sit beside him.

She sat, settling onto the wooden bed as grandly as she could. "I feel like a king myself now."

"As princess, you are a little less than king." Agamemnon's secret smile grew. "As demigod, a little more."

Achilles laughed. "Oh, let me be more."

"And you swam here?" Agamemnon said. "No one has ever been so eager to see me."

"You made an impression," Achilles said. "More or less. All my bruises have vanished."

"I saw," Agamemnon murmured. He turned on the bed, staring at her with frank fascination. Again, the ship rose and fell, and they fell with it. "We could have a rematch."

Achilles slid up onto her knees, letting the cloak drape around her like enormous wings, and stared the Great King in his bright green eyes, leaning toward him. Her heartbeat shuddered in her ears, and the power in the air was like unwatered wine. "You still have *your* bruises. It wouldn't be fair."

He leaned in closer. His breath was warm and sweet against her face. "What if I surrender?"

She put her hand on his shoulder and felt the taut corded muscle there, the subtle throb of his pulse, the rough smoothness of his skin. "Then I'll enslave you." She slid forward, pushing back on his body with her other hand, feeling the coiled power of him settling back under her fingers, barely held in check by his own will. His eyes never left hers, but burned into her, unblinking.

Agamemnon was magnificent, and he was hers to take. She caught the buckle of his golden belt and undid it. It fell away from his narrow hips, and she slid his kilt away with it, shoving them off the bed. She shrugged the purple cloak off her shoulders and slid forward, settling onto him. His eyes widened as their bodies met and joined. The shock of him inside her was sudden and exquisite, at once alien and familiar, and then subsumed into a surge of power that swept through her body. Every muscle in Achilles clenched, and a wave rolled through her like the waves of the sea outside.

Lightning flashed across the sky. She was there in the sky, not just in the cabin. Agamemnon moved inside her, and she cried out. Thunder rolled; the seas churned; the dolphin packs surged through the water. The ships of the Achaians were spread out like a net on the rolling waves, and as Agamemnon thrust up to meet her, the oceans lifted, the ships lifted, and she gasped in time to the sky.

The clouds opened up. Sheets of rain fell. A bolt of lightning lanced down onto one of the black ships, and it erupted in fire. The Great King trembled underneath her like the ocean, and she snarled. A sudden wave heaved up, smashing the burning ship against a reef that tore like knives through its flimsy sides, crushing the oars like spider's legs. Achaians screamed and fought the water as Achilles rose and fell, in awe of her own imagined power.

An old man cried out in the darkness, struggling against the waves. The ocean massed around him on four sides, a tunnel of water he could not escape. As hard as he fought the water, it was futile, there was no way out of the well. Kheiron screamed. Dolphins surfaced all around him, shrieking, clicking, smashing into him with their bodies, crushing him under the water, bearing him down into the depths. The sky flashed twice, and thunder shook eleven hundred and ten ships.

Achilles fell back and slid off Agamemnon, collapsed against him. Sweat-slick, they panted. The thunder faded. The rain died down. The only sound in the royal cabin was their breathing.

"Let's conquer the world," Agamemnon gasped in her ear.

Achilles laughed and stretched out against him. Everything felt golden. She imagined she might be glowing, might have some faint divine nimbus all around her, a subtle fire in her belly and her loins. She had never felt more powerful. "Yes. I will."

She swam back to *Delphini* through glass-calm waters under the moonlight. The surface of the sea had settled to such pristine stillness that she could see the topography of the seafloor, the mountains and valleys full of seaweed, the curious squid darting through their underwater forests, and the predatory dolphins hunting prey. She climbed the side of *Delphini* and scrambled back over the rail next to the steering oar and found herself face-to-face with Phoinix and Patroklos, who stared at her wide-eyed. Patroklos's brow was furrowed with worry.

"Little Red," Patroklos said, "where were you? We thought you were swept overboard. There are boats out looking for you."

"I went for a swim," said Achilles, wringing salt water out of her tunic. She was dripping on the deck, but every muscle of her still felt warm and glorious. "It wasn't bad."

Patroklos took a deep breath, then let it go. "We can't see the *Kentauros*. Kheiron's ship. Meryapi is climbing the mast to use her seeing stone, but we might have lost it. At least we didn't lose you."

Achilles threw her arms around Patroklos. She liked his worry for her, but clearly she was fine. "You did not lose me," she agreed. Then what he had said began to sink in, and she remembered what she had felt during the storm—not just Agamemnon moving in and under her, but the visions that had flashed across her mind like lightning. Kheiron's ship too. Perhaps she had seen its fate. Or perhaps—

She frowned. "I'll join Meryapi. I have good eyes." She started along the deck, but Patroklos followed, keeping alongside her, face still worried.

"Red, I— If you wanted to swim in a storm, I would have swam with you. When we land at Wilusa, I will follow your lead. My chariot will be behind yours in squadron, and when you dismount, I will follow on foot. I thought you'd disappeared."

"I'm half-god," Achilles said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Patroklos nodded forlornly. "I'm all mortal, though. Anything might happen to me."

Achilles scowled. Was Patroklos trying to make her feel guilty? She squinted up the mast, where Meryapi had mounted the ladder and was clinging to the summit, holding a large crystal to her face. "She's going to get herself killed. Is that what you're trying to tell me, Patroklos? I need to guard my family better?"

“You *are* half-god, so we will rely upon you implicitly.” Patroklos’s humor seemed to be returning. “She’s a better climber than you think. She used to climb the palace pillars in Hundred-Gated Thebai.” He raised his voice. “Any sign of them?”

“Southeast,” Meryapi called down. “Sharks are circling a reef. Wait—I see a mast.”

Patroklos’s expression darkened. “We’ll get under oar. There may be survivors.”

The starboard drummer beat at half-speed and the port at full, and *Delphini* looped slowly right and made its way southeast. The oars tore the surface behind the ship, but when Achilles went to the prow and clung to the gilded dolphin, she could see straight into the unbroken water ahead. The first signs of the reef came in jagged pieces jutting out of the seafloor, and then it rose in a wall of pitted rock rich with colorful darting life—and misted with diffuse and clotted red, red in a dozen different densities. Bits of wood bobbed on the surface, and torn pieces of human bodies too small and unrecognizable to assemble into anything remotely resembling a living man. Scraps of clothing floated among the seaweed, and—as Meryapi noted—sharks circled in the shallows.

The Egyptian gasped.

Achilles slid down from the dolphin and stood by her, along the rails in the bow of the ship. “Have you never seen bodies?”

“Many,” Meryapi said unhappily. “In the House of Anpu, god of death. But never broken like this, shattered by the hands of nature. Except once when a man mauled by hippopotamuses was brought in, or what was left of him, and the priests put together just enough body to bear him to the starry realm. This is worse.”

Pinned to the rocks at the surface was the shattered torso of an old man. His face had been crushed as if by a thousand fists, but his blood-soaked beard was familiar enough. *Kheiron*. Achilles kept the scowl off her face, but she did not know how she should feel. If she had wanted him dead, surely her spear was enough.

Phoenix and Patroklos came up. The rowers were holding the ship steady, straining to pull it back from the reefs and keep it out of the deadly zone. Patroklos’s face was ashen, and spots of blood flamed in his cheeks. Phoenix only shook his head.

“He was as good as dead already,” the old man said. “We talked about it at Aulis while everyone was drinking. No fault of yours, Red, but it was clear he’d offended the gods when you came back looking, well, like you do. The Silent One’s not a merciful sort.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. “You *expected* this?” She looked back to the reef, to the shattered body crushed into the rocks. “He expected this?”

“Something like it. Maybe in Hittite country, maybe at sea. He thought he was toughening up a goddess’s son, doing what had to be done, but gods don’t care about intentions.” Old Phoinix turned away from the carnage of the sunken *Kentauros*. “Nobody survived, guaranteed. Gods leave survivors when they need stories told. Here the Screech-Owl was making an example.”

It made sense. For a moment Achilles had thought it was her own doing, but the Silent One had a way of answering her old prayers, years later. And in a way, she supposed, it was a fitting sign of love. She had decided not to avenge herself on Kheiron—not until he gave her a pretext—but her mother was a goddess and had no such limitations. “We should leave the wreck as it is. If we fail to get the message, the gods may repeat themselves.”

Patroklos and Phoinix nodded, and Meryapi sighed. The Egyptians were famous for respecting the dead, but the will of the gods was the will of the gods. Patroklos gave the sign to the rowers, and the drumbeats began again, and the ship strained back toward the fleet.

Phoinix uncapped a wineskin and offered it to Achilles. “Can I say a few words?”

Achilles took the wineskin, sipped it. Strong, bitter stuff. “Of course, old man.”

Phoinix grunted. “I want you to know what kind of man Kheiron was to me. I know you had your differences, but—”

Differences. Achilles smiled coldly and drank from the wineskin. “You don’t have to make me like him, and you won’t. Speak your piece.”

Phoinix nodded. “Back in the old days with Herakles and Philoktetes and your father, back when we were all pirates, his bow and shield saved our necks a dozen times. He was a clever warrior and a devoted friend. When you were born, Peleus cried for a week about Thetis—a good girl, she was—and Kheiron said he’d teach her son strength and make it all worthwhile.”

“*Athena* was my mother,” Achilles said flatly.

“Well, yes, but—” The old man frowned. “Thetis still gave birth to your body. And old Kheiron never really thought you were a god’s child. He was a doubter. Herakles used to say the gods would get him in the end, and be cruel about it.”

Achilles decided she would ask the Silent One later for more insight into the mechanics of divine childbirth. She frowned and turned away. Enough about Kheiron. She did not want to think about his crushed body, or his past, or his love for her father, or his *intentions* in throwing her down a well. At least now she would be free of the well forever, and the memory would fade. “I’m taking the wineskin,” she said at last.

“That’s fine,” said the old man. “I just wanted you to know he wasn’t all bad.”

“To me he was,” said Achilles, “but I understand your feelings.” It was a lie, but it should shut him up.

She stalked back to her cabin. Balios and Xanthos would not trouble her with alternative narratives of the past, and if no one had shoveled their shit overboard while she was with the Great King, then it was her responsibility. And perhaps Balios would be done sulking.

“**Y**ou *had* to spit everywhere,” Achilles sighed. “I know Xanthos has a weak stomach, Balios, but from you, I think this is malice.”

The seasick white stallion gave her a sidelong stare and snorted, lifting his head away from her. He stood in his stall with a certain truculent stance that meant he was still upset, possibly more than he had been when she left for her night swim, and his mouth was flecked with bits of spat-up food. Achilles took a rag and reached out warily—just let him try to bite her!—but he let her dab his mouth clean, pretending she wasn’t there. Xanthos had not quiddled, but alas, his diarrhea had continued.

Someone had brought a bucket of water into the cabin and left it there—probably how they found out she was missing earlier—and she dipped the rag in it and scrubbed effluvia off her horses, then brushed them with a boar-bristle comb and set to work shoveling out the dirty straw. The whole cabin would be cleaned out properly when they landed, and her horses would have proper grass, but until then—

She sighed and offered the horses each an apple to test their appetites. Xanthos ate with delicate pride, determined to show Balios how good he was being, how much he had earned his petting, and Achilles obliged him

with a great show of affection, calling him a Titan of a beast, more terrible than Britomartis and mightier than Zeus himself. The horse lifted his golden head and swished his tail.

“Balios, Balios,” Achilles sighed. “Come now, do you want an apple, or are you ill?”

The red-flecked white stallion seemed to consider her question for a long time. Poor thing, he had probably forgotten why he was mad at her, but he was a stubborn animal, not quick to forgive, and he gave her a skeptical look.

Achilles bit into the apple. Tart, not too sweet. She offered him the rest and he ate it doubtfully, probably to discourage her from stealing any more of his food. “I wasn’t avoiding you earlier. I didn’t know there would be a storm, or I would have stayed.”

Balios flared his nostrils. He didn’t seem to believe her.

“I swam to see the Great King,” Achilles said. She felt suddenly nervous, as if her horses might gossip to the other Achaian horses, but of course she could trust them. “I seduced him, and it was amazing. I’ve never had a man before, Balios, only dreamed of it. It was so easy, and it felt exactly right. He was strong, but I was strong too, and I felt so powerful with him beneath me. You wouldn’t understand; horses don’t mate the same way. But I never felt anything like that.”

Balios gave her a sidelong look. A little more kind, now, as if he knew what it took for her to speak openly of such things.

“I could get used to that,” Achilles said. “He’s married, and being a queen isn’t my style, but we’ll have other chances. Maybe I’ll become a great ruler myself, and conquer the other half of Assuwa. Like Great King Minos, but prettier. I’ll have kings to choose from, and take two to bed at once, or even four. Men can be magnificent creatures.”

Xanthos snorted.

“I was with a girl before,” Achilles said. “Deidamia. I met her after I left Phthia. She was kind to me, and I loved her.” She swallowed, not quite able to meet the horses’ eyes now. “I keep dreaming about her, and the smell of her hair. She’s a day or two that way—” She waved vaguely at what she thought was north. “I wish you could meet her.”

Balios nodded once. He was paying close attention, as usual. And horses knew longing too, Achilles knew, and loss. And loneliness.

She looked at him gravely. "I'm sorry I ran away without you. But I couldn't have fed you. I put you out of my thoughts as best I could, but without my dear horses—" She offered them both a hand, and they allowed her to touch their muzzles, Balios with preening delicacy and Xanthos eagerly. Suddenly her eyes were wet, and she remembered them again as tiny foals, almost too rickety and skeletal to stand. Already Balios had been persnickety and difficult, Xanthos friendly and curious—and now here they were, grown stallions, swaying in time with the rocking of the longship, and no doubt desperate to make landfall. "We'll stay together from now on."

After a while the door opened and Meryapi came in with a bag of incense over her mouth. "I thought I'd check on you."

"Braving the stench of my stallions!" Achilles laughed. "Augeias's horses can't have stunk worse."

"Nothing a little perfume can't mask," Meryapi said bravely. "We're a day or two from Taruisa, Patroklos says. The storm actually sped us closer."

Achilles nodded. "Will you keep records of the war? Send letters home to Grandpapa?"

"All my letters go to Uncle Khaemweset. I'm not writing official state correspondence. My interests are mostly literary and, well, cultural."

"Are you still writing about dolphins?" Achilles thought of the dolphins she had seen—imagined?—hunting through the sea like water-wolves.

Meryapi smiled. "Actually, yes. New data came to light."

Achilles laughed. "What does that mean?"

"During the storm, I heard dolphins speaking in their tongue. They said a great deal. I could not understand them because there are no good dolphin grammars, but a traveler once told me that dolphin hunting cries sound like whining puppies, but creakier, and these sounded like a legion of buzzing baby hellhounds. They went past in hunting parties during the storm." Meryapi blinked at Achilles. "I never realized until now that storms happen underwater, too. The waves extend far below the surface. The seaweed was moving on the seafloor, like tall grass in the wind."

Achilles liked this notion that waves were underwater wind. "I saw dolphins too while I was swimming," she said. "And I remembered a dolphin story. Would you like to know their secrets?"

A frown creased Meryapi's brow, and she seemed about to object. Then she arched a perfect eyebrow, and her eyes glinted. "Tell me everything."

“Decades ago,” Achilles said, “my father went raiding Kolchhis with old man Herakles. Their ship wrecked in the Dardanian straits—near where we’re going—and they thought they would die, when along came a dolphin.”

Meryapi frowned again. “The dolphin rescued them, and that’s why the ship is named *Delphini*. I heard this from Patroklos.”

“Yes, but not the way I tell it.” Achilles laughed. Everything flowed like molten bronze. The past could be changed; she had always liked her version better. “The dolphin’s real name was Hypouleia—Sneaky—or at least that is the name that she earned when she brought secret snacks of mackerels and clams to old King Minos’s daughter, the one who ran away off to Athenai. Sneaky was going to let Herakles drown, because he was quite the mean old man and his sweat stunk of rage, cattle raids, and family slaughter —”

“Are those not old Achaian traditions?”

Achilles smirked. “But Peleus was trying to drag old Herakles to the surface, really fighting the water, struggling so helplessly and so uselessly that Hypouleia took pity on him. Also, he was very handsome by dolphin standards, being hairless and beardless at the time.”

Meryapi’s eyes widened. She seemed fascinated by the idea of dolphin beauty standards. For a moment, she seemed about to speak, but then she held the incense bag closer to her mouth and waited intently.

“Naturally she could not let such a pretty thing drown, so Hypouleia nudged them to the surface with her nose and pushed them all the way to the beach. Then she tried to proposition my father, but he spoke very poor dolphin. She whistled at him like this”—Achilles clicked and whistled the way she’d heard some dolphins do once—“and he thought she was telling him, ‘Even the dolphins have heard of the mighty Herakles, and it is an honor to assist.’ But in fact she was saying, ‘Hello, gorgeous, what are you doing while your washed-up friend dries out?’ He tried to reply politely with ‘We are ever in your debt’”—she clicked and whistled again—“Only what he actually said was, ‘We are interested in a threesome.’ So she chortled at him and swam off.”

The Egyptian watched her with wide eyes, repeating Achilles’s whistles and clicks under her breath, as if testing them for telltale signs of grammar. After a long moment, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Is this a true story?”

Achilles met Meryapi's accusing look with a grin. "It is a magic story." Meryapi lowered the incense bag, her face perfectly grave. Then she emitted out a high, chittering dolphin-laugh.

The next two days went by silently. By evening on the second day, the coast of Assuwa grew from a faint blurring of the horizon into a majestic line of beaches, plains, and rolling hills beyond, and on the southern end of the horizon, the snow-covered bulk of a mountain: Mount Ida, the famous mountain of Taruisa plain, mother of many rivers, where at times Aphrodite was rumored to dwell.

As the sun began to sink, Achilles brushed down her horses again, and thanked them for being good, and told them they were finally free of the sea. "Just a few more hours," she promised.

Back out on deck, Meryapi and Patroklos had made a fire on a bronze tripod and were grilling skewered fish for the rowers, a final hearty meal in case the Hittites were waiting on the beach. "We'll douse the fire when the sun sets," Patroklos said, "and get into harness. I don't think they're expecting us, but if I'm right, we'll be some of the first to land. Dig some ditches, put down some stakes, make it a nuisance to get at us."

"Light extra fires," Achilles suggested. "Make 'em think we're all landed. Plus, there are eleven hundred ships. *Someone's* going to run aground."

"True. More light means fewer corpses in the morning." Patroklos nodded. "You're in charge of finding things to burn."

"Oh, I am?" Achilles smirked. "And you're used to giving everyone orders."

"If you want to give the orders, I'll obey," Patroklos said.

Achilles nodded. "I order you to carry on giving orders. I'll find firewood."

The sun sank into the sea behind them, and they covered the tripod and sailed in quietly. As they neared the beaches of Taruisa, rowing toward a long spit of land with a ridge running through it, fires began to spring up along the shore: first one, then another, then two more. Then four more in a line; then another three.

As if in answer, a red star began to smolder in the sky.

"Are those Hittite fires?" Meryapi demanded, peering through her strange glass crystal. "I can't see anything in this darkness."

Achilles narrowed her eyes, staring into the distance, trying to peel back the dark far enough to see what hid behind those fires.

And do I have a goddess's eyes? she asked herself. *Yes, I do.*

All at once she saw them: island-rigged longships, pushed up high onto the beach, each with a sail marked with a many-branched tree. "Odysseus has landed ahead of us. Come in quickly and we'll join him on the beach."

Chapter Ten

The islander longships were drawn up high on the sand; the fires were higher still, along the ridgeline, and as Achilles waded ashore with Tooth-of-the-Dragon in her hands, she saw that Odysseus had anticipated her idea: dozens of extra fires had been started, and men were rushing about clearing dry brush and scrub to feed the decoy fires. Odysseus himself was in full panoply, helmeted, shield strapped to his back, and stood facing away from the long dark plain beyond. Seeing Achilles, he waved her over. "There's a force of Hittite archers a thousand yards downhill, shadowing us. They'll clear out before it gets much darker, but they already got one of ours, so try not to make yourself a target."

"Hittites steal women," Achilles snorted. "They don't shoot them in the dark." But it was all too easy to imagine an arrow whistling out of the darkness and catching her in the throat or the eye, so she took care to keep on the seaward side of the fire. "Who'd they kill?"

"Archon Iolaos of Phylake. Cousin of yours." Odysseus pointed a bronze-clad arm along the slope toward a heap of crisscrossed branches. "Arrow to the eye coming ashore. Damn good shot too; the archer was standing all the way up here." He held up the broken shaft of an arrow fletched with red- and green-dyed goose feathers.

The fletchings were delicate craftsmanship, each cut carefully for just enough curve to impart a lethal spin to the arrow in flight. Achilles imagined how the spinning arrowhead must have drilled its way into the dead man's eye socket and shuddered. "A good shot with good arrows."

Odysseus nodded along the slope. "Iolaos's girl is here. We talked her out of burning herself with him, but she's not doing well. Maybe if you say a

few words?”

Achilles scowled but started on her way toward the unlit pyre. Iolaos, Iolaos—he had been a guest at Phthia a few times, but they had never spoken. The old men liked him well enough, and he’d kept to himself. She was not happy at his death, but it was hard to summon a real reaction.

She reached the pyre and found herself looking down at a red-faced girl about her own age, but scrawny and swollen-eyed and covered in dirt, her belly fat with child. Her husband’s body lay inert on the heaped sticks, not so different from a slaughtered ham or goat, and certainly the last thing from an archon. “I salute the dead,” Achilles said leadenly. “Iolaos of Phylake, first fallen of this war, my second cousin.”

“He didn’t even have armor on,” the girl hissed. “I told him to put on his helmet, to take this fucking war *seriously*, but he said we were safe until morning.”

“Did you get a good look at the archer?”

The girl stared at Achilles as if she had sprouted a second head. “Of course not. *My husband is dead.*”

People die in wars. People die all the time for no reason. At least there’s an enemy to kill. The words came to Achilles, but she let them return to the void and stared silently at the woman with the corpse for a husband. She summoned up the image of the arrow in her mind, then continued in a lower voice. “The arrow had distinctive fletchings, red and green goose feathers, and fine craftsmanship. A nobleman shot your man, maybe even a prince. I’ll find him and kill him. My word as your husband’s kin.”

“You’re Achilles. The Silent One’s daughter.” The girl shuddered and picked herself up, wiping her eyes with her dirty hands, smudging her eye sockets with soot and clay. It gave her the look of a skull come to life. “Give him a slow death,” she said. “Give him the courtesy of actually *knowing* he’s dying. If you bring me back the hand that killed my Iolaos, I will sacrifice a hundred cattle to your mother.”

“Give Athena fifty,” Achilles said. “Give the rest to me.” She scowled, not sure why she was making promises to murder a man she’d never met to avenge a man she’d met three times, but—fine. She was here to fight a war, and warriors had to kill.

And the extra cows would be nice.

She walked back toward Odysseus, but halfway there, she paused and let her eyes adjust to the darkness, staring out across the plain. A few

rushlights and reed candles glowed in farmhouses along the winding river Skamandros. In the distance beyond, maybe three miles across the plain, rose the walls of a great city. Lanterns topped its twenty or thirty tall towers, casting a wide smudge of light around the walls. Wilusa was a large city, bigger than Thebai of the Seven Gates. Even in the darkness, the sheer expanse of its walls suggested dwellings for thousands.

And somewhere between the town and her—somewhere—was a stranger she had promised to kill. Perhaps he stood on that isolated hill half a mile hence, where the Skamandros separated into three marshy streams. Perhaps he had cold blue eyes and short black hair, an aquiline nose and full, contemptuous lips, and a Hittite bow in his hand. Perhaps he could see her too.

Anyasha. The word came in a whisper in her ear. *Son of the Goddess.*

Achilles made her way back down to the Myrmidon ships, where Patroklos was unpacking tents. She told them what she had seen. When she mentioned Iolaos's bonfire, Meryapi gasped.

"They're going to *burn* him?"

To an Egyptian, this must have been the ultimate disrespect for the dead. The idea made Achilles uncomfortable too, if she thought about it: a bit too much like roasting slaughtered cattle and sending the aroma to the gods. What if Iolaos smelled delicious? She kept her mouth shut.

"Only his flesh, so it doesn't rot," Patroklos said. "Agamemnon went over this at the war council. It is far more disrespectful to let men rot, and Hera, Queen of Kings, has personally called for cremation. She will treasure the bones of our dead and restore their flesh in the afterlife."

Achilles thought of Iphianassa slitting the throats of the cattle, of the great roasting flames, of the scent of cooking meat, and her stomach growled. She did not feel particularly reassured. Meryapi, on the other hand, grumbled but seemed to accept the divine verdict.

"Your Hera is known to us as Hathor," Meryapi said, "and has an excellent record as divine caretaker of mankind. If she says it is right, I must accept that sometimes the gods give different instructions at different times. But, husband," she added sternly to Patroklos, "if *I* die here, for whatever reason, you *must* preserve my body properly. Remember my instructions."

"You won't die," Patroklos said with a frown, "but—of course."

More ships were landing, and new contingents. Diomedes's black ships were pulling onto the shore a few hundred yards north, and the ships of Sparta were landing to the south, and each new arrival set up new fires, guiding the Achaian fleet in off the darkening waters.

Achilles lingered by the pyre of Iolaos and was joined by Menelaos in full armor, carrying a wineskin and a torch.

Menelaos Atreidai's helmet was Hittite-style, bronze and conical and buffed to a high sheen, with cheek guards and a nose guard and a tall stiff crest of black horsehair. His eyes blazed from under the helmet. Bands of bronze formed his cuirass and extended downward into an armored belt and a skirt of bronze bands that covered him all the way to his greaves, and a light shield was strapped to his arm. One of his Spartans held his spear. The king of Sparta knelt by the dead man's wife and whispered with her for a moment, then rose to his feet and led Achilles a few yards away.

Menelaos's eyes were wet. "Achilles," he said, "I know I weep like a woman, but I hope you will forgive me. I'm sorry for your cousin. I did not expect us to lose a man so soon, and when I think of the others who will die, I wish diplomacy had succeeded."

"Me too," Achilles said. "But I know who killed this man."

"Odysseus showed me an arrow, but I didn't recognize it," Menelaos said. "You do?"

"Do you know an Anyasha?" Achilles asked. "A goddess's son?"

Menelaos's expression darkened, and he nodded slowly. "Anyasha? Yes—Aineias of Dardania. He was in Hattusa when Tudhaliyas threw us out. Tall, black hair, supposedly the son of Aphrodite. Said Helen never loved me. *He* shot Iolaos?"

"I think so," Achilles said. "I sensed him, and I knew his name, though we've never met."

Menelaos gritted his teeth. "He dies."

"That's what I was thinking. He'll be out again tomorrow, looking for more action."

"He'll find it."

They drank together and went back to the pyre to pour out wine at the feet of the dead.

Below, Achaian ships were beaching up and down the shore. One pale longship glided up onto the beach in an open space opposite the unlit pyre,

and as it ground its way up onto the sand, Achilles turned, her eyes pulled down to it as if drawn down by weights.

The rails of the ship were decorated with the horns of bulls, and the skulls of cattle decorated the prow, and carved bone encrusted the cabin in the back. The rowers wore bleached ox skulls on their helmets. A white-armed girl in diaphanous cloth floated down from the ship, lantern in her hand. Her face was veiled and her headdress was horned with the horns of a mother cow, and her fingernails were covered in sharp golden sheaths. She ascended the slope, and her lantern cast a vast shadow down the slope behind her.

“My niece,” Menelaos said uneasily, and bowed. “Hera’s new high priestess.”

“Iphianassa,” Achilles murmured.

The child’s veiled head lifted. “Achilles. I have been waiting for our paths to cross properly. I am here to light the pyre. Where is Laodameia, wife of the fallen?”

The red-faced, round-bellied woman with the soot-smudged eye sockets bowed to the priestess. “I am here.”

“Give thanks to Hera, who welcomes your noble warrior to her bosom.” Iphianassa glided closer to the pyre, then opened the lantern with a gold-nailed hand. Red coals spilled out onto the dry wood. “Give thanks to Hera, who will purify his bones and seal them to herself.”

Laodameia shook. Tears cut tracks through the smudges around her eyes. Her face was blank, the look of a woman who cannot believe what she sees is real. “Thank you, Queen of Kings.”

“Give thanks to Hera, Iolaos,” Iphianassa hissed, and the coals began to catch. The dried brambles and brush converted from wood into tinder in an instant, and fire danced up the branches, a tongue of ember-light that traveled along the dried wood and released its form. The smell of fat and hair filled the air.

Iphianassa breathed deep, as if the aroma were sweet to her. And it *was* sweet, terribly, terribly sweet. Achilles covered her mouth against the sheer savor of it, revolted that a man’s body could smell so appetizing, but the child-priestess groaned with bliss. “This,” she whispered, “is the sweetness of a true offering to the gods. Courage, Iolaos: your death will consecrate this war, and all will call you Protesilaos, Firstfruit of the Fallen, sacred to

the gods.” Smoke rose from the pyre, and plumes of it wreathed the priestess, and she trembled.

Achilles could not stand there any longer. She stepped away and walked along the ridge, and a moment later she saw that Menelaos had come with her, sweaty and ashen under his armor. “Agamemnon is landing,” he said, pointing down the beach. “We should check in with him.”

“I didn’t like that,” Achilles said.

“I saw.” Menelaos’s shoulders slumped under the burden of his armor, but he trudged along the beach, torch in hand. “But this could be a long war. Bones we can carry home. Corpses rot, and you’d like that even less.”

“Your niece seems very zealous.”

Menelaos walked in silence for a while. Then he sighed. “Yes.”

“Was she always so?”

“She was a girl like any other. But the goddess demanded her, and we dedicated her to Hera. Now—” Menelaos’s shoulders squared again. “She bears the burden with a child’s aplomb. We can’t all be sad drunkards. If this is what the Queen of Kings desires in exchange for her support, we will win this war more cheaply than we deserve.”

“Odysseus and Diomedes seemed worried about Iphianassa,” Achilles said.

“They brought her to the goddess. She was frightened at first.” Menelaos stopped abruptly and turned back to Achilles. The torch in his hand made the bronze of his armor a strange mirror of its flames. His eyes were lost in shadow. “I’m frightened too. I’ve never seen so many men under arms, and who knows how many will die when the Hittites come. I should have guarded Helen better when I had the chance and spared us all this trouble.”

His fear bothered Achilles almost as much as the child’s savage joy in burning the dead. “We’ll get your wife back tomorrow,” she said. “Chin up.”

Agamemnon’s tent was almost a megaron unto itself. It was supported by sixteen poles that rose like pillars and was floored in straw covered with heavy Hittite rugs. The Great King’s golden chariot with its brilliant Egyptian decorations sat on one side, and on the other was a table laden with jars of wine and loaves of bread and golden rings. The Great King’s simple wooden seat sat just off center, and in the very center, a brazier full of hot coals glowed in the darkness, giving everyone’s skin a hellish sheen.

As Achilles entered, Agamemnon rose from his chair and nodded to her, and his green eyes met hers, and for a moment everything fell away. There was only Agamemnon, bright-eyed King of Kings, and his subtle smile, and her answering grin, and the coiled power in his body, and the answering strength in hers.

Ah, Great King, what I wouldn't give for another hour alone—

Then once again they were not alone, but surrounded by kings and archons and captains in bronze scale and boiled leather, in boar's-tusk helmets and brass helms, in red cloaks and blue cloaks and white, their eyes all burning with the same red light from the brazier. Diomedes was there, a stern statue with coal-red eyes, and Odysseus, and old Nestor, but the rest were a blur. The smell of sweat mingled with the smell of burning. Slaves distributed cups, and the smell of wine mingled with fire and flesh.

Agamemnon stood in front of the brazier in his cuirass of black-enameled and gilded and silvered bands of bronze. The armor was intricate, decorated with three black snakes on each pauldron, their mouths turned up to snarl at the Great King's bearded head; two more snakes decorated the neck guard, facing each other with malevolent intensity.

The king spoke in a low, measured voice. "Since my family came out of Hattusa and settled among the Achaians, we have known this day would come. The corruption of the Hittite empire has finally become so absolute that they break solemn vows, condone piracy, rape and plunder, and violate the sacred laws of hospitality. I won't give a long speech—tonight you need sleep—but make sure your men are unpacked and ready to fight in the morning. Have your grooms triple-check the axles, and make sure your bows are ready to string. One of us is already dead, so set your sharpest lookouts.

"In the morning, we'll take the bridge into Wilusa and burn the countryside. Hopefully they give up Helen and sue for peace, but if not, we'll keep at it. If Hattusa sends an army to relieve the city, we'll crush them. If we have to, we'll sack every city in Assuwa.

"Drink to victory, to the Queen of Kings, to the Silent One, to the Achaian federation, to Menelaos, to justice. Do not offend the local gods, but take whatever treasure your spears win."

The Achaians repeated the toast and drank. The wine was bitter in Achilles's mouth, but she drank too.

“Now go,” said Agamemnon. “In the morning, listen for the horns and Stentor’s yelling.”

The moment dissolved. Achilles made her way back up the beach in the dark. The bright watch fires made it hard to navigate the beach, but in the end, she reached her Myrmidons and recognized Patroklos by his wild hair and Meryapi by her Egyptian good looks.

Balios and Xanthos were being brushed by some stable girl—stable boy?—she squinted for a moment to figure it out. The scrawny slave looked vaguely familiar, a wan, boyish-looking girl or girlish-looking boy in a woman’s skirt. The slave wore kohl, applied with delicate care to masculine eye sockets—charcoal mixed with oil, the sort of thing Achilles had tried to wear in Phthia before she ran away.

“Who’s that brushing my horses?” she asked Patroklos sotto voce. “Man or woman?”

“Melia?” Patroklos said. “She used to be your slave, but she was named Bathykles then. You gave her to me as a gift, remember? I let her change her name and clothes when she told me what she really was. Seemed only decent. Your horses like her.”

The answer bothered Achilles. It seemed like a petty thing to worry about at a time like this, but she barely remembered this boy Bathykles, who had supposedly been her slave. And if a woman like her had been *in her household*, had *been her property*, she should have been *told*. She pushed the thought from her mind. “What’s Meryapi doing?”

The Egyptian was kneeling in front of a small table, lighting cones of black incense and muttering in the sibilant tongue of her people. There was a ghost of a chant there, the impression of a melody.

Patroklos leaned closer and whispered, “She prays to Ra at night in all his aspects so that when the sun rises he will guard the people she loves. Ra is the ultimate great-great-great-grandfather of her house, and he looks after her grandfather and her mother. She is particularly worried tonight, so she may be up for several hours. Try to sleep. She won’t make much sound, but we’ll be glad of her prayers tomorrow.”

Ra—the Eagle, the Lord of Light, the father of the Weapons—Achilles had seen him in the Silent One’s memories, raging at the cruelty of the Great Mother. She remembered the way his wings had shook, and Pallasu’s ancient scorn.

The Silent One had said that Ra was dead. Achilles watched Meryapi's purposeful movements, the careful fluttering gestures of her hands, the way she drew with the incense smoke, the whispered spells and secret motions, the fervent light in her eyes and the intensity of her prayers. All that care for a dead god she did not know was dead.

A great sorrow came over Achilles, and she went into her tent and slumped down on a straw-stuffed cot. The darkness consumed her. As she plunged into oblivion, she felt the fluttering of her mother's silent wings.

Chapter Eleven

She was home in Phthia, a ghostly Phthia lit by no sun, and the swaying fields of summer grass and grain were stirred by no wind, fluttering like weeds on the seafloor. The diffuse smell of threshed grain and cut grass filled the air, and over it all loomed the ancient mountain called Narta, and on its slopes stood the palace town, and at its base the walled stables of the chariot fortress. And then she found herself in all of this, standing in the stableyard by the open gates, as old Kheiron led out a light chariot drawn by two old mares, Kyaneia and Laodike.

Kheiron was dead. Blood smeared his beard, and his eyes stared out of two enormous bruises, but he wore a kindly smile, and he whistled a silly Aiolian tune the mares had always liked. Kyaneia and Laodike were dead too, three years now since the accident. Their necks were contused where the cart-yoke had snapped their spines, but they looked at Achilles with solemn amusement, and Kyaneia snickered the way she always did when she wanted attention.

This was the ghost of a memory, or a memory with ghosts. *I was eleven or twelve*, thought Achilles, and when she looked down, she was a child—but still female, flatter and narrower but recognizably herself.

“Remember,” Kheiron said, “horses are prey animals. To a wild horse, fear is survival, and flight is safety. What we demand from our horses is nothing less than madness: to charge the enemy’s flanks as we shower them with arrows; to risk spears, javelins, and arrows in their bodies; to run *toward* danger and not away, against their own better judgment.”

Achilles remembered what she had said: “If horses are such cowards, why employ them at all?”

“Horses, like men, can be trained to courage.” Kheiron vaulted onto the cart and smiled a gentle, bloody smile, holding the reins. “In the wild, horses follow a single brave leader, usually a stallion but sometimes a mare of ferocious temperament. If they ran pell-mell, they would be easy prey for wolves and lions, but, running together, they can trample anything that blocks their escape.”

“And so I must become their mare of ferocious temperament?” Achilles had said.

In reality, Kheiron had cursed her faggotry before the lesson continued, but his ghost only nodded. “Since it is not in your nature to be a stallion, yes: you must be the most dominant of mares. Look only ahead of you where you want them to go, and *never look to them*, for horses look at their leaders, and the horse that is looked at thinks, *I am the leader*. This terrifies them.”

Achilles smirked, making sure not to look at Kyaneia or Laodike. She hopped up into the chariot next to Kheiron. “Give me the reins.”

“In a true battle,” Kheiron said, “they will falter when they smell blood. When men shout and other horses scream. When arrows strike next to them. When other chariots flee. At such times you will need either incredible strength or else absolute confidence and a firm hand they dare not test. Once you begin to negotiate with them, they will panic.”

“I am the child of a king and descended from the gods,” Achilles said proudly. “Why would I negotiate with horses?”

“They’re ten times your size.”

Achilles shrugged. “Mount Narta is a million times my size, and Phthia is a thousand times my size, but I will rule both one day.” She took the reins from Kheiron. “Father said Herakles used to kill horses that failed him.”

“Herakles was a terrible horseman,” Kheiron said dourly. “Don’t be like Herakles. He never talked to his horses. They were supposed to read his mind.”

“I see.” Achilles flicked the reins, and the mares began to move. They glided through the open gates and off down the dirt road onto the plains. It was pleasing, being back with these mares, and pleasing having Kheiron in her chariot, watching her silently, despite his ghastly death wounds. “I’m sorry Mother killed you.”

“*You* killed me,” Kheiron said. “You are half-god, and that is a thing you can do now.”

“Oh.” Achilles fell silent, and her mind began to wander back to Wilusa in Taruisa, while the Aiolian plain rushed past on all sides and the scents of grass and chaff and horseflesh filled her nostrils.

Suddenly the sky was black. Lightning stabbed down without warning and struck the earth, and the ghost mares screamed and reared. The chariot pitched and bucked, and Achilles clung to the reins and jerked hard to the right, keeping her eyes on the fields, shouting to the horses. She saw danger in the grass: serpents in swarms, a nest of serpents, a man with serpents in his hands, with serpents in his hair, with serpents in his eyes—a man who was a serpent. *Kill him!* she snarled at the ghost mares. *Trample him!* But they reared again, and the axle snapped, and the yoke twisted, and their necks broke, and the cart pitched wildly into the air, and she was floating—

“Immortal gods,” Achilles snarled as she flung herself up from her cot. “I’ll kill them all. I’ll break their divine necks. Was that Apollo in my dream? The Serpent invaded my mind!” She was drenched in sweat, and her ears were ringing. She pushed open the tent flap. It was dark outside. Everyone was asleep but the guards at their lookouts and the slave girl who had been grooming Balios and Xanthos, Melia, who had once been her malaka slave Bathykles. Malaka—the word brought a pang of old guilt. She had never wavered in her insistence that she was kunai, not a man at all and certainly not an impotent one, but she had called others malaka more than once. It must have come from weakness, from the fear that everyone was right about her, but it was an ugly thing.

Melia sat next to the stallions, humming a soft melody. Achilles stared at her, trying to remember her better. She remembered a scrawny nuisance of a child, weak and snotty, but she had never thought anyone at Phthia was a girl like herself.

“What watch is it?” she demanded of the slave.

Melia raised her black-lined eyes. “Early in the fourth. It will be sunrise in a couple of hours.” Her voice quavered, as if the sight of Achilles frightened her, but she was keeping calm.

Achilles stalked over and sat down next to Melia, staring her in the eyes. She did not admire the appearance the slave girl presented, or the fear, but she supposed it could not be helped. “You’ve been with us a long time?”

Melia blinked as if startled. “Since I was six. The king bought me to mend your clothes.”

That sounded plausible. Achilles forgot sometimes that before Skyros she had not been allowed to weave or sew, and others who were not the king's sons had been bought to attend to such tasks for her. "And you were a woman that entire time?"

"Yes, but not until my lord Patroklos gave permission."

Achilles narrowed her eyes. "You could have told *me* what you were," she said. "Maybe I would have had a companion on the way to Skyros." On Skyros, this gaunt, pathetic body before her could have become something soft and elegant like Damia. Instead of drawn charcoal on the eyes, she could have been someone refined, a weaver of great skill perhaps, or a perfumer, or even one of Skorpia's clever rice farmers, who coaxed the finicky plants to produce medicinal glues. An entire unlived life flashed in front of her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Melia's eyes widened, and she shrank back, swallowing hard. The lump in the girl's neck bothered Achilles; it was like a taunt. "I was going to," Melia said hoarsely. "But you caught me."

That was an absurd accusation. Achilles narrowed her eyes. "I *caught* you? What did I do?"

The girl's voice turned into a choked whisper. "You beat me. For mocking you. I didn't mean to mock you." Achilles could see Melia's muscles standing out against her skin, veins throbbing with the effort of holding totally still, suppressing a flinch of the entire body.

And then Achilles remembered too: the malaka slave boy Bathykles in a terrible parody of a woman's tunic, pinned badly, eyes smudged with charcoal stolen from Achilles's pot of eyeliner, and the little weakling saying that *he too was a girl*. Achilles remembered the rage that had surged up inside her, and the way she had lashed out with hands and fists, and finally flung the parody of her shame out of her chambers, then stalked off to hunt boars with a spear, lest she should murder her own slave for mocking her.

Achilles stood up sharply and stepped away, turning her back on the slave girl. "So you were not mocking me after all," she said after a while. "Well. I was a harsh mistress. I will buy you from Patroklos and set you free, if you like. You can go to Skyros and be welcomed."

"I don't know how to get to Skyros." Melia's voice was wary, careful. "I am content here. Patroklos has been a good master. Please let me stay."

Achilles felt a certain respect for the slave now. It must not have been easy to see her again, and Melia must have been dreading this conversation. It would be easy to get rid of the slave girl and make herself feel better, but

Best not to make things worse.

This was the last thing she needed on the morning of her first battle, and she might be exhausted on the field, but she supposed she deserved it if she had been a cruel mistress. “Would you like to be like me? A woman in body?”

“I have learned that it is best not to tempt the gods.” The words came out very carefully.

Achilles remembered what Kheiron’s ghost had told her in the dream. If *she* had been the one who killed him, if the mere fact of her hatred had twisted the fabric of the universe and stirred the seas to dash him on the rocks, then Melia was wise to avoid too close an association. “Fine. I’m going for a walk. I’ll be back in an hour. Have Balios and Xanthos yoked to my chariot by then, and brush them down good. I need them sharp.”

Without waiting for a reply, she stalked away. It was strange to think she had so unjustly hurt someone she could barely remember, but all she could remember of Phthia, it seemed, was her own pain. She had even managed to see Melia’s childhood courage, Melia’s attempt to tell her she was not alone, as mockery of *her*.

I was often called selfish growing up. I never fully believed it until now.

The anger in Achilles smoldered and grew. In the night sky, the red star throbbed. If Zeus was coming to destroy her, let him come. The Thunderer himself could not be angrier than she was, or more ready for a battle to the death.

Brass horns blasted all along the ridge.

In her cuirass of scale and banded pauldrons, in her greaves and boar’s-tusk helm, sandal-shod, shield strapped to her back, Tooth-of-the-Dragon in her left hand and a composite bow in her right, quiver on her left hip bristling with black-fletched arrows, scabbard underneath it, dagger sheathed on her right hip, blood pounding in her ears, Achilles descended toward the waiting chariots.

The Myrmidons were on the right of the formation, drawn up beside the other Aiolians, along with the Euboians and Boiotians and islanders.

Odysseus waved to her from his chariot, though it took her a moment to recognize him under his boar's-tusk helmet. She waved back.

Then she reached the chariots of the Myrmidons.

All sixty chariots were fully crewed, except one: the lightweight Egyptian chariot Patroklos had reserved for her. Balios and Xanthos stood in harness, snorting and stamping, though they settled as she approached. Patroklos stood on the cart in full armor, shield strapped to his left arm, reins wrapped around his right.

"Playing charioteer today?" Achilles said with a mocking laugh. "Oh, Patroklos. You're good with a bow. You shouldn't be driving."

"I'm not as good as you." Patroklos grinned, though the collar of his cuirass hid his mouth; his eyes crinkled, and his voice echoed a little.

"Come on. You always wanted to do this."

"I did," Achilles allowed, and stepped up into the chariot. "How are the horses behaving?"

"Balios is being his usual charming self, but Xanthos is fired up." Patroklos turned his helmeted head to survey the chariots. The sun was beginning to rise beyond Wilusa on the other side of the plain, and the river flashed with red and yellow light.

The fields below them were green and full of tall grass and nodding flowers, white asphodels and red crocuses and stands of goldenrods. Birds called in the distance, and vultures circled to the northeast. The plains were deceptively flat, but as Achilles studied them, she realized that they were folded, with countless shallow dells hidden by the curves of the landscape. It was good chariot country, but ambushes might lurk anywhere.

"Can you see the bridge to Wilusa?" Patroklos said.

Achilles squinted down the slope. She could, just barely. It looked deceptively close to the city from here, but it was probably closer to half a mile from the walls. "There may be fords to the south," she said. "And to the north."

"I sent Automedon to check," Patroklos said. "There's one five miles south, but no Hittites."

High above, an eagle shrieked. It would be convenient, Achilles thought: to mount the sky and circle overhead, to spot the enemy wherever they might be hidden, to flush out their ambushes and spy on the movements of their troops. *Mother*, she thought with an ironic smile, *send out your owls and tell me what to expect.*

But the gods did not seem to perform miracles on request, and no sudden flight of owls filled the sky. “Just so you know,” Achilles said, “if the horses panic, we break right. At least that way we won’t run into the infantry.”

“They won’t panic,” Patroklos said.

“They’ve never been in battle. They might.”

“You’ve never been in battle,” said Patroklos. “You won’t panic.”

“I’m different. I’m crazy.”

He laughed. “So are your godsdamn horses.”

The horns blasted thrice, signaling a general advance. In the center of the army, the spearmen formed up in ranks. The drums began to beat slowly, and the spearmen inched forward. Even a little faster and they would lose their cohesion in a hurry. As they advanced, squadrons of chariots began to roll forward on the left, and then Patroklos and a dozen others began calling out commands on the right, and one by one the chariot teams began to move. Hoofbeats drummed on the earth, wheels creaked and whined, bronze clattered, and the smell of sweat and metal filled the air. Balios and Xanthos began to move, impatient to go faster, annoyed by the close formation.

The sun came up higher, and Achilles squinted against it. “We should have waited till noon,” she muttered, stowing Tooth-of-the-Dragon in the spear holder and settling against the chariot railing. “What a nuisance the sun is.”

“It won’t matter long.” Patroklos squinted, maintaining the pace. “Keep your eyes out, though.”

The sounds grew louder. Achilles looked around her on every side and almost recoiled from the sheer number of people and horses all around her. She had never *seen* so many living bodies in one place, never heard such noise all at once. It was too much. It was like the stories about Kadesh, the sheer *loudness* of it all. “They must hear us all the way to the city.”

“Good. Maybe it will frighten them back to diplomacy.”

She looked at him. “Do you believe that?”

“I hope for it.”

But Achilles wasn’t sure if she did.

Slowly they crawled across the grassy plain, trampling flowers under hooves or breaking them beneath the wheels. Once Achilles bent down and plucked a crocus and tucked it behind her ear, since the chariot behind her

was already going to trample it anyway. "I wish this were a desert," she said. "It seems a shame to ruin good land."

"It'll be fine in a month."

More hope. "Who knows if it will?"

The bridge was closer now, a large stone-and-wood structure that crossed the river at a deep point, broad enough for four chariots to cross together. Lines of Hittite infantry were drawn up on the bridge, and a small phalanx guarded the approach. In front of the infantry was a squadron of about two hundred chariots, much fewer than the Achaian chariotry, but all Hittite-style, heavily armored vehicles with three men in each: a driver and two archers, and each archer also a spearman. Even from where she was, Achilles could easily make out the magnificent bronze armor of the Wilusan nobility. She had heard of Hektor and Alaksandu, princes of the city; these must be the tall men clad from shoulders to knees in burnished bronze scales, though even their bronze was dark against the brilliant sunrise behind them.

The Wilusan chariots began to move away from the bridge, going south along the river. A flanking position, or a harrying one, though a dangerous choice if this was all they had. Achilles scanned the south for hidden troops. There were copses of trees along the river, and thick orchards full of fruit trees that might hide infantry but had nowhere to hide chariots.

Agamemnon's horns on the left flank blasted four times, the signal for the chariots to begin shooting arrows. One by one the chariots began to pick up speed, pulling out of their tight formations and rumbling toward the bridge. One by one the archers began to fire. Achilles set an arrow to her bow and waited as Balios and Xanthos rumbled slowly on. In front of her, the first Achaian chariots were turning, loosing arrows on the infantry and then rolling toward the Wilusan chariots for a second shot.

She bent her bow as the chariot rattled toward the bridge. Archers from the bridge had begun to return fire. Arrow bounced off chariots and armor and horse-armor. One horse went down screaming behind them, but Balios and Xanthos did not seem to notice. Balios still trotted scornfully on, as if all this were a meaningless parade exercise, and Xanthos seemed grim.

She sighted down her arrow, picking out a tall Hittite sheltering behind a cowhide shield. Too much of his free shoulder was exposed, and she let loose; a moment later, he collapsed, too far away to make a sound. An arrow glanced off Patroklos's pauldron, and another struck the wheel, and

then Patroklos started the horses turning and Achilles drew another arrow. The chariots of the Wilusans were further away—too far away—and Patroklos swore but struck the reins harder and shouted, “Faster!”

Balios and Xanthos began to move in earnest now, and the green fields thundered past. The Wilusan chariotry opened fire. Just then, behind them, Agamemnon’s battle horns blew seven sudden blasts.

Achilles twisted her head round and in an instant *saw*.

War chariots were slamming into the Achaian left from the tall grass to the north. Instantly she *knew* that they had come down the coast from the northeast, crossing the river by a northern ford under cover of night to lie in wait. And then she *felt* him, Anyasha, Aineias, charging at the Achaian left flank with his chariots, bows firing, horns blasting, men shouting, horses screaming.

A cry of panic went up in the Achaian infantry. Chariots from the left were trampling wildly back through the troops. Men were screaming. Horses were breaking, running wildly about. Chariot yokes slipped, and axles shattered.

“Immortal gods,” Patroklos growled, “we’re in trouble.”

In front of them, the Wilusan chariots had regrouped . . . or finally grouped up as they had planned all along. Infantry were pouring out of the orchards, and the chariots were beginning to charge, ready to meet them headlong. Arrows came plunging down among the Myrmidons, and horses began to scream, and the smell of blood suddenly filled the air, and Achilles heard Kheiron’s warning echoing in her ears: *Horses are prey animals*.

Her pulse, their hoofbeats, the rattle of wheels, all thundered in her ears, but she stared through it all, training her eyes on the Wilusan chariots, and lifted her bow for a shot. *You will not break, Balios. You will not break, Xanthos. Keep moving.* Arrows plunged down all around them, and infantry came charging out with spears and shields to hit them from the flanks, and if either horse flinched, they would be lost—

Balios and Xanthos did not flinch.

She felt them gather, and then they threw themselves forward. The chariot bounced and rattled, and she clung to the rails to stay on, and Patroklos shouted a long, shrill cry of not terror, not rage, but sheer exhilaration. She bent her bow and shot, pulled and shot again, shot blindly into the wall of oncoming horses and metal and spears, shot again and again, then let go her bow and tore out Tooth-of-the-Dragon. They went

roaring past the Wilusan chariots, and she was stabbing down at the spearmen on foot and sweeping them off their feet and roaring and bellowing at the top of her lungs. Arrows bounced off her armor. A chariot cut across them just in time for Balios and Xanthos to throw themselves on it, hooves striking down in unison and smashing the driver's skull and crushing the spearman's shield, and they trampled over the shattered chariot and bounced over the screaming spearman, and Achilles leapt from the car with a roar. Achaian chariots were rushing up alongside her and getting bogged down, and the riders were leaping down to stand with her, meeting her shield to shield, and she turned, bellowing, looking for those two Wilusan princes in their walls of scales, but—

They were already two hundred yards downriver with two-thirds of their chariots, fleeing full speed for the bridge. The phalanx had opened to let them through. The ambush had broken; the Hittite horses had panicked.

Achilles turned on the stranded infantry and charged into the orchard. Tooth-of-the-Dragon found a man's throat; she flung him down and grabbed his axe. A man rushed at her with spear and shield, and she drew her spearpoint back and swung the axe, hooked the rim of his shield, and twisted; his own momentum tore his shield away, and she plunged her spear through the gap and into his face.

A man ran from her, so she chased him out of the orchard. He was fast on his feet and leapt onto a screaming horse, which reared and shrieked, but he clung to it—

Xanthos and Balios thundered across her path, and Patroklos threw out an armored hand. She caught it and leapt onto the chariot, scrambled up onto the railing, and let her whole body carry Tooth-of-the-Dragon up over the railing and into the air. It whistled out and plunged through the fleeing man, flinging him off the screaming horse and pinning him to the dirt. She leapt free again to retrieve her spear.

The horn blasted six times on the left. This was the signal that the left flank was clear, that the danger had been repelled. Achilles began to shout for the right to regroup. "Myrmidons!" she screamed. "Gather!"

But she could already sense the day slipping. The Wilusan chariots were still crossing the bridge, but their phalanx was edging back behind them. It would be impossible to just crash through that wall of spears and shields. It would be a long, slow withering of archery now, and no more excitement for a bit.

She climbed back into her chariot and saw that Xanthos and Balios were trembling with rage still, foaming at the mouth, their eyes mad with bloodlust. Patroklos looked shaken.

The Myrmidon chariots began to form up again around them, letting the stranded Wilusan infantry disappear into the orchards or run off upriver.

“I guess I didn’t have to worry about their morale,” Achilles said. “Balios, you’re crazy. Xanthos, you’re crazy too. You’re a death god and a lion disguised as horses. What’s *wrong* with you two? I love you both so much!”

“Achilles,” said Patroklos. “You’ve got a little—” He gestured. “Blood on your face.”

Achilles wiped at her face. Chunks of blood came off on her hand. It must have sprayed. Her pulse was thundering in her ears. She had never felt so alive. She wanted to charge the bridge, as mad as that was; she wanted to feel the arrows bouncing off her armor, and if any got through, some insane part of her wanted to feel them penetrate her skin and muscle and strike the bone beneath. She shivered and began to laugh a shrill, shaky laughter.

“I told you,” Patroklos said. “Your horses are as crazy as you are.”

Achilles drew in a chattering breath. “We need to find these fords to the south. Bypass the bridge. Hit them from the flanks.”

But the horns of Agamemnon blew twice. The Great King had other ideas. Retreat, the signal meant, and regroup out of reach.

Skirmishes continued throughout the day. Archers, mostly, taking potshots from concealed positions and sneaking away. The Wilusans withdrew from the bridge. The attackers on the left flank turned out to have been Dardanians from further up the coast, led by their prince Anyasha, Aineias —“I knew it! I still need to kill him,” Achilles muttered when she heard—who had indeed crossed an unknown ford and taken the left flank by surprise. A few hundred men were dead, and dozens of horses, and the wounded had nasty arrow wounds. By early afternoon, Agamemnon sent out slaves to collect the dead, and slaves came from the Wilusan side to do the same.

This part bothered Achilles. It seemed strange to kill a man and then let his body be taken away. She was not sure exactly what she was expecting; civilized warfare customs everywhere dictated that the dead be collected in good order. Even the Egyptians would only take a hand from the enemy

fallen to get an accurate count, and send the rest of the body home for burial.

An exhaustion fell over her. She told Patroklos to take her back to camp and made sure to pet Balios and Xanthos enthusiastically and praise them as divine horses, gods among the horse race, destroyers of their enemies, brave horses of abnormal pride and dread, *good boys*. Meryapi stared at her in dismay, but Achilles took off her armor to prove that the blood was not hers, and the Egyptian princess seemed to relax. “Thank Ra,” she said, “and all your Achaian gods besides. I’ll have supper made.”

Achilles dragged herself to her tent and collapsed inside. Supper sounded good in an abstract way, but her body was suddenly devoid of all strength, and she slipped into a fitful sleep.

“I killed six men today.”

The words echoed in the realm of bones. Not all the bones in the Silent One’s kingdom were dry that day; six new skeletons were heaped at the corner of the pile, red and black with clotted drying blood. The owl that settled upon them looked up at Achilles with blank, wide eyes.

“It felt so good.”

“Yes,” the Silent One whispered, and suddenly she was standing behind Achilles on her right, holding up a strip of flayed red meat. Her silver-taloned hands shredded the strip into two smaller strips. “Would you like some? It is no crime to consume your own sacrifices.”

Achilles recoiled. “You’re eating them?”

“They’re dead,” Athena said idly, “and, like all mortals, made of meat. Is this not the same principle you observe with cattle, goats, sheep, and birds?” She stuffed the shredded meat into her mouth, and her strange elegant face was smeared with red. “Did you at least inhale the *aroma* of your victory? It smells like everything worth having: like sacrifice, like power, like triumph. Every man you kill will make you stronger. A war like this could make you strong enough to face the Thunderer.”

Achilles stared at her mother’s blood-smeared face. “I would rather not kill any more than is necessary to rescue Helen. I had to kill in battle, but I will not kill for its own sake.”

“Don’t lie to your mother,” purred a soft, sweet voice behind Achilles on her left. She spun, and there stood the Queen of Kings, cow-horned, golden-clawed, and grinning a bloodstained smile. “You liked every kill you made.

As you *should*. You are the daughter of a goddess, and you could become a goddess yourself, greater than the Thunderer, more powerful than Kronos before him. It is your lot in life to fight, to triumph, to feed. That is the way of the gods.”

Achilles glared at the Queen of Kings and the Silent One. “And if I kill the gods?”

“That’s what gods *do*,” Hera sniffed. “I can see we are inflicting premature enlightenment on you. One way or another, the more you kill, the more like us you will be, and in time you will understand everything.”

“Or,” said Athena, tilting her head birdlike to stare at Achilles, “you will rescue Helen and the war will end, and the Thunderer will leave you alone, for he fears Helen’s power.”

“Yes,” Hera agreed, “but that’s no fun. Your daughter would make a magnificent King of Kings.”

“Let me sleep,” Achilles growled. “I am tired, and I don’t want you in my dreams.”

Athena reached out her silver talons and took Hera by the arm. “Come, sister,” she said, and they vanished.

In a twilit world of sea and sky, Achilles laid down her heavy head and dozed. Something in her felt sick, stained, twisted, and yet her stomach never stopped growling.

Chapter Twelve

Meryapi woke her. “Achilles? Food is ready. They’re dividing the loot, but Patroklos went to get your share. An Amazon has come to see you.”

Achilles blinked and rolled to her feet. “An Amazon? Why?”

“She says you killed three of her brothers in an orchard today.”

“I didn’t even know Amazons had brothers.” Achilles scowled and tried to get her bearings. Her stomach was still growling, and the tent was still spinning. “She just walked right into the camp?”

“She came with the Wilusan priests. They came to negotiate buybacks of captives. Your army took dozens of farmers prisoner, and their families want them back.” Meryapi held out a small cup of mixed wine. “Drink this.”

The wine was well-watered and refreshing, and Achilles felt steadier. “All right. Let’s meet the sister of those strangers I murdered.”

The stars were out, and the Achaian fires were roaring in a strong sea wind. Melia was tending Balios and Xanthos, who had been brushed to a glistening sheen and were snorting indignantly. On the other side of the fire stood the reason for their anger: a scrubby black pony with a small, dark, pale-haired rider whose cold gray eyes stared intently at Achilles. The Amazon was slim and wiry, with gold torcs wrapped around each biceps and glittering tarnished silver rings on each finger; her ears were pierced with rings of brass and bone, and her face was impassive.

She spoke, but her words made no sense. Hittite, Achilles thought, but what she said was impossible to decipher. “Essi ansekurrames” were the first two words, but then she spoke too rapidly to follow.

Meryapi touched her arm and murmured in Achaian, “She wants to know if you’re the chariot fighter and asked when the Water Hittites—that’s the Achaians—started letting their women out of cages.”

“Tell her that I am, and anyone who wants to cage me can try.”

Meryapi nodded, replying to the Amazon in Hittite.

The woman’s eyes flashed. “Sessus kuenesta,” the Amazon said flatly, “u anzas summas kuennummeni.”

Meryapi went a little gray. “She’s saying that you killed her brothers and she intends to kill you in return. Later, of course, on the battlefield.”

Achilles stared up blankly at the Amazon, then shrugged. “Tell her that her brothers tried to kill me, so that was bound to happen.”

Meryapi translated.

The Amazon smiled coldly and said something else in Hittite. She went on longer this time, making a cutting gesture with her hand, and her horse snorted.

Meryapi took a deep breath. “She says that you should know better than to make excuses. She wants you to know the Hittites call her Antusekururiya—Andromakhe is the best translation I can think of, man-killer. Her Amazon name is Annasu. She is the commander of the nearest Amazon town, Kilikassuwa, which Achaians call Kilikian Thebai. The Amazons of Kilikassuwa will join the Hittites of Wilusa to avenge their lost brothers. She swears this by a god named Pyssas Appaliunas, their God of Brothers.”

“How is this my fault?” Achilles said haughtily. “Our quarrel is with Wilusa, but if the other locals insist on getting involved, I’m ready for them all.” As Meryapi translated back, Achilles stared the Amazon in the eye, and the Amazon began to grin murderously.

She said a few words, then turned her pony to leave.

“She says she’ll see you on the field. And that she’ll drag your body behind her horse.”

“Her horse isn’t big enough.”

“Achilles!” Meryapi sounded annoyed now. As the Amazon rode off, Meryapi turned to Achilles, scowling. “Did you have to antagonize her? You were supposed to say her brothers fought well.”

“Why didn’t you just lie to her for me, then?”

Meryapi blinked. “I should have.” She motioned for Achilles to follow her along the slope to a large cooking fire. The flames had died down to

coals, and cauldrons of stewed meat and beans and fish were bubbling eagerly. “Everyone has been waiting for you to eat. We are, of course, grumpy.” She ladled stew into a bowl and offered it to Achilles.

Achilles plopped down by the fire with her stew. It smelled delicious, but it was still bubbling hot. “Why did you wait?”

“The forms must be observed,” Meryapi said irritably. “If lowborn eat before highborn, slaves before masters, grooms before charioteers, sailors before captains, the entire world will become topsy-turvy, the gods will rise up in anger, and the universe will come to an end.” She seemed exhausted. “Even now, I must wait for Patroklos to come back—what’s taking him so long?—lest I should publicly eat in front of his troops before him and make him a laughingstock.”

“Achaians don’t care *that* much about etiquette,” Achilles said.

“*You* don’t care that much.” Meryapi covered her face in her hands. “I’m sorry. I have never been so far from home, and I feel unwell. I have been thinking of what will happen if this campaign drags on too long. I had factored in the western Hittites, but if this lasts long enough, we’ll get the full strength of the Hittite empire, and the fifty cities of the Amazons, and all of Lukka and Masha, and the Leleks, and—while I admire my Achaians very much—I’ve talked to veterans of Kadesh about what happens when Assuwa unites against one foe.”

Achilles lapped at her soup. As her stomach expanded around the warmth of it, a tingling heat spread through her limbs and her exhaustion fell away. “This is delicious. Don’t worry. If we can’t win soon, I’ll just go into Wilusa and kidnap Helen back myself.”

Meryapi stared at Achilles. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I was joking.”

Meryapi narrowed her eyes to kohl-lined slits. “I hope so. You would die bravely, and Patroklos would die bravely too, and I would be left to explain to Ra why I, granddaughter of his chosen king, dedicated my life to such careless barbarians.”

Achilles thought perhaps Meryapi was underestimating her. But just then she spotted Patroklos coming up the beach with a small box in his hands and a brooding look on his noble face, as if something weighed on his mind.

After supper, Meryapi muttered to Patroklos, and Patroklos offered Achilles the little box. "There was a moderate amount of plunder. I did some negotiation with the others for your share. Agamemnon gets first prize of anything we take, and after him Menelaos, Nestor, Diomedes, Idomeneus, and you." He opened the box, displaying a slim golden diadem and a necklace of golden beads strung on a leather cord, each bead marked with complex glyphs. "Here's your spear-won prize."

Achilles took the necklace. "Did we take it from some poor rich woman? Is that why you look so grim?"

"A Hittite lady traded it for her son. We had him captive; she has him back." Patroklos shrugged his big shoulders. "Fair, right?"

Achilles laughed. "Certainly more portable than a captive." She took the beads and hung them round her neck. "Does it suit me, Meryapi?"

"You look like a barbarian empress," Meryapi said. She seemed much cheerier now that she had eaten.

"Agamemnon asked for you," Patroklos said. "He's planning the next attack. Said to tell you that you were magnificent; everyone told him what you did on the right." He grinned at her. "I told him that you were there and had noticed your own magnificence."

They made their way across the camp, past tents in neat rows, past ditches and middens already teeming with flies, past Diomedes's camp with its careful trenches and ridges to channel latrine filth away from the tents, past rows of longships on wooden chucks, past countless cookfires and laughing Achaians dining on spitted meat plundered from the farms of Taruisa. Just outside the Mykenanian quarter, they stopped to let a small procession pass, and Achilles could not help staring.

They were Hittites, not Achaians. There were six men in long white tunics and tiered kilts, their long black hair covered in white ashes, their faces streaked with dried blood cut through with tear tracks. They stood stiffly at attention, bearing staffs in their right hands and bronze goods in their left: a belt here, a broken sword there, a punctured helm, a dented corslet of bronze bands. Their leader had the look of a priest. He wore a necklace shaped like a nest of snakes and a serpent diadem, and his men followed him in grim silence. No doubt across the Skamandrian plain, Achaian priests were engaged in much the same ritual, bearing back Achaian dead.

Behind the Hittite priests were seven women, all wailing. Their veils were torn, shreds of gauze streaked with blood and dirt. Their hair was covered in white ashes; their red-stained eyes glared directly ahead of them, as if meeting the stares of the Achaians would be a taunt too great to bear. “Kukunni,” they sobbed. “Kukunni!” They too bore scarred bronze armor. A few of the pieces looked familiar. Achilles remembered the chariot she had charged with Balios and Xanthos, the way their hooves had crashed through the frame and crushed the shieldbearer’s shield. Yes—that was the broken shield, carried by a sobbing Hittite woman with red-stained eyes.

Achilles watched them go by, marveling how like Achaian women they looked, down to the fashion of their ripped gowns and blood-smeared girdles and blood-and-charcoal-smeared breasts. Identical mourning customs; a slightly different language; the same wail. And *she* had done this to them, and had never even met them, only some careless relative of theirs for a chaotic moment on the battlefield.

Once the procession had passed, Achilles turned to Patroklos. “Maybe we should kill the Hittites more carefully, so as not to spoil their gear. Better mementos for the bereaved.”

“Don’t mock them,” Patroklos said gravely. “They lost family today. So did some of ours, and so may we in time.”

“*You’re safe. You’re under the protection of a demigod.*”

Patroklos shrugged ruefully and put his arm around her. He was warm if subdued, and she wished she had spoken less carelessly, for she could feel his worry. He had always worried for her, that she would tempt fate or anger the gods, but he had never stood in her way.

By the time they got to Agamemnon’s tent, the kings and archons had gathered again, all the same faces from the morning, flushed and exhilarated. Half of them had oiled their beards and combed their hair, and everyone was wearing fresh jewelry.

“I see the ransoming went well,” Achilles said, “and everyone’s got shiny new things.”

“Including you,” laughed her cousin Aiwas. “I saw you today, you crazy bitch. The Hittites pissed themselves all the way back to the city.”

Agamemnon held up a cup of wine and met everyone’s eyes. When he looked Achilles in the eyes, he held her gaze a moment longer—or was she imagining that?—and smiled with secret pleasure. “Bless the Queen of Kings,” he said, pouring out a few drops into a bowl, “for awarding us such

victory. We have lost thirty-six chariots, forty horses, and sixty-three riders; one hundred and ten heavy infantry died, and three hundred light infantry; but the Hittites lost twice as many chariots and half again as many infantry. They'll be feeling this tomorrow and crying out to the Lord of Plagues and the Honey-Eater and the Thunderer for vengeance. Maybe they'll hide behind their walls, but they can't have that much food stored."

The Great King drank deep from the cup and passed it down. "Obviously, the real lion in the tent is how quickly they were reinforced. The contingent from Dardania that hit our flank was nearly as big as the one from Wilusa, and my scouts saw men coming up the coast from the south too. Piyama has good relations with Seha, Apasa, Millawanda, and all the other major cities south to Lukka; there could be sixty chariots from Seha in a week, three hundred from Apasa and Millawanda in a month, two hundred Lukkans by midsummer, and who knows when that old bastard Tudhaliyas will summon the dark lords of Hattusa from their thousand valleys? He's a coward and an oathbreaker, but he has five hundred chariots under his *personal* command."

"And there are Amazons sniffing around," Achilles broke in.

Agamemnon looked up in surprise. "I thought the Hittites hated the Amazons."

"Apparently not." Achilles shrugged. "Some Amazon from Kilikian Thebai, wherever that is, is going to drag my corpse behind her horse."

The Great King's tall brother-in-law Idomeneus said, "The Amazons have been friendlier with the Hittites lately. They *were* enemies, but they've been mending things and intermarrying. That's why the Hittites worship the Lord of Plagues and the Honey-Eater, and the Amazons leave offerings to the Thunderer and the Father of Fear."

"Who cares?" Menelaos growled. "Amazons don't even have chariots." The wine cup had stopped on him. He drank and passed to Nestor.

"Doesn't matter," the old man said. "Herakles helped the Hittites take Apasa from the Amazons, and he came back with six of the nastiest scars I ever saw. I'd rather fight Tudhaliyas's five hundred chariots than Pattasilya's mean little pony-riders."

"We need to keep the pressure up," Agamemnon said grimly. "If the Amazons attack, we burn this Thebai." He frowned, then turned to Patroklos. "Why are so many cities called Thebai?"

Patroklos shrugged. “They aren’t. Hundred-Gated Thebai is really named Waset, and Kilikian Thebai is Kilikassuwa. We Achaians are shit linguists.”

Agamemnon raised an eyebrow. “That’s what your wife says?”

“She knows what she’s talking about.”

Agamemnon nodded. “Thank you for indulging my curiosity.” He looked around the tent, his green eyes suddenly bright. “We need to strike tomorrow, before they can seize the initiative. I want to land a picked force behind enemy lines in Dardania, to keep Anyasha distracted. Achilles, Patroklos—can I count on you? Burn his lands, kill his cattle?”

“We don’t have enough men,” Achilles said bluntly. If Anyasha had two hundred chariots, he had thrice her numbers. “It sounds fun, but I need more chariots.” She scanned the faces in the tent until her eyes settled on Odysseus and Diomedes. She grinned at them. “How about you gentlemen?” She wanted to show them what she could do.

Diomedes nodded gravely, and Odysseus actually grinned back.

“Then it’s settled,” said Agamemnon. “I won’t keep you longer, friends.” His face was hard in the light from his bronze brazier, flushed with wine and sun.

As the commanders began to wander off one by one, Achilles touched Patroklos’s arm and murmured, “Take care of the preparations. I need to talk to the Great King.”

Patroklos raised an eyebrow. “Anything I should know about?”

“I’m not going to pick a fight with him. I just have questions.”

Patroklos seemed uneasy, but he nodded anyway. Achilles wondered if he suspected her of romantic designs on Agamemnon, if he would appoint himself defender of her virtue, insist on playing chaperone like she was some simpering chieftain’s daughter instead of a warrior. But no—Patroklos only bowed and left the tent.

Bit by bit, the others wandered out. Diomedes murmured that he was looking forward to fighting at her side the next day, and Odysseus clapped her shoulder as he walked past. Then she was alone with Agamemnon.

“Your cousin Aiwas killed two men today, and so did Diomedes, but Achilles killed more than anyone.” Agamemnon sounded pleased but thoughtful. Now that they were alone, his deep, rumbling voice was more pleasing than before. “Hard to believe that was your first battle.”

“If I’d fought before, you would have heard of it.” Achilles took a step closer to Agamemnon. She imagined kissing him again, his lips pressing

into her, the taste of him in her mouth.

“They say only one man in seven can kill in his first battle,” Agamemnon said. “It took me three. I had the training, but ending life is hard. I killed pigs for practice.”

“I’m not a man, which probably helped.” Achilles narrowed her eyes, a little amused. “Is the Great King accusing me of unusual bloodlust?”

Agamemnon’s green eyes flashed, and a haughty smile curled his lip. “You have a certain zest for everything.”

The way his mouth bent was irresistible. Achilles took a step closer, then leaned suddenly up.

He met her kiss for a moment—salt, wine, sandalwood smoke, the taste of fire, the force of his lips and tongue—and then he pulled away. “Not tonight, but soon?”

Achilles scowled at him. “Am I going to have to kill *ten* men first, or are you just afraid we’ll start another storm?”

Agamemnon raised his eyebrows. “Let’s be discreet. The Achaians are a jealous bunch. Idomeneus has wanted me for years, and I don’t know how your kinsmen would react. Let’s not find out two days into the war.”

The rumble of his voice was a delicious thing, and Achilles gritted her teeth, frustrated in ways she’d never been with Deidamia. What he said made sense, but she wanted to push him down onto the tent floor. She shrugged. “We’ll be discreet. But if I bring you back Anyasha’s head, we’ll take a boat trip together, do some scouting up the coast.”

Agamemnon’s eyes widened, and he shook his head ruefully. “What a terrifying woman you are. I can hardly say no to such romantic words.”

Achilles bowed to Agamemnon just so, then met his eyes for one final stare and backed out of the tent.

Outside was laughter, firelight, jokes, meat, men—so many men. It was strange to stare at them so hungrily, not afraid of their mockery, knowing she could kill almost any of them in a spear fight, and that they all knew it. They all saluted her as she went past, all cried, “Peleis!” *Daughter of Peleus.*

She could have them too. True, they probably had wives back home, but that had not stopped her with Agamemnon. *Let all the Achaian women hate me. None were my sisters when I needed sisters, and now I have Meryapi.*

She wandered by the water’s edge, watching the waves ebb and surge below the ships. Halfway up the beach, she stopped by a longship decorated

with countless bones.

“Beware, Achilles,” said a high, sweet voice from upon the ship. Pallid Iphianassa clung to the prow, her red lips curled back from her dainty white teeth, the rest of her face lost in shadow.

Did she know about Agamemnon? Achilles stiffened, suddenly alarmed. “Why beware?”

“Beware Apollo, Lord of Poison.” The girl giggled. “Why else would you beware? No one is likely to defeat you in the melee, but if he guides an arrow through the gaps in your armor—”

“I’ll kill him if he tries,” Achilles growled. She did not like this warning. It reminded her too much of her nightmare before the battle. “Is he watching me?”

“In a manner of speaking. The Queen of Kings detected his presence and told me to warn you. Beware Anyasha’s arrows; they are poisoned.”

“I’ll keep an eye out.” Achilles began to move away, but the girl slid down from the warship and approached her, her lips parted.

“Wait.”

Achilles stood very still. The pale child unnerved her, and particularly the way she was staring at Achilles, as if Achilles made her hungry. Achilles breathed very slowly and kept her face neutral. This girl could see *through* her, and maybe *inside* her, into her very thoughts.

Iphianassa’s smile inched wider. “I just wanted to tell you that you carry the blessing of two goddesses. The Egyptians would know the term: *She of the Two Ladies*. They don’t always get along, the Horns and the Eyes, but when they do, no one can stop them. You smell delicious. You could be king if you wanted.”

Achilles took a step back from this hungry-eyed girl. “Your father is king. Do you mean for me to replace him?”

Iphianassa shook with sudden shrill laughter. “Of course not. Serve him faithfully. Breed him a child if you like. That’s a woman’s lot in life, and what you chose.” The child turned away, walking back toward her ship.

Achilles narrowed her eyes. She wanted to argue, but her skin was crawling. Shaken, she moved away and reminded herself never to go near the bone ship again.

The warning about Anyasha’s arrows, though—she would be careful of those the next day.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun rose over the hills of Assuwa and shone through the sparse pines of gently rolling Dardania. Sunlight gleamed on the brass of Patroklos's helmet and glowed red in his beard and in the wisps of hair that escaped from under the cheek guards of his helm. Achilles gathered the reins of Patroklos's chariot-horses Sthenele and Polymele around her waist and tied them carefully, then lifted the chariot-shield into place, the better to protect herself and her precious archer. She caught Patroklos's eye, and they smiled at each other without thinking, prompted by the same secret joy.

Achilles had woken up hours before with a question: *What is love?*

As she had strapped on her armor and trudged down to the ships, she realized that she did not know the answer. A month before she would have said, *Love is Deidamia*, and yet—

On the ship, she had asked Diomedes and Odysseus and Patroklos.

Diomedes said, "Love is shared duty," and explained that he could trust his cousin and wife Aigilia with the throne of Argos in his absence, for they were bred from the same stock and born from the same soil. She had chosen him king; their interests were one. That was love. But his mistress Laodike he had not loved, only desired for her golden hair and her silver laugh and her skin like polished copper and her eyes like chips of tin.

Odysseus had said, "Love is certainly not desire, nor would I desire your metallic mistress, neither. Love is what my Penelope has for me: a fierce, constant obsession, the savage focus of a daughter of Perseus. Always she tries to increase our wealth, our ships, the power of our house. Her ambitions are endless. Telemakhos, our son, will rule a naval empire. I have many infatuations and so does she; we like the same girls; but love is the

cultivation of our land, the way we painted frescoes together in our palace, depicting our future ghosts as winged guardians over Telemakhos. Love is what I feel for the Silent One, who plants clever schemes in my brain, and constantly urges me to excellence, and gives me strange dreams of the ancient world, of the cities of sacrifice, of the dreams she dreamed when she drank from the skulls of the old ones. Love is the creative force that imbues life with spirit.”

Achilles had watched the coast of Dardania glide by in the dark, brooding on their answers. What she had for Agamemnon was not love; it was mutual recognition and lust, a hunger to pull him into her body and draw the strength from his royal form and tremble and laugh and glory in the sheer wonder of being herself. But it was not love.

“I think love is a salute between souls,” Patroklos had said wistfully. “In a sense we are always alone, ships in the night crossing the wine-dark sea. And yet, every now and then, we uncover our lantern, and an answering lantern flickers across the waters, and we know that we are also never alone.”

Now they smiled at each other in the blaze of sun on bronze, and the horses snorted and pawed the turf, and Odysseus called out, “Achilles, use your goddess eyes! That meadow between those woods—what do you see?”

Achilles narrowed her eyes and looked harder. “More than a hundred magnificent cattle. I think we’ve found Anyasha’s favorite cows. Shall we ride over and steal them? Give him something to worry about that’s not named Agamemnon?”

Odysseus laughed. “It’s a beautiful morning for a cattle raid.” He sprang up on his chariot, bow in hand. His driver started him down the slope, and the islander chariots followed.

A moment later, Diomedes rolled downhill in gleaming bronze armor inlaid with green copper boar emblems, three javelins in his hand, whispering some secret joke to his driver Sthenelos. The chariots from Argos rumbled downhill after him.

They left the infantry to guard the ships, and one by one the Myrmidons began to roll downhill, all smoke-black leather and gleaming bronze and stamping Phthian horses and fluttering horsehair crests. Patroklos gave a nod, and Achilles flicked the reins. Sthenele and Polymele began to move as one, and as the car bounced and rattled down onto the flat golden plain of

nodding grass and brilliant wildflowers, Achilles and Patroklos too moved as one, trimming the reins, bobbing with the chariot, never fumbling against each other, always swaying together.

She loved *Patroklos*, she loved *Meryapi*, and it had nothing to do with desire, only joy—to see them was joy; to breathe with them was joy; to ride with Patroklos on a cattle raid was joy; scanning the pines for ambush was joy; holding the shield to protect them from Anyasha’s arrows was joy. If she failed, they would die together, and that too was joy.

There was a break in an encircling ring of trees, and a golden meadow pregnant with blue tulips and golden sunflowers and green weeds. Long-horned Egyptian cattle, each unblemished and fat and enormous, walked among the weeds, chewing the grass in their fat jowls. They had seemed poorly guarded from a distance, but now that Achilles was closer, she saw that they were entirely unattended. She slowed the horses.

“Something is not right,” she murmured to Patroklos. “Who would leave such rich cows alone?”

“It’s a trap,” he agreed. “No matter—if there are infantry in the meadow, we’ll ride them down.”

She choked the reins and lifted her hand, and the Myrmidons stopped halfway into the woods. Ahead of her, Diomedes halted his chariots, and at the edge of the meadow, Odysseus dismounted and turned his own chariots around, dismounting some of his men. They felt it too, then: the premonition of ambush everywhere in the air, and yet no obvious spot for attackers. There might have been infantry in the pines, but no chariots could have hidden in the dense trees.

There must be archers further into the trees, but there was no sign of anyone there, either.

“If there’s an ambush, it’s deeper in the pines,” Patroklos said. “We can probably just guard the way out, keep the chariots back so we have a clear line back, and drive the cattle out toward the ships. The trees are too thick for good shooting, so they’ll have to come after us. If they come on foot, we’ll cut through them, and if they start shooting, we’ll outrun them.”

Achilles frowned. She wanted an open fight, or else no fight and steaks for supper, but his logic was sound. “Myrmidons—guard the tree line. Diomedes! Keep an eye out!”

“Both eyes!” he shouted back. “Odysseus, hurry up with those fucking cows!”

In the meadow, the Ithakan had begun smacking the cows with his spear, driving them out of the tall grass toward the opening in the trees that led back onto the plain. The cows obeyed docilely, still chewing as they plodded along.

Detestable creatures, cattle: obedient slaves, Achilles thought, without dreams of escape. Or perhaps all they had were elaborate dreams of cattle revolt, but no initiative, no courage to take action. Yet look at them: magnificent walls of muscle, with horns and incredible strength. They would be impossible to herd and slaughter if they actually *acted*, if they had will to match strength. “Cows are the worst kind of slaves,” Achilles muttered aloud.

Patroklos blinked at her. “What?”

She was about to explain the idea she had just had, but the wind changed—only slightly—and a new smell reached her nostrils. The smell was of horses, but something was not right—

She thought of the Amazon Andromakhe on her pony, with her hard eyes and pale hair, and of the stoical, kentaur-like union between woman and beast. And then she thought of the pines, too dense for chariots, too dense to spot an enemy—but not too dense for ponies. The plan hit her suddenly. The ambush was never supposed to be in the meadow. They would hit the chariots just as they thought they were safe on the plain. The instant they were far enough from the trees, the arrows would fly.

“Amazons,” she told Patroklos. “In the forest.”

Comprehension dawned instantly in his eyes. He told the Myrmidons in a low, measured voice, then turned to her. “We have to tell Odysseus. We can’t just yell, or they’ll cut him off in the meadow. Better to be ambushed all together.”

She nodded, murmured to Sthenele and Polymele, flicked the reins, and they began to glide toward the meadow. They passed Diomedes, whose face furrowed into a frown, then suddenly went slack with understanding.

They reached the meadow just as Odysseus was smacking the last few cattle into the corridor of trees that led out to the plain.

“Oh no.” Odysseus kept his voice low. “Tell me what I missed.”

“Ponies,” Achilles said. “There are Amazons with Anyasha.”

“Did you see them?”

“No. I—smelled them? Sensed them? I’m not sure.”

Odysseus's expression went dark. "Let's play dumb for now. If we leave the trees in good order, expecting an ambush, we should be able to get out alive. I wish I hadn't driven the cattle up, though; they'll make it hard to maneuver."

"No, it's good—we'll use the cows," Achilles said abruptly. The idea came to her fully formed and audacious, and she felt a mad grin spread across her face. "Just a few of us stay back behind the cattle while the others move out. When they get out of the trees and the Amazons charge in, we stampede the cattle and let them and their clever fucking ponies deal with a hundred horned oxen in their rear. We'll escape in the confusion."

Odysseus smiled wickedly, nodded assent, and passed orders to his men, and they began to move up ahead of the cattle. A couple of islander chariots stayed behind with them, and Diomedes and Sthenelos rolled up a moment later. Achilles explained the plan as they began to drive the cattle slowly forward, keeping an eye on the chariots assembling at the edge of the plain. At least the men knew to expect an attack now, and at least their horses were pointed the right way.

Achilles kept Sthenele and Polymele moving at a slow walk behind the cows; Patroklos bent his bow, sighting carefully at one cow's rear. It would take only a few wounded cattle to panic the rest of the herd into a stampede. The stink of alien horses was growing stronger. Achilles scanned the trees for Amazons, but still there were none . . .

Then, abruptly, arrows whistled out of the trees. The Achaian charioteers flung up their shields and lashed their horses, and the chariots picked up speed. Arrows rained down, bouncing off shields and armor, but here and there a man screamed as bronze transfixed exposed flesh, and here and there a horse reared and kicked the air and twisted and thrashed, pierced by falling arrows. It couldn't be helped. Even knowing the ambush was coming, there would still be a battle, and that meant losing men.

The mass of chariots peeled away, trampling across the plain.

Ponies burst out of the trees behind them, each bearing a small rider armed with a bow. The Amazons chased after the chariots, shouting a shrill battle cry in a language nothing like Hittite: "AITA! KALU! APLU! ARTUMI!" Each word was followed by a volley of arrows, and the scrubby ponies were gaining on the chariots.

Patroklos and Odysseus loosed their arrows, and Diomedes and Patroklos and Odysseus began to shout, and Achilles felt herself shouting too. The

horses began to scream and stamp, and the cattle—the docile, sleepy cattle—bellowed as they were pierced with arrows and groaned in fear as the horses rushed up behind them. Their massive hooves pounded the thick earth, and their bodies heaved forward. They thundered out of the forest toward the Amazon rear.

It was hard to keep just far enough behind them not to foul the chariots, and Sthenele and Polymele kept shying back and trying to veer left, but Achilles jerked them back onto course and kept her eyes forward, straight forward, straight through the rumbling herd and into the Amazon cavalry ahead of them.

The pony riders broke off around the cattle, opening their formation to let the herd rampage through, and lost their momentum; the chariots pulled away, chased by stampeding oxen, but Amazons broke off from their disrupted formation in groups, turning their bows toward the back of the cattle herd and the chariots behind them. Achilles let go of the reins—let the horses take them wherever they liked, she needed both hands for the shield. She lifted the massive leather roundel over Patroklos, and three arrows struck in rapid succession: *thuk thuk thuk*. Another bounced off the wheel, and another struck her bracer and flew upward—

Patroklos snatched it out of the air, then ducked against her, pushing his body up against the shield. There was only so much cover to go around. “Left!” he was shouting. “Break left!” Loud enough for the others to hear. Loud enough to carry over the stampede. Yes—they all had to keep together, chariots abreast, using the stampede as an obstacle. Achilles caught the reins and tugged left, and the horses followed. Odysseus’s chariot pulled up beside them on the right, and a moment later, Diomedes plunged into place on the left. For a moment they rumbled along together, moving like the fingers of one hand or the limbs of one body, and in that moment, Achilles loved them too.

Then Odysseus’s driver screamed. He had been standing on the right side of the car, and when he let his shield slip too low, fletchings sprouted from his throat and eye. He toppled backward—but the reins were still tied to his waist. Odysseus hacked the reins, but it was too late; the horses screamed and twisted in their yoke, and the chariot careened wildly right. The Ithakan king jumped free and rolled in the grass, scrambling to his feet.

By instinct, Achilles pulled sharply right, looping round to grab him. Two Amazons fired, and her heavy shield was too slow; one arrow grazed

the edge of her pauldron and sliced a cold shallow line up her arm. Next to her, Patroklos let out a shrill yelp.

There was no time to check if he was safe. She flung her arm out as the chariot looped round and yanked Odysseus up, and the three of them collapsed into each other. “Shield us!” Achilles shouted at Odysseus, and the Ithakan raised the shield just as the Amazons closed in again.

Every muscle in Achilles’s body wanted to *turn round*, to *face* them, but the horses were in headlong flight. Any confusion now would make them uncontrollable. No Balios and Xanthos, these mares of Patroklos’s, but she urged them on—“Faster! You’re outrunning ponies! Faster!”—and they pulled ahead, reaching the leftmost edge of the cattle stampede again.

“We’re gaining,” Odysseus panted. “We might even keep some cows.”

It was luck, or some sixth sense, that caused Achilles to fling out her left hand. She stared in wonder at the arrow she had caught in flight, six inches from Patroklos’s flank. It was beautiful, with red- and green-dyed goose feathers and a long bronze tip slick with viscous white venom.

Anyasha.

She dropped the arrow and snatched one of Patroklos’s javelins from the chariot rack in the same instant, flung it in a perfect spinning throw, moving almost faster than her own mind could follow. The spear arced through the air.

Anyasha was thirty paces away, concealed in the tall grass by a pond. His bow was bent for another shot. His eyes were wide and bright. His face was exactly as she had imagined it: proud, aquiline, black-haired and black-browed and full-lipped, handsome like a god, with the pitiless stare of a lifelong hunter.

Their eyes met with the javelin halfway through the air between them.

For a moment, she loved him too.

Then a black swan erupted from the pond, its great wings flailing, and the javelin slid into it. The enormous bird flung its neck to the sky, shrilled a cry, and splashed back into the water.

Anyasha fired another arrow, but Odysseus had moved the shield, and the poisoned shaft slid off the treated cowhide and pinwheeled out of sight.

Then they were past him, and a stand of pines came between them, and time resumed.

They only took a few cows back. The rest dispersed, scattered by Amazons and none too eager to run toward the Achaian ships. Amazon arrows had killed six Myrmidon charioteers, eight Argives, and eleven of Odysseus's islanders, counting his charioteer. He seemed most shaken by the loss of his horses, weeping as they pushed the boats back into the water. "I raised them from foals" was all he would say.

Patroklos had a long, shallow arrow wound in his arm. He had barely noticed it after the initial pain, but when they got to the ships, it was bleeding profusely. Still, it was not deep, barely into the fat. The muscle beneath was untouched, and there was no force to the bleeding. Achilles shredded a strip of Patroklos's tunic and wrapped the wound, pulling the strip as tight as she could manage. "You'd better not be poisoned," she said. "Or I'll make the gods pay."

"I too caught an arrow out of the air today," Patroklos said with a chuckle. "I think the gods favor me. The Amazon arrows didn't look poisoned, only that Anyasha fellow's."

"Did you see what happened with the fucking swan?"

Patroklos nodded. "If he is the son of Aphrodite, she was looking out for him. It was still a damn fine javelin throw."

They piled back onto the ships in silence. The infantry was in poor spirits, as generally happened when the cavalry came back in disgrace, and no one was in any mood to celebrate.

When they returned to the main camp in the afternoon, the troops there were in little better spirits. The infantry had clashed on the banks of the Skamandros with the Wilusans, but the Wilusans had held the bridge and the fords, and several hours in the sun had produced nothing but wounds, exhaustion, sunstroke, and sixty deaths from stray arrows. Talk in the camp was that the Great King was going to call a day's truce for burials and sacrifices; three days of fighting was too much.

As the sun beat down mercilessly and the heat sent shimmering waves up into the sky, Diomedes paced back and forth. "They were waiting for us," he said. "Maybe an Achaian shared our plans with the Dardanians, or maybe we were spotted, or maybe we really are that predictable. We need to be smarter."

Achilles agreed.

Patroklos was the sole exception to the general malaise. He clapped Diomedes on the back. "We made it out together. We can learn from this.

And now we know Achilles can catch arrows out of the sky, so we'll all just stand next to her. Don't be despondent, friends. Meryapi will pour some wine and explain what a proper Egyptian general would do."

Achilles chuckled. Patroklos, Patroklos—she loved Patroklos. But her hands were covered in his dried blood, and the smell of his wound was bitter in her nostrils. If it had been Anyasha's poisoned arrow and not a clean Amazon one—if anything had gone just a little differently—*Patroklos* might be among the dead, and instead of trudging to Meryapi's grand Egyptian tent together while Patroklos cheered them up, they would be walking in numb silence, trying to understand how he was *gone*.

There must be a better way, Achilles thought. *I will not be the one to get my beloved killed. I will not be the one to tell Meryapi that Patroklos is dead.* It had been impossible to get her shield into place fast enough. When the enemy were shooting at Patroklos, there were no certainties.

A mad plan began forming in her mind. *Love is madness*, she thought.

And in the grips of that madness, those who love become deadlier than the gods, and lose all rational fear.

Chapter Fourteen

At night, the Skamandrian plain was a ghostly terrain. No firelight marked the farmhouses now; they had been plundered during the day, or else the men in them had fled to the city. The wildflowers still nodded in the night breeze, seaweed half-submerged in the foggy mists that rolled up off the river. It was easy to move unseen in this darkness, silent as a spirit, with no armor to clatter, her only weapon the star-metal dagger strapped to her hip. Achilles marveled at how sharp her eyes had become in the dark. She saw every trick of the landscape, every field mouse darting through the grass. The last rabbits were creeping off to their warrens. Night birds wailed, and owls hooted in the pines.

Achilles had bartered her old Skyros jacket with Melia for a gray homespun mantle. Though Melia lacked the chest to fill out the jacket, she had seemed drawn to it, to the thought of herself dressed like a proper Achaian woman. Achilles had also brought a gray pot of ashes and charcoal and blood from supper's cattle, and an old pair of greaves that could pass for Hittite.

The bridge to Wilusa was guarded by a group of bleary-eyed Hittites, and the ford was guarded too, but she took a long detour further south into the Skamandrian marshes and waded through the waist-high shallows with her cargo on her head. On a small hilltop shaded by pines, she waited for sunrise.

An owl settled in a pine across from her, hooting softly. It seemed an ordinary bird, but she did not trust it. Spies of her mother could be everywhere. Perhaps her mother knew her mind already, but she kept her thoughts composed, thinking of everything in isolation, not considering the

details of her plan. As night wore on into the wee hours of the morning, she smeared her face with mud and charcoal and dabbed her cheeks and hands with blood, smeared the homespun mantle and the bronze greaves, covered her hair in charcoal and ash.

What am I mourning? she thought. *My sorrow must be strong enough to transcend language.*

The owl stared down at her with its huge yellow eyes, tilting its head to the side, scrutinizing her.

Mother, if that's you, then help me mourn.

She thought of Damia now, and of poor Melia. In a different life, she might have been friends with Melia, protecting her instead of hurting her, guiding her instead of hitting her. They might have gone to Skyros together, a younger and an older sister, arriving like so many of the kallai did, in desperate pairs that had survived Achaia together. Bandits had raped some on the road; wandering Mainads had lashed others with whips, for the kallai had been outcast from the cult of Dionysos under suspicion of tainting the grapes. Still others had paid their way to Skyros from distant islands all across the Aigaian Sea, working as ship's whores for passage from Alashiya or Knossos or Antikythera. She and Melia might have been two more such together. If she had not been alone, Achilles might have believed in the gods, and prayed to Aphrodite, and been cut with the others, and joined in the mysteries, and told the tales.

And she would be in Damia's arms now, while the wind from the sea creaked in the oak forests on the slopes of Skyros, while the waves caressed the shingled beach.

A few tears came, enough to sting.

Perhaps it would be better to cry for Thetis, the woman who had died to give her birth. But Achilles found it difficult to imagine the scene and even harder to care for the woman she had only met as bones. *Did she love me? She never knew me, but I was a parasite in her body for most of a year. I ate her life.*

A few more tears came, bitter ones, mostly at the absurdity of human reproduction. It was harder to mourn than she thought.

"Well, Mother?" she said to the owl. "What have *you* to say?"

The owl floated down on soundless wings, landing on her outstretched hand. Its talons bit into her forearm, and it stared into her with hypnotic

yellow eyes. No—they were gray now, and in those eyes Achilles could glimpse valleys of dry bone, mountains of skulls, cities of sacrifice.

The watch fires in Wilusa were burning low. The eastern hills were beginning to brighten. The owl's talons broke her skin, and then the bird fluttered quietly away. Achilles stared at the blood welling up from her forearm and smiled ruefully. "If my eyes cannot weep, my body can." Now her eyes stung, and she wept at last. She did not know what she wept for, but she sobbed, and clawed her garment, and smeared ashes and blood on her face and breasts, and then, as the dawn began to illuminate the hills, she made her way sobbing toward Wilusa, bloodied greaves held close to her breast, disguised as a mourner.

Wilusa was a vast city. Its lower wall had a stone course ten feet high, and on top of the stonework a second wall of baked brick, each brick stamped with glyphs and the two-headed bolt of the Thunderer, and on top of the wall, battlements of massive bricks shaped like the heads of spades, each large enough for an archer to shelter behind. There was a deep moat, fed by the Skamandros here and draining into the Skamandros in the distance; and at the southernmost point of the city was the enormous Skaian gate, older than the walls, hewn of great blocks of ancient stone and cut in an antique manner that Achilles did not recognize. An enormous face surmounted one gatepost, a somber woman's face of old-hewn stone weathered by centuries of rain and wind but painted heavily regardless: a face as black as the night sky, save where the hands of the artists had carefully painted white and blue stars. The proportions of the face were ancient, neither Hittite nor Achaian, and her features were proud beyond measure.

A gilded statue of very recent manufacture stood at the other gatepost: a woman with golden face, golden hair, golden eyes, golden breasts, clad all in rich red and purple robes, belly swollen. On an altar before her were countless apples, most rotting, some fresh.

The gates were ajar. Spearmen guarded them, rubbing bleary eyes against the coming day. She did not meet their gaze, only let herself tremble with sobs and clutched the greaves against her breast, so the cold metal could bite her skin.

They did not challenge her, and she passed under the Skaian gate up an ascending ramp through a cavernous gatehouse older than time, dripping with dew. The walls were covered in cracked frescoes in antique style,

depicting women coupling with bulls and men with cows, but there was no time to stare. She kept moving, and stepped out onto the streets of Wilusa as the city began to wake.

The first smell was of people: not as many as in the camp at Aulis, nor so foul, but an older, richer smell: ten thousand meals on a hundred thousand nights, millet stew and barley beer and rye, boiled lamb and roasted beef and mint and coriander and toasted cumin, aromatic sandalwood and pine smoke, day sweat and night sweat, a thousand layers and ages of sage smoke, clay and plaster and lime. Fresh notes of baking wheat bread and drying blood. And the sounds—bellows roaring to life, children coughing, mothers muttering, fathers praying to the Thunderer and the Queen of Heaven and the Lord of Plagues, rams' horns blowing from the citadel.

The streets of the lower city were a warren of packed dirt and baked clay gutters leading haphazardly down toward the river, and two-story townhouses with sturdy doors, all the windows on the second floors. A fortress-warren of a lower town. Each building had a niche above its door, and on each niche sat a wooden apple and a small wood effigy of a woman, all new, all painted bright yellow. As men and women ducked in and out of the open doorways, they genuflected to the twin idols.

Achilles continued her solitary procession through the maze of streets, moving slowly enough, choked with sobs, that she could find her way. The last thing she wanted was to look like she needed help.

The inner walls towered above the outer city, with enormous guard towers looming still higher. She had never imagined buildings could be so big. The walls were painted red at the base, but higher up, where they turned to brick, they were bright yellow, and the tops of the towers were deep royal blue. A gate led through the inner wall, clad in rich tiles depicting golden apples on a blue background. Another golden statue guarded the gate, bare-breasted, pregnant, holding an apple bough laden with fruit. All were new and unweathered. This was madness—the Hittites of Wilusa seemed to regard Helen as more than a human, as a goddess, and to have accepted this over the course of a few short months.

Achilles remembered to sob as she trudged through this gate, past a line of armed men. Her pulse sped up and hammered in her ears, but she forced herself to move slowly. The temples had to be in the upper city; if the customs of the Hittites were as close to Achaian customs as she thought, the

trophies of the dead would be on display in the temples, and no one would stop her until she got at least that far.

She moved into the planned streets of the upper city, broad avenues flanked with palaces built like fortresses, each with its own gatehouse, each with its own sigils and symbols, massive glyphs over the doorposts shaped like thunderbolts or swans or bulls or cobras or antelopes or vultures. Each palace had a horned altar before it, and on each altar were shattered weapons and broken helms, sweetly rotting apples, and gilded effigies of a golden woman with a sun disk above her head. Blood spattered these images; lines of blood marked the streets; goats, probably, dragged for cooking up the hill toward the temples. The scent of roasting apples was strong in the air.

How can these idols all be of one woman? The idea was absurd and infuriating: that the Hittites of Wilusa would first kidnap Helen and then worship her as a goddess in front of every building and on every altar, as if she were the Queen of Heaven herself. Absurd! She might be a princess, but her blood was no more royal than Meryapi's.

And yet Achilles had dreamed she was the Silent One, Pallasu, and in a bygone age had witnessed the birth of the Thunderer and his brothers, and of a sister greater than them all, the Apple of the Sun, who had blazed from her mother's loins, hot enough to sear the gods. So perhaps Helen was more than human, and the Achaians did not understand the true stakes of this war. The Hittites would fight to the death to keep her. Achilles gritted her teeth, grimly pleased with herself for taking this risk. This was the only way; when she rescued Helen, she would spare countless thousands.

Achilles worked her way up the slope toward the temples at the summit and the palace beyond, a walled house on terraces great enough to fit the palace of Skyros into one of its kitchens or storage buildings, a house with great horns over every doorway, with brilliant stone reliefs on its outer walls painted with glorious scenes of gods at war, Amazons and Hittites gripped in battle, the Thunderer casting his bolts like javelins. On the wall overlooking its double doors was a new scene of a golden goddess being received by a king, a queen, and a long line of armored princes in pointed helmets.

As for the temples, she recognized them one after another, each pillared God's House painted brightly, each reeking of rich incense and fresh blood and beaten bronze.

First came the House of Eyes with its thousand pairs of staring eyes and rooftops guarded by wooden owls. Next came the House of the Bear with its trophy skulls still snarling over the doors, and the House of the Snake with its twisted pillars, and the House of the Cow of Heaven with eight pairs of enormous ivory horns. The Green Lord of Bronze had his smithy-house next, and then the Red Lord of Flint's charnel, and the Earthshaker's tower with its forest of spears.

But the last two temples were on the palace terrace, flanking the walled house of Piyama the Sorcerer and his sons. On the south end was an antique temple painted black with pitch and enamel, small and humble and made of ancient wood, with no markings to distinguish it, only the strong scent of blood. On the north end was an enormous pylon with gilded thunderbolts in a row above the gate, vast hammers on each side of the doorway, and enormous flanking reliefs of immense bronze bulls. This city was dedicated to the Thunderer above all gods: to Zeus, who was Taru to the Hittites and Tor to the barbarians of the western wastes, Amun in Egypt and Indra in the east, Teshub, Haddad, Baal, Perku—the Thirdborn Weapon, the red star.

Achilles looked up and saw the red star, larger and nearer than before. It must have been crossing an enormous void between the House of Zeus and the poor earth below. The chariot of the Thunderer really was coming. She could forget for an hour or a day, but he was coming. The iron knife strapped to her hip sent a chill through her bones.

She approached this northernmost temple, walking with desolate pride. There were guards and priests here, but all she had to do was meet their eyes for a moment, deposit the bloodied bronze on a pile of broken armor, wail . . . and then back out of the temple and slip out of sight.

The temple of Zeus had not been built to thwart climbers. Still, she crept up the side with care, moving quick and unseen, and settled onto the roof, shielded from the street by the pylon. From here, she could see into the palace. She covered her head with the corner of her soiled mantle and waited, surveying the palace grounds for a sign.

It came in the form of an eagle.

The bird floated soundlessly past her, feathers outstretched to soar in over the pylon, the temple, the garden walls, the courtyards, before alighting on a golden statue that stood motionless above a reflecting pool, her hair blowing in the wind of the bird's descent.

Or—no, it could not be—

The statue was no statue, but a woman gazing east into the blaze of the sunrise, her face and body caught for an instant in such bright golden sunlight that she too seemed gold. Her face was frozen in absolute longing, her eyes narrowed against the brilliance of the morning.

All around her stood a bewildering array of upright mirrors, each flashing in the sun, each reflecting its brilliance back onto her. Some of the mirrors were silver, and some were bronze; some were polished copper, and others cloudy tin; some were burnished obsidian, and others a strange clear glass. All of them reflected her back at herself, and she looked at none of them.

The absurdity of the sight froze Achilles where she crouched. *This* was Helen: tall, naked, well-formed in an abundant, curvy way, tawny-skinned, flax-haired, glorying in some inner garden of the palace where she was supposedly prisoner, with an eagle on her outstretched arm. At some invisible signal the golden woman fell backward into the reflecting pool with a splash, and the eagle soared back up into the sky.

Achilles bode her time. Helen emerged from the pool after a while and put on a saffron robe, then went into a tall broad tower. Minutes passed. Servants entered the tower through other entrances, bearing bolts of cloth, brass spindles, heaps of feathers, brightly painted boxes, bowls overflowing with yellow apples, apricots, bunches of yellow grapes—

Some captivity, Achilles sneered. They were treating Helen very well. And she did not seem especially distraught. Perhaps the spell of silence had been a lie to protect Menelaos's feelings; perhaps Helen had simply traded up for a bigger kingdom, a grander palace, more shiny things in yellow and amber and saffron and orange. She patted her dagger, then pondered how to get inside the tower unseen.

The simplest solution was over the rooftops. It was ten feet from the temple to the garden wall, and Achilles was not afraid of heights; she took a running start and leapt. The world rushed past her, and for an instant she felt a surge of terrible joy. Flight! It would be a marvelous thing to soar like that eagle through the sky, to rise instead of fall.

She slammed into the rooftop of the garden wall, rolled, and caught herself on the edge. She crept toward the central tower, keeping out an eye for guards and servants, but this high on the hilltop, no one was looking for a bedraggled mourner on the roofs.

She waited. The trickle of servants slowed, and one by one they returned empty-handed, wandering off in various directions. Each had a vacant,

hungry look; each moved away with purpose, hands curled at their sides, lips parted, faces flushed.

Achilles dropped into the courtyard. She nearly turned her ankle and swore in Achaian. Then she slipped into the tower and climbed a winding stair, coming out in a treasure room full of looms and desks and tables strewn with finery. Blocks of half-chiseled marble and logs half-cut into shape sat along the edges of the room; rolled sheets of gold leaf and bolts of cloth were stretched out on tables. Through it all wandered the golden one, grinning to herself, all large white teeth. She turned as Achilles entered, transfixing her with enormous amber eyes. Wolf's eyes, frank and staring and utterly wild.

"There you are," Helen rasped. She had a rich, smoky voice with an edge to it, and every breath she drew seemed to delight her. She spoke Achaian with the faintest royal Hittite accent. "I expected you half an hour ago, but you took your time. So—" She motioned toward a wet patch of plaster on a wall, where she had drawn a golden woman wreathed in fire spreading vast golden wings, in the company of a winged eagle-man, about to leap off a cliff. Both had enormous golden orbs above their heads, and those orbs were treated with gold foil and gleamed where the light caught them. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Achilles stared at her.

Helen grinned. "How did I see you coming? You absolutely *glow*. You are shorter than I expected," she added, stepping toward Achilles and taking a circuitous step around her, "and dirtier. A costume? No, a disguise! But you could have walked right in."

Anger. That came first, right after disbelief: a surge of rage. Eleven hundred ships had sailed, and already hundreds had died, and this woman laughed and spoke of costumes and told her she could have walked right in. "You are Helen of Sparta, are you not?" Achilles said coldly, putting her hand on her hip to feel the handle of her dagger. "Wife of Menelaos Atreidai."

"I am Helen of Wilusa too," Helen said mildly, her wolf's eyes laughing, though her face was grave. "Men sent me to Sparta. Men took me from Sparta. Alaksandu Piyami calls me his wife as well, and like Menelaos, he is a good man, a noble man, a proud man." There was a soft mockery in her voice. She circled past Achilles, studying her from behind.

Every hair on the back of Achilles's neck stood up, and she turned, baring her teeth at Helen. "Men have died to bring you back."

"I saw from my tower," Helen said. "I have excellent eyes. Like you." She bared her teeth right back at Achilles, smiling wider this time. "Let's not pretend we are ordinary mortals, daughter of Pallasu. Every night I dream a little more. Every morning I remember more."

Achilles clung to the dagger handle. It was solid in a room that seemed to swim. She slipped her hand under the mantle and clutched the weapon.

Helen gave her a strange sidelong look. Her nostrils flared, and her tongue flickered out to taste the air. "Whatever you have under that garment of yours, I don't much like it. So. Are you here to *claim* me?" Her tawny eyes laughed again, and she leaned in, parting her lips.

Achilles held herself still. Her breath caught. She felt a flush of warmth, a tingling in her stomach, a heat in her chest—and stared back into Helen's wolf-eyes with sudden anger. "Don't do that again."

Helen's eyes widened, and she licked her lips. "I like you. I want to show you all my art. You think you're here to whisk me off to Menelaos, aren't you? 'Come, Helen, back to that boring provincial capital across the sea, where they grow fine pigs and fine grapes and fine young men like Menelaos.'" She moved abruptly away, picking up an apple made of gold. She tossed it to Achilles.

It really was made of gold, enormously heavy, and exactly like an apple. Achilles tossed it onto the floor, and it rolled away. "So you were bored. Then you arranged your own kidnapping?"

Helen sneered. "I didn't have to. *Things just happen for us*. Haven't you noticed?" She waved her long, elegant fingers at Achilles. "What a lovely shape you have. Spies reported that the Achaians wished to bring *Akhillewos Peleos* into battle, but no—*Akhilleas Peleis*! Did anyone get *hurt* when that happened?" She gave the word "hurt" a mocking edge and glided past Achilles once again.

Damia's face, frozen in that strange, stiff stillness, and those words burned into Achilles's memory: *You are proof. I have to be Deidamia. I am not a goddess's daughter.*

Helen smiled a sardonic smile. "Let me save you years, daughter of Pallasu: you are no longer adrift in the sea of fate like a shipwreck thrown about on storm and tide. Now you are fate's favored vessel." There was a mocking tone in her voice, and as she bent down, she began to dig through

heaps of rich robes and cloths, then flung a rough, dirty pelt from some enormous sheep at Achilles. "Here; it's the Golden Fleece the legends spoke of, the one Iason gave to Muwatallis. It cleans up really nice. Wipe your face, let's get a good look at you."

Achilles caught the fleece and wiped at her face, glowering at the golden Hittite but never taking her eyes off her. She *hated* Helen. And she was not leaving without her. It had not occurred to her that Helen might not want to leave, but the dagger of star-metal burned even the children of gods; that much she knew from the small, numb scar she had inflicted on her own skin. She flung the fleece back down.

"I like the look of you," Helen purred. "You're very pretty. In a fiery way. You look like you're about to murder me."

Achilles drew the dagger. "I'm about to take you back to the Achaians."

Helen narrowed her eyes. "The Achaians can have me," she replied. "They just have to win."

Achilles pointed the knife at Helen. "I'm about to save about forty thousand lives. You will not like the way this feels, so don't put me to the test."

Helen scowled and took a step back. "What an irritating threat. I was willing to explain the whole game to you, what the gods *really* want with us, but now I won't."

They want me to kill the Thunderer. Achilles bit her lip and tasted blood. She circled Helen, trying to close in on her. It was going to be much harder to escape with an unwilling captive, but there was plenty of rope about, and perhaps she could roll her up in a rug and then simply carry her out like a piece of temple tribute, or pretend to be a mourner bringing treasure to the Achaians to barter for stripped armor, or—

Helen picked up a golden rod decorated with falcons and held it up. "Don't make me play out a farce of single combat with you. I'll lose. You'll hurt me. I'll scream. Then my guards and my princes will rush in. Hektor and Alaksandu and Taruwili and Panderu and all their family. Anyasha will hear my screams and come on horseback; Andromakhe and her Amazons will ride to my defense; you will face them all with just a dagger, and even you will die."

"I could cut your throat," Achilles suggested.

Helen winced and touched her neck. "I bet that would hurt."

"Not for long."

Helen seemed strangely intrigued. She shook her head. “As much as I’d like to know if I can die, please don’t. The same war would be fought, but without a prize for winning. If you want me to go back with Menelaos, win the war.”

Achilles took a step closer to Helen, who stepped backward into a golden loom—and froze, eyes widening, lips parting as if to scream. Achilles dove at her, crushing her up against the loom and covering her mouth with one hand. She put the weapon to Helen’s throat. “Don’t scream or I’ll open you up,” she growled.

It would be easy too. That golden neck trembled with a suddenly faster heartbeat, and Helen gasped as she pulled her hand away. “Don’t cut me,” Helen whispered.

“Tell me what the gods want,” Achilles whispered back, maneuvering to pin Helen’s hands together, twisting, trying to get the larger woman under control. She was too close to Helen, and all her instincts screamed to get her distance; she could imagine half a dozen ways to break free and disarm herself, but the golden-eyed woman just stood there frozen, swallowing hard. Of course. *She* had never had a dagger to her throat.

“*Me*,” Helen whispered. “*Everyone* wants *me*. So let the strongest have me. The world will be my dowry.”

Achilles stared at her, frozen for a moment with the knife between them, and Helen leaned down toward her, golden eyes hypnotic, heavy-lidded, golden lips parting to whisper:

“That Golden Fleece you threw on the floor? It is worth more than the entire kingdom of Kolkhis. In that box is a bow from Eridu, sacred to the dead god of the second city, a magical weapon that can wound gods. I have a thunderbolt of Taru. I have a girdle the Amazon empress Appalutiya used in the war with the old gods. I have Typhon’s spear. The gods cannot yet take physical form, not until the world glows with the heat of sacrifice, and magic fills the air, and reality itself begins to bend. *Then* they will come, and I will go to the strongest. But the time before that time is our time, *Achilles*.”

Suddenly Helen leaned in, and their lips met. A shock went through Achilles. Her hand fell weakly back. Helen’s neck bled freely from a thin, shallow scratch, but her eyes still burned into Achilles.

“I know some tricks you don’t. You’re not strong enough to just come in here and take me, not without magic of your own.”

A heavy, drugged weight descended on Achilles. Her mind screamed for her limbs to move, and they obeyed, but sluggishly, as if her body were at a distance, or at the bottom of a well.

Yes, Helen purred, let your memory take you back to the place you never left. For me, it is sunrise on a mountaintop—when and where, I do not know, but the sun rises and the sea covers everything and I am utterly alone.

For you, it is at the bottom of a well.

She was drowning again. The way the water burst into her body; the way her limbs would not respond, only went limp and flaccid, appendages belonging to somebody else who was already a corpse; the heat, the searing, the million small explosions as water overwhelmed the bubbled air inside her lungs; the darkness full of bright red flashes; the thunder in her ears; the soundless beat of vast wings.

Mother—Thetis, toothless skull bleached by time—where are you? I am drowning.

Mother—taloned Mother, Mother with giant eyes and many teeth, Mother of the silent wings—where are you? I am clawing at the walls of the well. I thought I had escaped it forever, but I am trapped in it again, and I will drown here.

I see before me a woman with cruel claws and the horns of a cow. I see before me a golden-horned alabaster cow with malevolent eyes, a white woman with malevolent cow eyes, a pale-armed woman with a flint knife cutting the throats of the cattle, cutting the chests of the humans, drawing forth sacrifices to her Mother.

Hera, Queen of Kings, Cow of Heaven—let me out. I can't breathe. The water is filling my lungs.

There are weapons in the darkness: a black dagger slipping through my fingers; a sword and spear of black metal, sideros, burning red; and four enormous black stars, each twisted and deformed by the heat of some terrible fusion, formed in the shape of a crown, a cuirass, and two greaves, calling out to the dark star inside me. There is magic in these weapons, power that can wound the gods, just outside my grasp.

But I can't reach them.

Chapter Fifteen

Achilles opened her eyes. Everything hurt. Her ears still rang, and she was drenched in water, shivering with cold. She lay in a ring of dead grass on a blasted hillside. Her clothes were in tatters, and her dagger was gone. Above her was the palisade of the Achaian camp. In the distance, across the plain, the painted upper walls of Wilusa glowed red in the light of the setting sun.

In her hand was a single yellow apple with a bite taken out of it.

She flung the apple away and staggered toward the gates of the camp.

As she approached, a guard gaped at her in blank terror. For a moment, the man seemed barely real, a flickering shadow that resolved itself into a Boiotian man raising his spear to bar her passage.

Achilles bared her teeth at the Boiotian guard. “Apometasteti,” she snarled, and for a moment the Achaian word meant nothing to her, a wandering animal’s warning growl. “Out of my way,” she repeated, and the man’s eyes widened in shock.

“F-Forgive me, Peleis,” the man stammered. “Everyone’s been looking for you—the Amazons attacked again two days ago—where have you been?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her blood was thundering in her ears again. Her hands clenched and unclenched. “Take me to my tents.”

The hapless lookout nodded and motioned for her to follow, and she did, through the broken land at the edge of a familiar ridge, now covered in burned stakes and mud, smudged and trampled, the grass crushed and torn. No wildflowers remained. They crested the hill and trudged down into the camp, and she recognized the tents of the Myrmidons as if from a dream,

though all but a few of her men were gone, and slave women sullenly tended the fires, stirred pots, mended cloth with long bone needles, while a harried woman with black hair surged to and fro, snapping orders in Achaian. She spun suddenly round, and it took Achilles a moment to recognize her.

Her eyes were bleary, and the black kohl around them was a smudged mess, no longer sharp lines but a blur around the rims of her eyes. Tear tracks had cut through the dust on her face. She stared at Achilles as if pierced and ran to her, throwing her arms around her neck and weeping in an incomprehensible tongue. Then her words shifted abruptly to sobbing Achaian, and Achilles hugged her fiercely back.

“Where did you *go*?” Meryapi sobbed.

Achilles clung to the Egyptian, clung to her warmth and solidity, trembling. Her eyes stung. “I went into the city,” she whispered.

“We sent *ships*. Scouts. Patroklos is out patrolling the waters, begging fishermen and dolphins for news of you.” Meryapi’s arms tightened fiercely, as if she would squish the life out of Achilles or crush her into herself, and Achilles squawked.

“But—” It hurt to move away even a little, but Achilles pulled back enough to look into Meryapi’s tear-streaked face. “How long was I gone?”

“A month!” Meryapi stared at her. “You went into the city to rescue Helen, didn’t you? Just by yourself, sneaking in? Achilles! They attacked the camp three times! Amazons with fire arrows burned my tent! I lost half of my books!”

Achilles swallowed hard. The world was still swimming, still a chaotic mass of shadows and flickering fires. “I found Helen. She—used magic—” Her body began to shake again, the same uncontrollable spasm of rage and terror that had ripped through her again and again and again, vibrations on a plucked string. “This war is a trap.”

“Hush,” Meryapi hissed, and motioned to a small tent scarred with burns. “Not around the slaves. Patroklos keeps bringing them back. Once their husbands are dead, he doesn’t feel right leaving them to starve.” She pulled Achilles into the tent and sat her down on a rug, sat opposite her, staring at her intently. “Every day I must find them work. I have them milling grain, but we’re starting to run low. Don’t say anything that could demoralize the troops.”

“I am pretty fucking demoralized myself,” Achilles said.

“Do not be demoralized! You are the daughter of a goddess, a warrior beyond measure. You are glorious in battles, splendid in armor. Balios and Xanthos will be overjoyed to see you.”

Achilles covered her face with her hands. The look in their eyes would be hatred this time, utter reproach. How could she have abandoned them again? *A month?* She groaned and clawed at her face, but her skin felt strangely numb.

Meryapi’s hands tightened on her wrists. “Don’t hurt yourself. You are a warrior like Neith. Tell me what happened, and we will make a plan. Patroklos will return soon, and we will figure out what to tell the king.”

Agamemnon too? And Menelaos! It was intolerable. The plan had been so simple, so daring. It should have worked, if not for the Hittite’s witchcraft. Achilles told Meryapi that in a shaking voice, and the Egyptian’s eyes widened. She looked small and tired without her perfect kohl, a mere mortal. *And I am a mere mortal too . . .* Achilles recounted what had happened in Wilusa, and then her feverish wanderings in the dark, the brambles and bushes all around her, the terror, the blackness, the strange glimpse of the cow-goddess, the *horror*. “Some demigoddess I am,” Achilles rasped. “I never escaped; I am drowning in the well . . .”

Meryapi grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Be calm, daughter of the goddess. We are of the divine lineages, you and I, and we have a responsibility to the common people to bear up under adversity. So the kidnapped queen has ambitions—and magic to enact them. We have a great army, but no way past their walls; we have a vulnerable camp and not enough supplies; we have you, a demigod, sobbing like a little girl.” Meryapi leaned closer, and her eyes widened, filling Achilles’s view: huge, dark eyes, with a tiny Achilles in each one. “I like our chances. Did you know that Grandpapa was almost captured at Kadesh? Excessive bravery and want of caution. Totally surrounded by Hittite chariots. Do you know what he did?”

Achilles sniffed, trying to blink her eyes clear. “No.”

“He prayed to Ra,” Meryapi said. “The ultimate grandfather of our house. At just that moment, an eagle flew over the battlefield, and the routed Division of Ra regrouped, and the Division of Amun took heart, and the Division of Ptah finally reached the field, and we won a glorious victory over the treacherous Hittites. So!” She smiled suddenly, and the two tiny Achilles-faces in her eyes smiled with her, a shaken, desperate, hopeful

smile. “You will pray to your gods for countermagic, and when Patroklos and the Myrmidons arrive, we will have a proper feast to celebrate your return, and then, when we have made our preparations, we will contrive a cunning stratagem to capture that walled city, and we will drag that Hittite bitch back to Achaia no matter how much magic she has, no matter how many gods she wants to seduce. Bah! What an *arrogant* woman! As if the gods would quarrel like children over a *Hittite*.”

Achilles took a deep breath and stopped trembling. Meryapi’s plan was something, at least, and her faith was an embrace. They sat together hand in hand. Meryapi’s pulse thumped against Achilles’s pulse, and the world regained some of its form.

Once she had eaten and dressed herself in a fresh tunic and found Tooth-of-the-Dragon (neatly stashed in an oiled cloth by Patroklos, not haphazardly thrown where she had left it), she walked through the Myrmidon tents, nodding to the few of her men who were there. They watched her with guarded eyes but clasped their hands to their chests in salute. She was not sure what she was to them—never anyone’s idea of a worthy prince, yet the child of their king and the dead queen of their land.

Best to do the hardest meeting first.

Balios and Xanthos stood by the chariots, gazing out to the breakers that slammed over and over against the helpless shore. Waiting for Patroklos to return, no doubt, tended by skinny Melia. “My horses,” Achilles said softly, approaching them with eyes suddenly wet again. “I didn’t mean to—”

Xanthos turned abruptly, nostrils flaring, hoofs describing a strange, agitated dance on the sand. His eyes rolled. For once she was not sure she understood his body language. Was he angry? Frightened? Confused? *Do I even smell like me?* she wondered.

But Balios caught her eye and held it calmly. Then he turned in a long, slow arc and walked toward her, all blood-spattered grace. He nudged her chest with his muzzle and fixed on her a single calm eye. It was not anger in his eye, but only a frank impassive calm. *Get up, mare of ferocious temperament. You’re frightening Xanthos with this uncharacteristic weakness. Dust yourself off.* Or so she imagined he would say, if he had words.

She laughed aloud and walked to Xanthos, staring out at the sea. He settled down, and eventually his ears stopped flicking, his tail stopped

swishing, and his breathing resumed its habitual calm.

This time it had only been a month, after all, not two years.

In the late watches of the night, three battle-weary Achaians came up through the mists and announced themselves. They wore bronze armor and brooched cloaks and battered helmets, and their spears were notched, and their shields were scarred. She recognized Odysseus first by his beard and his voice and the rueful way he approached her.

“Where *were* you? The Silent One herself has been, well—silent.”

And Diomedes, saying nothing, smiled to see her, saluting with his spear. He had a bit of blood on it, but she said nothing.

The third was Menelaos, haggard and haunted, who immediately sagged with relief as he got a good look at her face. “I dreamed you went into Wilusa to bring Helen back. Two days after you disappeared I dreamed it, and then—you didn’t—you *did*.” His face fell. “I am sorry to have put you in danger.”

“It was my idiotic plan,” Achilles said firmly. “Not yours.” She was not sure how much she wanted to tell them about Helen. Not yet. Did Menelaos know how fickle Helen was, not the faithful, anxious woman he had apparently seen in Sparta, but a power-hungry demigod? She frowned. “I got closer than I had any right to, too, only—”

The king of Sparta’s face suddenly seemed brittle to her, his expression full of something like hope, something like fear. He was steeling himself not to ask questions; there was something hurt in him that feared to be hurt again; she imagined him as a child, dangled by his mother’s hand from the high walls of Mykenai.

“The spell of the Wilusans is powerful,” she said. She needed a good lie, something plausible that would not crush Menelaos’s heart. The words started out slow and careful, then grew easier and easier, until they rolled out of her mouth with a logic that was not her own, as if another woman spoke with her tongue. “Its magic is too strong for me, too strong for her. She obeys the commands of her father, the Great King of the Hittites, and though she gazes west, longing for the Achaians, she does not think of rebellion. She must be spear-won, as we planned.”

For a moment, utter rage blotted out her vision. Was Helen’s spell still at work in her, still twisting her words to suit it? She tasted bile, impotent anger.

“Next time,” Odysseus said mildly, “remember me. I’m good at idiotic plans; you’re good at killing things. Together, we could work much mischief.”

“Don’t leave me out,” Diomedes added. “I’ve been keeping in shape.”

Menelaos had gone silent to ponder what she said. Now he clasped her shoulder and said, “Welcome back.”

They passed the night drinking wine at Meryapi’s insistence, and Achilles insisted on sharpening their spears.

A few hours before dawn, old Phoinix and cousin Aiwas came in on a Myrmidon ship and said the others should be returning soon from down the coast. They had gone to Amazon Lurnesha to seek her, and had tangled with the local Amazons, and had even fought a tiny Amazon *man* riding a horse, a man with enormous scars all over his chest and a vicious way about him, but in the end they had all gotten out safely.

“Also,” Aiwas said, “on the ship I learned a board game they play in Lazpa with stones and a special wooden table. I’ll teach it to you. It represents ship battles. I tried to teach Phoinix, but he was too drunk to play.”

“I’ve been drunk for weeks,” the old man confirmed. “I thought I was going to have to tell Peleus you were dead.”

As the sun began to creep up over the ridge, blazing across the plain of Taruisa, Agamemnon arrived in full armor, flanked by kings: Idomeneus of Kreté, his brother-in-law; the lords of Athenai and Thebai in full bronze; and old Nestor behind them. Agamemnon looked her over. She rose to greet him, and he leaned very close and whispered:

“Achilles, daughter of Peleus, *you are out of control.*”

He straightened up and looked her in the eye. His green eyes were impassive, and his voice was deep. “You have returned to us. As the priestess of the Queen of Kings reminded us, we require your spear to win the city and recover our lost queen. At noon, we will sacrifice to the gods for your safe return. Tomorrow, we will return to the battlefield.”

Every word was purely formal; every motion of his body was controlled; there was as little feeling to what he said as if he had been cast from metal.

He saluted with his spear, and the kings with him did likewise. Achilles returned the gesture quietly. The shame burned in her cheeks as surely as if she had been a coward instead of idiotically bold. When he left, it was a relief.

“He’s right,” said old king Nestor. “Goddess’s daughter or not, it means nothing if you vanish when we need you.”

“I’ll prove myself,” Achilles said coldly. Somehow the old man’s words cut deeper than Agamemnon’s, and she had to blink back hot tears to keep her composure. “I’ll take every town in Taruisa. You’re having trouble with the Amazons? I’ll burn their cities.”

“Be calm,” the old man said. “Do not let rage rule you.”

“Calm!” Achilles curled her lip. “I’ll be as calm as the sea.”

The old man gave her a sardonic bow and withdrew.

Hours more she brooded, until the ant-sailed Myrmidon ships returned. She met them on the sand. When Patroklos saw her, he leapt into the water and paddled to her side with loud shouts. He bounded toward her, splashing salt water everywhere, and scooped her up in the midst of the rolling surf and spun, and the world whirled around them. He crushed her to his chest, laughing with joy and shaking with sobs. She laughed with him, cried with him, shouted for him to let her down, and they both collapsed into the surf, sitting in salt water to their waists.

“Everyone is furious with me,” Achilles said solemnly.

“Well, you *do* have an army,” said Patroklos. “You didn’t need to leave us out.”

“I wanted to sneak into Wilusa. You can’t pass as Hittite ladies.”

Patroklos cackled. “You never gave us a chance to pass as Hittite ladies. If you wanted me to, I would have tried, but I admit you have a natural advantage.”

Achilles sighed. The waves droned in and out, keeping their words private from the rest of the army, from Menelaos. “Helen is making sport of us. She says she will go to the strongest.”

He squeezed her hand. “Then let’s be strongest.”

At noon, on a mound of earth and wood surmounted with a horned altar, the Achaian priests sacrificed ten bulls one by one, slitting their throats and letting the red blood run down the altar and into trenches dug in the sand, so that the thirsty earth could drink her fill; then they killed twenty goats and twenty sheep. Iphianassa was nowhere to be found, and Achilles wondered where she could have gone. She would ask Agamemnon— No. She would not, until she earned her way back into his good graces.

Then pigeons were killed, and seagulls, though these were not a traditional offering. The cooking fires roared high; the Achaians sent up a cheer at the smell of roasting flesh, and Achilles surmised they had eaten poorly for the last few days.

One by one the Achaian kings went to the platform and dipped their spears in the blood; and she followed just behind Diomedes, dipping Tooth-of-the-Dragon and returning to her Myrmidons. *See, Mother, I am sacrificing!* She throbbed with anger. Now, of all times, she could use divine guidance from her mother, but Athena had abandoned Achilles when she most needed help, when Helen struck her down with a kiss. *Help me, Mother!* she demanded, scanning the heavens for owls.

The Silent One remained silent, but the camp lurched back to life. Craftsmen hammered bronze and patched shields and sharpened spears, fletched arrows, tightened belts, tested wheels. The light infantry had a leaner, hungrier look than before, gaunter men with darker eyes and a more practiced way of carrying their spears and shields. The heavy infantry had more scars, more dents on their shields and corslets. In each quarter of the camp, there were clay urns, each large enough to contain the ashes and bones of a man. There were too many urns. Hundreds.

At twilight a priest came and called on Achilles. "The Queen of Kings summons you," he said. "Speak to her high priestess."

Achilles rose grimly and followed. If her divine mother had abandoned her, if the Silent One was not going to help her, any god would do. *And if you don't like that, show yourself, Owl Goddess.*

The priest conveyed her onto the longship of bones, and in the cabin of that ship, Iphianassa sat in silence, pale as wax, with the severed head of a bull on her lap, upside down. Every few moments she leaned down to suck at the shorn veins of his neck. When Achilles entered, the child looked up with a sardonic smile. "I speak," she said in her high girlish voice, "on behalf of the Queen of Kings, and with her words."

"I see."

"You have met the Apple of the Sun. Do you desire to possess her for yourself?"

"Not especially," Achilles said scornfully. "Let Menelaos have her if he wants her. Or let her die."

The high priestess smiled, baring teeth like knives. "She is strong, is she not?"

“She has magic. That’s not the same thing.”

“Is it not?” The child rose with a bored grin. “My sister—little Screech-Owl—is still nursing her wounds. She took the brunt of Helen’s kiss for you, and it will be some time before she can do much more than scream in the darkness. You got off lucky that time, my fiery demigod.”

Instead of fear, Achilles trembled with anger. Perhaps it was good to know that the Silent One had helped her after all, but she felt no gratitude, only fury at that golden Hittite witch. “So her magic can sear the gods? I thought you lot were all-powerful.”

“Would that we were,” the priestess sighed, and immortal things echoed in the youthful voice. “I do not always love Pallasu, but in these latter days I have come to rely on her. It is a frightful thing to lose her counsel at this time. Nevertheless, I know what she would say to you.”

“I’m waiting.”

“To seize the Apple—or to kill her—you need magic weapons.”

“Yes,” Achilles said coldly, “I do. Where should I start?”

“Divine weapons are rare,” the child said. “A century ago, your mother’s pet mortals forged a set in Egypt out of the star-metal that can burn our flesh. They used it to drive the Three away from this world.” Dark stars burned in the shadows of Achilles’s mind: a dagger, a sword, a spear, armor, all jagged as if hammered out of the darkness, all formed of black sideros, the metal of the end. The child sighed, and the images vanished. “But those weapons have disappeared, and I do not know where to find them. The Silent One might know, but—”

“Useless,” Achilles growled. “I’m not going to Egypt to search for lost toys. Do better than that.”

“The Amazons had divine weapons four centuries ago,” the child said idly. “During the war against the elder gods, we forged many weapons for the warrior queens, for they were our allies. Hephaistos made them javelins of lightning, bows with teeth like serpents, axes that can cleave the limbs of a god. They buried the weapons in the tombs of their ancient queens.”

Unbidden, images of great tombs came to Achilles: enormous mounds of earth opening on one side to a colossal stone gateway approached by stone-walled, stone-paved paths. Fierce tattooed women with cruel axes and bows guarded the tombs, and within, stone ceilings rose in staggered courses like the layers on a boar’s-tusk helmet, their pinnacles lost in darkness. Intoxicating smoke filled these tombs, where the Amazons dreamed dreams

of power. In these dark chambers, she would find weapons that had killed gods.

“The Tombs of the Queens are near the great towns the Amazons built: Kilikassuwa, Lurnesha, Smurna, Millawanda, Apasa, Amassuriya, Tamiskuriya. Take the divine weapons any way you please, Achilles: might is right. Now gird yourself for battle, and take the Amazons’ measure.”

“I will,” said Achilles.

But what she thought as she turned to go was merely this, with a sudden savage smile: *There will be vengeance for Meryapi’s books.*

Chapter Sixteen

The plain of Skamandros had changed utterly. Some of it was the progression of the season; the grass had dried to faded yellow straw, and the wildflowers had withered to saffron and umber, and the dry season had lowered the river, so that the tawny clay showed through the slow, lifeless water. The sun beat down, and sweat ran off Achilles's arms and legs, slid out from under her bracers, trickled over her fingertips. The rails of her chariot burned to the touch, and Balios and Xanthos toiled in the heat, snorting and grumbling. Old Phoinix had the reins today, and Patroklos rattled along with his friend Automedon beside her.

The plan was simple: Agamemnon would attack the bridge from the west while the chariots of Argos and Aiolia and the islands went south to the ford. The Skaian gate was closest to the bridge, and the ford was between the bridge and the gate, so the Hittites would have to defend the ford or surrender the bridge.

Sure enough, as they approached, the opposite bank blazed with bronze. Hundreds of Hittites were drawn up across the river, and the sun flashed on their scale armor and their conical helmets and their tall tower shields and their spears. This was no terrain for chariots—and behind the river, the Hittites had dug defensive trenches—so Achilles dismounted and clapped Phoinix on the shoulder. “Take care of Balios and Xanthos. If the Amazons try anything on the flanks, line up the light infantry in front of the carts with the river to their backs.”

The old man nodded solemnly. “Watch out to your front too,” he said. “Those trenches might stop our chariots, but they won't stop the Amazons' mean little ponies. As for the Hittites—”

“Don’t worry. Our bronze is as good as theirs.” She drew her ant-guard sword and tucked it into her shield hand, hidden behind the boss of the shield. “I won’t lose.”

Achilles joined Patroklos at the head of the line of dismounted chariot fighters, and the heavy infantry lined up behind them. To the left of the Myrmidons were Diomedes and his men, big and covered in overlapping bronze plates, with tall boar’s-tusk helms and black horsehair crests. To the right were the islanders, and Odysseus in full panoply, spears tucked under his shield arm, bow strung. They were all so beautiful and so fierce. Achilles gazed across the river, for this would be the first time she got a good look at the faces of the Hittites.

The Hittites were beautiful too. There was Alaksandu at the very front, a tall man with a face like a god, long black hair tied behind him, bright eyes, a long beautiful neck protected with a bronze collar, fishscale armor bright as gold, golden greaves, a tall shield of bronze and wood, and a spear tipped with a short black blade of some unearthly metal. Sideros.

It was her dagger from Poseidon, reworked into a spearpoint to use against her. She bared her teeth and slammed Tooth-of-the-Dragon against her shield, roaring a curse.

She made out Hektor too, even taller than Alaksandu, splendidly built, with armored shoulders so wide and strong that the rage left her for a moment and she was full of wonder. His helmet was tall and surmounted with a bronze crest with a mane of red horsehair, and his hair beneath it flowed black and unbound to his shoulders. He was beautiful too.

And Anyasha—ah, Anyasha. On the other flank of the ford, Anyasha stood with bow in hand, his shield-bearer protecting his body, his sensuous lips twisted with scorn; but his eyes were bright with strange longing.

On the hill, above the walls of Wilusa, above the gates and the guard towers, on the summit of the hill, she saw *her*, Helen, and met her yellow wolf’s eyes. Helen was frozen in anticipation. All her toys were neatly lined up, and the game was about to begin.

Rage rekindled in Achilles. Those fools—if they knew what they were *really* fighting for, would they be so eager to stand in her way? She pointed the bronze blade of her spear up at that tall tower and bared her teeth.

“Speech!” roared Eudoros, who had once held her down for one of Kheiron’s thrashings.

“Advance in line,” Achilles said, “shield to shield. The first man to break the shield wall will have my spear through his neck. How’s that for a speech?”

The Myrmidons roared their approval and clashed their spears against their shields, then lowered them into place. They advanced toward the river step by step, crushing the straw grass into the mud. The water was only knee-deep, and the current weak. Achilles advanced step by step, minding her footwork as the feet of hundreds of men churned the clear river yellow.

Finally, the Hittites were a spear’s throw away—and the first arrows began coming down. They clattered off shields, bounced and arced away. Behind Achilles, a man screamed a short, blood-curdling yelp, and something splashed in the water.

“Stay in line,” Patroklos growled. Perhaps he had detected some wavering that she, lost in the gurgle of the water and the hum of the arrows and the splashing of feet, had missed.

Javelins came next. One struck the boss of her shield and bounced off, and the handle buzzed in her hand. It was all she could do to cling to her ant-sword and steady her wrist against the vibrating metal. Two fouled Patroklos’s shield, and he grunted under its sudden weight. Soon the lines would meet and he could share her shield, but for now, the arrows rained down.

More screams. If anyone broke ranks now, they would die. It was too late to turn back; they were too far into the water. The heavy infantry threw their javelins at the Hittites, and the Achaian archers on the bank loosed arrows, and a few answering screams went up from the Hittite ranks. Then they were past the point of missiles, and Achilles let out a shout, and Patroklos yelled to her right, and they charged up out of the water into the wall of Hittite shields.

Achilles slammed into a man twice her size as hard as she could, and the sheer force of him threw her back into the water, back into the shields of the men behind her. They flung her forward again, back out of the water, and she threw her shield at him, caught his spear with her spear, slid her sword over his shield-rim, and shattered his face. Blood and meat and teeth and bone went everywhere. She lunged over his falling body and into the Hittites, parrying spearpoints with her spear and sword.

Alaksandu bore down on her, and she choked her spear back, held her ground, and made him flinch back at the last minute. Rage filled her as his

spear glided past her face; she hacked at the shaft with her sword and thrust Tooth-of-the-Dragon with all her strength, but he twisted at the last minute and it struck his bronze collar, glancing off, and—

Golden Helen fanned out on a couch beneath him, her body rising to meet his, her lips parted, saying his name again and again, Alaksandu Alaksandu Alaksandu, and on her lips his name was golden too, and he clasped her hands with his hands, and their fingers interwove and their bodies melded, and everything was drowning in gold, and the city was gold, and the people were gold, and the whole world was full of light—

The vision passed before Achilles in an instant, but it had distracted her just long enough. Alaksandu's shield crashed into her helmet, and she slammed into an Achaian warrior, who went down in a heap on the riverbank. She nearly fell too, but rebounded in time, as Alaksandu bore down on her again with his sideros spear. Tooth-of-the-Dragon had been knocked back off the centerline, but there was just enough time to whirl it around and slam the butt-spike into his corslet, shattering a bronze scale.

Alaksandu fell back with a cry, and she rushed after him, but at that very moment a man of enormous size glided past her, his own spear perilously low, aimed to catch Patroklos in his unguarded flank. *Hektor.*

Achilles threw her body at him and slammed into *his* side, and Hektor clattered back, regaining his footing further up the bank. Patroklos was shieldless now, fighting with his spear alone, but Achilles dove for her shield and flung it up just in time to block a javelin that hurtled down the bank at her cousin. The javelin plunged into the shield and she threw it down again, for there was no time to pull the spear out.

The formations had opened up; the fight had spread onto the bank; the Achaians were still advancing from the water, and in places the Hittites had given ground. Achilles guarded Patroklos's left as Hektor advanced again, more cautious this time, wary, circling. He gave a probing thrust; she parried it with a restrained tap of her spear, waiting for him to commit so she could redirect and skewer him like a hog, but he was equally restrained. Their eyes met, and—

A laughing, younger Alaksandu danced in the waters of the Skamandros, and his brother Hektor watched him in awe from the thick rushes, marveling at the gracefulness of his dance. How could anyone dance so beautifully? What a beautiful brother he was, and a beautiful life they had, in their city of horses and gods, in their city no army could conquer.

On the opposite bank sat an Amazon girl on her horse, and her eyes met Hektor's, and they smiled at each other. Maybe the Amazons were not enemies, not anymore, not forever. Maybe one day he would learn her true name—not Antusekururiya, not Andromakhe, but her Amazon true name, and the taste of her lips, and the sound of her laughter. It was a beautiful dream—

This time, Achilles was ready for the flash of vision and drank it in, flowing as Hektor flowed. Their spears met again, and Hektor darted in, trying to overpower her and snare her weapon, but she knew this trick, Agamemnon had *tried* this trick. She pulled her spear back out of reach and kicked at his exposed shin with all her might, trying to crush the bones in his leg. He let out a cry and staggered back into his own line, and two Hittite spearmen flung their shields up to protect his retreat. No matter; one spearman flung his shield too high, and she glided under his spearpoint and ran her sword through his foot.

The Hittite soldier howled, and as his body ripped free and his foot came apart on her sword and tore the blade out of her hand, she saw his life flash before her eyes—his mother, his wife, his daughter, his city, the graves of his family, the small gods that protected them, and the golden-eyed Hittite queen who had stood on the walls above the Skaian gate smiling as he trudged down toward the Skamandrian ford to die.

Achilles gathered herself, snarling. The Hittites were reeling back, forming a shield wall behind the trench. A hundred yards down the line, on the far end of the ford, the fight still raged, so she caught up a fallen Hittite shield and her ant-sword and took off toward the fighting.

She reached them just as Odysseus screamed. A javelin was in his shoulder, not thrown but thrust by Anyasha, who whirled, parrying an Achaian spear with his own spear, kicking the spearman back, then tearing his javelin free and turning back round to finish off Odysseus—but Achilles flung her Hittite shield out over the Ithakan and deflected Anyasha's spear, then thrust up at Anyasha's flank.

He caught it on his javelin, and she twisted, trying to smash his face with the Hittite shield. She let it go as it hit him, and he staggered back. She stood over Odysseus, who was howling in pain, clutching his shoulder.

Anyasha tossed his javelin. She knocked it out of the air and bared her teeth at him. *Demigod, if you are a demigod, let me show you what I could not show Helen.*

He stared at her with furious eyes. She stared back. The lines of Hittites had retreated a few steps behind him; the islanders had come up to cover Odysseus, but no further; and Anyasha and Achilles had room to maneuver, to stare into each other, to feel the hate between them.

My mother entrusted her to me. The thought came from the mind of Anyasha unbidden, and Achilles saw: golden-eyed Helen, face twisted with pride and hunger, cheeks smeared with sacrificial blood, while all around her a dozen men and women pierced their hands with daggers and worshipped her. A woman stood in the doorway, only half-real. Her flesh was blue as night and full of stars. The galaxy glowed from her skin.

Protect her, my Anyasha. I cannot manifest yet, but I am coming.

“So your mother is a goddess,” Achilles growled. “Let’s see if goddesses can cry.” She stepped toward him, keeping her spear well back, daring him to commit to an attack. When he did not, she stepped in closer, and thrust for his belly.

He twisted off the centerline, pulled back. He seemed off-balance. Not used to fighting lefties.

She grinned at him, shifted her grip right, thrust at his left shoulder.

He stepped back, trying to parry, but she was too quick for him. She shifted her grip again and darted in, and she could *feel* it, *feel* the moment when he knew that it was too late, that he had overcommitted.

Everything was golden. The hunger of Helen was everywhere, and her eyes—the sun was Helen’s eyes, the river Helen’s eyes, the dying sunflowers were Helen’s eyes, the bronze helmets Helen’s eyes, everything, everything, and her teeth, and her echoing hunger—

Anyasha swore and fled, bleeding, diving behind a raised shield.

On the left, Diomedes roared victory. The rear of the bridge would fall. The Hittites would lose today. The ground was red. Achilles’s hands were red. She saw red and gold, flickering red and gold, and her body shook—

Then the ground began to shake. Hundreds of drums rang out, or—if not drumbeats, then—

The retreating Hittites parted their ranks, and a line of riders charged through: women on horses who leapt the trenches with ease, armed with bows and axes and shields, sending up an ululating war cry as they bore down on the Achaians. One more magnificent than the rest bore directly down on Achilles.

Talasuttariya. Shetra. Thalestris. Hittite and Amazon and Achaian names flashed through Achilles's mind. A hundred cavalry charges, and a hundred battlefields, and a hundred times the Amazons crying around her, crying Captain, Shetra; crying her Hittite name, Talasuttariya, to strike fear into the people of Assuwa; crying AITA! KALU! APLU! ARTUMI! as they charged on her command. Four daughters she had, all captains of the cavalry, and formerly eight sons—but an Achaian woman had butchered three.

Now she was here for revenge.

The Amazon flung a javelin as she flew past, nearly pinning Achilles to the bank, but it glanced off her scale armor and stuck in the clay. Achilles caught up the fallen Hittite shield again in case the Amazon had another javelin and stood with the islanders in line, protecting Odysseus, who still screamed, while Shetra the Amazon came round again, stabbing down at Achilles's shield as she passed, glancing off, and without a second thought tearing out an Ithakan's exposed throat with the same point.

The Amazons were firing bows from out of range, directing a withering fire onto the Achaians at the ford. One by one the islanders began to fall, clutching their eyes or gasping as their necks sprouted fletching, their small hide shields too slight to protect them.

The Amazon captain shouted a challenge in Hittite: "Hassantes kuinnesta u tuk kuemi!"

Achilles let out a laugh, for the words sounded familiar. "And I'll kill their mother too," she shouted back. She stepped forward.

The Amazon rode at her, lance in hand. Achilles stood her ground, eyes on the spearpoint. Time slowed, and the flash of light on the tip of the bronze slid closer and closer, and the hooves of the Amazon's small horse thundered closer, ready to slam into her face and crush her body and trample her bones. It was a fearsome thing, this mounted kentaur of a woman, horse and rider moving like one body, plunging toward her in one motion.

If Achilles had been right-handed and her stolen Hittite shield had covered her left, she would have had no defense. As it was, she flung herself left at the last moment, keeping her spearpoint free, and the lance slid down into her shield. The sound of shredding bronze filled the air, and the lance came off in the shield, and the Amazon twisted on her horse in a

single fluid motion, leaping backward off it, spinning, axe in hand, hooking Achilles's shield.

Achilles released the shield just as the Amazon pulled her lance free, and for a moment they hung there suspended as the shield fell away, revealing Achilles's sword.

Achilles brought up her sword to parry as the axe came whirring down, and the bronze bit deep into the wood. The Amazon grunted with the jarring force of the weapons striking. Then Shetra's lance came across her body, aimed for Achilles's face, and Achilles thrust Tooth-of-the-Dragon across the lance's trajectory and into Shetra, deflecting the lance and pushing the spear through the Amazon's neck.

Their eyes met. The Amazon stared blankly at her and gave a sudden jerk, tearing her axe free. The motion carried her backward off the spear. She did not quite manage to fling the axe or swing it again, but it trembled in her hand as she shuddered on the crushed gold-and-red straw grass. Bloody foam poured from her mouth.

Someone was screaming, "ATI, ATI."

Achilles turned toward the voice just in time to duck under an arrow. Across a distance of forty or so yards, the Amazon who had come to the camp was nocking another arrow, screaming, "ATI, ATI." Mother, mother—Achilles could *feel* the meaning, though the words were foreign. She ducked behind the fallen Amazon, sheathed her sword, and lifted the corpse by her armor. Blood foamed onto her hands, but she dragged Shetra's body backward into the Skamandros.

No more arrows were fired at her. Shrill horns blasted on the city walls. The Amazons kept up their withering fire on the ford, and the Achaians began to withdraw under their shields, walking backward. It was too risky to flank the bridge now, not with the Amazons in place and the Hittites regrouping behind them, not with Odysseus wounded.

Once she was back to the chariots, Achilles flopped the dead Amazon down next to old Phoinix. "I killed her sons too. By the time we're through, I'll probably kill her whole family."

"It happens in war," said the old man.

Achilles trembled. She felt stronger than she had this morning, less tired. Exhilarated. Well-fed.

On the towers of Wilusa, she could feel Helen's sated hunger, her satisfaction.

It was a good day to be half a god. Achilles thought perhaps she should want to vomit.

She met Agamemnon on a hill overlooking the bridge. He had taken it regardless, but the Hittite defenders had withdrawn in good order. Now an Achaian garrison held the bridge, but—

“The Amazons will slip in and butcher them at night,” Achilles said.

“How’s Odysseus?”

“Alive.” Odysseus had been swearing with great inventiveness, promising that he would find new ways to torment Anyasha when he caught up with him. Achilles had suggested flaying him alive, but she had not meant it.

“Good. We’ll call a truce to exchange bodies. Diomedes says you got Thalestris.” Agamemnon gave Achilles a speculative look. “Maybe the Amazons will show some caution.”

“They’ll attack twice as fiercely until they’ve had revenge.” Achilles squinted toward the city. “I bet I’d make a good Amazon.”

“They say Amazons always have to be on top,” Agamemnon said with a half smile. “They ride their men like horses.”

She smirked. “Sounds familiar.”

His face darkened, and he shaded his eyes against the glare. “My scouts sighted another contingent of Lukkans coming from the south. And the cities of the Amazons have emptied. Every day more fucking ponies keep trickling into their camp. Today’s fight will be for nothing.”

Achilles thought of wolf’s eyes, and yellow apples, and golden teeth. *No. For less than nothing.* “We have ships,” she said.

“Yes, we have ships.” Agamemnon’s expression grew more dour. “The Queen of Kings told me to raid the coasts, burn the Amazon cities, sack their sacred tombs . . .” He trailed off. “It seems like sacrilege,” he said at last. “Artemis and Apollo will strike back, I’m sure of it.”

“Send me.” Achilles bared her teeth at him. “Attack the Lukkan cities. Attack the Hittite flanks. Make them regret sending armies north. I’ll plunder the Amazons myself, I’m half-god.” She needed the divine weapons in their royal tombs anyway. The thought of shearing through Helen’s golden neck made her tremble with fury and joy. Yes—she would take the Hittite’s head. Let Menelaos weep like a child until Helen’s spell dissipated, and then let him praise Achilles the spellbreaker.

Agamemnon sighed. "If only there were a way over their walls. Or under. But you're right. We need plunder and food, and we need to split the army up for a while. We can't keep fighting over a mile of land, back and forth, with no results." He turned to face her, and she saw that he was tired, his handsome face lined, his green eyes hollow with sleeplessness. "I'm sorry for my harsh words yesterday."

"But you were right, my king," said Achilles. "I will always be out of control." She smiled at him, and an answering spark flickered in his tired eyes.

"Well," he said. "If we steal off alone tonight, I *could* try to tame you."

"Yes," she echoed, grinning. "You could *try*."

That night they took a boat out into the dark waters off the coast. Under the stars, he mounted her, gripping her hips in both hands, his breath loud in her ear, and his thrusts rocked the boat in time to the waves.

But all Achilles could think of were the golden wolf-eyes of Helen, and the way the Amazon's blood had foamed over her hands, and the scream of "Ati, ati," and how each of her enemies had dreamed their beautiful dreams and hoped their beautiful hopes, and how *good* it felt to kill.

Chapter Seventeen

Achilles stood on a hill overlooking Kilikassuwa, watching fire lick over the wooden roundhouses of the Amazons. She was becoming addicted to the sight of fire on a grand scale, fire working its magic over more than the humble logs of a campfire or the heaped straw and tinder and rough stumps of a bonfire. Perhaps there was nothing more beautiful than to observe the burning of an enemy town from a suitable hilltop as she wiped the blood off her hands and face, scrubbing her skin down with loose dirt. Soon she would go down to the water again and let the sea cleanse her of smoke and dirt and dried blood—but it seemed a shame to miss the beauty of the fire.

The mud-brick houses of the lesser folk of Kilikassuwa, closer to the river and the sea, were curiously immune to the leaping flames that spread from roundhouse to roundhouse, rolling up and down the thatched roofs, consuming the pillars in their concentric rings, and finally taking down the scaled outer walls of thick bark painted with the brilliant colors favored by the Amazons as a defense against—well, fire. It worked for a while.

Over it all, the red star blazed in the sky. It had come nearer in the last weeks, burning with the ominous fire of Zeus.

First Achilles had raided a town her Myrmidons named Antandros—Men-haters—thinking it was Lurnesha, and found the town half-empty, with a tiny garrison of Amazon teenagers on half-trained ponies who shot at them with bows and then fled to the hills. The Lukkan peasants in the town explained that it was not Lurnesha after all, and she had only burned a few Amazon roundhouses in reprisal for the arrows.

Then they had struck the real Lurnesha, guided by local peasants. That city had emptied out at the sight of their ships, with a caravan of Amazons

fleeing on ponies up into the hills, taking their children and husbands and cattle and clothes, but what they left behind, Achilles gave to her Myrmidons, and the rest they burned. There were Lukkan peasants in Lurnesha too, and Masha, who were not proper Amazons; they begged for mercy and brought her gifts of goats and wine and fatted pigs, and she sold them back their freedom.

In Lurnesha, she killed six Myrmidons for raping and pillaging after she had extended her mercy to the peasants. One by one she shot them through with arrows, and told Patroklos that her orders were to be obeyed: when Achilles declared mercy, no child of Phthia could revoke it.

Then, at last, they had found Kilikassuwa, and the red star had reached its present glow, a light hanging over everything, growing brighter and brighter.

She had killed three young spearmen in Kilikassuwa who ran at her howling with rage, screaming the names of Shetra and her fallen sons, their mother and their brothers. The Achaians had parted to let them face her, sensing the personal nature of their mission, and Tooth-of-the-Dragon had opened their throats and stomachs with the ease of an artist's brush. Red—red—red—red and purple—red and black—red and blue. “Ati, ati,” they had gasped in the dust, calling out for a mother who had already died—that or Aita, Aita, the Amazon god of death, who would reunite them all in the hell of the Amazons, the Valley of Bones.

Wings beat soundlessly, and an owl alighted on Achilles's spearpoint. *Mother*, she thought. *Ati*.

Patroklos came up the hill. His face was tired and streaked with blood and smoke. His spear was dirty, and he had not cleaned his shield. “We seem to have captured the Amazon children.”

The owl leapt from Tooth-of-the-Dragon and floated soundlessly off toward the burning town. Achilles blinked at Patroklos. “Do they know where to find the grave of Queen Vlaska?”

“No. They are saying they would rather die than be enslaved or disgraced, but they are all crying.” Patroklos looked grim. “Look, Red—maybe we can ransom them back, find a face-saving way to leave them some food.”

“I have no use for armies of slave children,” Achilles agreed. “Only for the Tombs of the Queens and the treasure inside.” It called to her in the way fire called to her, but maddening and hidden: weapons to replace her stolen

gift, divine weapons no Helen and no god could shrug aside. “Maybe we could sell them to the peasants.”

“They will not buy Amazon children,” Patroklos said with suddenly wide eyes. “The Amazons would never forgive the loss of face.”

Achilles frowned. She was not prepared to kill children, no matter how urgently they begged for death before dishonor. The roof of the greatest roundhouse of Kilikassuwa was undergoing the final transformation from wood to embers, fire playing in one last golden line across the surfaces of its fibers, transforming them for a glorious instant into a roving band of gold—and then the roof collapsed, and sparks fountained up to greet the red star in the sky.

“I need to find the Tombs of the Queens,” she said. “We can’t waste too much time with these brave children. Have Meryapi interrogate them and set them free on some honorable pretext. Leave them food to honor their courage. I won’t be known as Achilles the Starver of Children.”

Patroklos nodded and went down to the edges of the city while Achilles watched the fires play. After a time, she thought she saw a man coming up from the town, a dark man on a black pony.

He was slim, sinuous, scarred from the neck down, and his dark olive skin was covered with tattoos. As he came nearer, his tattoos resolved into a scene of battle rendered in gray and green ink and silvery scars, a war on sea and land and sky fought between Amazons and islanders and gods. His hair was black and his eyebrows thick and his eyes as dark as the sky, and his white teeth were set in a grimace of challenge. He was armed like an Amazon woman with axe and bow, javelin and lance, and was the size of an Amazon woman; but he was no woman.

He rode slowly up the hill and dismounted, knelt, and fixed her with a look so witheringly cold, so quiet in its violence, that she could look nowhere but at him. He spoke in a low, fierce voice, in heavily accented Lukkan, and somehow the strange words untangled in her mind and she discerned their meaning. “K’allassama auwisi kuwatti ahramman uppiuna.” *You came from the sea to bring suffering.* “I surrender to you. Take me for my people.”

She stared down at him, at his ferocious eyes and his white teeth—filed sharp, she saw—and took him in for a long moment, for there was a mystery here she could not understand. Under the tattoo of battle, she could see that his chest had been cut with two enormous scars—and his hips too,

and his belly—as if someone had simply carved away everything it found extraneous to his body. There were two burn-scars on either side of his navel, and his slim hips were covered in patterned scars like the skin of an armored lizard. His face was beautiful and catlike and full of scorn.

Though she could understand the words he had said, she knew almost no Lukkan of her own, only— “Wani,” she said—*tomb*—and “urasrai”—*great woman*.

The look in his eyes turned to hatred so absolute she took a step back. Of course, she was burning the town of his people, searching for the graves of his foremothers, and yet—

“Wananzi urasrassa,” he corrected flatly, and rose to his feet, pointing to his scarred chest and the scenes of battle there. “Pihasassi.”

That would be his name, or at least his Hittite name. The thunderbolt of Taru. Perseus, it was said, was named Pihasassi by the kings of the Hittites. Bellerophon’s legendary horse too had been given the title Pihasassi.

Achilles stared at the scarred man in confusion, not sure what to make of him. Perhaps his presence was some riddle, or part of an alien scheme she did not understand. She pointed her spear down toward the ships and led the way. The man leapt up onto his pony and followed.

Meryapi, arrayed in her finery with her eyes painted carefully in the best black that could be blended from Assuwan ingredients, looked up as Achilles approached with her captive and frowned. “Who is that man?” she said.

“Pihasassi.” Achilles pointed her spear at the pony rider. “He speaks Lukkan. He surrendered to me, I think. Ask what he wants, who he is, and how a man learned to ride like an Amazon.”

Meryapi frowned and looked Pihasassi up and down with scarce-concealed suspicion furrowing her brow. Then she spoke rapidly in flawless Lukkan, much better than the Amazon’s had been, all graceful, gliding syllables.

The Amazon listened for a moment. He smiled cruelly and replied, each consonant half-hissed, half-spat. His voice was deep and pitched still deeper, raspy as if with smoke.

“He says he will take you to the Tombs of the Queens and help you murder the sacred guards and seize the treasures of the dead, but that you must cease sacking Amazon cities and taking Amazon captives. In

exchange he will be your slave and your sworn warrior, to command as you please, to kill as you will, a plaything—no, *toy*—no—*weapon*?—in your hands.”

“Well, which one is it?”

“I’m sorry, he used a very strange word. *Brisewos*. I don’t think it’s Lukkan or Hittite or Amazon.”

“*Brisewos*,” the man said, lifting his head arrogantly and pointing to himself. It was his name.

He was dangerous, that much was plain to see, and Achilles could not stop staring at him.

Meryapi murmured another question in Lukkan.

Brisewos laughed harshly and answered at some length, slowly, savoring or resenting the words, eyes flashing, lip curling with scorn.

Meryapi frowned, translating carefully. “He was an Amazon born and raised. He is like you—I’m not sure what he means—but his sisters in the cavalry did not recognize his—force? His member? Oh, his manhood. So he cut his body to show them.” She blinked. “I think he’s explaining his tattoos or his battle scars, but he’s being very figurative. Anyway, they did not like his name and took away his horse. He would have fought for them still, but they sent him away. Now he is ready to betray them.” She seemed confused.

But to Achilles, everything was suddenly clear. He was like *her*, but a man: a man’s soul born in a woman’s body that burned and raged inside it, and finally tore it into the shape of his soul, the mirror of the way the kallai cut their bodies to be free of their shame. Those scars on his chest, on his hips, belly, thighs—in her mind’s eye, she could see the blood, the rage, the gritted teeth as he hacked and sawed and laughed and shook and went into shock, the dazed days and nights half-dead, and then the horror and the anger of his sisters, who *did not understand*.

“Tell him I accept his terms,” Achilles said. “He will be my slave but keep his weapons, and will help me take what I want from the Amazons.”

Meryapi looked at her, very serious, wide-eyed. “But are you sure? There is such rage in his eyes. And he would betray his own sisters—”

“Haven’t you looked at my eyes?” Achilles said. “I am the goddess of rage.”

“Yes,” said Meryapi, “but you are my sister.”

“I imagine,” said Achilles, “that his sisters betrayed him first. Whereas you would never betray me, and I would never betray you.”

Meryapi frowned, only half-appeased. “I cannot second-guess your decisions in your camp. I will tell him.” She spoke in Lukkan again, and Brisewos smiled a cold smile and bowed low, touching his forehead to the ground.

Some premonition filled Achilles. The reflected fire of Kilikassuwa blazed in Brisewos’s eyes, and as she watched him, unable to read his expression, she felt caught between mistrust and longing. Surely he could see she understood, and could understand her in return; yet it was no small thing for a man to betray his sisters to the woman who was burning their town. She felt a bitter smile coming on.

A moment later, Brisewos matched it with a bitter smile of his own.

Achilles set out that night for the Tombs of the Queens, on foot, guided by Brisewos. Even if Patroklos had not insisted she take a companion, she was not foolhardy enough to go alone with him. Automedon, Patroklos’s charioteer and a passable Lukkan-speaker, joined her, dressed in a thick linen cuirass and a heavy wool blanket belted round his waist. She too armed herself lightly, taking Tooth-of-the-Dragon, a fine chariot bow with a dozen arrows, and her ant-sword. A curious thing had happened during the last battle outside Wilusa: Shetra’s axe had scarred the glyphs on the blade into a new form, and now it read *AKHILLEAS*.

Brisewos led them out of the plains behind Kilikassuwa, taking them along a dry streambed and up into the foothills. Soon darkness and dense pines forced them to make camp, and they bedded down on pine needles and their thick blankets. Brisewos settled into a hollow in a dead pine and closed his eyes, but Achilles could feel him watching her through his eyelids.

“Handsome fellow,” Automedon said in Achaian, nodding at Brisewos.

“I suppose,” Achilles agreed.

“Scars are a story in the flesh,” said Automedon. Like the other Myrmidons, he was dark-haired and light-eyed, though he was slimmer than most, with sensitive lips and deep-set, thoughtful eyes. “I see on him a tale of battles lost and wars won. I like that.”

Achilles nodded silently. Her stomach growled, and she nibbled at the dried meat she had brought. There was no bread left, and she had seen no

point in bringing beans.

"I wonder if he has a cunt," Automedon mused, "or if he cut that out too."

Achilles turned a cold stare on her companion. Even in the dark, the starlight was bright enough for them to see each other's faces, and there was yet a faint red glow from burning Kilikassuwa.

"What? I was just curious. He doesn't speak Achaian."

Achilles curled her lip at Automedon and said nothing.

The Myrmidon frowned at her, apparently annoyed at her reaction. "If you were wondering, I *certainly* wondered if you had a—"

"I don't," Achilles sneered. "Want to see?"

Automedon threw up his hands. "You can't blame a man for wondering. Everyone is born an idiot, knowing nothing, and learns the rest by asking questions. The gods put the spark of curiosity in our minds."

"What color is your asshole?" Achilles retorted. "I too have that spark of curiosity."

Automedon looked at her blankly. "I'm not sure," he said, and his sensitive lips pursed a little tighter. "Actually, I have no idea. This is going to bother me now."

Achilles laughed aloud. "At least you're sincerely an idiot. I won't check, if you were going to ask."

Automedon snorted. "I'm not that foolish, mistress. If you want the first sleep," he added with an apologetic shrug, "I'll be your humble watchman."

Achilles thought that sounded fair. She settled back onto the pine needles and pulled her blanket tighter, wiggling to avoid a tree root. Just as she was starting to yawn, Automedon spoke in a low voice.

"Mistress. Do remember that I never joined in Kheiron's bullying back home."

This was true, Achilles thought. "You never tried to stop it."

"I was a child too." The Myrmidon shifted his weight, and pine needles scraped and rustled under his body. "We're comrades now."

That too was true. And more pleasing to hear than she would have thought. Achilles rolled over to rest her head in the crook of her elbow and soon sank into a dreamless sleep.

By midmorning Brisewos was leading them through a steep ravine along the backside of a mountain. In Lukkan he told Automedon that the Tombs

were less than an hour away and that they must move quietly, for the Amazons who guarded the Tombs were elite, though few. They must take the Amazons by surprise, or the Amazons would kill them.

Carefully they worked their way up a long defile, using tree roots and bushes to pull themselves over gravel and scree. It was not easy ground, but not impossible, either. Several times through the trees they glimpsed a paved road leading back down toward Kilikassuwa, the road they had avoided by this route. Finally they came out on a hilltop guarded by a ring of standing stones, and on the hilltop stood three immense earthwork mounds covered in green grass and bloodred poppies, and in each of the mounds was cut a stone gateway.

Two Amazons brooded near the central barrow. One sat by herself at the end of the road, spear-armed, bearing shield and axe, staring intently in the direction of Kilikassuwa. Three more were kneeling in a circle, whispering among themselves. It seemed to Achilles that the topic of conversation could be nothing other than the column of smoke that was still rising thick above the city to the southwest, and she heard them say, “Akhlis, Akhlis,” in tones of fury.

Akhlis is closer than you know. Leaning against a standing stone on the outside of the ring, she set an arrow to her bow, pointing to the two at the center. No one was looking their way; it would be best to kill them first. Automedon too drew his bow, aiming an arrow, but Achilles watched Brisewos most of all, for this was the moment of testing. Either he would shoot his erstwhile sisters, or he would warn them.

He shot, his expression as cold as a statue’s.

That startled her almost enough to miss her mark. Automedon’s arrow killed the second Amazon, catching her through the neck. Achilles’s only pierced her chest; it would have been fatal, but not silently. The first Amazon fell with Brisewos’s arrow through her eye.

Whatever battle instinct made a warrior look up just before the ambush came, whatever warning spirit or half-noticed rustle translated by the sleeping mind into a premonition of death—whatever it was, the three kneeling Amazons stirred as one, caught up their weapons with a cry—

Another fell with an arrow in her eye. Brisewos let out a hiss of triumph.

Achilles shot again, but her arrow went wide, gusted by wind. Automedon’s missed too. But Brisewos calmly nocked another arrow.

The two still standing turned toward Achilles with a cry, and their sister on the southeast end of the hilltop sprang up and started running toward them.

Brisewos shot again and killed another, but the running Amazon and the standing one both lunged toward the stone they were hiding behind, and Achilles dropped her bow and swept up Tooth-of-the-Dragon and caught the first Amazon's spear on her own and flung her back.

It was strange to be fighting someone smaller than she was, strange and fascinating. The Amazon moved like a viper, dancing away a step and darting around the next standing stone.

Achilles darted to the right, so that her spear had freedom of movement, and parried the Amazon's next thrust and flung herself forward to push the Amazon back.

"Akhli!" the Amazon snarled. "Ulullu." She darted back behind the stone, and Achilles opened up space again, knowing well the moves a smaller foe might make. The Amazon could burst out on the right or on the left—would wait until the last minute, hoping for Achilles to commit—

A blur of motion to her left; a wet crunch; a strangled cry; Achilles flung herself around the right-hand side of the stone and saw Brisewos pulling his axe from his former fellow's neck. He bared his teeth in a ghastly smile and said something in Lukkan.

Automedon emerged from behind a stone pillar, looking shaken. There was a spray of blood all over the left side of his face—not his own—but his weapons were clean. "He says the Tombs are yours to plunder, but he claims the bodies of his former sisters to burn."

"Is that the custom among the Amazons?" Achilles asked in a low voice.

Automedon translated, and Brisewos replied with a scornful laugh and a short invective.

"No. But he considers it unworthy of his honor to leave their bodies for the bears, and we have no time for funeral rites. Go, he says, take what you want, but leave the bodies of the queens."

"I was not going to defile the bodies of the queens," Achilles snapped, and stalked toward the central, largest tomb.

It was exactly as she had seen in Hera's vision: a paved road of stones walled in courses of stone that led to a great stone gate, and beyond the yawning gateway, a vault of stone courses like the rows of boar's teeth on

her helmet, rising up into the dark. She went into the dark tomb. Automedon did not follow.

Inside the barrow, time itself was heavy. It was hard to breathe, and the air was full of a scent like hemp flowers, acrid and tarry and sweet, green and cloying all at once. A copper brazier sat on a stone pedestal in the center, glowing with coals that lit the burial chamber in ominous red. Two stone couches flanked it on either side, each bearing a statue of a reclining woman.

The statues were painted bright red, and black tattoos snaked all over their skins, forming images of a great battle. The statue on the right was painted with an enormous snake wound round her body sixteen times, and the one on the left was painted with an army of bears, each one great-clawed and ferocious, accompanied by countless bees. Aplu. Artumi. Apollo. Artemis. The Serpent and the Bear. Each statue carried a bowl on her breast, and each bowl was full of tiny dried green flowers.

At the rear of the tomb was an enormous featureless lead box. It had no lid, no hinge; it was perfectly blank, as if it had been cast into shape.

Here the Amazons came to dream dreams of power. Here, then, Achilles would seek her answers. "Come back to me, Mother," she whispered. "Help me find these divine weapons."

Two gray eyes glowed in the darkness, meeting Achilles's eyes.

Achilles moved as in a dream. She took a handful of dried flowers from each of the two bowls, then trickled them, one after another, into the brazier. Smoke curled out like serpents' tongues and filled the air. Something began to buzz in her ears, and her heart began to shudder, and it seemed to her that she could float.

The sudden flames of the brazier flung a shadow onto the vaulted walls and ceiling: a horned owl, majestic and great in size. It spread its wings, and the fire leapt up, and the smoke billowed, and Achilles breathed it in.

Vlaska, Queen of the Amazons, stood on a mountaintop, waiting to die.

Queen Luspi had already fallen, shattered by the darts of the winged snake Typhon, Ancient of Days, Son of Tiamat, but Vlaska's final arrow of sideros had pierced his wing. He was falling like the lightning, vast as an island in the clouds, and a hundred times the lightning struck him as he fell, and each thunderclap swept through her bones and shattered her ears and

ruptured her internal organs, but she wept with joy, for this was a death no one would ever forget.

I, Vlaska, Queen of Queens, mother of Epasa and of Knossos, have slain a god.

Let me watch him fall, then myself die.

I am ready.

Across the waters came another scream so vast it sounded as though ten million falcons had cried out together, and over Tiri Island dawned a second sun. The mountains heaved. The seas shook like a cloth. White plumes shot up from the island—no—no, it was half of the island flung aloft at once, and underneath it, an eruption of unimaginable force.

Ra is dead. Kronos is dead. The Eagle has fallen.

Vlaska let the Bow of Aplu fall from her hands and turned to face the second dawn, arms outstretched. She flung back her head and laughed a laugh of triumph. “Bless my daughters, Artumi! I dedicate this sacrifice to you.”

As the fire reached her and her body was seared away, Vlaska, Queen of Queens, gazed upon a golden face of a woman that blazed out of the eruption, painted across the heavens, unimaginably beautiful: the Apple of the Sun.

Vlaska’s last thought was of utter longing.

Achilles woke in the darkness, heavy-headed, slow. The afterimage of Helen was seared into her mind, glorious, sun-bright, laughing with terrible joy. Achilles lifted herself to her feet. Something felt very wrong.

The lead box was open. But there were no divine weapons inside, no bows that had felled gods, no axes glowing with sacred light, no swords of flames, no spears tipped with sunbeams, no terrible missiles or shields that could blunt the wrath of a Titan. There was nothing inside but a single golden mark that glowed dully in the darkness. As Achilles leaned toward it, squinting to see it, the golden mark gleamed with its own internal light, and she knew that it was the image of gold lips, as if some woman of gold had seared the metal with her kiss.

She staggered back, and her lips burned where Helen had kissed her before. A sudden glow erupted from the box like a second sun, the aftershock of that ancient eruption Achilles had dreamed, and Helen blazed

in front of her, formed entirely of burning sunlight, all mocking, laughing malice.

Now that you know I have killed gods, taste me again!

For an instant, Achilles was frozen in place, lips burning, body stiff as stone, staring at the golden one's golden shadow. It was a trap, and she had blundered right into it.

The image of Helen beamed at her with a look almost like love, almost like hunger, almost like scorn, and flung out a golden hand, reaching for Achilles's throat.

Wings flapped desperately against the golden glow as the owl flung herself between Achilles and the woman of light, throwing her wings out like a shield, blocking the incorporeal golden hand. Helen's burning image seized the owl's body, and Athena screamed a terrible scream, beating her wings wildly, her cry shrill and desperate, higher and higher. *Apple of the Sun*, she raged without words, *you will not have my daughter!*

But it was not enough; a current of terrible force tore through the Silent One and slammed into Achilles, flinging her back, and she reeled away, staggering out from the open mouth of the tomb into the sunlight beyond. The smell of rotting apples filled her lungs and seared in her sinuses, sweet and acrid, and she collapsed onto the stone path, covering her face with her hands.

Through her fingers, the red star burned—nearer than before, throbbing with a terrible power. Achilles's lips burned, and her stomach twisted up inside her. She vomited onto the stones, still reeling. The owl burst out of the tomb and flapped blindly about her head, slamming into the doorposts, then crumpling down onto the stones. The bird stared blindly skyward, its pupils contracting to pinpoints. Its body shriveled and smoldered, feathers drying out, talons and beak losing their luster. The Silent One's voice in Achilles's mind became shrill, narrow, desperate, and lost all words, strangled to a voiceless shriek. All at once the owl crumbled. Its feathers held their shape a moment longer, then fell to dust.

The inside of the Tombs of the Queens was dark again, but Helen's golden laughter lingered in the air.

Chapter Eighteen

They sailed to Lazpa, half a day from Kilikassuwa, where the fleets of Idomeneus and Odysseus had seized the Hittite fortress of Mursiliya and captured the town called Makara by the Achaians and Issa by the native islanders. It was a gorgeous, apocalyptic sight from the prow of *Delphini*: a Hittite fortress on a hill guttering flames and smoke, and below it a town of Achaians and islanders, untouched by the invaders, who considered them kin. Achaian hymns to white-armed Hera rose over the Red Lagoon below the city, and islander hymns to her cow-horned aspect Rhea, Queen of Kings. The smoke of cooking meat mingled with the smoke of the burning fortress, rising up the green slopes of Lazpa to the towering emerald heights of a dormant volcano. Dolphins danced in the water, following *Delphini* toward the port.

Achilles told no one, not Automedon and not Brisewos, what had happened in the Tombs of the Queens. She still felt sick, close to vomiting again, and no amount of wine or even seawater could wash away the taste of rotting apples. Fear had given way to rage again, but without divine weapons, she was helpless against Helen's incomprehensible magic. When she had a chance to talk to Meryapi alone, she would tell her what had happened and then ask her about the divine weapons that had been used in Egypt a century before. Perhaps it would be useless, or perhaps it would be another trap—perhaps the Queen of Kings had set her up, hoping to curry favor with Helen—but Achilles refused to let that languid golden monster intimidate her.

Brisewos, at least, had not returned to the ships empty-handed. He brought back the ornaments of the slain Amazons, and a knife from one, a

hatchet from another, a javelin from the third. “Tarupiyya,” he called them, some Hittite word neither Automedon nor Achilles could translate. Now the Amazon man smiled coldly at the sight of the burning city, laughing softly as the ship glided into port.

Crowds had come down to greet the Myrmidon ships as they put in at the port of Makara. The women of Lazpa were painted gloriously for the occasion, red-lipped and yellow-cheeked and black-eyed and bare-breasted, dancing island dances in time to the hymns and calling out to the Myrmidon sailors. “Either they’re thrilled to see the Hittites go,” Achilles murmured to Meryapi, “or terrified we’ll sack their homes.”

“The two motivations are not mutually exclusive,” Meryapi murmured back. She had been watching Achilles since Kilikassuwa, observing her carefully. No doubt she knew something had happened and was waiting to discuss it. Meryapi was clever like that.

The smell of food filled the air, and Achilles’s appetite, curdled since the Tombs, began to return. Her mouth watered at the scents of toasted cumin and boiled millet, roasted hog and carrots and asparagus, cured olives and goat cheese. Everyone in the harbor had little gray pots of stewed grapes and pomegranates, peace offerings to the latest wave of invaders.

And then Achilles’s heart leapt with sudden joy, and she forgot the terror of Helen’s trap. In a little group on the shore, resplendent in their finery, taller than the other women and more carefully painted—there was a group of kallai. They too were bare-breasted in their open jackets, and sang the hymns, and shook clay rattles to honor Aphrodite just like the kallai of Skyros, and their lips were red with pomegranate liquor, and they stood close together, bodies almost touching, singing with such harmony that Achilles’s eyes burned and she had to look away, suddenly overcome with a feeling she did not fully understand.

“Mistress,” said Melia, who had appeared next to her, eyes downcast. Melia wore the open-chested jacket Achilles had bartered her and—strangely—filled it out much better than before. She had put on weight at some point, when Achilles’s back was turned. Her chest was womanly now, and her hips had grown. Somehow, she looked less of an underfed rat; somehow, she looked almost beautiful. “May I join the celebration? I swear on my life I’ll be back on the ship before we leave. I just—I’ve never met others like me, except—” She broke off the sentence and turned her head away.

Except you. The words unsaid still somehow slid into Achilles's brain, and she bit her lip against a sudden upwelling of emotion.

Achilles looked back to the port, back to the group of kallai, who had met Melia's eyes and were calling out to her, calling, "Kallaia, kasi!" *Beautiful one, sister!* "You may go," Achilles said, "but I will hold you to your oath." Then she looked away again, turning her face back to the burning Hittite fortress, so that she would not have to see the kallai, once-sisters, never-again-sisters. She knew the words to their hymn, the secret variations only kallai used, but she would not torment them as she had tormented Deidamia and Melia.

"Achilles! Patroklos!" Odysseus shouted from the shore. He was waving, and in full armor, and grinning like a fox. "There's food here for half the fleet! Come on up, we're watching the fort burn. Idomeneus has set up tents and a nice bonfire, and we're eating like kings."

They walked up the hill with little clay mugs of hot stewed grapes and pomegranate, sweetened with honeycomb and spiced with cumin, a strange little appetizer that delighted Meryapi as much as it confused Achilles's palate. "This reminds me of home," Meryapi said happily. "I used to own a farm of beehives, and my peasants brought me honeycombs for months. I wrote a monograph on the ways of bees and got fat on honey and got a toothache."

Achilles was thinking of other things, though. "Melia looks different," she said.

Meryapi licked at her empty clay mug, then picked up her step as they neared the burning fortress. "How so?"

"You know. More womanly. Fatter, I guess," Achilles added with a snort, poking at her own hip.

"Ah." Meryapi smiled, and the smile crinkled her kohl-rimmed cat-eyes. "That is because of silphion. I gave her mine."

"What's silphion?" The wind was blowing in from the water, pushing the smoke away from them, up the slopes of the great green mountain.

"You don't know?" Meryapi laughed aloud. "It's a plant. It prevents pregnancy and helps the body do all manner of womanly things. Great Mother Neith planted it everywhere, from Libu to Elam to Punt, as a gift to women all over the world so that they would magnify and bless her name, curse her Ten Thousand Enemies, and give her praise offerings."

Ah. Moonweed, they called it on Skyros, except for the kallai, who called it blood of the goddess. “Don’t you need it?”

“Not anymore.” Meryapi gave Achilles a little smile. “Patroklos has not yet realized, but I haven’t bled since before Aulis. The little Patroklid will arrive in early spring, I think, so keep the father safe.”

It took Achilles a moment to realize what Meryapi meant, and then she flushed with embarrassment at her own denseness and felt a stab of envy, then a flutter of joy. It was surreal to imagine some tiny version of Patroklos and Meryapi, some little person taking hold in Meryapi’s belly—especially now, as they walked into an encampment overlooking a smoldering fortress strewn with broken Hittite shields and blood-streaked armor.

“I won’t let anything happen to Patroklos,” Achilles said quietly. “But your child must call me Aunt Achilles, and I will protect it, too. With my life.”

Meryapi touched her hand. “I know.”

“There is something else I need to talk to you about,” Achilles said. “But in secret. It concerns the gods and is desperately important. No one else can hear.”

Meryapi’s brow furrowed, but she nodded. “I thought so. After supper, when the men have drunk themselves to sleep. Stay sober.”

It was difficult to stay sober, for Odysseus had in mind a long night of drinking and plotting, and tall Idomeneus seemed eager to play along. They boasted first of the way they had conquered the local Hittites, exploiting a weakness in the fortress’s defenses to sneak a group of Kretan axemen in through the fancy modern brick-lined sewage tunnel that kept the Hittite fortress nice and clean. “It was a shitty job,” laughed Idomeneus, “but we opened the gates and caught them sleeping.” Then Odysseus fell into a more serious mood. Agamemnon had assigned him a special mission: obtaining enough grain for the whole army to return to Taruisa. All the stores on Lazpa would last maybe two weeks in the field, so he was sending ships to Alashiya and Sidon and Turi and Gath in Kna’an, and Odysseus himself was going to Egypt to negotiate a grain deal. He wanted Meryapi and Patroklos to advise him.

“Grandpapa will charge you market rates,” Meryapi said instantly. “There will be no discounts. Great Queen Puduhepa and Great King

Tudhaliyas have negotiated Egyptian neutrality in this war. He will do nothing to favor one side.”

Odysseus sighed. “Well, Agamemnon has given me a lot of gold. I’ll be using most of my personal fortune too, and getting reimbursed when we take the city. War is incredibly expensive, but Penelope has commanded me not to skimp. ‘Better rich in food and weapons than in gold and silver.’”

“She is wise,” Meryapi agreed.

After the others had gone to sleep, Meryapi and Achilles walked away from the camp and down the lower slopes of the dormant volcano. Under the moonlight it was a strange, romantic wasteland, full of verdant olive trees and pines and low scrubby bushes Achilles did not know, rich with dark red berries.

Then they came to a forest of stone trees.

No living thing dwelt here. The trees were marvelous, far more detailed and lifelike than any statue carved by human hands, gleaming with a thin sheen of silica. They had lived once and now they were dead, petrified in an instant by a venomous breath exhaled from the volcano. Here and there in the stone forest stood strange, tiny stone creatures like hideous dogs, or halfway-monsters between dogs and weasels, frozen in lifelike postures, gleaming with the same sheen of silica as the trees.

“What god could have done such a thing?” marveled Meryapi.

But this forest was more ancient than the gods. In forgotten days, the gods themselves had marveled at its primordial desolation. “The earth itself did this,” Achilles said softly. “Before the gods were born.”

Meryapi stopped in a grove of petrified trees, examining their blasted trunks—and here and there, small branches that had fallen to the ground, turned to stone, the imprints of their leaves still visible against the rocks. “What did you want to talk about in secret?”

“In the Amazon tomb, I did not find divine weapons. Instead, I found Helen’s trap. She had been there first and put her kiss there to destroy me. My mother protected me again—but she was burned cruelly, and Helen’s laughter filled my ears, and I can’t get the taste of her out of my mouth.” Achilles’s cheeks burned with shame, then renewed anger. If Helen would stand before her just once without magic to protect her, she would crush the life out of that golden neck.

Meryapi’s face tightened. It was not exactly fear that narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, but something more complex, harder to read. “That is

powerful magic,” she murmured. “I have read of such sorcery, but it has not been seen in generations. It should not be possible.”

“It happened,” Achilles said flatly.

The Egyptian nodded slowly, making a delicate gesture—fingers outspread, thumb folded in—and brought her hand back and forth, as if testing an invisible wing against the air. A strange light glittered in her eyes. “Then we must learn to counter her.”

“I’m no sorceress,” Achilles said. “I need weapons that can cut through her tricks.”

Meryapi’s lip curled, and she laughed mirthlessly. “Maybe you need a sorceress.”

“I saw the weapons I need in a vision,” Achilles said. Before the Queen of Kings had told her about the weapons of the Amazons—had it all been a trap?—Achilles had seen others. While she wandered through the darkness, Helen’s first kiss smoldering on her lips, she glimpsed a dagger, a sword, a spear, and armor—all of black sideros, all crackling with a terrible power, cold enough to cut the gods. “But the Queen of Kings said they were lost.”

Meryapi’s eyes narrowed. “There is power in dreams and visions.” She studied her outstretched hand carefully, each finger positioned precisely, and made a delicate plucking gesture, as if she were striking the strings of an invisible harp. “Where and when were these weapons lost?”

Achilles frowned. “If we can trust the word of the Queen of Kings, my mother’s servants forged them a century ago in Egypt and used them to drive away the gods.”

Meryapi sat down on the blasted stump of a petrified tree, peering up at Achilles with a strange look on her face. “Your people call your mother Athena, or sometimes Athana. I had thought it a strange coincidence, for gods acquire many names, and their ways are a mystery, but there are no coincidences where magic is concerned. I may know how to find these missing weapons.” Her face darkened, as if her mind were on the brink of a precipice, staring off into the darkness, searching for some secret terror.

Achilles stared at her friend, and the Egyptian gave her a small, wan smile that did not reach her dark eyes. Meryapi bent down and took a petrified stick from the ground, reaching out to carve signs in the dust: a semicircle, a wave, a disc with a smaller disc inside it, and something that looked like a feather or a leaf.

“Athena,” the Egyptian intoned. “Aten.”

“Aten?” Achilles murmured. It was familiar. Then she remembered: the word had come to her in a dream, before her vision of the birth of the Weapons. “What is Aten?”

Meryapi examined the signs she had cut into the dirt, and her brow furrowed into a deeper frown. “Aten is a word for the sacred sun, Ra’s chariot, Ra’s holy boat—and also the name of a god who set her face against the other gods, particularly Amun, Heru, and Ptah, the Royal Three. Does that sound like anyone you know?”

Achilles sat down beside her. “My mother.”

The Egyptian nodded carefully. “Everything else I am about to tell you,” she added, “is conjecture. The relevant records have been destroyed, but—if you read the other records carefully—there are context clues that no longer lead anywhere, oblique references to tablets smashed long ago and papyruses that no longer exist. From titles and numbers and archives and tombs, I have gleaned a basic outline—but it is forbidden knowledge.”

“Who’s going to punish us?”

Meryapi’s face darkened. She nodded, still peering at the Egyptian word carved into the dirt. “Before Grandpapa was Great King, it was his father, Menmaatra Seti Merenptah, whom your people called Sethos. Before him, it was his father, Menpehtyra Paramessu, called Menophres. Before him, it was Horemheb Merenamun, who restored order to the Two Lands. Before him, Tutankhamun ruled the Two Lands. And before him ruled a nameless king who shook the foundations of the world.”

“Nameless?” said Achilles.

“His name was destroyed utterly. Wherever this name should be found in the records, it has been replaced with THE ENEMY.” Meryapi’s nostrils flared. As she began to speak again, her voice caught. “It is known that he worshiped Aten, and he declared all other gods traitors to Ra and enemies of Ra. Armed with unstoppable weapons and great magic, he made war on Amun, Heru, Ptah, and all the gods.”

Aten. That name again. Every repetition of that name stirred memories in Achilles that were not her own, whispers from another life. *Pallasu. Aten. Mother.*

“During that time,” Meryapi whispered, “the world was turned upside down. The gods were accused of terrible crimes. All the chronicles teach that the accusations were false, but . . .”

In the darkness under the stars it seemed to Achilles that she saw echoes of an endless night. She looked up, and the red star glared down at her, swollen, burning brighter than all the other stars: the red star of Zeus, Amun, enemy of Aten.

“What has *Aten* told you about the gods, Achilles?”

“The gods make war on each other,” Achilles said. “They use us and forsake us. In the Amazon tomb, I saw the gods kill each other for power.”

Meryapi’s eyes went very wide, and her face turned brittle; it was like pottery at the edge of shattering, spiderwebbed with stress cracks, as if waiting for the answer to some ancient question. “Tell me everything.”

—Across the waters came another scream, a cry so vast it sounded as though ten million falcons had screamed all together, and over Tiri Island dawned a second sun. The mountains heaved. The seas shook like a cloth.—

“Ra is dead,” Achilles whispered. “Kronos is dead. The Eagle has fallen.”

For a moment, Meryapi’s face went utterly blank. Like Damia’s face had gone, all those times on Skyros, when Achilles had denied the gods. Meryapi’s endless prayers to Ra, her sacrifices, her thousand little rituals and murmured blessings, Meryapi’s whispered thanks, her whispered pleas, her little smile at the thought of the great God of her family and her land—all these things flashed at once through Achilles’s mind while Meryapi stared leadenly ahead of her.

It was too late to stop now. “The gods killed him four hundred years ago,” Achilles whispered. “In the islands north of Kreté, aided by Amazons. They used the Apple of the Sun—Helen.”

Two enormous tears rolled down Meryapi’s cheeks. Her shoulders shook.

“Meryapi,” Achilles whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Meryapi said in a low, toneless voice. “You spoke the truth. I heard it in your voice. And the piece fits the puzzle.” Tears streamed down her face, but her eyes blazed.

Achilles reached out to touch Meryapi’s shoulder, but the Egyptian twisted away.

“Do not comfort me,” Meryapi said. “I am crying because I am *angry*.”

Achilles shrank back. She was not sure how to respond to this Meryapi, but her heart sank. How could she have been so careless? How could she have just blabbed it all out into the open? *Your beloved god is dead, Meryapi! You have been praying to a corpse!* Heartless, thoughtless,

heedless, worthless—*Achilles, how could you think so little and say so much? You have seen Meryapi's love for Ra, and now you tell her he is dead? Fool.*

"They know," Meryapi said numbly. "The high priest of Ra, at least, must know THE ENEMY was right. The gods murdered Ra. Aten and her servants sought revenge." She turned her eyes back to Achilles, and they were sharp as flint. "Any more secrets to reveal?"

The jagged light in Meryapi's eyes was so ruthless Achilles shrank back. She knew in that moment she was being tested, that to conceal anything from Meryapi now would never be forgiven. She swallowed. "I used to be a boy—in body, not in soul."

Meryapi snorted and shook her head. "Stupid girl. Glyke told me *that* before you ever landed at Aulis. She thought it was great gossip. For the first time I thought perhaps my husband's people were savages after all." She sniffed and scrubbed at her eyes. "You should have been born in Egypt, where we are civilized. We would have been friends from girlhood. Anything else?"

"Well. I—fucked Agamemnon." Achilles covered her face with her hands. It was too terrible to see Meryapi staring at her like that.

Suddenly Meryapi laughed, a harsh little convulsion of sound. "Well, who can blame you? Stop hiding your face. It is not *your* fault that I was lied to my entire life. Even the liars themselves may not have known better. Ra is *dead*? I should have known long ago! I am directly descended from Ra, and yet he never spoke to me the way your mother speaks to you. I am blood of his blood, yet he let me learn of his death from an Achaian. *Look at me.*" She tugged Achilles's hands away from her eyes and pulled her upward by the wrists.

Achilles rose, staring into Meryapi's suddenly bright eyes. It hurt to see Meryapi like this, and yet—

"*Ra is dead,*" Meryapi mused. "And only Achilles would tell me the truth, when man and god alike conspired to keep the secret." There was something dangerous in her eyes. "I do not know where to find your mother's weapons—but I know where to start, and I know *how* to look. Magic has returned to the world, and that golden Hittite witch is not the only one who understands it. We must prepare."

She led Achilles down to the beach overlooking the lagoon, and they walked along the shore for what seemed like all night, while the red star

glared down at them in malevolent splendor. Sometimes Meryapi paused to stare back at it with a cold menace. Every now and then she stopped, tearing branches from a nettle, gathering slivers of caked salt from the beach, snapping a long switch from an olive tree. Finally they came to a thin rill of fresh water that ran down the flats to the lagoon, and Meryapi led them inland until they reached a little grove where hot fresh water bubbled up from the earth. Suddenly she lashed out with the branch, and a small waterfowl crashed to the earth, wings beating, then going limp.

“Stand here,” Meryapi said.

She reached out with the olive branch and drew a complex shape of interlocking circles in the dirt, surrounding Achilles in an expanding pattern of circles.

“Language,” Meryapi said, “is magic. The tongues of man and beast were severed by magic. The tongues of man and man were severed by magic. I now see why. But if you can stare across time and see the memories of the Amazons who slew Ra—if Helen can sear you from afar with a poisoned kiss—if I can peer through the darkness of time and discern the truth about Aten—then I think—” She broke off, then knelt by the hot spring and scooped up a double handful of water, making a circle of water around the circles cut in the earth. Over this circle she crumbled the flaked sea salt, and then she tore a wing from the dead bird and offered it to Achilles.

Achilles took it warily. She was not exactly frightened, but it was disconcerting to see Meryapi kill and dismember so effortlessly.

“Tell me about your father,” Meryapi said coldly.

“My father is Peleus, king of Phthia, son of Aiakos, king of Aigina. He wandered with Herakles and won the throne of Phthia by wedding my mortal mother, Thetis, whom I never knew.”

“Good,” said Meryapi. She picked up the nettle. “Hold out your hand.”

Achilles held out her hand. Meryapi slashed the nettle down, and burning pain erupted across the back of Achilles’s hand. She held it out still, proudly, keeping her face perfectly calm. She had hurt Meryapi enough tonight. Let Meryapi strike her back.

Meryapi raised the bloody nettle. She seemed transformed, her streaked kohl somehow magisterial and menacing, a hieratic shroud upon her eyes. “You came into being as the food of the gods,” Meryapi said. “But you have

power over the gods.” She lifted the bloody nettle to Achilles’s lips. “And so I open your mouth.”

Achilles tasted her blood on the nettle, and her lips tingled.

Meryapi brought her a small handful of water from the spring: “Drink.”

It was bitter going down.

“Now do the same for me,” Meryapi said, and stepped into the circle.

“Exactly the same. Spare me no pain. I must stand in circles of earth, water, and salt. You must ask me about my father. You must draw blood with the nettle. You must speak the words. I must taste. I must drink. You must will my mouth to be opened, and the eye of your soul must see my mouth opening. Do this for me, Achilles Peleis, daughter of Aten.”

Meryapi’s father was named Hatiay, a general and master of supplies of the Medjay guards, husband of Henuttawy, a daughter of the Great King’s body. Meryapi did not flinch from the lash of the nettle, but tears ran from her eyes, and the rage that smoldered there was brighter than ever. She licked her own blood hungrily from the nettle; she watched Achilles fiercely as she said the words; she drank the water with a bitter smile.

They buried the remains of the bird under the circles in the gravel, and then Meryapi led Achilles down to the beach again and sat in the sand. The eastern sky was starting to brighten, pale pink and gold emerging from the darkness over the waters.

“What was your spell supposed to do?” Achilles wondered.

Meryapi only smirked. “You will find out. All my life I have waited for magic to return, and you can wait with me just a little longer.” But she held out her hand, and Achilles took it, and they sat on the sand waiting for the sun. The lagoon began to brighten, and the dolphins danced in the waters, spinning and leaping in acrobatic display, chittering at their constant games.

After a long time, Meryapi began to murmur in a low voice: “The double doors of the horizon are opened.” Only those were not the words she spoke; the words she spoke were not the light glissando of Achaian fluttering from syllable to syllable on an airy gauze of vowels, but a language of consonance and sibillance, of gutturals and hisses, dense with sounds.

Asenshef aptwy a’aty a’akhut.

The first rays of golden sun spilled out onto the lagoon, and the dolphins let out a shrill of delight. Their squeaking, their squealing, their buzzing filled the air, and Meryapi laughed suddenly. “So *that’s* what they’re saying.”

How bright it is! the dolphins were calling to each other. *Let us form a hunting party and gorge ourselves on slow morning fish! How bright it is! Let us hunt.*

Achilles stared in wonder at the leaping dolphins in the lagoon. It was absurd, after pretending to know their speech so many times, to *hear* them, to actually know what they were saying.

Meryapi leapt to her feet and called out in a series of whistles and awkward clicks, trying to form her lips around strange sounds humans could not make, buzzing with her nostrils flared and not quite managing to imitate the dolphin chitter: *It is bright!*

Is that one talking to us? a dolphin called out in perplexity, head poking up quizzically from the waves just a bit off the shore.

My mouth is opened, Meryapi sang back.

The dolphin peered at her. *Are you begging for food?*

Meryapi tilted her head sideways, considering the question. Then she started laughing, a surprisingly deep belly laugh that culminated in a near-snort, and turned in excitement to Achilles. “Look what I did with magic!”

“How did you do this?” Achilles found herself laughing too, numbly, shocked both by Meryapi’s excitement and by the dolphins lining up in the surf, gossiping about them. She was pretty sure they were the talk of the whole lagoon now.

Wonder what it would be like to fuck a human.

I’m sure they’re equipped for it!

No, you fool, they’d drown, and that would ruin the whole game.

But if they did not drown? I’ve never fucked a human.

Start small. Offer them gifts of food. See if they’re up for more. Maybe nuzzle them. Humans think we are very beautiful.

That is true. They are such strange things. Look at their skinny little bodies!

The sound of dolphin laughter echoed across the beach. Meryapi was still laughing. Tears still ran from her eyes, and kohl ran down her cheeks in black streams. “There are many spells I copied in secret as a girl, for I have always wanted power over earth and sky. I wanted to be ruler of the Two Lands, perhaps even a god like Ra. But whenever I attempted magic, nothing happened. The gods were silent. The world was cold. But since I met you, things have been different. And last night, when my eyes were opened, I realized that magic is tied to the gods; that sacrifice is tied to

magic; and that certain spells should work now for me that never did before.” She took Achilles’s hands again and looked into her eyes, and a dangerous gleam was in Meryapi’s eyes. “Let’s go to Egypt. We’ll get Odysseus his grain, and we’ll find Aten’s lost weapons and learn THE ENEMY’s arts. Only swear this to me—”

Achilles clasped Meryapi’s hands and nodded before she even heard the terms, but Meryapi laughed.

“No, wait until I tell you the oath.” The red star was visible now even by day, too bright to be entirely erased even by the sunrise. Meryapi lifted her eyes to the red star and bared her white teeth. “Your mother Aten brought you to me for a reason, and I will not live in fear or denial, but accept my fate. Swear to me that we will live as sisters forever; we will never fight each other; but we will avenge Ra on his enemies. One day, we will rule together as immortal goddesses.”

Achilles found herself laughing. The sheer arrogance of it amazed her, and she stared at Meryapi in wonder. “As immortal goddesses? Very well. I swear.”

“Good. Then I will get to show you Egypt.” Meryapi grinned. “Now let’s flirt with some dolphins.” She walked down to the water’s edge, whistling and clicking:

We come from far away, and we know we are strange, skinny creatures, but we wish to speak with you and learn your ways . . .

Chapter Nineteen

“No good comes from talking to dolphins,” Meryapi muttered. For days now, *Delphini* had been swarmed by pods of dolphins. At first Meryapi and Achilles had crept out at dusk and dawn to talk to them, Achilles inquiring about the secrets of their people while Meryapi recorded linguistic observations on clay tablets. Thus, Meryapi discovered the subtleties of local dolphin accents across the Sea of Aigaia, as well as the complexities of dolphin politics; it seemed that a delicate peace existed between the Dancing Dolphins and the Spinning Dolphins and the mysterious Black-and-White Dolphins, who were giants among dolphinkind and not nearly so friendly as the smaller dolphins.

But lately all the dolphins wanted to do was proposition them, demanding to know how many octopus or tuna would lure them down into the water to play, and the dolphins’ suggestions became more and more explicit as time passed. More alarmingly, certain dolphins wanted them to keep an eye out for their enemies, maybe ram them with the ship.

“I don’t suppose we can stop knowing their language,” Achilles said.

“Knowledge is irrevocable.” Meryapi brooded over her tablet, then incised a final line. “No good comes from talking to dolphins,” she repeated, reading from her tablet. “Let this knowledge be guarded carefully in the Great Archives of Awen. Let him who reads it be trained in discretion.” She looked sidelong at Achilles. “I do not want my people drawn into dolphin civil wars.”

They were outside the cabin, separated from Balios and Xanthos by thin walls. Melia was singing to the horses on the other side, humming some bittersweet, wistful hymn she had learned on Lazpa, all longing mingled

with subtle satisfaction. She might have been singing for days, only Achilles had been distracted by dolphins saying, “Take off your clothes.”

“She must have fallen in love in Lazpa waters,” Achilles murmured to Meryapi in dolphin. They had taken to speaking to each other in that language when they wanted to gossip.

Meryapi nodded. “I saw their farewell from the ship. She has glimmered ever since with a sorrowful beauty—oh my, dolphin-speech can be poetic when it needs to be!—and the longing in her voice pulls at me like deep ocean currents.”

“What was he like?” Achilles asked. “The man she was with.”

“No man,” Meryapi said. “A woman like herself.”

A pang went through Achilles. When she had first kissed Deidamia on Skyros, when they had first walked alone on the sandy beaches of the eastern shore, she had felt the same plangent longing she heard in Melia’s voice, the same unexpected satisfaction, the same joy and sorrow to meet another who was the same and not the same. She had embraced Damia once in the late afternoon and marveled at their mingled shadow stretching out across the beach, a giant woman embracing herself.

“Do not weep,” said Meryapi. “She knew the love of a beautiful woman, and now she sings songs of her. That love is a bright treasure she can revisit for all her days.”

Patroklos came up behind them now and put his arms around Meryapi, smiling at Achilles from around her shoulder. “My wife has become a dolphin. Should I become a dolphin too, or must I resign myself to the loss of you?”

“I am not a dolphin!” Meryapi objected in Achaian, twisting round. She grinned at him, toying with his beard. “I am merely an ethnographer who studies barbarians. *You* are my favorite to study. These barbarian dolphins have given up all the secrets I care to investigate.”

Show us your funny little bodies! called the dolphins from the water. *Can you believe their tails are split like that? Forked! For easy access.*

They reached Egypt that day. All morning the southern horizon slowly solidified into a low-slung country green with trees and marshes and reeds and low grasses, and in the afternoon the land dimpled inward.

Meryapi cried out, “It’s my river!”

Boats and small ships passed them in both directions as they worked *Delphini* onto the river, and Meryapi kept pointing to things, explaining them in delight. The waters of the river stood high, and everywhere were little reed boats with peasants hunting for birds with slings or bearing cargo to and fro, while larger river barges carried catches of fish south toward “Grandpapa’s house.”

“She means all of Pi-Ramesses,” Patroklos explained, “the greatest city in the world.”

Everywhere palm trees waved in the afternoon breeze; everywhere birds rushed and flew. *Delphini* left the dolphins behind as the rowers carried them upriver, and soon the banks teemed with massive hairless gray-pink beasts called water-horses, and enormous fisher birds. Achilles had always been told there were giant serpent-dragons in the waters of Egypt, but when she asked where these “crocodiles” could be found, Meryapi laughed and pointed at a log drifting along near the bank. “Water-lizards are no trouble. But water-horses are belligerent giants who kill without regard to birth or station. The first Great King of the Two Lands was murdered by a water-horse, totally unprovoked.”

This was one of the six branches of the great river, Meryapi explained, and all the river was called Hapi. “Meryapi means ‘The River Loves Her,’” she added, leaning over the side and trailing her fingers through the water.

“I know that,” Achilles said, and she did.

As the sun sank on the western bank, reed-lights glowed along the water. There were so many houses and towns. It was enough to make Achilles dizzy. Achaian land was so small, so thinly peopled. Whenever she asked, “Is that the city?” Meryapi only laughed and said no, it was just another village.

Achilles had switched to speaking in Egyptian now, marveling that Meryapi’s magic allowed her to make sense of a tongue so unlike her own. “*Api akhet*,” she murmured, and it was true: the river was in flood.

Achilles went to her cabin to see her horses, but Brisewos was there, ashen-faced and clutching his stomach. For a moment Achilles felt dismay, then curiosity. She willed herself to speak in the tongue of the Amazons and be understood by this man, but hesitated.

“Karnis,” he snorted, twisting himself upright. “Si kare, si kere, si arke —” He spat on the floor. *Bodies. You cry about them, you tend them, you bend them*— “But they still betray you.”

“Did you vomit in my horses’ stall?” Achilles asked, peering at Balios and Xanthos, who gave her haughty looks.

Brisewos smirked at her. “Now you speak Amazon,” he said flatly. Understood, the harsh sounds of his mother tongue were more deadly than ever, a language of bladed consonants and sharp sudden sibillance. “Did you learn it in the Tombs of the Queens?”

“I am a goddess’s daughter,” said Achilles.

“Of course.” Brisewos gave her a cold smile. “I am an exiled traitor among strangers in a foreign land, so we have exactly nothing in common. I don’t suppose you would teach me to speak Achaian, so that I might talk to literally anyone but you and that insufferable Automedon?”

Achilles gave him a haughty smile. “You don’t want to talk to me?”

“I want options.” Brisewos wiped the back of his mouth on his hand. “We are in Egypt now?”

Achilles nodded.

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me *why*?”

Achilles shrugged. “We need Egyptian grain and weapons.”

“I always wanted to see Egypt.” Brisewos tried to maneuver himself upright. “My many-times great-grandfather came from Libu in the armies of Sesostri. He was a great warrior, beloved of Queen Otere of the Amazons. Egypt is in my blood, if only distantly.”

Achilles considered the Amazon warily. She did know the spell Meryapi had used; she could perform it on him. Yes, he looked at her as at an enemy, but there was something between them nonetheless, some understanding—

“How did you know of me?” she asked. “When we met in Kilikassuwa, you already knew my name.”

“You are a woman who was a man,” said Brisewos. “Word travels fast when prodigies go to war.”

“I was never a man.”

“Is that so?” The pale-eyed man arched an eyebrow at her. “I was once a woman, though I did not care for it. I fought alongside my sisters. That part was good.”

Achilles folded her arms across her chest, staring down at the Amazon man with his scarred, tattooed body, a man of pictures of war and war-wounds. “You may have once been a woman,” she allowed, “but I was never a man.”

He laughed at her. “Is man a shameful thing to be?”

“Some of my best friends are men,” she said haughtily. “But it was never my way.” She felt her anger rising but saw a glint in his eyes too. He was probing her, teasing her, taking her measure, poking her to see what made her angry, what made her Achilles.

“You would have fit right in among the Amazons,” Brisewos said with a faint, bitter smile. “Riding with Ais instead of begging your Ikihi to see you.”

Achilles bared her teeth. He was finding the weak points in her armor, testing them, jabbing them. “The Amazons would have treated me as they treated you,” she snapped. “I’d have had to win my womanhood with a knife.”

“No,” Brisewos sneered. “You wouldn’t have. *You* would have been welcomed from childhood. *I* am an abomination to the Amazons, but you would have just been another sister of the cavalry.”

That one hit home. The burning of Kilikassuwa filled her memories. Ati, ati— Achilles turned her back on Brisewos. “In the mountains of Aiolia,” she said coldly, “*you* would have been welcomed as a brother. Leontius of the Lapiths is grandson of King Kaineus, who was born a woman and grew up into a man.”

“In another life,” Brisewos agreed, “that might have been nice.”

This seemed a good note to leave on, so Achilles moved for the door. But as she left, Brisewos spoke to her again.

“Let me speak Egyptian,” he said, “as you speak Amazon. Neither of us will ever be truly at home anywhere, but if I could at least speak the languages—”

She squared her shoulders and hardened her heart, but the forms of the ritual unfolded again in her brain, the circles, the salt and water, the ritual questions, the spell words, the nettles’ sting: *I have opened your mouth*. She stalked away before he could see her weaken.

At midnight they floated into the wide harbor canal of the House of Ramessu. Rows of great lamps burned on the waterfront, casting a yellow glow onto the waves. Behind each lamp loomed a pillar, and dozens of pillars along the grand canal joined to support a vast open-air gallery and warehouse through which more lanterns moved even at midnight. Oxcarts and donkey carriages carried freight away from the water to a series of depots, while small rivercraft darted from quay to quay, carrying smaller

cargoes up side canals to enormous storehouses. A curtain wall surrounded the palace quarter, pierced with a dozen enormous pylons topped with pennants that fluttered against the night sky, and Egyptian guards stood at each gate in gleaming bronze panoply, their gear burnished so bright Achilles could see the stars in it.

Even at midnight, flute songs floated in from the rooftop taverns of the bazaar, and sweet melodies from the great temples rolled in from the southwest. As *Delphini* docked, Achilles counted eight enormous temples opening directly onto the water, each with its own dock and ships, each with its own gallery of temple guardian statues—and the statues themselves were colossal, thirty feet high, painted with lurid brilliant colors, a world of blazing gods.

She reeled at the magic of it. Next to her, Meryapi stared with parted lips at her hometown, exhilarated, sweating in the humid night heat, and then beginning to grin, her little teeth bared in a crocodilian smile. “There are so many spells all around us,” Meryapi whispered. “I can feel them now. There is magic on every wall, and it is waking up. Oh, Achilles—” She clasped her hand. “Let me take the lead, and play the part of a barbarian goddess’s daughter. Pretend you don’t know the language, and keep your ears open.” Achilles nodded in agreement.

They unloaded the horses, and Melia and Automedon led them off toward the Great Stables.

“In which,” said Meryapi, “each horse will have his own special cistern so that he can relieve himself without fouling the stable.”

Patroklos looked around, getting his bearings. Meryapi pointed to a small, low-slung barque crewed by slim Egyptians in fine white linen tunics, who hailed her as they glided up to the quay. They came from her mother’s quarters in the Great House, and she and her guests were welcome there. At the last minute, Achilles decided to bring Brisewos with them; he had done well at the Tombs, and she felt a pang of guilt at the thought of leaving him to the stables and Automedon’s invasive questions.

Then it was a floating journey back across the river to a quay hung with diaphanous cloths. Closed blue lotuses lay just beneath the surface, and rich perfume filled the air. Music rang out from the other side of a low wall, and Meryapi led them into a night garden full of plum trees heavy with dark fruit, and then into a guest-hall. “My mother is asleep,” she said in Achaian, “but we will pay our respects in the morning. Patroklos and I will take my

old sleeping quarters.” She gave Brisewos a sidelong look. “Achilles, you will have my old sunroom, and your Amazon man can stay with you.”

The palace chambers were sparse and plain-walled, whitewashed and sweetly scented, with low, cunning Egyptian beds made of simple wooden frames with complex nets to sleep on.

Pi-Ramesses was never silent. The sound of boats on the water and pipe music in the garden and night birds and distant voices mingled into one low drone that shifted in the dawn hours to include the creaking symphonies of crickets and the croaking of frogs and the twittering of morning birds. Achilles could not sleep. If Brisewos slept, he slept with his eyes always open, listening to all the voices he could not understand.

In the morning they met Meryapi’s mother, Henuttawy, a grand woman in her middle years, expertly made up and covered in jewelry, who greeted them all and embraced her daughter and whispered advice about pregnancy that only Achilles managed to hear—recommendations about foods to eat and foods to avoid, and ways to balance out the barbarian blood in the child with infusions of Egyptian honey.

Then they were off to the Great House to meet Odysseus, who had just arrived in the harbor. Meryapi gave him a letter of introduction to present to Ay, chief secretary to her uncle Prince Merneptah, who was responsible for foreign grain sales. Patroklos promised to help Odysseus navigate the Egyptian bureaucracy, and they walked off arm in arm as Patroklos explained correct Egyptian bowing etiquette.

Meryapi led Achilles in the opposite direction, moving with purpose.

Everywhere the swollen pillars of the palace loomed. Every wall was painted with brilliant scenes of the Great King glorious and sun-kissed, eternally young and strong, smiting the Hittites at Kadesh, making peace with ambassadors from a hundred lands, serving up sacrifices of bread and beer to the gods in their Egyptian forms, decreeing laws, building monuments. It was dizzying, all this glory dedicated to a single man.

All of Skyros palace could have fit comfortably into a single wing of the Great House. The treasure in one room would have taken Phthia a generation to produce. The wealth of Egypt was not a metaphor; the splendor of Pi-Ramesses was not exaggerated. In this metropolis of canals and stately dwellings, storehouses and stables, temples and army bases, twenty times the population of Wilusa led busy lives, without thought of the petty little wars of the north.

Achilles felt dizzy and sick to her stomach. She looked over to Brisewos every now and again and saw that his expression had gone more closed-off than ever, his hard eyes slitted, taking in the endless echoing halls and the infinite processions of bureaucrats and alchemists, artisans and doctors, scribes and soldiers. Meryapi led them on through high-infinite hallways and porticos, out into blazing courtyards, through bright gardens full of brilliant reflecting pools, and then abruptly Meryapi was leading them through a gateway and into a low pillared audience chamber. The transition from the glare to the darkness of the hallway was dizzying, and Achilles froze in place while her eyes adjusted.

A man was sitting on the floor surrounded by clay tablets and half-opened scrolls, sheafs of papyrus, pages of stamped metal leaf, and countless heaps of wooden panels covered in painted writing. As they entered, he looked up. "Meryapi!" he said warmly. "Welcome home. Your letter arrived only yesterday, the one about Amazon glottal stops. Before that, the one about dolphin jackal-packs hunting at sea—fascinating. I see you brought barbarians to study."

"Remarkable barbarians," Meryapi agreed. "Here is an Amazon man who became our captive as a hostage for his people, and this is the Achaian warrior princess that I wrote to you of, the fire-haired charioteer who fights harder than any man of her people."

Achilles kept her face neutral, remembering Meryapi's instructions to hide her understanding.

"They are *beautiful*," said the man. He was slim, elegantly made, and wore a stylish black wig down to his shoulders cut into splendid bangs. He might have been thirty or fifty. "I've never seen such a fine specimen of an Achaian before. Her hair is naturally the color of flames. She looks like a statue. What powerful muscles in her arms and thighs. And she has killed many men?"

"She has."

"The Achaians are buying grain for their war?"

"Yes. So I decided to come here."

"I'm delighted to see you. I am organizing a series of reports on the final repairs at Ipetsut. All of Waset is in order. If you can stay for Opet, Father will be going all the way upriver, and everyone will be there."

"If I can, I would be delighted," Meryapi agreed, "though I must be with my barbarian husband."

“I still don’t know what you see in him.” The man laughed aloud, then rose, coming closer to inspect Achilles and Brisewos. He gave them a very slight bow and spoke in careful Hittite: “Greetings to you both. I am Khaemweset, son of the Great King, Chief of Artificers, First Priest of Ptah. Welcome to Pi-Ramesses.”

“I was wondering if I could look through the archives,” Meryapi said. “The Amazons had a substantial number of metal ingots stamped with weights and measures from the thirtieth year of Amanahatpa the Third, and I would like to see if this was a result of his prolific diplomacy in the Mitanni sphere of influence.” The lies came off her lips effortlessly, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Khaemweset pursed his lips. “Interesting. Amanahatpa the Third is one of my particular interests, second only to Father and Menkheperra for sheer splendor and imperial sway over the world.” He motioned for everyone to follow, then led them deeper into the columned building. “I do not believe he had diplomatic contact with the Amazons directly, for by his reign their power had already greatly reduced relative to its zenith at the time of the Great Kings of Amenemhat-itj-tawy . . .”

Achilles’s head pounded. Her stomach kept souring, and it was all she could do to listen stoically while Meryapi and Khaemweset spoke. Sometimes she could follow as they talked of dead kings, royal expeditions, letters to foreign leaders, messages on clay tablets; sometimes the words swam together, and she felt herself losing the language, running up against smooth granite surfaces of untranslatable Egyptian. She strained to make the words make sense, but that only made everything worse. Was she ill? Was she dying? Perhaps it was a reaction to Meryapi’s spell. Or perhaps a lingering reaction to Helen’s searing kiss. Or perhaps a fresh assault, weakened by distance.

Brisewos caught her hand. Startled, she stared at him, wondering what he had sensed. But he only squeezed her hand, his own smaller hand dry and unusually strong.

Finally, Meryapi led them back outside, thanking her uncle profusely. She led them back to her mother’s enclosure and they all sat down, Achilles and Brisewos sweating profusely, Achilles too nauseated to pick at the cold melons a servant brought in.

“That was not a complete waste of time,” Meryapi said in Achaian. Her eyes glittered with secret pleasure. “I kept asking him questions that would

lead to THE ENEMY's reign, and then about the magic of the temples in the reign of Amanahatpa—THE ENEMY's father—in hopes of learning about the weapons of Aten. He deflected everything. Systematically. Automatically. I don't know how much he knows, but he will be no help. Wherever your mother's divine weapons are concealed, he will block us rather than reveal the slightest clue."

"How was it not a waste of time, then?" Achilles demanded.

Meryapi smirked. "He is too good a historian, and his mind is much too orderly. All his deflections added up to something, a sort of wall of avoidance around a single place—and I was able to fit the puzzle pieces together. THE ENEMY built a city in the desert south of Men-nefer, a new capital of white limestone. It was occupied well into Horemheb's reign, so it is not entirely erased from history. Where better to look for Aten's weapons than in Aten's city?"

Achilles sipped cold water and let her stomach unknot. This strange, beautiful land felt dangerous to her, and yet here Meryapi was princess—ever confident, she seemed to gleam here more brightly than before, and her bright eyes sparkled.

"Let's go, then," Achilles said. "Time's wasting. We've got a yellow-eyed witch to hunt." She got up, then fought to keep her balance. She did not want Meryapi to see her weakening; she would not be undone by mere nausea; but she found time to sneak off by herself and vomit in the river. If this was Helen's magic, she was beating it on her own.

Meryapi left a message for Patroklos with old Phoinix, and they took a barge down the great river. The winds blew briskly south, easily carrying the barge up against the current, and they glided deeper and deeper into Egypt, bound for the ancient capital of Men-nefer. Pi-Ramesses floated off into the distance behind them, and Egypt just kept on scrolling by, an endless land of inundated fields and cities on the high ground, of fat cattle and enormous hippopotamuses, reeds and rushes, swamp birds and crocodiles, rich marshes, and—beyond the river—red cliffs, and an endless rolling desert.

Cities greater than the others rolled slowly past, one after another.

First there was Paru-Bistet, the House of the Lady of Cats, a city of pillared temples and serried rows of mud-brick houses, teeming with docked barges and the sounds of singers and musicians, of zithers and

drums and flutes and horns and tambourines, a city in full festival, streets filled with women dancing and men drinking wine. Meryapi clapped her hands in time to the songs and cried out a spell to the Lady of Cats, and cats trailed their boat for miles along the riverbank, mewing and keening.

Then they floated past ancient Awen, the City of the Pillars, with its boulevards of obelisks and monumental statues and colonnades all along the waterline. An enormous series of temples to Ra rose behind grand stone pylons, and the priests sang eternal hymns to Ra that echoed out over the waters, and Meryapi turned her eyes skyward, staring into the sun with a brooding intensity. Achilles was feeling better now with her stomach purged and held Meryapi's hand. After a while, as the city receded behind them, Meryapi smiled faintly, then shrugged.

"Tell me about your uncle Khaemweset," Achilles said.

"He is a finder of lost things," said Meryapi. "He has excavated so much of our history, bringing that which was forgotten back into the light of day. The Two Lands have been ruled by Great Kings for two thousand years, and so much would be lost forever if not for his tireless labors." She laughed. "He told me once that he got his start using magic, and practically was a temple robber, digging up lost treasures to pay for Grandpapa's early wars. He showed me his spellbook once, which he kept on hand even though it no longer worked. When he was young, his magical spells became ever-weaker, ever-fainter, and he augmented them with sheer *research*. Eventually all gods ceased to answer his prayers, but with an army of researchers and diggers—" She shrugged. "Now I have magic. I win."

Fields of pyramids began to roll into view now, mountains of white limestone that blazed in the midday sun, each capped with a pinnacle of gold. The heat rose in waves from those structures and shimmered at the summits of each pyramid, and Achilles felt something shudder inside her, something vast and terrible and more than human. They came in groups: first three, then four, then six, then two. It was impossible to tell how vast they were, but Meryapi said calmly that the tallest pyramid was five hundred feet tall and had been built fifteen centuries earlier, when the world was younger and the gods all lived in Egypt.

After a while, Brisewos spoke in his native tongue. "A boat has been following us since the city of canals. Do you see it?" He pointed back across the waters.

Achilles narrowed her eyes. In the distance, barely visible around a bend in the river, a small white sail carried a slim barge up the river. On the deck of the barge was a tall woman, robed and hooded. For an instant, Achilles could see all the way to her eyes, and they were golden.

“Helen,” she said. Nausea stabbed through her again, and she doubled over and retched into the river. Her stomach was too empty for anything to come up.

Meryapi stood over her, staring icily back at the distant boat behind them. “The Hittites do have a presence here. Grandpapa married their princess Inarahepa, Tudhaliyas’s little sister, when I was a girl. She is a known Hittite asset in the Two Lands. It would be trivial for a sorceress of Helen’s power to collude with her aunt across the sea.”

“She had yellow eyes,” Achilles objected. “I doubt Inarahepa has wolf-eyes.”

Meryapi frowned. “If Helen can send her spirit so far—” Her eyes darted back to Achilles, widening with concern. “Has she appeared in your dreams yet?”

No, only in my stomach. It didn’t make sense. “If she can do that, why bother with a boat?”

“I’ll keep an eye on the boat,” Brisewos said abruptly in Amazon, scowling. “You may not trust me enough to speak a language I understand, much less tell me what is going on, but I have tied my fate to yours, fine ladies, and I will protect you.”

They passed ancient Men-nefer at dawn. Their pursuer turned onto a side canal at the port of Paru-nefer, the House of the Beautiful, with its thousand workshops and factories, and vanished from sight. Brisewos and Achilles squinted behind them, looking for signs of the suspicious vessel, but it had gone.

“Perhaps it was not a pursuer,” Meryapi said in Amazon.

Brisewos scowled. “I know an enemy when I see one.”

Achilles’s stomach turned over again. She managed not to vomit for hours, but when she tried to eat some dried figs in the afternoon, she was violently sick. Finally she asked Meryapi, “Could Helen’s spells afflict me over all this distance? I’ve been nauseated all day.”

Meryapi looked worried. “In theory.” But after some thought, she shook her head. “More likely you are not used to the water. Patroklos shit himself for a week when he was new here.”

That explanation was reassuringly mundane, so Achilles decided to stop feeling sick. It was easier said than done, and the sick-sweet of bile kept welling up in her stomach, but she found that the longer she went without eating, the better she felt.

They sailed upriver all day and night, until they came to a ruined city unlike any other. Akhetaten, the Horizon of Aten, rose from the river wreathed in fog. All day and night Meryapi had whispered spells into the waters, praying to her river, letting her hand glide along its surface, leaving a soft wake. Now an abandoned city half-shrouded in desert sand lifted above the fog, all alabaster walls and enormous pylons, and, almost immediately, an abandoned, crumbling quay.

The captain of the barge was full of fear. That place, he said, belonged to ghosts, and no one went there anymore.

“Do not be afraid,” said Meryapi. “I am the blood of Ra.” Her smile was small and bitter, but the man obeyed her, tying up the barge.

The sun was beginning to turn the eastern horizon pale. Meryapi drew out a curved ivory wand, the claw of some long-dead animal carved with symbols and signs. She drew concentric circles in the sand just beyond the quay, then pierced them with two triangles, forming a six-pointed star. “I am oriented toward the gates of dawn,” she whispered. “Guide me through the doors of the horizon.”

The curved wand pointed east toward the shut-up gates of a palace enclosure.

The three approached it cautiously. The doors had moldered away; only their general shape still held, and when Achilles nudged them with her foot, they fell in pieces from their hinges.

“There is a strong curse on this place,” Meryapi whispered as they entered the first courtyard. Date palms and papyrus plants had overgrown the low buildings. The quiet was absolute; there was no sound of animal life.

Achilles did not need her friend’s magic to tell her this ruin offered no welcome.

Once this palace had been grand, though far smaller than Pi-Ramesses. Once this palace had been full of riches and finery and laughing men and women in soft gowns, and everywhere the walls had been as brilliant white as the surface of the moon. There had been music—such sweet music of drums and zithers and pipes and choirs of voices and plangent horns—

Achilles's eyes burned suddenly, and she felt a tear track down her cheek, though she knew not why.

They passed into a crumbling southern wing, another courtyard built around a dried-up pool, heaped with yellow sand blown in by the wind. The walls and surfaces were blackened, charred by some forgotten conflagration. Longing—sorrow—hope—all were burned indelibly into this place. The dried-up pool had once been full of sweet clear water and bobbing blue lotuses, sacred nymphaea water lilies that opened to exhale the sweet drug of magic—

Meryapi stopped, staring blankly at a section of wall. Her wand shot out, hacking at the stone, as if tearing away a veil. Achilles stared at her, but Meryapi gestured with her wand, and the wall shimmered. Black glyphs appeared one by one, then blushed gory purple, and then bloodred. As Achilles stared at it, the picture-writing shimmered with meaning she could almost read, and then she glimpsed its meaning all at once, and the hand that wrote the message, and a woman's hard, resolute face, her fierce eyes lined in Egyptian kohl, her lips red, her expression desolate and terrible.

And there was something else about her, something unmistakably familiar, some undefinable absolute longing that caught in Achilles's throat and stilled her breath.

Was the woman who carved this message kallai?

The message written in blood was not long, but the rage in it echoed across a century:

Immortal gods, you think you have destroyed me.

Aten has abandoned us, fleeing for her life.

My beloved husband has been killed, and now I have been killed.

His Great Wife has lost her faith, which we both cherished.

Ay gathers strength like a demonic bull; Horemheb will blot out our names; Paramessu will twist the knife.

Now I, Ankhesenmaat Kiya, wait for you in the Endless Labyrinth, for my power does not die with my body. Come, immortal gods, and face Kiya in the darkness, for my wrath is beyond death.

What did the gods ever give me?

Nothing that I did not seize for myself.

What did the gods steal away from me?

THIS.

The sun rose blinding gold over the desert. The present fell away, and a single piercing cry rose up on all sides. For the duration of a breath, for a dozen heartbeats, the past shone forth.

In the water of the pool, blue lotuses exhaled their fragrant magic. The sun rose in glory in the eastern desert; Kiya cried out and flung her arms open to the sky, gasping for breath; beads of sweat were flung off her into the pool, and Neferneferuaten Nefertiti, beautiful beautiful beyond beautiful, slid up out of the water and embraced her breast to breast, belly to belly, sweetly exhaling sorcery from mouth to mouth, and their lips were one, and their bodies melted together. Behind Kiya, her lord burst up out of the water like a crocodile, her husband, strong and tall, sliding back into her so sweetly that she cried to the sun, "Let me stay here forever," and his arms caught her, Meryaten Neferkheperura-wa-enra Akhenaten, beautiful beautiful in the forms of Ra, her lord of sorcery, her king, and the glory passed through her body, and Kiya, who had been born Joseph and cast out by her people, Kiya, who had been broken and imprisoned, cut and thrown into a well, Kiya the accursed, Kiya of Kna'an, Kiya the Sorceress, was now Kiya the Beloved. Kiya's tears streamed down her cheeks and onto her queen, and for an eternal moment, Great King and Great Queen and Beloved moved as one.

Then the vision was ripped away, and Achilles screamed. The loss of it, the unbearable sweetness torn from her—she was flattened to the cracked white tiles, and Meryapi fell next to her, holding her, hissing words in unintelligible Egyptian that resolved into a spell of protection.

She was like me.

"You are not her," Meryapi was whispering. "Her pain and loss are not yours. Come back to me, sister of my heart."

"She was like me," Achilles whispered back. Her heart hurt. Her stomach pounded. "She was kallai."

Meryapi squeezed her close, then helped her back to her feet.

Brisewos was peering at them both, his eyebrow arched. "Whatever you saw," he said, "it must have been horrible beyond reason. Did you find what you set out to find?"

"I know where we must go," Meryapi said quietly. She pointed at the wall, messageless again, scratched where she tore away the veil. She smiled coldly. "But if the golden-eyed Hittite witch is listening, I will not reveal our next move to her. Do you hear that, golden-eyed Hittite witch?"

Soft laughter rang through the dead city—a woman’s arch chuckle, and then loud male braying.

Three large men burst over the top of the wall, armed with clubs and axes. Their eyes were golden like the eyes of wolves, and though their garments were Egyptian, the contempt on their faces was the contempt of Helen.

“She heard you,” Brisewos said.

Chapter Twenty

Wolf-eyes; white walls; heaped sand; the thunder of her heart. The man with the club was coming straight at Achilles. If she had Tooth-of-the-Dragon, she would simply have spitted him. But she only had a dagger, so she spun and kicked the ground, flinging sand up into his eyes.

The shower of sand sparkled like jewel dust in the morning glare. The man cried out and swung his club wildly.

She dodged it, circling, trying to keep him between her and the nearer of the two axe-men. She could see him blinking sand out of his eyes, regaining his balance, and knew she had to strike *now*—so she lunged, trying to cut past him on his right, letting the dagger in her left hand punch out toward his flank as she passed him.

Her assailant let out a strangled yelp, and her dagger came away in a shower of gore, but his body swung round like a ball on a string or a doll in the hands of a child, club whistling from the rear, and—

Heat exploded across Achilles's back. She staggered forward, tumbling against the edge of the dried-up pool. For a moment she was frozen, staring into the wolf-eyes of Helen, which blazed from an Egyptian man's face, watching his blank expression turn into the ghost of Helen's savage smile. Then the man turned back toward Meryapi, who was staring them down, wand extended, hissing some spell—

Achilles flung her dagger and threw herself after it. The blade sank deep into the back of the man's neck, and she caught it like a handhold, using her weight to pull the Egyptian to the ground.

Brisewos had taken the further man's axe and kicked him to the ground, and they were struggling. The third man was still standing, and now he had

a clear path to Meryapi. She stood still, eyes blazing, looking *past* them all at something that was not here—and the man closed in on her, raising his axe.

Achilles left her knife where it was lodged and threw herself at the axeman, catching the weapon in both hands just as it started to come down. It was enough to arrest the weapon's momentum, but she was jerked off-balance and he spun, flinging her backward onto the sand. Her stomach exploded with pain, and her vision blurred.

Get your magic kiss away from me, Helen. The axe—where was the axe? It had been flung backward off into the sand, torn from her hands as she tore it from his. Her ears were ringing. She tried to get up and saw him standing over her.

She started to roll to her feet.

Her shoulder flared with pain. He had slammed down his sandaled foot on it, pinning her. She twisted free, flinging sand at his triumphant wolf-eyes, at *her* triumphant eyes behind his eyes, but he covered his face with his free hand, then drew back his foot, aiming a kick at her belly.

Brisewos leapt on him with a snarl, knocking him to the ground. The smaller man sank his filed teeth into the attacker's neck and thrashed his head back and forth. Bloody foam spattered everywhere, staining the pale sand and their white garments.

Achilles retched onto the sand of the courtyard, then dragged herself back up. She took her dagger from the dead man's throat and stabbed him twice more, just to be sure. She staggered to the man Brisewos had left on the ground with his head half-off. Stabbed him once, to be safe. And then the man who had knocked her down, the man who had almost kicked her belly.

"Their eyes," she said.

Their eyes were dark brown now, like Meryapi's.

"I saw it too," said Brisewos, letting the third man's body slip out of his arms and onto the sand. He wiped the blood from his mouth on the corner of the man's tunic. "Ugh. He tastes awful." He slid to his feet, looking up at Achilles with a bloody, pointy-toothed smile. "You're welcome."

She swallowed back bile, acrid and sweet. She wanted to cry, wanted to thank him. It was more than she would ever have done in his place, protecting his captors with his life. Her vision blurred again, and her eyes

stung, but the only words that came out were gruff, cold: “Why did you get in the way? I can take a *kick*.”

His expression twisted with sudden contempt, then surprise, then finally bemusement. “Are you *trying* to miscarry? There are herbs for that.”

Miscarry? Her ears were still ringing. She stared at him, trying to make sense of the word.

Brisewos laughed aloud. “I can’t believe it.” He wiped his mouth again, then spat blood onto the sand. “You’re pregnant, you idiot. You’ve been vomiting since we got here.”

“No. Helen was using her magic—” Achilles sank back down onto the sand, sitting awkwardly, trying to process the idea. The vomiting was a common sign, and she had not bled since that first time on Skyros and the ship to Aulis, but— “How do you know?”

Brisewos snorted and sank down beside her. “I was pregnant once. I didn’t like it.” He took her hands and helped her stand up again.

A cloud covered the sun. The morning air cooled almost instantly, and a breeze came up from the river. Meryapi sighed.

“That,” she said, lowering her wand, “was unexpected.” She surveyed the carnage calmly. She spoke at first in Achaian, but, seeing the blood on Brisewos, switched to Amazon. “You have done more for your captor than honor would demand, and you owed *me* nothing at all. I bow to you.” She curtsied slightly, then peered at the bodies one by one, frowning.

“What were they?” Achilles’s body was shaking. The pain in her shoulder still radiated outward with each breath, though it was already starting to fade.

“Bandits hired with Hittite gold, I should think. Helen has powerful magic, like the sorcerer kings who built the pyramids and could send their souls across the world. A willing servant makes the spell much easier.” Meryapi frowned, stepping back to survey the carnage from further upslope. In dolphin, she said, “We must go. The golden-eyed one is watching us from afar, so wherever we go, she will send her minions.”

Brisewos buried the corpses under drifts of sand while Meryapi watched pitilessly, prophesying miserable afterlives for the villainous dead who had taken foreign coin to attack their own princess. Then they changed back into their travel clothes, buried their robes, and went back down to the river. Everything felt suddenly remote, as if the entire world had become colder and further away, and a numbness was setting in.

Meryapi took Achilles's hand and murmured in her ear in dolphin: "I heard what he said to you. Is it Agamemnon's child?"

Achilles felt herself flush. "I haven't fucked anyone else yet."

"Oh my." Meryapi squeezed her hand and laughed a little. "We'll face another danger together when the time comes, sister of my soul."

It was hard to process the idea. When it had been impossible for her to carry a child, *that* had seemed absurd, that she simply could not do what her father's most lowborn slave girls could. Now—after all this time—it seemed equally impossible that her body could actually do it. She clung to Meryapi's hand. "Will Agamemnon's child be dangerous?"

"Of course," said Meryapi. "Politics." She pulled Achilles closer, draping her arm around her shoulders and resting her other arm on her stomach, gently running her hand over Achilles's belly. Some of the tightness faded. "But I was referring to childbed. The women of my family are prolific and strong in childbirth, but Patroklos told me that your mother was not so fortunate, and neither were the daughters of Aiakos."

Achilles clung tighter to Meryapi. She could not allow herself to think of the toothless skull of Thetis she had dug out of the pit-grave. She was sinking in the well—

"Don't worry," Meryapi said. "I know many spells for childbirth."

They found the barge where they had left it, and the captain seemed relieved—and terrified—to see them. He had seen another boat beach itself half a mile upstream, he said, but no one had dared go into Akhetaten to give a warning. Achilles called him a coward in Achaian, which he took for her agreement, and then they set off downriver, bound for the Grand Canal that led to the lake known as Great Black.

As the boat glided downriver, Achilles brooded over her vision of Kiya and over her own belly, but neither mystery became any clearer to her as they sailed. It was a sickening feeling, trying to imagine what this Kiya's life had been; Egypt may have been kinder to kallai than Achaian lands, but the gods, evidently, had been cruel. And yet Kiya had known love in the arms of a king and a queen, THE ENEMY and his consort, and Kiya's magic still echoed across the years. And whenever Achilles thought of her stomach—*pregnant?*—it was hard not to vomit again.

She owed Brisewos, though.

That night, in the cabin reserved for honored guests, Achilles told Meryapi that Brisewos deserved to have his mouth opened. Brisewos heard his name and raised his head, and Meryapi explained the ritual in Amazon.

"I will give you the languages of the world," Meryapi said, "as a gift for saving my sister and myself from the evil of Helen."

Brisewos nodded once. "I accept your gift."

"But if you ever betray us," Meryapi said severely, "I have modified the spell so I can claw it all back. Magic is in my blood, and I have studied every major magical text in every library in the Two Lands. I have sat in the funerary temples of all seventy-six kings before Great-Grandpapa, and have studied the magical syntax of their grimoires, and have formulated my own theories of magic based on the writings of Djehuty Thrice-Great the Lord of Magic, who left secret stone tablets in Khemenu that only I and Khaemweset have seen. It would be dreadful, Brisewos of the Amazons, to learn the languages of the world and then have them torn away."

"I respect your threat," Brisewos said calmly.

They conducted the ritual as quietly as possible, with supplies from the ship. Meryapi used a sprig of salted papyrus rather than thistles. The effect, it seemed, did not depend on the thistles. Brisewos murmured to himself in Egyptian, tasting the flavors of that language.

"They speak a tongue like this in Kolkhis," he said, "up in the mountains. I went there once, and a witch told me that I would be a king one day, and found my own city in the west."

"Then we will all be royalty," Meryapi said haughtily.

They went out onto the deck and watched the land float past. Swaying palms dotted the shore, and rushes and cattails lined the banks, and settlements every few miles. Every inch of the canal had been dug out by hand more than five hundred years before in an effort that dwarfed the pyramids.

Meryapi gazed on ahead into the sunset. She spoke, and Brisewos crouched across from Achilles, watching Meryapi intently, and Achilles watched the handsome Amazon, marveling at the cruel, catlike perfection of his face, the sharp lines of his jaw, the brooding fullness of his lips, and the lidded restlessness of his pale eyes. Meryapi's words passed over her in soft waves, pursuing some thesis in flawless Achaian.

"Reality itself is like bronze," Meryapi said, her words gliding fluidly from note to note. *H'ousia auta estin hosperei hi'khalkis*. "When it is cold,

it is hard, and holds steady forms that cannot change. Cast bronze into a shape and it will hold that shape forever. It will sooner shatter than bend. Pray all you like; cold bronze is a solid thing and cannot change to answer your prayers. When reality is cold, the gods are invisible and far away. They may appear in dreams or not at all. Magic is nothing. The world is a world of objects and things, of stable rules, where chaos is unknown and order reigns.”

She took out her curved ivory wand and gestured toward the setting sun. It seemed to Achilles that she could hear an ancient melody rising from either side of the darkening canal and could see them—thousands upon thousands of laborers trudging back to their camps after a long day of digging under the hot sun, singing praises to their kings who were like gods: *Amenemhat*, *Senusret*. They sang of a world without famine, a world with an eternal granary always ready for harvest, a world where the marshes to the west would become an inland sea, where the reservoirs of Egypt would overflow with sweet water, where grain would grow like grass, a world of infinite plenty under kings who lived forever.

“If you warm the bronze, if you heat reality,” Meryapi murmured, “it becomes ductile, bendable. You can shape it and hammer it to your wishes. You can change its properties. The rules can be twisted into exciting new shapes. Magic becomes possible. The gods appear as shadows, and sorcerers gain the upper hand. The world is warming; magic is returning; Helen can send her shadow here to pursue us, and I can work magic of my own.”

“And if it gets hotter still?” Achilles asked.

“Then it melts.” Meryapi turned, grinning. “Gods walk among us, ten or twenty or fifty feet tall. Sorcery is as breath. Dreams are made flesh. The world is molded to our desires; the seas dry up; the land changes; the stars rain down. The hotter the world becomes, the easier reality flows, and the less form it will hold. Eventually magic itself becomes unnecessary, and divine will enacts everything.”

Achilles thought of her vision of the dying star and its black metal heart. “What if it gets even hotter?”

“Perhaps it turns to vapor, or eternal flame, or maybe the world ends, or maybe we all fuse into one enormous being, reunited with the universe itself!” Meryapi laughed. “No matter which of Djehuty’s mysterious writings I read, there was no mention of what happens then.”

Brisewos spoke in his low, hard voice: “What makes reality hotter or colder? What summons magic or banishes the gods?”

Meryapi peered off toward the south bank, contemplating the sand dunes and the ever-deepening night. “I do not know.”

But knowledge stirred in the mind of Achilles, knowledge and another’s memories. She could taste the blood in the air of a forgotten time, and the chill of snow on the wind of some ancient winter—she could taste the cries of the condemned, and her pulse shuddered in time to the frenzy of the worshippers. “Sacrifices,” she said. “The giant horned cattle and the hairy elephants and the woolly horned land-hippopotamuses and the giant hawks and the great bats and the cave bears—and men and women.”

Meryapi looked at her in consternation. “That might work.”

“It did.” A weight settled on Achilles, and she could *feel* her—the Silent One, her mother, whispering as if from just beyond a door, a voice from another room, still hoarse from her last brush with Helen’s kiss, but slowly growing stronger again. *We became so vast, and Great Mother was the greatest of us all.*

Meryapi sat down between Achilles and Brisewos, and took Achilles’s hand. “I saw something like that once—in a temple older than the pyramids, deep underneath Men-nefer.” She tilted her head back, reciting in a soft murmur:

*Seven skeletal cattle follow seven fat cattle across the sky
flaying the flesh from their bones.
A man rises skinless from the earth
and is burnt in a fire.
The gods feast on the aroma of his offering
And the fires burn higher.*

“I thought it was only a metaphor.” Meryapi squeezed Achilles’s hand again, and they floated along in a darkness dimly lit with stars.

Chapter Twenty-One

At the far end of the Grand Canal was Lake Merwer, Great Black, and ancient Shedet, the Place of the Crocodiles. The lights of the low city flickered on the rippling waters. Standing statues of crocodiles stood along the piers of the city, greeting travelers from the Grand Canal with toothy stone smiles and desolate painted eyes. In this darkness they alighted from the river barge and went quietly through the streets. It was cold, and the air was sweet, but Achilles kept her bronze dagger close, hidden just under her traveling cloak. Somehow it had melted or deformed between the fight and now, and the handle of it was bent perfectly to match the shape of her own hand.

Above the city of Shedet was an enclosed palace for the women of the Great King's family, where they slept in a guesthouse. In the morning, Meryapi ordered a carriage to take them up to the Endless Labyrinth.

At first it looked like a shallow mesa rising from the plains overlooking the Grand Canal, and on top of that mesa was a modest pyramid and a vast temple complex below it. But then—as the carriage bore them nearer to the table-land jutting up from the plains—Achilles gasped, for it was not a mesa, but a single building pierced with great doors and supported by enormous stone piers and walls. It had been a mountain six hundred years before, Meryapi said with a glint in her eye, but the entire top had been carved off, and countless rooms cut from the living rock, and the whole thing roofed in stone. Piers and pillars and relieving walls had been added inside to support the immense weight of the Labyrinth, and an entire pyramid and temple complex had been built on top. Within the Endless

Labyrinth were temples to all the gods, tombs of a dozen kings, libraries as old as writing itself, and things unknown and unknowable.

“No one knows how many rooms are in the Labyrinth,” Meryapi said. “I explored it for three months with Uncle Khaemweset, and we soon left the occupied areas and were lost for days. Our servants went back to find guides, and we set up camp in a hall where sunlight made its way in through an oculus. Eventually we found our way out. But Iahmesu Aakhaperu once sent five hundred men into the Labyrinth to find its deepest rooms, and only fifty-five returned alive. The bodies of the lost were never found. It would be a good place to hide—well, anything.”

Brisewos looked up. His expression was intent; the word clearly intrigued him; but he said nothing. How much did he really understand of their mission? How much had he picked up on the riverboat? Achilles thought of asking, but then they reached one of the gates of the Labyrinth, and all thoughts left her.

This gateway was not large in proportion to the structure, though it was as large as the Skaian Gate at Wilusa, painted in a repeating pattern of eyes and suns in red and yellow and brilliant blue and green, and picture-writing in careful black columns. Statues of ibis-headed gods stood just within the doorposts. Beyond was a pillared courtyard lit with lamps, and a scent like five hundred years of incense layered into a single breath.

Meryapi had procured lamps in the harem-palace, spare jars of oil, and packs of provisions. A priest recognized her and offered to be her guide, but she told him she was merely going to pray at the Temple of Meskhent an easy thirty rooms in, and that she sought the blessing of the goddess on her growing belly. The priest nodded wisely and waved them in.

Lamplight glowed on white pillars along the walls of each chamber, and each room opened onto three or four others. Achilles followed Meryapi’s purposeful stride, and for the first hour they passed through temples and votive halls where priests stood praying and scribes sat diligently at work, copying from the engraved walls. Pi-Ramesses had been full of spells, but the Endless Labyrinth was full of older magic, and where the walls of the House of Ramessu had shouted the praise of the Great King, here the walls spoke to jumbled layers of years upon years, to the writings of endless lecturers and scribes, to centuries of records, of secrets, of treasures.

And then all at once they were in an empty room with walls defaced and scarred, lit only by Meryapi’s and Brisewos’s lamps.

“This is as far as I have ever been and known the way back,” Meryapi said. “It is called the Room of Desecration. No one knows its story.”

Achilles marveled. The smell of centuries was thick here. It was dizzying, this place, and even with the walls hacked up, the white pillars were beautiful, and the air was strangely rich with the spice of old perfumes.

Meryapi took out her curved ivory wand. “Kiya,” she called out. “Where are you?”

KIYA. The word echoed in the darkness. *Kiiiiiya*. Silence swallowed the name—and then it echoed again, from deeper within.

“Who is Kiya?” Brisewos demanded.

“THE ENEMY’s wife. She took the weapons of Aten here.”

Brisewos smiled faintly. “You need them to kill the Hittite witch.”

“Clever boy.” Meryapi gave him a hard look. “Enough questions.”

Achilles lifted her lamp warily, straining to catch the last echoes of the fading name. *Kiya*.

Meryapi led them through a door into a room walled in green engraved papyrus and palms, and then another room full of mutilated statues of a jackal-headed god and a crocodile god and a cat god and a falcon god, all hacked with axes. Ancient violence pulsed in the air.

“Kiya!” Meryapi called out again.

KIII-YAAAA, echoed back the voice of the Labyrinth.

“Stay close,” Meryapi hissed, and lunged through another door. Room after dark room rolled past, until finally they came to a staircase. She led them down into deeper darkness. “Now we are truly underground,” she said. “I do not know if this was the right way, but it *feels* right to go further into the dark, and seek her far beneath the world. Kiya!” she shouted again.

KIYA, shouted the Labyrinth.

Between one step and another,

Achilles fell—

—Kiya fell. There was simply no more holding her body upright. Light-headed, she stared up into the pitch-black of the underground chamber. The air here was stale and ancient, bitter and motionless and full of the dust and weight of centuries, and yet—

She laughed. Here in the darkness of her prison, she was finally free. There was nothing here but darkness, nothing but a tomb, and yet within

this prison she could escape a prison far more absolute, a prison she had never been able to leave, no matter how many enclosures or cages they threw her in. They had called her Joseph once, and flung her into a well. Then they called her *little monkey*, and made her a slave, and tried to take everything from her—but here in the darkness she was free.

She found a sweeter current of air amid the dank gloom and drank it greedily. She dragged herself along the floor to follow it, and presently, she found herself in a larger space, a darkness wider than the last. In the middle of the darkness shone a single yellow ray illuminating a single pinpoint on the floor.

The single ray of light spoke: *Who are you who comes before me with nothing but magic?*

I am Kiya, she answered back.

Kiya, said the light in the darkness. *I am Aten—*

—Achilles gave a sudden jerk. She was being held up by strong arms. By Brisewos, who was stronger than he had any right to be. He had put his lamp on the floor. Achilles's lamp was next to it, but it had gone out and was cracked; she must have dropped it.

Brisewos grunted and pushed her back to her feet. "Stand *up*, princess. Stop fainting."

"I had a vision." Kiya had been imprisoned here long ago. Aten came to her and taught her magic.

"Is Achilles all right?" Meryapi's voice came from very close, from the other side of a pillar, tight, concerned. "Wait—where are you? Where are you both?"

Achilles picked up Brisewos's lamp and stepped toward Meryapi's voice, but she found herself up against a wall covered in images of bulls being devoured by skeletal oxen. She shrank back, searching for a doorway.

"Meryapi!" she called back.

Brisewos scampered up behind Achilles and grabbed her hand fiercely. "I'm not getting lost in here," he growled. "Give me the lamp." She gave it to him, and he pulled her to the right, through a doorway. "She's this way. I can hear her."

Pattering feet, light and small, suddenly padded across the floor—but which floor Achilles could not tell. Something clattered in another room. Falling metal echoed.

“Wait!” Meryapi cried. “Look out!” There was still no telling where she was. Another room, certainly; perhaps a room or two away. Her voice kept moving, and wherever they went, the sound of her shifted. And then—

A creature padded into the hallway, enormous, armored with leathery scales: a crocodile of great size, pale yellow in body, almost sickly gold. Its jaws creaked open and a gargling roar hissed from its throat. Its tail slapped the walls. It slid closer, and its yellow eyes burned with Helen’s ruthless hunger.

With Tooth-of-the-Dragon this beast would have presented little challenge, but the dagger in Achilles’s belt was not enough. Brisewos tugged her toward the door in the left-hand wall, and she slid quickly after him, trying to put the white pillars between them and Helen’s beast.

The crocodile was agile, sliding sinuously around the pillar and toward the doorway, so Achilles broke into a run. The slapping steps echoed out behind them, and Brisewos’s lamp shed a wild bouncing light on the walls and ceilings ahead, but she managed to point him right—then left—then right again, trying to put as many doors, pillars, walls as possible between them and the monster.

“Achilles!” shouted Meryapi. Nearer, this time—or further away?—Achilles snarled in frustration and flung herself where she thought Meryapi’s voice *should* have been, hoping against hope she would not run into another door, while the leathery feet of the crocodile slapped along behind them, and its tail smacked pillars, walls, statues—

Brisewos jerked away, and suddenly Achilles was alone in the dark, pitching blindly through black corridors and passages, and there was no light, nothing but the slap of the crocodile’s feet behind her and the thunder of her heart, and then she was falling once more.

Even before she opened her eyes, Achilles knew she was in the land of the dead.

Achilles stood in the dark, and the darkness was lit by a subtle green glow that came from everywhere and nowhere. No sunlight penetrated this realm, and the air was heavy with centuries. And she was not alone. The presence that surrounded her was vast and formless and *angry*.

You are a god.

Achilles flung her head back, suddenly full of a desolate pride. Her nausea had faded, and inside her belly pulsed something dark and terrible.

“Not exactly. I am Achilles, daughter of the Silent One, whom you call Aten.”

Let me taste your blood that I may know you speak the truth.

An enormous sarcophagus of black diorite appeared in the dark. The lid was carved in the form of a woman. Her black stone eyes were open and stared up into the darkness, lifelike and unblinking; her face was a mask of challenge; her heavy black hair, subtly carved into coiled braids, surrounded her carved shoulders, and her hands were crossed on her chest. The whole thing had been brightly painted once, but the paint had flaked away, leaving only bits of colored pigment that suggested an armored gown, richly cuffed wrists, ornately painted fingernails, flawlessly lined eyes and lips: a queen armored against eternity.

Achilles pressed her thumbnail to her index finger, and, as if her nail were a razor-sharp talon, drew blood. She pressed it to the lips of the sarcophagus.

You are her blood. The thought was scornful, vast and terrible and cruel. Poor frightened thing, she fled while we were killed, seeking to save her own wretched immortal life. Will it hurt her if I snare you here for centuries, trapped with me in the dark while your body rots and your bones molder into the earth? Will Aten even notice you are gone?

“You will not snare me,” Achilles said flatly, “not that she would care.”

A horrible voiceless laughter filled the air. *Wrath. I like that, little god. It will be fun to kill you.*

“You can try,” Achilles sneered.

You are in my realm, Achilles, within my magic. Your mother cannot even see you, much less save you.

“She was never going to save me,” Achilles growled. “Zeus is coming for me from the stars, and that fucking Hittite witch is playing games with my life. Wherever I am, she is looking for me. That’s why I need your weapons.”

The laughter grew acute. *So blunt. Not much of a dissembler, are you?*

Achilles narrowed her eyes. “I say what I think and do what I say.”

So you do. Something flickered in the darkness: the shadow of a woman like the one carved into the sarcophagus, half-melded with the shadows. The one you call Zeus I knew as Amun. His servants murdered me, and I have waited here for a hundred years to repay that kindness.

Achilles flung her shoulders back and stared up at the vast shadow. “Let me do it for you.”

An interesting proposition. What do you know about the war among the gods?

“I know that Zeus and his brothers killed Ra. I know that you served my mother and drove the Three out among the stars with divine weapons. I know they killed you.”

Then you know everything. And nothing.

The gods fight an endless war among themselves. For a time, I was Aten’s weapon against Amun, Heru, whom you call Ares, and Ptah, whom you call Hephaistos. For a moment, I won, and justice reigned on earth. Corruption was driven out.

Images assailed Achilles from all sides: the white streets of Akhetaten, the dark corridors of the Labyrinth, the harem-palace of Merwer glimpsed from the Grand Canal, the proud splendor of Meryaten Neferkheperura-wa-enra Akhenaten and the glorious beauty of Neferneferuaten Nefertiti, and the plan they shared, and the goddess who came to them in solar radiance and offered her designs for a paradise on earth where mortals lived in harmony and the gods were brought to heel. They had driven the gods away and lived for a time in peace. And then—daggers in the back.

And now I dwell here in the Endless Labyrinth, where first I dreamed to defy the gods, but I cannot reach beyond its walls and smite them, for my body is dead and my magic is bound here, inexorably linked to the past.

Achilles’s eyes stung again. The vision from Akhetaten burned in her memory, and she wept for Kiya.

The ghost laughed scornfully. *You dare cry for me, godling?*

The images changed: blasted Kna’an, a childhood of cruel brothers with sharp elbows who called her a boy, and a hated inescapable name. Joseph, Joseph, *Joseph*—it stuck to Kiya like a curse. In the cages in Egypt they had called her *Joseph*; as the knife cut her, *Joseph*; as she tumbled into the darkness of the well, screaming and flailing at the air, she heard them jeering *Joseph*. But she had torn that name away and risen from the darkness to challenge the gods themselves.

Achilles sneered. This was firmer ground, and she stepped forward, baring her teeth at the ghost. “Kiya. Look inside me. You’re not the only who’s been thrown down a well.” No matter where she went, the well was

still with her. Kheiron was dead, but the well could never die. She could face that now, for much of her strength had been born in the well.

There was a silence in the dark. Something stirred, studying her more carefully, more closely, more bitterly. *Nor the only one formerly called by a hated name.*

I see.

So. We are alike. That is your thesis. Your tears were not the condescending tears of one who will never understand but the tears of a foolish child who dreams herself my sister.

And yet look at you. You already have more than I ever dreamed of, demigoddess. There is a child growing inside you.

An enormous frustration rose up in the dark, a terrible poisonous envy. Then Kiya was in her *mind*, feeling her body, tasting it, and Achilles's body felt alien to her as the alien consciousness considered it point by point, rising from her swollen feet—I *did not realize they were swollen*—to her thickened belly, cabled with ligaments to hold in the darkness swelling there, to her hardening breasts, sore and thick with veins, to her blood rich with the humors of growth, and finally to that core of darkness that Achilles's mind could not penetrate.

You will have a son, if you live to bear him. Kiya's thoughts were jagged and full of—hatred? longing? envy curdled with tenderness? *My body was incapable of that. I never knew my lord the way his Great Wife did, for the gates of my body were never opened. Why shouldn't I tear you apart for your intolerable good fortune, goddess?*

Achilles sneered. "And deny my divine family the privilege?" The words were slight, insufficient to carry her thoughts, but the rage sprang up in her again, and her thoughts rampaged on without language. Agamemnon would never be father to this child; Deidamia would never be his mother, though Achilles had dreamed so many foolish times of raising a child with her. Zeus would strike her down and boil her belly, and it would burst with her son cooked inside; there would be nothing left of him but the smoldering ruin of her womb. The Silent One had made her a woman in body to pull her into this war, to make her into her instrument, to use her to fetch lost weapons and distract yellow-eyed Helen.

They were more alike than Kiya knew: Achilles was simply the newest tool of Aten, thrown scraps to keep her feeling—*something*, something, just enough to restrain her wrath.

Aten did not give you a womb, Kiya murmured in the dark. She cannot do that.

Achilles touched her belly with a scornful smile. “Obviously she lied to you about that.”

You opened your body and called forth your own womb, half-goddess. It was your first miracle.

Achilles stared into the darkness. She could not see Kiya anymore, but she clung to her sarcophagus, staring into the statue’s bleak black eyes.

Kiya laughed at her. *Gods take the credit for whatever we do for ourselves.*

Rage blossomed in Achilles’s mind, a wrath so sweet and golden she wanted to glory in it and fan it to an all-consuming flame. She felt freer than she had in months, more purely angry, no longer trapped or confused or lost. How *dare* Athena play her for a fool. Idiot Achilles, to trust the monstrous owl from her nightmares, to call her Mother, to praise and thank and bless her, to be her willing slave, thinking Athena was protecting her from Helen’s attacks out of love, when she was only protecting her own interests.

I see you are not entirely a goddess yet, Kiya murmured. Your rage against them is pleasing. You are alive. You can still act.

“I’ll butcher her,” Achilles whispered. “I’ll kill them all, or die trying.”

Kiya’s laughter was strangely sweet now, not bitter or jagged but soft and full of sinister mirth. *I can accept that. Come closer, little sister, for I have gifts for you.*

Take my weapons of star-metal, the metal-of-the-end.

Take my masterwork, the NEBUSNEKHEN, the wrath of Kiya that I forged to blind the gods. It is no use to me here.

And take my spellbook for your little friend. Her grandfather’s grandfather Ramessu killed me long ago, but he was a weapon in the hands of the gods. Now she is a weapon in your hands.

Something glinted dully behind the sarcophagus, and Achilles searched and found a small box of gilded wood. She opened it, and inside were terrible weapons of black sideros salted with red rust—a spearhead, a short, thick sword—and armor. There was a corslet of sideros, a helm of sideros shaped like a black crown, and two greaves of black sideros, all covered in red rust. And last, hidden under the sideros weapons, was a single golden collar in three hinged pieces stamped with tiny glyphs: the nebusneken.

The metal of the end burned coldly when she picked it up, and its weight was a terrible thing.

The nebusnekhen was hot, almost feverish, and when she touched it, her lips tingled suddenly, then burned, and for a moment she tasted Helen's lips again—and then charred flesh. A thousand miles away, wolf-eyed Helen recoiled with a hiss, seared by Kiya's scorn.

Kiya's voice whispered in Achilles's brain.

The gods are arrogant and fear only each other; they will never expect a pet to snap its leash. Use my gifts. Do as you said. Kill the Three. Kill Aten if you wish. Kill them all. Take my wrath with you, little sister.

Now go.

Achilles staggered out into a dark room—dark, but lit with a single ray of sunlight. Meryapi and Brisewos stood together with an open wooden box on the floor between them, and Meryapi was just lowering her curved ivory wand. “Where were you? I called for hours, but you did not come. I heard that creature scream—but we feared the worst.”

Meryapi pointed into the box, which was full of copper plates stamped with writing, a heap of rusted black sideros weapons and armor, and a hinged golden collar in three pieces. “Look. We have found the treasures of Kiya.”

Achilles fell on her hands and knees and vomited. Darkness was growing inside her, and deep within that, a hotter, deeper darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It took them hours to pick their way out of the Labyrinth, but at least the crocodile-beast was nowhere to be seen, if it had ever existed. Real or imagined, Kiya's searing scorn had driven it away. Within her Labyrinth, at least, the dead sorceress was more than a match for Helen's far-flung magic.

Whatever soul-sickness had clung to Achilles since Helen's lips had touched hers was gone now; she felt herself again, less bitter, less furious, less cruel, hungrier, tenderer, more full of joy. A ghost had imprisoned her in the dark; the ghost had also set her free. She clasped Meryapi's hand as they retraced their steps through the maze of corridors and halls, suddenly full of a dizzy delight.

Finally they emerged into the sunlight. It was noon. Their carriage was gone, but a short distance outside the Labyrinth was a slim black chariot drawn by two black horses. A man stood beside it with a curved jet wand. His eyes glowed as golden as the sun, and in the bright midday light, his urbane smile was as deadly as a sword.

"Uncle Khaemweset," Meryapi said. "I did not expect to see you here—nor to see you with the witch's eyes."

"I do not know your witch," said Khaemweset in a deep voice. "I was sent here by Amun, Heru, and Ptah." He pointed his black wand at the red star that burned in the middle of the sky. "They came to me in a vision."

"If you think that, then so be it. Either way, we will go now, Uncle." Meryapi's voice was sad, but her eyes were absolutely cold. Achilles began to step forward, but Meryapi held her back. The Egyptian woman spread her stance a little, planting her feet on the stones.

“You will stay. Come home, Meryapi. Leave divine weapons and wars in heaven to the gods, or you will die. They sent me to take you home, and keep you here, and ensure your long life.”

“I will not die,” Meryapi sniffed. “You might, if you stand in my way.”

“I am a sorcerer,” Khaemweset said with a frown, “and magic is returning. I know curses you cannot possibly resist. And think of your friends, whom I will curse first if you do not yield.”

“I am no magical neophyte,” said Meryapi. “I knew more than you credited even before I found Kiya’s spellbook.”

Khaemweset’s gold-bright eyes narrowed. The name of Kiya seemed sufficient to make up Khaemweset’s mind, and even as he gave a rueful shake of his head he lifted his wand between two fingers and released it delicately—

A black serpent uncoiled on the sand, rising with a hiss from the broken stone.

Meryapi spread her arms in front of Achilles and Brisewos and then released her own ivory wand. A pale cobra slithered out of her grip, spiraled out around her outstretched arm, and grew; it glided down her belly, waist, hips, and legs, and slid down onto the stones.

The black snake moved black and forth, sidewinding, slithering, opening its jaws—and then it lunged and sank its fangs into Meryapi’s cobra. Meryapi’s snake went instantly limp, and the black serpent opened its jaws wide, engulfing the pale snake. It slithered deeper, pushing more and more of the cobra through its jaws.

Khaemweset’s eyes glowed brighter, and a smirk of triumph spread across his face.

Achilles looked to her friend in concern, but the Egyptian princess hadn’t even flinched. With exquisite calm, Meryapi reached down and caught her serpent by the tail. The black snake writhed and struggled, but it was stuffed full of white cobra, its fangs harmlessly held apart.

Meryapi grinned impishly, then flicked her wrist—and lifted a curved wand of jet and ivory, fused flawlessly into one. “Thank you for all your valuable lessons, Uncle Khaemweset.”

Khaemweset stared at Meryapi. “Wait—”

Meryapi raised the double wand like a hook and tugged it toward her, speaking a single word. It was over as abruptly as Helen’s kiss had been,

and in Meryapi's cold smile was the same absolute confidence that had made a wolf's grin of Helen's.

Khaemweset's eyes faded to black. He sank to his knees.

"You are dreaming, Uncle Khaemweset," Meryapi said, advancing on him with a strange light in her eyes. "When you awaken, none of this will have happened. You will wonder that Amun and Heru and Ptah favored you with such a strange dream, and you will forget that I spoke the name of Kiya, and that I went to the Labyrinth and defeated your magic. You will remember only that I visited you, and asked you questions about birth-magic, and that you were proud of me and knew my child would be mighty."

Khaemweset bowed his head. "It will be as you say," he said dully.

"You were always my favorite uncle." Meryapi pointed with her wand, and he stepped onto his chariot and rattled away. She watched him depart, then motioned for Achilles and Brisewos to follow her back down to Shedet.

That day they returned to the canal and went back downriver the way they had come:

Men-nefer.

Awen.

Paru-Bistet.

Pi-Ramesses.

Two days later, *Delphini* left the city of canals with a hold full of grain, and the fleet of Odysseus pulled out of the harbor close behind. They sailed north, bound for Wilusa in Taruisa.

Bound for Helen and the gods.

The dream began in the Labyrinth, in an echoing black courtyard full of bones. Oracle bones, seared with coals, presenting stark choices. Then a ray of light shone in the darkness, and piled skulls grinned from the shadows, a gallery of skulls of men and beasts: skulls very nearly human, but with elongated jaws and jutting canine teeth; skulls with enormous central holes like gaping sockets for gigantic third eyes; skulls of boars and dogs and carnivorous horses with shearing carnassial teeth; skulls like the skulls of bears, but thrice or four times larger; skulls like the skulls of enormous cats with teeth like daggers.

Two silver eyes opened, lit by the ghostly ray of false sunlight. The light faded, and the eyes grew brighter in the dark.

Mother, said Achilles, but there was no sound.

Two enormous wings opened in the darkness, and the Silent One stepped forth. Black clotted blood dripped from her feathers, and blood stained her gaunt face and her enormous skeletal hands. Blood dripped from her curved white talons, and gobbets slid off her feathery mail. She stepped forward, and her talons dragged lines of congealed blood across the floor. None of it was hers, and all of it was ancient.

Daughter, the Silent One said coldly.

You abandoned Kiya and her king. There was no point asking for a denial; the Silent One would have lied without a second thought, and Achilles would have known it was a lie. *They trusted you; they fought the gods for you; you left them to die.*

The Silent One opened a taloned hand and let the clotted gore speak for itself. She nodded once. Her enormous eyes never blinked.

Did you feel no loyalty?

Desolate laughter rang out in Achilles's mind, and there was a hint of scorn in the Silent One's answer: *I am a goddess. I helped them when I could, but I will not sacrifice my immortal life for mortals.*

How could you say that? You are a coward.

The Silent One stepped forward and pressed a talon to Achilles's breastbone. Cold, so cold—

I am; I always have been. Kiya has every right to despise me for it. But she can get in line.

Names exploded in Achilles's mind, names she did not know and faces she had never seen, and lives withering like bark in a bonfire.

Medousa. Ganpana. Arakhne. Skylla. Maatkara. Senenmut. Sita. Arzuna. Ulupi. Nakula. Uluka. Anbu. Bazi. Aga. Ilku.

Shall I stop here? No? Then you will need a wider mind, with more room to hold my dead.

The names blurred; the faces danced and became impossibly numerous, some with features that seemed Achaian or Hittite, some that seemed Egyptian or Assyrian or Hurrian or Elamite, and most a bewildering array of faces that were alien in their blend of features, ancient proud beautiful faces of every shape and hue, all bleeding from their eyes and their severed necks. The tops of their skulls were opened, and one by one, the Silent One

drank from their open skulls, drank a slurry of gray and pink memories, and trembled, and wept blood from her eyes, and cried out in a thousand voices.

I dwelt in the Great Mother's temple and mastered the arts of memory. My talent was that I forget nothing, nothing, that I can drink the memories of the dead and bring them life again, for I am Atana who forgets nothing, and when I was but a girl, an invisible girl with staring eyes, my friend Pallasu, glorious Pallasu, elegant and tall and full of secrets, slipped and fell and smashed her brains on the rocks of the Great Mother's temple, and I was sad that her beautiful brains should go to waste and be forgotten and her secrets should be drunk up by the stones, so I knelt there on the stones and lapped her up, and then I TOO WAS PALLASU and the GREAT MOTHER asked WHERE IS PALLASU and I answered HERE I AM—

The Silent One's voiceless voice thundered in the darkness, and the memories of ten thousand lives exploded on every side: the birth canal, the cold, the mothers' breasts, the greedy sucking in of life and light and shapes and colors and words and Others, the growth of minds and souls and bodies, the journeys, the ancient landscapes, the trees and animals and fish, the languages lost to time, the adventures, the lovers, the writhing of bodies, the quickening of life, the pain of birth, the withering of sickness, the cold of slow oncoming death, the *ends*—and then the decapitation, the breeching of the skull by an enormous beak, and the soft tongue of Pallasu-Atana, Pallas Athena, Aten, the Silent One, the Watcher, the Eyes of Night, She Who Remembers, the Designer, Cunning-in-Things, Learner of Forms, Drinker of Secrets, I—WE—

Then Achilles was sitting in the darkness, and the Silent One was sitting across from her, hunched over, eyes as wide and staring as ever, trembling, breathing, shuddering.

Athena lifted her head and stared into her daughter's eyes.

Kiya is in good company. I have had so many allies in my war against the others, and they are all dead like her. If you survive this war and it pleases you to do so, my daughter, you can carry out their vengeance; I will not resist.

But first you must survive.

That is all I care about, my daughter. I have given you the means to survive. If you despise me for it, so be it.

Achilles wasn't sure if she despised her mother. But she had plenty of time to think it over. *Delphini's* voyage across glass-smooth autumn seas was slow, for the winds up the coast were poor. Achilles vomited the first three days at sea until Brisewos put hemp flowers into an Amazon brazier and filled her cabin with acrid smoke, banishing nausea and replacing it with hunger. Then she was ravenous as a beast and fished constantly off the stern, catching mullet and bream and sole, turbot and whiting, bonito and grouper, and even a splendid swordfish that she roasted, offering the flaky meat to Meryapi and Patroklos and Brisewos before devouring the lion's share in a single piscivorous day. "I could eat the whole sea," she growled to Brisewos, who laughed and patted her belly and said she was going to get fat.

"I don't care if I get fat," Achilles said haughtily.

"It would suit you, anyway," Brisewos said. "You look very beautiful this way. Your hair is redder every day, and your skin drinks in the sunlight and is not burned." He smiled faintly. "If I were not your captive, I would be captivated."

Achilles smirked. "I bet you tell all the invaders that."

Brisewos laughed at her, but there was a gleam in his eye like a challenge, and he glided away. Later he returned with an enormous bloody steak of tuna skewered on his javelin, and carved off pieces for her, smirking.

She devoured them.

The golden-eyed Hittite witch did not appear in all their weeks at sea, but the red star grew, taking on the unmistakable character of an eye in the sky, red glowing around a coal-black pupil that rotated to search the earth.

They were passing the great mountainous bulk of the isle of Kreté when Patroklos asked Achilles if she was pregnant, and if so, whether she would still fight.

"I'm indestructible," Achilles snapped. "If the Amazons can fight pregnant, so can I."

"The Amazons can't fight pregnant," Meryapi objected. "Though they are not demigoddesses."

"Amazons can and do fight pregnant," Brisewos observed. His voice was low, sardonic, the words crisp and Amazon, dense with consonants. "Not in the last month or two, but until then. Take precautions, but don't get soft. Get fat, but stay strong. Don't be some housepet."

Meryapi snorted. “When Miauw had kittens, she had an entire room to herself with blankets and a warm brazier, and her litter, blind in the way of kittens, wriggled under the blankets while she watched over them. Soon enough, she taught them to open their eyes and skulk and hunt. And she did it all with far less stress and trouble than my mother had with my poor brother. I, for one, *do* intend to be a housepet.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” said Achilles.

“His head was too deformed to live.” Meryapi shrugged. “Mother was upset for the wasted labor, but even the descendants of gods have stillbirths.”

Achilles touched her belly, but nothing stirred. She felt a fluttering sometimes in the blood vessels of her abdomen, but nothing she hadn’t felt after a heavy meal. Now that she knew something was growing inside her, it was hard not to become obsessed with the question of whether it was alive, or whether her body was growing around a dead thing, trying to nourish a corpse. It seemed unlikely—most pregnancies were not stillbirths—and yet . . .

The sea rippled softly. The currents carried them briskly along, but no great waves swelled in the depths. It was as if the sea itself pulled them north, back toward Wilusa, as if Poseidon himself smoothed their way, even if the wind tried to refuse them.

On the fourth day, Meryapi cried out and pointed into the water. A drowned city lay spread out beneath them, all sunken houses and palaces, with schools of bright fish dancing through its gutted windows. Mosaics in the form of dancing goddesses swirled up and down the Mese of the drowned city, and squid lurked in the darkened buildings, hiding in the thick seaweed. Sun and waves had scoured away the pigment from the buildings and bleached the stone and fired clay, and in the sunlight the drowned city was as white as bone, ageless and strange.

Perhaps this was the wreck of Tiri Island, drowned in the war between the gods, when the Amazons fought for the Thunderer. Perhaps it was the ruin of an older city where Great Mother’s priestesses had lived before the birth of the Apple of the Sun.

“Time is a cruel prison,” said Meryapi. “I will never speak to the people who lived here. I will never learn their language, never hear their stories, never tell them mine. If I were immortal, that would still not be enough, for

the dead are trapped in tombs of history, and no one can reach them or change their lives.” She stared into the depths, eyes full of longing.

“You could conjure their ghosts with magic,” said Patroklos, putting his hand on his wife’s shoulder. There was such pride in the way he smiled at her, as if it were his privilege to witness her thoughts unfold, and Achilles felt a sudden surge of love for her cousin.

It was wonderful that Patroklos’s fate had become entwined with Meryapi’s, wonderful despite everything that they were here together, while Meryapi raged against the prison walls of time. It was wonderful that Patroklos knew how wonderful it was, and how fortunate they were to be in this prison of time together. Achilles tried to find the words to tell them, but none came to her save Patroklos’s own words: *Ships in the night crossing the wine-dark sea. And yet, every now and then, we uncover our lantern, and an answering lantern flickers across the waters, and we know that we are also never alone.*

She took their hands, and they stood side by side on the deck, gazing down together as the sea carried them over the forgotten ruins of a drowned world.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They landed on the beach of Taruisa at the beginning of winter. Half the fleet was still scattered, but every day Agamemnon's ships went out to call the Achaians back to the war.

The night after they landed, Helen came to Achilles in a dream.

Achilles stood nowhere in the dream, on an alien shore in the shadow of a vast orange world. The light was golden and deep purple in that place, a strange twilit world between dusk and dawn. The light came from everywhere and nowhere, and the sky was filled with floating droplets of liquid metal. Flakes of golden snow fell, but they passed through Achilles. She could stare into them down to their crystalline structure: unimaginably fine, gilded feathers radiating fractally from an unseen center, glittering as they fell.

Helen stood before her, naked, staring into Achilles with her lupine gaze. Helen's beautiful face was a mask of hunger, and after a moment she tilted her head, shook out her golden ringlets, and rasped, "You have them, don't you?" There was an edge to her voice, a nervous glimmer in her eyes, half-threat, half-excitement. "I tried to stop you, but I hoped you'd manage anyway."

"God-killing weapons?" Achilles said mockingly in Egyptian. "I have a great deal of sideros, yes."

"Are we speaking Ran Kumat now?" Helen bared her bright teeth in a snarl. "A parlor trick. Souls already can speak to each other without words; language was invented to limit communication, not expand it." She opened her arms wide and let the golden light play over her, regarding Achilles

with a sneer of challenge. “What do you want, daughter of Pallasu? I can grant wishes when my magic grows strong enough.”

“I want you dead,” Achilles answered mildly. She thought perhaps that even in a dream, she might be able to hurt Helen, and she willed a spear of sideros to appear in her hand.

It did.

Helen took a step back, eyebrows shooting upward. “You don’t like me *at all*.”

“I’m sure I’ll like you fine with a spear in your throat.”

Helen’s breath caught, and her eyes widened in surprise. She seemed, if anything, delighted. “Don’t you want Menelaos to have me back? Love conquers all, joyous reunion, fat Achaian babies, prosperity in our times?”

Achilles snorted. “Menelaos does not deserve that.”

Helen smirked. “I happen to agree, so I was hoping you wanted me for yourself. Do you want me, daughter of Pallasu?”

“I want you gone.” Achilles pointed the spear at Helen. “You are a demon sent by the gods to ruin our lives. You are all fat with human sacrifice, gluttoned on murder. Why would I play along with your games?”

“*Our* games,” Helen said coolly, holding up a golden finger. “You’ve been playing along beautifully. Every man you killed was a sacrifice to you. Some were also sacrifices to me. You grow stronger with each battle, and we grow stronger too. Hunt me if you like; kill me if you like; it’s all part of the process, and as things grow hotter and hotter and hotter—” She licked her lips.

Achilles flung the spear at her. It caught Helen squarely between her breasts.

Helen’s eyes went wide, and she staggered back. Bright golden blood flowed out of the wound. “That—feels—amazing,” Helen gasped. “So, this is agony. If we were awake and that spear real, oh—” She bit her lip until it bled a thin rivulet of gold, struggling to stay on her feet. While Achilles stared, Helen began shaking with desperate laughter, and blood slid down her belly and hips and thighs, dripping on the colorless dream-soil, staining it golden. “I’ve never had a real enemy, Achilles. Everyone always wanted to control me for themselves, to use my power, and—this—” Helen’s lips parted in wonder. “I won’t waste this chance. I will drive you mad! You will learn to hate me with such passion that nobody, nothing else, matters to

you.” She pulled the spear out of her chest and put her fingers in the wound, then raised them to her lips and licked the blood. “That hurts so much.”

“Consider it first fruits,” Achilles snarled.

Helen stared back at her with a gleam in her eyes that was like love, and Achilles woke up in a hot night-sweat, tangled in her blankets, her stomach throbbing.

Snow began to fall, draping the world in a temporary shroud of peace. Achaian scouts and foreign traitors said that when the snow melted, three armies would gather immediately on the plains of Taruisa, armed for apocalyptic struggle. The armies of the Hittites were massing in their fortress-cities of Hattusa and Tarhuntassa; the Amazons had camped near Tamiskuriya under Great Queen Pattasilya; and an army of kin and allies of Wilusa and Dardanos was gathering in Thraki.

Wilusa itself burned with watch fires, and Wilusan scouts crept out to murder Achaian foragers. The red star had taken up residence over Mount Ida, towering over the plains of Taruisa like a staring eye, the warship of Zeus. On the tallest tower of Wilusa, a golden light flashed. Storm winds lashed the sea, churning the surf.

As winter set in, Achaian ships returned to the beach of Taruisa. One by one the crews staked out tents on the ridge, dug ditches, hammered palisades, lit fires, built ovens, baked bread, sang songs, set out bowls of wine, and showed off their plunder. Odysseus portioned out grain for each Achaian crew to last through spring; Aiwas bartered cloth and furs plundered from Kizzuwatna and Thraki for bronze dishes and massive heaps of firewood; Menelaos sent every crew an urn of wine from Lazpa. Agamemnon received tribute in his tent, taking a tenth of all the plunder and heaping it high. The soldiers traded copper, silver, gold, tin, bronze, shells, jewelry, armor, weapons, slaves of every nation, skilled in all arts. The captains strolled from tent to tent, laughing uproariously and singing along with their men.

“Play this game with me,” giant Aiwas kept telling Achilles. It involved cubes of metal, each exactly marked with tiny pips, and the goal of the game was to use them to move carved metal chariots around a circuit, simulating a race. You could redouble your speed, slow an opponent’s chariot, join forces with an ally to block their movements—but for all that, it seemed essentially random and boring, and Achilles kept making excuses

not to play. “It’s such a good game!” Aiwas insisted. “It’s not just random; there’s a lot of strategy; we just need two more players.”

The air grew cold and dry. Achilles found herself with nosebleeds most days, getting heavier and hungrier and meaner. She ate pork or beef constantly and craved extravagant things: bread stuffed with fish eggs, salt pork, and samphire dredged up from the Lazpan coast.

Meryapi was getting pudgy faster, and she kept complaining that her ankles were going to disappear and that she was developing stretch marks. “Not all battle scars come from swords and spears,” she declared, pointing out a silvery tiger-stripe working its way down one hip. “Patroklos, you must adore my scars as I do yours.” Patroklos laughed uproariously and promised to massage her hide with oil until she was as supple as her dolphin friends; and Meryapi warned everyone that dolphins were wicked political schemers, always trying to draw foreigners into their internal strife, and not to trust a single word the creatures clicked.

At night, while wine flowed freely in the camp, Meryapi and Achilles set up in a little brick shed to work the sideros of Kiya. They scoured off the sideros with pumice and saved the red dust in a little box, for no one had ever seen anything like it. Then, with Brisewos working a bellows over a bed of hot coals, they heated the metal of the end to a cherry glow and Patroklos hammered it out, following Meryapi’s orders. Slowly they reshaped the breastplate to fit Achilles, for it had been made for a larger warrior. They shaped the crowned helmet for a smaller head, and bent the greaves to fit her calves. They sharpened the spearhead and the sword on a grindstone.

In the tongue of Egypt, Meryapi whispered, the metal of the end was known as bia-enpet, the metal of heaven, and each armament had once had an Egyptian name when Ankhesenmaat Kiya and THE ENEMY forged them out of fallen stars. But now, weaving spells, Meryapi consecrated each of them for Achilles with a new, Achaian name: the spear was Deimos, the sword Aletheia, the greaves Kion, the breastplate Philos, and the crowned helmet was named Drakon.

They hurt to touch, burning Achilles’s hands and flesh. But she was half-mortal; they would burn the gods far more terribly.

Brisewos spent more and more time in Achilles’s tent.

Once, Agamemnon came to see Achilles on war business, discussing his plans for the coming battle and how he meant to fight at her side at last, shoulder to shoulder. “We’ll crash through Hektor’s formation and roll them up,” he said, “and if Tudhaliyas himself takes the field, we’ll take his head. There is only room for one Great King in these lands, and it will be me.”

Then he spoke to Brisewos in Lukkan and widened his eyes when the Amazon answered in cool, accentless Achaian. The two men’s eyes met, brilliant green staring into pale gray, and both men smiled.

When Agamemnon had left, Achilles asked Brisewos what had happened.

“I saw him once in Thraki,” Brisewos said, “fifteen years ago, with my sisters. We were burning a town, and he—on his longship—was anchored offshore, biding his time, waiting for an opening to steal our plunder. I was a woman then, and he was a boy.” He smiled, and his panther’s face settled into a look of brooding hunger. “Our eyes met, and we had a moment. I wanted to take him—but not as I then was. It was not meant to be, and he soon sailed away.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. Jealousy was not her style, but she was not sure what she felt. She wanted Agamemnon again, but she wanted Brisewos too. If he had not been her captive, she would have climbed onto him and asked him to show her what kind of man he was *now*.

Brisewos’s eyes glinted like chips of smoky mica, reading her thoughts. “We have something here,” he said. “As your anger grows, as you grow fat with child, your lust grows too. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way *you* look at me, daughter of Peleus.”

“I am your captor,” said Achilles. “I draw the line at rape.”

Brisewos laughed aloud. “If that’s the only problem, set me free. I’ve helped you out enough.”

Achilles scowled at him. “You must think I am a foolish girl, ready to give up my captives for a moment’s straining desire.”

“A moment?” Brisewos scoffed. “Hours. Days.”

“Hours! Days!” Achilles snorted. “All men say such things, but in the end you’re all just men.”

Brisewos smirked at her and walked out. He had taken to strolling around the camp talking to the Achaians, and wherever he went, he made friends. Patroklos had taken to drinking with Brisewos in the evenings after forge work, and sometimes Odysseus and Diomedes would join them, and

Achilles would drink a cup of milk before retiring to her tent to rest with Meryapi in the fragrant Amazon hemp-smoke. The men's laughter rang out late in the night, and Meryapi grumbled that the most wicked curse of pregnancy was the way her stomach had soured on wine. They lay talking for hours.

"Neoptolemos," Achilles announced one night. "Deidamia liked it, and I was happy to please her. I miss her still, and sometimes, I want—" She broke off, not sure how much of her longing was too much to share.

"After the war," said Meryapi, "we should go to Skyros and take Deidamia on a tour of the world."

"She will never leave Skyros." But the idea was beautiful. Achilles could almost see it: *Delphini* in Skyros harbor, and Damia coming down to the docks, and Meryapi holding a tiny ginger-haired baby, half-Meryapi and half-Patroklos and all-beloved, and Achilles with Neoptolemos in her arms, and Damia's eyes widening—

"She will leave Skyros when I persuade her to leave Skyros," Meryapi said confidently. She rubbed her belly. "The little one is kicking," she murmured. "I kept forgetting to tell you, but now—ha. It's almost worth the loss of wine. I will teach little Sekhem to manipulate adults from infancy with wide baby eyes and cooing sounds, and your Damia will be helpless."

"Sekhem is the name you want?"

"Sekhem is the Egyptian name," Meryapi said smugly. "It means power, because I am very powerful, and my children will be even stronger. In Achaian, my child will be called Aktor, after Patroklos's grandfather, or Aigina after your mutual grandmother."

"These are strong names," Achilles agreed, falling into a reverie. The brazier lay between them, gushing complex, lovely curlicues of sweet smoke. It was sweet to dream Meryapi's dream and imagine them all at Skyros, and Damia's heart softened, and perhaps—

But I will die in this war. Even if Neoptolemos was born, even if Meryapi kept her son safe from danger and Patroklos and Meryapi raised him as their own, nothing could save Achilles. Helen meant to destroy her, and Zeus himself was coming with his brothers, and if by some miracle she should survive the Apple of the Sun and the Three Weapons, well . . .

She had promised Kiya she would make war on all the gods. That part she had not told Meryapi, not yet. To defy the gods was one thing; to outmaneuver them was reasonable enough; to want revenge on them was

understandable. But to plot their destruction—even after seeing Kiya’s fate!—that was madness.

Yes, I will die in this war.

“Meryapi,” Achilles said.

Meryapi groaned, tossing under her blankets. “Go to sleep!”

“When I die, bury me somewhere clean, and don’t let any gods eat my brains.”

Meryapi snorted. “Foolish Achilles. No gods will eat your brains, for they would go mad. If *I* die, bring me back to life. Now go to sleep.”

That night the gods came to Achilles in her dreams.

She was sitting on a throne on the moon, ruling over the shimmering silver waste, and the whole moon was covered in a sea of dust and dry bones.

The Silent One came first, staring at her with the accusing eyes of an owl. *My daughter*, she said, *you will never understand me. But I will always be on your side, no matter how little you trust me.*

“As you were on Kiya’s side?” Achilles said scornfully. “Begone.” She waved her hand, and the ancient goddess dissolved. A thousand owls flew away in all directions.

Next came the Queen of Kings, horned like a cow, bringing heifers with their throats slit. They bled out sweet hot salty blood on the lunar surface, and the blood fed Achilles. She felt an almost physical thrill.

“You are sacrificing to me,” Achilles said. “Stop.”

I would know you better, said the Queen of Kings. *My favorite, Agamemnon, loves you dearly, and in your belly beats the heartbeat of his child. Speak the word, and I will have him put aside Klytaimestra Mino’o and take you.*

“He wouldn’t do that,” Achilles said coldly. “And if he would, I would not love him. Why do you seek to buy me, Hera-Rhea, Queen of Kings?”

“Because you are dangerous. You always have been. Your mother trusts you, but she was always, in her calculating way, naive. Name your price and I will pay it.”

“The time may come when I do,” Achilles said grandly. “Now begone.”

She sat on the silver throne alone for a time—an infinity? a second?—contemplating the pockmarked wreckage of the lunar surface. A war had been fought here ten thousand years ago by gods marching under the banner

of Great Mother, facing down her Ten Thousand Enemies in the airless void. Here the stars were even brighter than on earth, and the spears of the gods had shattered and gouged the moon. The corpses of fallen divinity still littered the dark side of the moon.

We fought in that war.

Three gods appeared before her now whom she had never met before.

The nearest was painted bloodred, and his hair and beard and eyes were red, and he was armed with a flint-headed spear and a flint-headed axe and a flint knife, all covered in blood. His wolf's teeth were bared and bloody, and he had horns like a ram and talons like a falcon, and he wore the skin of a black wolf spattered in gore. He bowed with an ironic smile: *I am the Secondborn, whom men call Ares, Maras, Heru, Lord of Red. Your mother was my foster mother.*

His brother stepped forward next, green as malachite, horned and muscled like an ox, wide-shouldered and bow-legged, with a long prehensile tail. Half-monkey, Achilles thought, but not a monkey like Meryapi had described them. Rather, a great terrible thing, manlike but far older and far stronger, full of cunning, with a second pair of hands for feet. All about him orbited fine pieces of floating copper and brass and bronze, complex arrangements of pieces that clicked and whirred and moved against each other, all part of some incalculably vast design. *I am the Firstborn, Hephaistos, Ptah, Fasta, cunning in things, poisoned from the beginning. Your mother taught me pain, resilience, and the necessity of eternal self-control.*

The third was bronze, with golden beard and hair and eyes like chips of copper, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a hammer in his left hand and three darts in his right. He was beautiful, this Zeus, this Taru, this Amun, this Thirdborn Weapon, killer of Ra, destroyer of worlds. The craters on the moon matched the weapons in his hands, and when he met her eyes, he gave her a sad, wan smile. *I am the Third. I will not pretend I am not a god of battles—but so are you, Achilles, daughter of Pallasu. I have been waiting so long to meet you.*

“At last we meet,” Achilles murmured, nodding to the three gods. “Will I meet Great Mother next, or is she dead and gone?”

Ra killed her. Some part of her climbed up from the underworld, but she is not Great Mother anymore. Zeus bowed his head, his expression unreadable. *I came to introduce myself, Achilles. I know the Apple of the*

Sun sees us as rivals, doomed to battle for control of her and for mastery of reality.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

"Oh, you've come to make friends?" Achilles sneered. "I've seen the drowned city that was Tiri. I know what it looks like when you play your little games."

You are young and reckless, as I was once. The bronze god smiled sadly, and his broad shoulders stooped. Don't you understand that we're cursed? We are too strong. Our wishes become fate; our desires shape reality; when our wills conflict, that conflict produces heat; heat produces power; power makes us stronger still, until we reshape history in our image, sculpt continents, wipe out species, blast whole worlds out of existence, and kill our own kind.

The only way to restrain our power is to talk, to agree, to find a path of least resistance and follow it.

"I am a quarrelsome, troublesome woman," Achilles said. "I'm going to kill Helen. Stay out of my way, or I'll kill you too."

Think of the people you love, said the Thirdborn. Don't be reckless. I have lost more than you can ever imagine, Achilles, and it breaks my heart to imagine the same thing happening to you. The universe is cruel, Achilles—do not make it crueler.

"Stop. I'll die of laughter."

Achilles woke with a start. Meryapi was tugging on her arm. The Egyptian cursed their fattened bodies, their slowness, the selfishness of babies who did not understand they were too heavy for their mothers' ease of movement. At last she was pulling Achilles outside, pointing at the southern sky.

The red star floated down slowly through layer upon layer of cloud, settling closer and closer to Mount Ida. And then it landed.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

Zeus had returned.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The snow was melting, and the Achaian camp hummed with battle preparations.

Scouts arrived with word that the Hittites had come. All the princes of Hattusa and their hordes had massed in the shadow of Mount Ida, supported by one thousand wagons laden with food, provisions, gear, spare tents, and raw materials. Lightning struck Mount Ida again and again, blasting the mountaintop where the red star had landed, and the Hittites lifted up a song of voices, drums, and zithers, praying to the Thunderer to vanquish the invaders. The Amazons had gathered by the Skamandrian ford. Thrakians and Dardanians and Wilusans were camped by the great bridge. Their campfires glowed across the plain.

The sun set over the sea in an eruption of bloodshot purple and blood-spattered gold. Everyone knew sunrise would bring battle.

Meryapi had given commands, and Glyke and the slaves had created a feast for the eve of battle, roasting ten bulls and sixteen sows, slaughtering ten goats for a bean stew in huge copper cauldrons, serving up a salad of winter greens and seaweed on spare shields lined with oiled cloth, and pouring out dozens of jars of wine into enormous eared mixing bowls.

All the commanders had gathered in Achilles's camp: somber Agamemnon and silent Menelaos, drinking grimly, all nerves; Odysseus and Diomedes, grinning like wolves and telling jokes about the Underworld and the horrific eternal deaths waiting for them all; Askalaphos the Argonaut, already drunk; Leontius the Lapith, who insisted on drinking with Brisewos and telling him of his grandfather's victories in battle; Aiwas of Lokris, Elephenor of Euboia, Epistrophos of Phokis, Thersander of

Thebai, Menestheus of Athenai, and Idomeneus of Knossos, all competing to drink the most, roaring out ever-bolder oaths: they would each kill fifty Hittites, strip the armor from Hektor, take Amazons as slaves and ride them like horses. Nestor of Pylos was drinking with Phoinix, reminiscing about the old days with Peleus and Herakles. Cousin Aiwas was shyly asking if it would be all right to touch Achilles's belly, and what pregnancy was like, and if that handsome Amazon was the father.

"He's my trainer," Achilles said. Brisewos had been teaching her the Amazon way of preparing for birth, starting and ending each day with a good run, eating bloody meat well-seared, donning her panoply each day to keep it fitted, adjusting the straps to compensate for her growing belly.

"Women have been delivering babies for millennia without Amazon military training," Meryapi said, "but when you tell Achilles that, she only says—"

"Those women weren't warriors." Achilles smirked. "I can't afford to lose my edge. How would Balios and Xanthos love me if I got soft?"

Aiwas laughed, then looked grave. "So, can I touch it?"

Achilles pulled open her jacket to bare her belly. It was already so thick, not yet egg-shaped but noticeably large. Aiwas put his enormous hand on her belly, feeling gently. "Is he supposed to be doing anything? He seems very still."

"Some babies take longer to kick," Meryapi said. "Don't worry her! Soon Neoptolemos will be incessantly punching her bladder."

Cousin Aiwas grinned. His giant hand was strangely tender, and Achilles found herself smiling at the huge man even when he had excused himself for another side of beef. Maybe if she had known him better when she was younger, she would have had a place to go when Phthia became too hostile. She set her hand on her belly, gently pressing inward, trying to signal to the mystery inside: *Hello*.

"Don't worry," Meryapi murmured in her ear.

"What if my baby is born a living corpse?" Achilles said. "Or with a tail instead of legs, or as a beast? Didn't the wife of Minos give birth to a bull-headed monster? And if my divine half isn't the problem, what about the mortal one? I told you about Thetis."

Old Phoinix and white-haired Nestor were walking by just then, winecups in hand, composed and largely sober. They paused, and Phoinix

said, “Lady, Thetis was sickly and pale through her pregnancy, and you glow like a living flame.”

“I think,” said old Nestor, “that you take more after your divine mother. If you cannot imagine the Silent One dying in childbed, then you should expect a similar ease.”

The old men wandered away, leaving Achilles to brood. She had been thinking about Thetis more and more. Sometimes she was afraid, and the toothless skull of her mortal mother appeared in her memories as mute witness to the dangers of womanhood. But sometimes she felt fearless, and then the thought of Thetis was a reproach: *she* had killed this woman she never knew, drank her life away, sucked the nutrients from her body until her *teeth* fell out, all to feed a parasitic demigod’s mindless fetal hunger. Achilles felt suddenly light-headed, short of breath, and caught hold of Meryapi to steady herself.

The Egyptian let out an indignant squeak and wobbled on her feet, barely keeping her own balance. “You’re doing it again,” Meryapi accused. “Stop thinking about the distant past and the distant future. Think about tomorrow and how you will protect my Patroklos, and my favorite horses in all the world, and your own careless self.”

“Battle is always a risk.” Achilles wondered if the Thunderer would act immediately, or if he would wait, feasting on Hittite deaths, biding his time, building his power.

“If you die on the field,” said Meryapi, “I’ll have them slit your belly open and try to save your baby, but this early, Neoptolemos will die. So if you *must* die, wait a month or two.”

Achilles smiled bleakly. The party was growing louder than ever, full of drunken generals boasting, and her own mood was darkening. “Remember to put my body somewhere clean,” she said. “Where gods can’t eat me.”

Later, as the moon rose to its zenith and the party died down and the kings, drunk and full, began to tire, Agamemnon stepped up onto a table and spoke in his deep, commanding baritone, each word ringing with a quiet conviction.

“My Achaians,” he said, “for the first time in this war we will face a foe that is our equal in numbers. Though divided into three parts, the enemy have enough men—and Amazons—to match us spear for spear, chariot for chariot, bow for bow. This is fitting. It is not by weight of numbers that wars are won but by intelligence, discipline, hard training, courage, and the

will of the gods. And Hera is with us; the Queen of Kings favors us. Athena is with us; the Silent One favors us, for her firstborn daughter is our champion. But the Hittites march under an evil banner, rallied by sorcery, with little real military experience beyond cattle raids and civil wars. They pray to Zeus, but they do not know that Zeus, who stands on the peaks of Mount Ida, cares nothing for the Hittites. The Queen of Kings came to me in a dream last night and revealed that Zeus will give up the Hittites to destruction tomorrow.

“So sleep soundly tonight, brave Achaians, and in the morning, kill.”

Once the kings had gone to bed, Agamemnon joined Achilles in her tent. He was flushed with wine and moved unsteadily, but his expression was serious, and he sat down on the cushion next to her with great care. Then he began to cough, as the hempflower smoke from the brazier filled his lungs. “Dear gods. Achilles, are you trying to ruin your lungs?”

“It helps me relax,” Achilles said. “I kept vomiting without it.”

Agamemnon looked at her earnestly, his expression flickering through several phases: first worried, then concerned, then calculating, then concerned again. “You’ve been showing since you got back from Egypt, but we haven’t talked about—well—”

Achilles patted her naked belly. “About the future Great King of all the Achaians and conqueror of the known world, Neoptolemos, who is certain to slaughter the Heraklids and the Tantalids alike until he wins dominion and hegemony over all the cities of the Sea of Aigaia?”

Agamemnon laughed uneasily. “You’re joking, yes? It *is* mine, I’m not disputing that, but my other children have better claims to rule.”

Achilles snorted. “My child is mine,” she said. “The rest was a joke. I won’t murder your other children.” *Even if he manages to be born*, she thought, *Neoptolemos will not be the vessel for my ambitions. Just as I refuse to be the Silent One’s vessel.*

“That is not what I meant at all.” Agamemnon leaned closer, his green eyes bright. The words came out thick, the sentences halting, slurred by strong drink and half-understood emotions. “To have been chosen by you as a lover, to have given you something of myself—” He broke off, then tried again. “The Tantalid bloodline is cursed, but you are a demigod, blessed by the gods, and if some of me lives on in your son, it is—” His face darkened

with frustration. “Wine dulls my tongue and this smoke does not help. I came to tell you I am honored, that’s all.”

“You are,” Achilles agreed haughtily. But then her heart softened. “As am I. You’re quite a sparring partner, Great King.”

Agamemnon’s face softened, and he smiled almost shyly. “You are the best sparring partner.”

The tent flap opened abruptly. Brisewos stood there, wobbling on his feet, drunker than Agamemnon and flushed quite dark. “My captor,” he said grandly, “you must hide me. King Leontius of the Lapiths simply will not stop telling me about his grandfather and asking me if I enjoy the company of strong men, and if I think he is handsome, and— Hide me.” He stepped into the tent and flopped down next to her. Then when he saw Agamemnon, he grinned suddenly. “Oh no.”

“Oh no?” Agamemnon’s eyebrows rose. “I thought we were on good terms, Brisewos.”

Brisewos smirked, rolling over and sitting back up. The scenes of battle on his chest showed through his tunic, and as his muscles rippled, the tattooed warriors did battle. The Amazon man lifted his head and gave Agamemnon a mocking smile, then looked at Achilles, then back to Agamemnon. “The trouble is, I’m very, very drunk.”

“As am I,” said the Great King. “I can barely speak in sentences.”

“We’ve met before,” Brisewos said. “Fifteen years ago. In Thraki. If you hadn’t had a boat, you would have ended up my captive.”

“I think I’d remember you,” Agamemnon said.

“I was a woman back then.” Brisewos laughed. “Imagine! A woman! Me!” He stood up, looming over the larger, seated Achaians, spreading his arms to show the tattooed scenes of battle all along the thick muscles. “I wanted to pin you, King of Men. That’s the trouble, the great ‘oh no.’ I am drunk enough to tell you that when our eyes met, you on your ship and me on my horse, I saw you underneath me, spread out for me, and—” He bit his lip, then burst into uproarious laughter. “I bet nobody’s ever told you that before.”

Agamemnon arched an eyebrow. For a moment he was silent, and Achilles watched him carefully, not quite certain how he would react. Such a declaration would have offended most of the men she had grown up with; they weren’t much for being pinned by anyone, much less *spread out* for another man, and—

"I *do* remember you now," Agamemnon said mildly. "It's a shame I had a boat."

Brisewos laughed, and Agamemnon joined him.

Achilles peered at them both, trying to calculate her own feelings about this development. They were flirting before her eyes, or more than flirting; their eyes were locked, this time with a wonderful intensity, each man staring questions into the other, neither giving an answer. They were beautiful, the one a wildcat covered in scars, the other with the shoulders and neck of a bull, both slim-waisted and slim-hipped and tight with corded muscle and barely controlled power, and both laughing drunkenly.

"Wrestle me," Brisewos said to Agamemnon. "All your boats are outside."

Agamemnon looked over to Achilles, then back to Brisewos. "In your captor's tent?"

Brisewos's lip curled, and his eyes flickered up to Achilles. "She can judge the fight."

Achilles rose to her feet, crossing her arms over her belly. "You actually want to wrestle?" she asked them with a smirk. "Oil up and see who ends on top?"

"Yes," Brisewos and Agamemnon said at once, and then they looked back to each other, and grinned, all teeth. There was a charge in the air now, a hungry dangerous energy between them, and Achilles liked it.

"Fine." She bent down and moved the smoke brazier out of the center of the tent, then set up a ring of cushions and motioned them both into it. "Don't hurt each other too much; there's a battle in the morning."

They stripped off their tunics and stood in loincloths, girding themselves for the struggle. She settled back on her cushions, and her breath felt short, close. The air in the tent was warm and sweet with the smell of hempflower, sweet with the scents of wine and sweat.

Brisewos sank into a low, loose stance, grinning.

Agamemnon stood opposite him, sizing up the Amazon man, before carefully circling, trying to drive him backward against the edge of the ring of cushions.

But Brisewos moved fluidly, his scarred flanks and slim hips sliding side to side as he maneuvered. His footwork was flawless as he circled round to the outside of Agamemnon and then suddenly lunged—not *at* Agamemnon, but past him on his left, flinging up the hook of his elbow as he passed.

Agamemnon twisted away before Brisewos could hook his arm or his throat, but the Amazon had opened up enough space to keep circling as Agamemnon spun round.

Brisewos slid by Agamemnon on the left again, but this time Agamemnon flung out his arm and caught Brisewos by the forearm—and Brisewos lunged in on him and flung his legs around Agamemnon's waist, and the Great King yelped as the Amazon threw him onto the cushions.

Agamemnon twisted, trying to get his legs back under him, rolling, trying to fling Brisewos off. He let go of Brisewos's other arm, and the Amazon twisted deftly round his body and put his neck in an arm bar, legs still wrapped around the Great King. Agamemnon thrashed like a bull, then caught Brisewos by the ankles, trying to pry open his leg grip and get hold of his body that way.

Brisewos started laughing, a low, hungry laughter that came from deep in his throat. Agamemnon pried Brisewos's ankles free, but the Amazon shifted his leg grip, letting his thighs slide up to Agamemnon's waist and then crushing them together so hard that Agamemnon gasped as the air rushed from his lungs.

"Try riding a horse for thirty years," Brisewos rasped in the Great King's ear. "Do you yield?"

Agamemnon gave a sudden jerk of his body, rolling so that Brisewos was on top of him like a rider straddling a horse. He convulsed, trying to pull free—he let out a hissing gasp—and finally his hands slapped the carpet in surrender.

Brisewos loosened his grip and let Agamemnon roll over. They stared at each other, pale eyes gazing into green, and then their mouths met.

Achilles's mouth went dry and a buzzing filled her ears and it was hard to breathe. It was beautiful—beautiful to see them kiss, to see their lips crush together and their eyes burn into each other as Brisewos caught Agamemnon's wrists and pinned him down, flat belly against flat belly, sweaty muscled bodies straining against each other. The Great King gasped, then let out a muffled moan of surprise as the Amazon slid against him, breathing raggedly.

The air was close and warm, and everything shimmered. Brisewos pulled Agamemnon off the floor and over to Achilles, then flung the Great King down beside her and crouched over her with a triumphant light in his eyes and his lips over hers, and before she knew what she was doing, she was

kissing him back and he was pinning her too, deftly positioned not to crush her belly, sliding one of his thick-muscled thighs up between hers. She gasped and bucked against him, and the Amazon laughed, then twisted, kissing Agamemnon again, his hand still pressing down on the Great King's chest, his sinuous body snaking against them both, and all of them were breathing together, breathing the same sweet breath, the same moment—

THUMP thum THUMP thum THUMP, thumped Achilles's pulse in her ears, a drumbeat growing louder and faster as Agamemnon's mouth was crushed against her mouth and Brisewos's fingers slid inside her, striking every tiny hidden note. Her feet, her hands, her breath, all turned to a single instrument he played, and she cried against Agamemnon and they kissed and they turned and slid and rolled and turned again. She was kissing Agamemnon as Brisewos thrust his hips against the Great King, somehow inside him, and Agamemnon cried out against Achilles and flung his arms around her neck, and then he was inside her too and everything was light and roaring sound.

Thunder crashed. Drumbeats rolled. The Queen of Kings stampeded into Achilles like a bull, her body overlaid on Agamemnon's, her face wearing his face like a mask, her gold horns and gold eyes and gold claws digging into Achilles as she gasped (*THUMP*) as they kissed as they melded as she melted (*THUMP thud*) as they molded around her Hera Rhea Hathor Agamemnon please please Agamemnon please, and behind the Queen of Kings Brisewos thrust and snarled and was more than Brisewos, and the Thunderer (*THUMP THUMP thud*) wore the Amazon like a mask, bronze muscles under tattoos and scars and skin, bronze beard under smooth-cheeked catlike hunger, Taru Zeus Amun Brisewos the Thunderer Tor Brisewos Diwos Set Hadad the Thirdborn Brisewos, and filled up the Queen of Kings, who screamed with power and plunged deeper into Achilles.

Lightning flashed so bright it blazed through the tent fibers. Thunder from Mount Ida filled the world. For an instant, Achilles was one with the gods.

Then Brisewos and Agamemnon collapsed back onto the pillows, covered in sweat, and Achilles fell away from them, gasping for air.

She stared at them, first one man and then the other. Where was the Thunderer? Where was the Queen of Kings? What had just happened? Agamemnon and Brisewos were smiling at her through the languid honey

of satiety, and though her heart pounded in terror, she feigned calm for their sake.

In her belly, something stirred. Neoptolemos kicked.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Meryapi had brought Achilles a new mirror of polished silver, flecked black where the sea air had touched it, and framed in copper inlaid with lapis and malachite and yellow glass and black hieroglyphs carved from ebony. In this silver mirror, Achilles saw her face strange and dim, hollow-cheeked and hollow-eyed, the bones of her skull somehow visible through the flesh: a haggard version of Achilles, marked by death.

“I’m afraid,” Achilles whispered. She had woken up alone at the witching hour and walked the beach by herself under the stars, and when she had returned, she found Meryapi here, armed with her magical supplies. “Today I may face gods, and I understand them so little. Last night—”

Meryapi leaned into the frame, and her face seemed to light up the mirror. Achilles no longer saw her own skull, but the cunning cat’s eyes of her friend, and Meryapi’s smirk of satisfaction.

“My beautiful sister,” Meryapi said, setting her hand on Achilles’s shoulder, “this is why you have me. For months now I have made a study of one who is a goddess, watching her rise up out of the darkness, at first a small, flickering spark, and then a leaping flame, and now—”

Achilles stared at herself in the silver mirror, trying to see what Meryapi saw. “And now the gods will eat me. How can I prepare?”

The Egyptian chuckled a low throaty laugh and shook her head. “Your encounter with Kiya was the last piece of the puzzle. I have been studying her spellbooks for the secret. Magic can grant life beyond death; magic can preserve the spirit, even after the body has been killed; and if a mortal sorceress could do so much with only her skill and her rage, what more can you and I do together? Remember our promise: we will rule forever

together as immortal goddesses. We came into being as the food of the gods, but we have power over the gods.” Her eyes gleamed brightly. “We will be beyond death.”

“I wish,” Achilles said, “that I had half your confidence.”

Meryapi laughed. “Fortunately, I have twice as much confidence as I need. And since you have me, I’m happy to share. Let me show you, Pyrrha, our invincible Red.”

She took a quill and a pot of red henna and began to make markings on Achilles’s hands, delicate script versions of an ancient mode of hieroglyphs. First, on Achilles’s left hand, she drew three stars on the littlest finger, and then two feathers, a braid, and a feather. She drew a bed by a window. She drew a sky full of rain. The hieroglyphs covered Achilles’s left hand, and then her right, a complex network of symbols staining her skin like purple blood.

Meryapi took clay and smoothed it into Achilles’s face until she was as pallid as a ghost, her features colorless and lifeless and cruel.

Then she took out a bar of red ochre and a stick of wax. She primed Achilles’s eyes with wax, then worked the bright red powder into the wax, and the rims and lids of Achilles’s eyes burned crimson. She pulled the red up at the corners toward the eyebrows. She traced Achilles’s eyebrows with deep red lines of burnt ochre until they were as sharp as daggers. Next came kohl, to define the shape of her eyes, giving her the lined eyes of a lioness, wrapped in fire. As Meryapi completed the kohl, she began to whisper:

*The sky rains down
The stars darken
The constellations are shattered
The bones of the hell-hounds tremble*

Meryapi drew darkness down over Achilles’s eyelashes until each dripped black, and then took brilliant red beeswax and crushed the carapace of a small red beetle into it, releasing spicy musk and bloodred juice. This paste she painted over Achilles’s lips, and it burned, and her lips curled back to bare her teeth in a snarl.

*The watchers fall to their knees
Seeing Pyrrha dawning as a soul
A goddess who feeds on her mothers
A goddess who makes her own name*

Meryapi rubbed the ochre on her fingertips and ran it over Achilles's cheeks, reintroducing red into her face, a glow of heat, of fire, of unbreakable health. She took a handful of glistening pearlescent powder and spread it across Achilles's cheekbones and nose, and around her eyes, and above her lip, defining every feature of Achilles's face into a terrible, beautiful battle-mask.

*Her glory is in the sky
Her wrath is in the horizon
Her head is covered in fire, in serpents of fire*

One by one Meryapi clipped golden bees into Achilles's hair, drawing it deftly up and back. She paused, frowned, and then lifted the masses of Achilles's curls higher still. She reached down onto the low table where Achilles kept her treasures, searching blindly for something, then lifted Damia's copper-and-malachite comb and pinned Achilles's hair with it. Her eyes met Achilles's, sparkling with secret knowledge.

In this silver mirror it seemed to Achilles that her hair *was* flame, that it writhed and trembled with its own internal heat, obeying the laws of its own sublimated convection. Now Meryapi took out Kiya's golden nebusnekhen collar and put it on Achilles's neck as a neck-guard, and hennaed signs of warning all along her throat and down her shoulders, and girt her tunic around her.

*Pyrrha is the Serpent of the Sky
She shatters at will*

Now Meryapi led her forth from the tent into the predawn darkness, and the cold air did not touch her, and the stars seemed to tremble. Achilles felt a terrible hunger rising inside her. She stood in front of her tent while Meryapi brought out her bronze armor piece by piece and strapped it into place, still chanting in Egyptian:

*She lives on the flesh of every god
She eats their entrails
Even of those who come with their bodies
Full of magic from the Island of Flame.*

Meryapi set the boar's-tusk helm on Achilles's head and brought her shield and spear, quiver and bow, and strapped the sideros sword Aletheia to her

hip. They had wrapped its handle in fresh leather, and she could hold it without pain, a weapon that could cut the gods.

As the east began to purple, lighting up enormous banks of fog that towered over the coasts and over the winding Skamandros River, Achaian horns sounded down the beach. One by one Achilles's men crawled out of their tents in armor, helmets in hand, and began harnessing their horses. There was Akastos and Aktor, there was Eudoros; there was Menesthios with Automedon, Peisander with Alkimedon, and Melia leading Balios and Xanthos over.

Patroklos came out of his own tent and gave a start when he saw Achilles, staring first at her and then at Meryapi. "You look like the Silent One's daughter," he said after a moment.

Achilles grinned. "I look like a soul-eater."

She was climbing into her chariot, when Meryapi let out a little "Oh" and touched her belly. Clear liquid ran out from under her tunic and down her leg, darkening the sand. "I thought that might happen soon. I felt the plug give way last night."

Patroklos paused just behind Achilles, halfway onto the chariot. "Is that —?" he asked Achilles, but Achilles only stared. As if in answer, the darkness in her belly gave a kick.

Meryapi regained her composure, twisting the edge of her tunic under her and waddling up to the chariot. "Patroklos, you may meet the little Patroklid today. You are absolutely forbidden from dying under any circumstances. And as for you, Pyrrha—" She reached up, patting Achilles's cheek. "If you should meet a god on the road, kill it for me."

Achilles caught Meryapi's hand and clasped it. Life moved so quickly from moment to moment, from struggle to struggle; one moment she had been walking into Aulis, terrified the mysterious Egyptian scholar-princess would hate her; now she was bound for the battlefield, ready to fight the gods, while her sister prepared for her own struggle. "I promise."

Achilles squinted against the fog that shrouded the plain, but it was impenetrable. Beyond the horses, she could see for a yard; on either side, there was only the slow creaking of chariot wheels and half-seen drivers. Patroklos murmured to the horses to keep them calm, to stay slow-moving and docile, lest they should break free and rampage through the gloom and fog.

“What if there are traps?” Achilles whispered. “A trench, stakes, pits—Hittite tricks.”

“You’re right,” said Patroklos. He held up his hand as a signal, and one by one, the creaking wheels of the chariots slowed down, and the soft breathing of horses softened more, and the whole squadron slowed.

Achilles slid down from the chariot with her bow in hand and crept ahead, moving carefully along the softened earth. It had thawed completely, and in places it was soggy, halfway to mud. Without landmarks, it was hard to know where she was; only the soft breathing of the Achaian horses behind her, and the creak of wheels, gave her any sense of direction.

Then the burned trunks of trees jutted out of the mist like fleshless fingerbones, and as a gust parted the fog, Achilles glimpsed the shattered remains of a farmhouse sacked in the opening days of the war. This was the grove where she had killed the Amazon’s brothers.

She crept on, soundless, barely breathing, until she heard faint songs through the mist. Distant voices sang in Hittite a hymn to Tarhunt, Taru, Lord of Thunder, Thirdborn, Du Pihassassa, Lord Zeus. They sang of his conception and birth, of his manly rise to kingship, of the way he contended with foolish elder gods and cut them down, of his restraint and wisdom, his glorious continence, the way he penetrated his rivals and filled them with the hot bronze of his seed—hundreds sang, and behind the shroud of fog, horses nickered, wheels creaked, feet trod the mud. The Hittites were coming slowly closer, maintaining their formations with effort, and their infantry stepped on the downbeat of the hymn.

From the east came a wailing Amazon song. It was the song of Andromakhe, singing vengeance for her slaughtered brothers, mother, sisters—*I sent the whole family down to the underworld*, Achilles thought. She paused in the burned-out grove to hear, concealing herself behind a charred trunk.

The song was full of names: the legendary queens Luspi and Vlaska; the half-Hittite sister-queens Annatiyupi and Appalutiya; Shetra the Amazon; her killed daughters Hathli and Ramtha; her slain sons Arnza, Lekni, Raske, Sekne, Markse, and Luksi; her living daughters Annasu-called-Andromakhe and Hastia-called-Hippodameia, who swore revenge and called for the Bear-Goddess Artumi to inhabit them and fill them with her might, so they could tear the limbs from Akhlis the hated one, Achilles the destroyer of towns—

And then Achilles saw a Hittite from Wilusa. He stepped out of the mist armed with a handful of javelins, young enough to be a boy, his long black hair spilling out from under his conical bronze helm, his face beautiful, his limbs clean—a dangerous child. Somehow she knew his name: Taruwili of Wilusa, son of King Piyama, baby brother to Alaksandu and Hektor, a tamer of horses, a lover of girls, famous among Wilusan women for the way he stared into girls' eyes like Narkissos in the mirror-pond, and then, at the last moment, just as their lips parted for a kiss, laughed like a little boy.

But Taruwili was not alone. Something great and indistinct rose up behind him, a god twenty feet tall and formless, half-made of mist, half-made of spirit, half snaking serpents and half man. One of the god's hands hovered over Taruwili's shoulder, and the other rested in the air above his head, and between the hand and the head snaked a current of invisible lightning, a string connecting the god's hand to the Hittite's brain.

Apollo the Destroyer stared at Achilles with blazing venomous eyes, and Taruwili turned his head and saw her too. His eyes blazed with the same venom, and he flung a javelin.

Achilles leaned out of the way, knocked her arrow, and as the spear hummed past her on the right, she leaned back out beyond the tree and fired.

The god swirled around the boy, and the wind whipped up, and the arrow vanished into the fog. Now the Hittite prince flung another spear—this one stuck into the tree—and rushed at her, thrusting at her face with yet another spear.

But not even a god could make the unpracticed child's attack land. Achilles flung her bow aside and dropped below the spear, pulled out her sword of sideros in a shower of sparks, and thrust Aletheia through the vapor of the god into the child soldier's throat. The weapon was not as sharp as good bronze, but it punctured Taruwili's throat on the strength of his own momentum and ran through him up to the guard.

The god's light left the Wilusan's eyes, and the serpent-silhouette twisted away from the dying child with an infernal scream. Taruwili's arms twitched and jerked as he foamed blood from the mouth and nostrils. Achilles angled the sword so that the dying youth slid backward off it and then caught the burned-out tree to steady herself. A wave of heat was running through her body, a subtle burning like wine on an empty

stomach . . . or an impending orgasm. She bit her lip. It was all she could do not to groan.

My first sacrifice of the day. The thought could have been Helen's, but it was her own.

She spun round, hacking the air with her sword, but nothing was there. There was no divine form of Helen with its fingers in her brain; there was no Silent One to pull her puppet strings. The smell of blood on the wet, heavy air was at once sweet and metal-bitter.

There was a sudden cry behind her. Hoofbeats rang out in the fog, and wheels clattered, and a man shouted. It was Patroklos—Patroklos was shouting! Achilles flung herself toward his voice just as Balios and Xanthos plunged out of the mist and sharply left, and the chariot swung wildly behind them, slamming into the ruined wall of the farmhouse. Two men fell out of the chariot and rolled across the broken earth, struggling hand-to-hand: Patroklos with his helm torn off and his long red hair flung out on the wind, and a Hittite with a bronze dagger. Achilles charged toward them.

The Hittite threw Patroklos back, and he stumbled to his knees, then dove out of the dagger's path and back toward the chariot, which was caught on the broken wall, grabbing a bronze sword from the weapon rack.

A man cried out in Hittite from the fog, armor clattering, spear whirring, and then—

Achilles flung herself in front of Patroklos just as a javelin flew out of the fog. It slammed into her chest, shattered a bronze scale, knocked her back into the chariot, but Patroklos rolled out of the way, guarding her left side as his enemy with the dagger closed in warily.

The man who had thrown the spear came charging out of the fog, eyes burning with poisonous light. Alaksandu of Wilusa, godlike, his long black hair streaming out behind him, charged at Achilles with shield and spear. Behind him loomed Apollo the Destroyer, Appaliunas, Aplu of the Hittites, Apep of the Egyptians, the King of Plagues, and Alaksandu's shield slammed into Achilles with more than human strength.

She twisted as he hit her and was flung away from the chariot. She rolled to her feet just as his spear came down again, sideros aimed for the break in her armor. She hacked at the spear-handle as it came in, and her black metal sheared through the wood, carving her old dagger-blade free of the prince's weapon. She caught the severed tip of the spear in her right hand, then circled sharply left, trying to slide past his shield before he could withdraw.

He flung the wooden spear-handle at her. She batted it out of the air, but it bought him time to grab Tooth-of-the-Dragon from the chariot rack. The serpent-god behind him hissed with pleasure, and the spear wound up.

Now he had the reach advantage.

But I know that spear better than any god does.

Achilles grinned, baring her teeth. What a fearsome monster she must have seemed, red-eyed-red-jawed-ready-to-bite, and as the Hittite advanced on her, shield before him, spear drawn back, she sprang nimbly to the right, putting his own shield between his spear and her, and slashed low with Aletheia at his ankle.

He dropped his shield low to block her, trying to bring the spear back around. She could feel the bronze slicing toward her, but she kept moving, gliding along the outside of his shield and plunging the broken spearpoint into his shoulder.

His armor caught most of it, but not all, and the man screamed and tore himself free even as the god inside him was expelled with a hiss, the man-serpent rising formless in all directions, abandoning the prince to his fate. Alaksandu swung his spear wildly to force Achilles back, but she caught Tooth-of-the-Dragon with both hands, ripping it out of his grasp.

She lifted the spear to strike him down when another Hittite burst out of the fog. Her spear came down and pierced deep into a great bronze shield that rang like a bell.

“Go!” roared Hektor, thrusting with his shield.

Achilles was flung back, Tooth-of-the-Dragon still in her hand, though the point was twisted and fouled. She swung it round to parry Hektor’s spear thrust and he grunted, angling his body to cover his injured brother.

Brave man. Achilles bared her teeth at him too and let out a growl that made him take a step back. She tossed her spear and sword each to the other hand, so that Tooth-of-the-Dragon was in her dominant left and Aletheia in her right. Hektor carried his shield carefully and was cautious with his spear, his footwork delicate, precise. No god inhabited him. Alaksandu stood in the shadow of Hektor’s shield, limping backward into the fog.

A sharp cry rang out. Patroklos had cut his foe’s throat and was moving for the chariot. Balios and Xanthos pawed the earth, struggling against their own harness, trapped for the moment, and Patroklos began pulling the cart free.

Hektor took a careful step backward in the direction of his retreating brother.

Achilles charged at him.

The Wilusan's eyes went wide with shock as she bore down on him. The wet air whistled around her. Her pulse roared in her ears. She let out a scream as she charged him, batting his spear to one side with her spear, pushing in on him as he gave ground, jabbing at his face and legs, and when he opened distance, lunging in again, trying to tangle up his spearpoint. She laughed wildly as she caught his speartip again and again, forced him to free it again and again, pushing his footwork to the limit. He was fast enough to keep disengaging, yet *so slow*, and she drove him back further and further, closer and closer to the river—she could *taste* it through the mist, could hear the gurgle of the ford, the battle song of the Amazons—

Just as Hektor slipped and fell, two slender figures broke out of the fog, armed with bucklers and axes. One was Annasu, Andromakhe, and as Achilles lunged at the falling Hittite, the Amazon flung out her shield to cover him.

The other Amazon let out a roar like a she-bear. Her axe swung down; Achilles darted backward and parried just in time, but the force of the blow sent a shock through her whole body, and her right arm went numb; somehow she held her sword. A vast figure stood behind the Amazon Hastia, formless as Apollo was formless, but clearly, for all that, she was unmistakable: Arktos, Artio, Artumi, Artemis, Britomart, Bear Goddess, *Urss*—she let out a thundering shout, and the small woman at the base of that vast shadow rushed at Achilles.

Achilles willed her sideros blade up to parry the next blow, but her right hand went limp and the weapon slipped free. The force of the blow had been too much. She managed to catch the axe-blow on her spear instead and twisted with her body, ripping the axe out of the Amazon's hand, but the woman was on her with a snarl, clawing at her throat, clawing at her face, trying to gouge out her eyes, and Achilles twisted and grabbed and bit, and they were rolling, and she was biting, tearing, ripping, surrounded by bears but somehow greater than they, and her teeth burned, and the blood in her mouth was sweet, and—

She stood in the mist with bloody hands, wiping blood from her mouth. On the ground before her was the torn body of the Amazon, and into the

sodden grass was seared the black outline of some enormous cave bear. The goddess had fled.

The third such coward running from her.

Annasu stared at Achilles in horror, then raised her axe in salute. "All the children of Shetra are dead but one. Kill me too, or I will drag your carcass behind my horse."

Achilles bent down and picked up her Aletheia left-handed. She rose, pointing the weapon at the surviving Amazon. The life in her was sweet; her body burned with subtle fire; and as she gazed at her living enemies, she felt something like love. It was wonderful.

Hektor, rising to his feet behind Annasu, caught her hand. "No," he whispered in Lukkan. "She has a god in her. Run."

"No god in me. I *am* a god."

Achilles bent down quietly and picked up Tooth-of-the-Dragon.

The Amazon took a step forward, but the Hittite pulled her back. There were tears in his eyes. *Oh, beautiful man*, Achilles thought, *I can make those tears go away*.

"Please," Hektor whispered to Annasu.

Achilles nudged Hastia's corpse with her foot, rolling it toward them. "Take her back with you," she said. "The battle will be long today, when the sun burns through the mist." Then she stepped away, moving back toward Patroklos. Let them charge at her turned back if they wished; she was ready to finish the Amazon's family and continue working on Piyama's.

But they did not charge her, and by the time she reached Patroklos and the horses, they were withdrawing into the fog with the body.

The sun rose at last, and the fog boiled away in a quarter of an hour. The armies had approached very close before the fog lifted, and now fought on foot in close order, shield wall against shield wall, spears struggling with spears, while Achilles stood on her chariot and rained down arrows on the Hittite infantry and Patroklos guarded her with a tall shield. Bronze rang on bronze, wood struck wood, and the shouts and curses and straining of the heavy infantry filled the air.

Each shot Achilles fired into the sky arced down and landed on a Hittite infantryman. Some glanced off bronze armor. Some bounced off shields. But as the minutes turned into hours and her quiver grew emptier and

emptier, she could feel the harvest of death, the sacrifice of each man her arrows pinned to the earth. She had never felt so strong.

Slowly the sun crawled across the sky. Bolts rained down with red- and green-dyed goose feathers, missing them narrowly again and again.

Anyasha.

Achilles peered out from under Patroklos's shield, scanning the battle line. The struggle was desperate; here and there she saw Achaian captains rushing into gaps in the battle line opened by falling infantry, and on the Hittite side the same was happening, charioteers dismounting to join the men of the line. But where was Anyasha . . .

There.

He stood under a tamarisk tree, aiming another arcing shot at her, and his arrow came whirring down.

Achilles flung out her hand and caught it. A mad laugh burst out of her, sheer joy at her own power. She drew the arrow and fired it back.

It came down true, bound for his heart, and blue-eyed Anyasha stared at the falling arrow, all open-mouthed shock, frozen—seconds before, he had loosed the same arrow—

For an instant, a woman stood over him. She was inhuman in stature, ten feet tall or more, and absolutely solid. Her flesh was the color of the night sky. In her body flickered silver light like strands of stars, and her burning eyes were stars. The arrow sank into her breast. Bleeding silver blood, she flung her arms wide and burst into a flight of black swans, flying up from the battlefield with great cries.

Once again Aphrodite had come to save her son.

She had no arrows left for the birds who had cheated her of Anyasha's life. She turned to Patroklos, baring her teeth. "Let's go," she said, "and find our place in the shield wall."

Patroklos shouldered his heavy shield and picked up his spear, clashing spear on shield. "Lead the way, Red."

They marched together into the battle line, looking for an opening.

The sun beat down. Many men died that day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When the sun sank, the Achaians withdrew. The priests of all four armies cried out hymns to the gods and ran out onto the trampled mud to collect their dead, and Achilles drove the chariot to bring Patroklos back to camp. Every muscle of her body ached from use, but the heat that suffused her was sweet beyond sweet, delicious beyond delicious, godlike power exercised. She was sated with blood. She trembled. The horses snickered and snorted, blood-hungry savages that they were, and once she let them stop to trample a snake that crossed their path. The horses tore it to bits with their hooves, enraged that the thing dared show itself in their way when they were full of the battle-rage. Patroklos was quiet, and once the horses fell upon the snake, he was quieter still.

“What’s gotten into you?” Achilles demanded.

“I was thinking of the numbers of men involved today,” Patroklos said. “There must have been nearly forty thousand on the field—four times the population of Wilusa or Mykenai, easily nine times Phthia—but let us say thirty-six thousand for ease of calculation.”

The Achaian tents were growing nearer, and the sea. The setting sun bathed the field in gold. Achilles laughed. “Why calculate on such a beautiful day? Look at that sun.”

“There are three hundred and sixty days in a year,” Patroklos went on, “excluding the festivals. So for each day, there would be a hundred men in their prime, most married. It seems likely to me that I am not the only new father today. Among the Hittites and Amazons may be several.”

“Hopefully we orphaned at least one,” Achilles said. It was not precisely what she meant; she had nothing against the anonymous infants and wives

of her enemies, nor against the men and woman she had killed today, but it seemed foolish to feel bad about it. “You know who wasn’t orphaned today? Sekhem.”

“Sekhem?” Patroklos said.

“Your child!” Achilles laughed. “Didn’t she tell you the name?”

“No.” They were at the palisades of the camp now, and Patroklos was laughing ruefully. “Now you’ve ruined her surprise. She said it was Egyptian custom for the mother to choose and asked me the names of our family three generations back, but she said I was going to have to wait and find out what she had wrought.”

“I won’t spoil the Achaian names,” Achilles said, frowning. It pleased her to have been given a secret even Patroklos was not told, but perhaps Meryapi would be angry. “You must act surprised.”

In the Myrmidon camp, men were trickling back in on chariots, and the infantry was returning in bands of three and five, carrying wounded or dead to the tents of sickness. Melia was minding a cauldron full of stew, but the other slave women were nowhere in sight; nor was Meryapi.

“Where is everyone?” Achilles demanded.

“In the spinning tent,” said Melia. “You can go in, but my lord Patroklos is not allowed.”

“Did they let you in?” Patroklos asked Melia. “How is she?”

“Of course they let me in. I am kallai, not a man.” Melia stirred the stew carefully, making precise figure-eight movements. “The baby isn’t here yet. She has spasms every few minutes.”

The look on Patroklos’s face was almost painful to see, suppressed fear yielding to a sudden glow of relief.

Poor man, he fought all day afraid for her.

Achilles flung her arms around Patroklos’s neck and hugged him fiercely. Then she let him go and stripped off her bloody armor, scrubbed the blood off her hands, and made her way to the spinning tent. It was guarded by two Lazpan slave women, who ushered her inside.

The inside was lit by a brazier full of red coals, and the looms were abandoned. Meryapi was lying on a small couch, wincing and grunting, and Glyke was muttering something in her ear.

“No, I will not,” Meryapi snapped. “I’ve been doing it all day, waiting for Sekhem to show his silly face, and he’s being dramatic, waiting until

everyone is desperate for his arrival. A regular prince of Egypt! Or princess. But a princess would be more considerate.”

“It will help if you’re upright,” Glyke said.

“I need rest.” Meryapi looked up with a sudden smile. She looked haggard, exhausted, and as Achilles approached her, her face suddenly squinched up into a scowl. “Ugh, not another one—it’s—like a hangover shit—every five minutes—”

“Take her arm,” Glyke commanded, taking Meryapi’s left arm, and Achilles took her right. Meryapi let out an indignant squawk but let them lift her, and Glyke nodded at the loom. They put her up against it. Meryapi clutched the posts and squatted, grunting, her face turning red.

“He’s not coming yet!” Meryapi snapped after the spasm passed. “I need to eat. I need food.”

“You’ll shit yourself again,” Glyke complained.

“I am your mistress!” Meryapi yelled. “Food!”

Achilles helped her back to the couch. “I thought the battlefield was hard.”

“Hah. We won’t know which is harder till it’s your turn. I will take notes.” Meryapi smirked. “But my spell—it worked. You’re glowing like the sun.”

A slave woman went out, and a few minutes later, Melia returned with stew. Meryapi fell on it like one possessed, eating every bite in moments. “More!” she commanded. Achilles’s stomach growled, but she stayed where she was, crouching next to Meryapi’s couch.

“How bad is it?” Achilles asked.

Meryapi licked her lips. “I can barely taste it. I just need fuel for this battle with my lazy son. Sekhem, get out! Stop loitering! My body is not your couch.” She poked her belly and glowered.

Every few minutes, a spasm rippled through her belly, racking her body for a minute or two, and she groaned and cursed in Egyptian and called Glyke a vicious goat and said that she needed her spellbook, as there was a spell for making nuisance babies show their faces.

It grew dark outside, but inside the tent the hours passed slowly, a timeless over-and-over repetition of Meryapi gasping, groaning, grunting, struggling for air, and erupting in curses. Patroklos had invaded her womb because that was what Achaians did; Sekhem was like Grandpapa, big-headed to the point of disaster; if only she could *stretch a little* more, this

massive shit of a child would finally emerge. “Sekhem, come on out or I’ll send your Aunt Achilles in to rip you free!”

“No matter what she says,” Glyke hissed in Achilles’s ear, “absolutely do not do that.”

Outside, a stringed instrument began to play, and Patroklos’s voice rose softly in song, singing an old tale about Perseus and Bellerophon. He sounded shaky and his playing was unpracticed, but Meryapi started trembling with tired, ragged laughter.

“Oh, poor man,” she said, and maneuvered herself back off the couch. “All right. I’m ready for another turn on the loom.”

For hours they held her up as she grunted and huffed. Her makeup was all streaks. She pissed on the floor. “Behold the pride of Egypt, the greatest power on earth!” She begged Sekhem in ten different languages. Once, long after midnight, she whispered deliriously that the problem was she didn’t know the language of babies, or she could reason with this little monster.

At sunrise, Achilles stepped out of the tent for a moment. She had to eat, look around, think; she was light-headed, and the power had fled from her body. The Achaians were blowing their horns, going forth to another day of battle, but Patroklos was hollow-eyed, his beard unkempt, and of the other Myrmidons, few were well-rested.

“We won’t fight today,” said Achilles. “They can do without us.”

Old Phoinix was sitting next to Patroklos, his arm round the younger man’s shoulder. Of course—they had both been present when Achilles was born. This must have reminded them of that.

“Don’t worry,” Achilles said. “She is a sorceress, and I am half-god.”

“Let the man worry,” Phoinix growled.

Patroklos smiled wearily and resumed his careful lyre-playing, plucking each note with the excessive care of a child or a neophyte or a man trying to distract himself from fear. “I’m not worried,” he promised. “Tell her I’m proud of her.”

Achille ate and went back in. Meryapi grunted when she gave her the message, then winced again. “Once, Great Isis ate too many unripe persimmons and drank too much beer, and for days she strained to pass a massive bowel movement. All the gods gathered to congratulate her on her difficult childbirth. They were so proud of her! Until she succeeded in her endeavor and they all fled from the stench.”

“I don’t understand the moral of that story.”

Meryapi let out a delirious laugh. “There’s no moral.”

During the course of the second day, Achilles noticed a change in the slave women. Their expressions darkened. They looked at Meryapi less and stopped laughing at her jokes, even the ones in Achaian. One by one they started to mutter to each other.

Finally Meryapi said, “You’re plotting against me, aren’t you?”

“No!” said Glyke. “We need a priestess to open your womb. It should not take this long, and you cannot do this forever. Already you are becoming exhausted. If this goes into a third day, or a fourth—”

Meryapi let out a sound like a wounded animal and let go of the loom posts, flopping down on her back on the tent floor. She had been dripping fluid for a long time, but now it was tinged dark red. “A priestess? Fine! While you’re at it, fetch me better midwives! Achilles—” She grabbed and caught Achilles’s hand, squeezing it hard. “I need water. I’m getting so thirsty and I don’t trust any of these slave women. What if they just want to be sold to someone else? How can I trust their loyalty? Maybe they want me dead.”

“They don’t want you dead,” Achilles said. For the first time she felt fear, sudden nauseous fear. Now that the word was spoken, it seemed possible, and the panic that surged up inside her made her hands and feet as cold and remote as the surface of another world, and the echoing in her ears made her own voice small and tinny. “I will find you a priestess.”

“Cow goddess,” Meryapi said suddenly. “Hathor is skilled in childbirth. Bring her priestess.”

Iphianassa. The idea was unnerving, but Achilles nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

Outside the tent, Brisewos was shouting at the slave women. “Let me help,” he was hissing in Achaian. “I know how to deliver a baby. It sounds stuck, but unless it’s breech I can work it free.”

“We’re not letting a man in,” the older slave woman was saying. “I don’t care what you say you can do.”

Brisewos stamped his foot. His voice came out in a low growl: “I used to be a woman. I’ve given birth and helped my sisters give birth. I can help.”

The slave woman did not look impressed. “The Queen of Kings herself decreed no man may enter a childbed. If you would bring down her wrath on my mistress—”

“Let him in,” Achilles said. “If he can help her, I will face the Queen of Kings myself. She can strike *me* down if she wants. I’m going to see her priestess right now.”

“Wait until you do,” the slave woman said. “If Lady Iphianassa says the goddess will permit it, then it is safe. Otherwise, no man may enter.”

Brisewos let out a snarl of frustration. “I’ll get someone who can.” He spat on the ground and stomped off.

Achilles hurried along the beach until she came to the ship of bones. There she found Iphianassa already climbing down to meet her.

The priestess’s strange spindly body was covered in pale yellow bruises, and her lips were stained purple; her eyes were sunken deep in their sockets; her teeth were sharp as razors now. All around her hovered the presence of the Queen of Kings. Iphianassa spoke, but her voice was Hera’s.

“The Egyptian’s childbirth has taken a turn?”

“Yes,” Achilles said. “Help her.”

“If I can, I will.” The goddess’s voice was strange and remote, strained. “It is still difficult to act upon the world directly. The war is only half-finished; most of my power still sleeps. Iphianassa will help as she can. But birth is a dangerous battle. Even your mother lost her vessel—”

Achilles grabbed the arm of the god-possessed child and dragged her back along the beach toward the spinning tent, pulled her inside.

Meryapi had regained the couch and some of her color, and she was eating a handful of grapes, then whimpering and clutching at her belly.

Iphianassa put a hand on Meryapi’s belly and palpated carefully, and the Egyptian hissed like a cat whose tail was pulled and kicked convulsively, catching the priestess in the face. Iphianassa sank back, clutching her face, letting out a shrill, horrible keening sound.

“Is this the best you can do, Achilles?” Meryapi howled. “Get me a real priestess, not a little girl!”

Queen of Kings, Achilles said wordlessly, staring at the fallen child-vessel, *get up and help her. I don’t care what you have to do. I will pay any cost. I was already going to kill the Apple of the Sun for you, and Zeus besides. Help her or I will become your enemy.*

Iphianassa stood up slowly. “There is a species of baneberry we used to use for labor pains,” she said, in a voice ancient and remote, “but it is extinct in these realms. Slaves: Bring catnip and chamomile. Bring elder

rose bark. Bring a pot full of water. Egyptian, calm yourself. I have crouched in childbirth two hundred and seventeen times. I am the one you call Hathor and Hera and Rhea, Queen of Kings. You will live.”

But the goddess’s thought blossomed like a dark flower in Achilles’s mind: *I will not lie to you, child of Pallasu. Your friend may die.*

Cold lanced up through Achilles’s abdomen. The darkness in her belly rolled and kicked. She clutched her heavy stomach and tried to breathe. She tried to make her face strong for Meryapi, but Meryapi was not looking at her; Meryapi was staring at the ceiling of the tent, muttering curses.

“I hate the cloth up there,” Meryapi said. “It’s been nibbled by night-moths. We’ll have the whole thing burned after this.”

The slave women returned with herbs, and the vessel of the Cow Goddess tore them to pieces with her talons and put them in a small pot with a little wine and a little water, mashing them up with a pestle as they boiled on the brazier. She cut her finger with a talon, bled a few thick black droplets into the pot, and offered it to Meryapi to drink. The Egyptian hissed at the bitter flavor and spat after she had swallowed.

Now we wait.

The contractions began to speed up. By late afternoon they came over and over, a minute apart at most. Meryapi no longer spoke, only howled, groaned, snarled. Finally in the late evening, something shifted; her hips rolled backward; her vulva bulged at the sides; Achilles and Glyke hoisted her back up against the loom so she could clutch the frame and squat, while Iphianassa held a basin full of water below her. Purple clots slid out of her into the basin; she cried out; and a pale blue foot burst out between her bloodied labia at an angle, kicking at the air.

Everyone stared.

Meryapi grunted and looked down. She saw the foot, and her face distorted into a mask of horror. Her words came out only in Egyptian now, a sudden halting thicket of tangled phrases each tripping over the next: “Breech—it’s backward—blue—dead!—is it dead? Oh Ra—please, Ra—” She convulsed again, and a second foot slid out behind the first, both legs now, and Iphianassa caught the shuddering legs and tried to pull and angle the tiny fat blue shaking thing out, and Achilles and Glyke clung to Meryapi’s shaking, sweaty arms and held her up while she howled “Ra, Ra, Ra”—

Mother, Achilles screamed in her own mind, come here, do whatever you must, only help. Fail me now and I will kill you.

Daughter, came the bitter mental voice of the Silent One, you already want me dead. Nevertheless, I will tell you what ten thousand years of death and life and minds and memories tells me: she is torn inside now. Get the head out as fast as you can. Crush it if you have to; it will die anyway. As for Meryapi, her chances are not good.

Suddenly the whole thing slid out of Meryapi, a blue struggling fetal thing covered in afterbirth, neck thrice-wrapped in red bloody cord, blood everywhere, red, purple, brown, black. Meryapi gasped. “Sekhem,” she said numbly. “Is he alive?”

Iphianassa skinned the afterbirth off the blue shuddering body, twisted the umbilicus, and bit it off, spitting out the blood with an offended look. “He is not breathing right.” The priestess-vessel cradled the blue thing in her arms, pressing gently on its chest with two fingers. One, two—one, two—tiny wheezing wet gasps, lungs that did not properly inflate. “His heart is failing.”

Meryapi began to shiver. They helped her onto the couch. She grabbed blindly at Iphianassa, and the priestess put the blue thing in her hands and she clung to it. “Where is Patroklos? Where is Patroklos?”

Achilles ran out to get him. He was already at the mouth of the tent, struggling with the slave woman there. Achilles shoved the woman aside and dragged Patroklos in. He pushed past Glyke and Iphianassa and flung himself around Meryapi, who was whispering deliriously in Egyptian. Patroklos sobbed, clinging to his wife and the blue gasping dying child.

Achilles stared at Iphianassa. “Now what?”

The empty eyes of the goddess stared back. “Now you wait some more.”

Sekhem died within the hour. Meryapi stared blankly at the cloth tent ceiling, eyes empty, lips forming the word “Ra” over and over, whispering prayers to the dead god she no longer believed in. She clung to Patroklos, and when Achilles came near, she seized her hand with terrible strength and pulled her close. “Don’t leave me.”

Crushed against Meryapi’s shaking chest, Achilles flung her will out into the darkness. *Helen*, she pleaded, *Apple of the Sun*—but there was nothing.

“I’ll be right back,” Achilles whispered in Meryapi’s ear.

“Don’t leave me!” Meryapi howled, but Achilles spun blindly round and burst out of the tent, out into the night. All around her the Mymidons were

staring with hollow eyes, terrified, some crying.

Achilles had no thought to spare for them. She undid the nebusneken and took it off, crouching in the dirt, covering her eyes. *Helen!* she screamed inwardly. *Helen!*

“Well, would you look at that?” Helen’s voice purred in her ear. “So *that’s* how you were hiding from me! You did so well the first day! Why weren’t you on the battlefield today? Oh.”

Help me. Help her.

Helen’s lilted laughter, sweet as smoked honey, filled Achilles’s brain. “Help the Egyptian witch? Why? The international sisterhood of the uterine hemorrhage?”

Leverage. I will agree to almost anything right now. How often will you get a chance like this?

“But this is perfect!” Helen said brightly. “She is dying, and you will be alone! You will return to the battlefield full of wrath and vigor, and slaughter hundreds of your enemies, and the world will be even more deliciously warm with sacrificial magic, and I will grow stronger, and Zeus will grow stronger, and we will be that much closer to the climax of my war! Why would I ruin something like that?”

Then you can help her. Tell me how. I’ll do anything.

“Alas,” Helen laughed, “I actually can’t. But if I could, I wouldn’t. Doesn’t it make you want to *butcher* me? Don’t you want me to feel what you’re feeling?”

I am not feeling anything.

“Ha! Yes you are!”

Achilles put the golden collar back on, cutting off the Golden Apple’s laughter. She lifted her head, and all around her, the Myrmidons had drawn close. Phoenix was crying. “Go back in to her,” he said. “Stay there. No one will bother you or my lord.”

“Meryapi isn’t going to die,” Achilles snarled, jerking back to her feet. “She’s strong with magic.”

But she knew it was a lie.

Brisewos returned that night with an Amazon priestess named Khryseis, who took one look at Meryapi and the dead blue child and boiled another tea, this one full of oil and resinous tincture of hempflower, and poured it

down the Egyptian's throat. "The wound inside her *may* close on its own, if she survives the shock."

"I'm cold," Meryapi said. "I need blankets." Lucidity of a sort had come back to her now, and she no longer prayed to Ra. She did not speak to Achilles or Patroklos, but she said their names many times and clung to their hands, pulling them closer. When her slaves piled blankets on, she shivered between them. "Please set me on fire."

Achilles clung to her, trying to give her her warmth. Patroklos sobbed soundlessly into Meryapi's neck. Achilles closed her eyes, trying to summon up the face of the Queen of Heaven, that goddess of the kallai who had appeared to thwart her arrow and her spear, that black swan goddess with the stars in her skin. *Please, immortal Aphrodite—the kallai say you love us, that we are your special daughters, so please hear me, self-created goddess—please—please—please—*

"Just don't go," Meryapi whispered. "Stay. Don't go." She kept whispering that for many minutes.

Eventually she lost consciousness. Her breath was slow and weak. The bleeding between her legs had slowed, but it never quite stopped. Achilles found her own consciousness lapsing in and out, her body and mind stripped too raw to keep up. Seconds of sleep, of nothingness, of safety—then minutes made of seconds of desperately listening for the next breath, and the next one, and the next one, and the next—

And then nothing.

Achilles felt Patroklos's breathing shift from despair to a deeper despair. There was nothing now to say or do. Nothing was real, and there was no energy left to move or breathe or think or even feel. They lay there, alone together, at the bottom of the well.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

*When I met you, I was wary: you were too bright,
too dazzling to be real, and I thought you would take my Patroklos away.*

*I was a clod of earth beside a radiant gemstone, a rock next to a pearl.
But you welcomed me unasked, loved me past my roughness, made me your sister.*

*You adorned my eyes with kohl and my lips with ochre.
You opened my mouth and my ears and taught me all the tongues of the world
and always knew what to do.*

Where are you now, princess of Egypt?

I cling to you, but you are gone.

I shake you, but you aren't here.

I scream your name, but no one answers.

*Even Patroklos has left. I am here in the dark
with what's left of you, but none of you is here.*

You will never see your river again

and I will never see you.

*But you taught me magic; you showed me
there is life beyond death, power that does not die
with the body.*

So I will not accept your death.

I will make them wake you up.

You will live again.

When Achilles finally left the tent, driven on by the ravenous hollow thing inside her, and walked out, nauseated, into the night, no one would look at her. The slave women confirmed she had been in the tent for three days and three nights after Meryapi's death. Glyke brought her a wine bowl of bone broth and another one full of water, and Achilles drained both; then she broke open roast marrow-bones and sand crabs, sucking out the juices. When at last she stopped, shaking, delirious, the hungry void in her belly still trembled with need.

The same thing will happen to me. Unless I can master death, this thing inside me will kill me.

She scrubbed her face with ashes and oil, cleaned her hair with water, found Damia's comb and Meryapi's bees still tangled in it. She left them there. Then she sat in her chair by the largest Myrmidon campfire and brooded. It was the gods who were at fault. Gods! Ha! How many women had died like this while the gods looked on? She asked Glyke that, and the woman turned pale. She asked several of the other slave women and after a while noticed they were all red-eyed and swollen from crying and hollow-cheeked from fasting.

What do they have to whimper about?

It was still dark when Melia came to her. The slave girl approached Achilles's chair boldly, shoulders back, chin up, as if marching to her death. Achilles's first instinct was to laugh—but she stopped herself when she saw the slave girl's face. At some point—it was hard to say when, but she had missed the moment it happened—Melia had become beautiful and proud. Her jaw was set with determination.

"Mistress," she said in a soft, even voice, "I come on behalf of my fellow slave women, both those owned by my lord Patroklos and those owned by you."

Achilles arched her eyebrow. "What do the slaves want?"

"They want your permission to remain in mourning," Melia said.

"Mistress Meryapi was beloved to them in the same way a captain of spears is beloved to the infantry under his command. Not all wars are fought with bronze, and she directed the whole camp."

“My permission is granted.” They would not understand, of course, that she was in no mood for death to be final: they were only mortals, and her quarrel was with gods. “Is that all?”

“No.” Melia crossed her arms. “They are afraid of you, mistress. They say you will sell them now that Meryapi is not here to blunt your rages.” She smiled a sardonic smile. “They think you may listen to me because I am kallai, but I told them not to expect much.”

Achilles sat back in her chair and rested her hand on her stomach. It was hard to the touch, distended around the darkness she called Neoptolemos, and she brooded over it. Something fluttered under her lungs, and the old rage began to gather. She put it quietly aside. *They’re mortals. Barely more than shadows to me now, but Meryapi will not be happy if I hurt them.*

She rose, looking Melia in the eye. The kallai swallowed visibly but stood her ground.

“Tell them nothing will change,” Achilles said at last. She put a hand on Melia’s shoulder and felt the younger woman straining not to shrink away. So. She was a thing of terror to them all, and facing her took courage equally terrible. She laughed aloud. “What captain’s widow would sell his troops? No. You and Glyke will carry out Meryapi’s standing orders as if she were merely away for a few days.”

Melia’s brow knit in confusion, but she nodded. “Yes, mistress. I’ll tell them.”

“They were right to send you, kallai.” Achilles waved the girl off and settled back in her chair. Nothing felt real. She was not sure where the Myrmidons were—probably in their tents, for it was late and the stars were out—and as for Patroklos, where had *he* wandered?

She got up again to go look for her cousin.

He was sitting on the beach by *Delphini*, staring out across the wine-dark sea. When she sat down next to him, he said nothing for a long time, only watched the waves come in, lapping the sand and draining back out into the surf. Somewhere out on the waters, a dolphin clicked, “Where is your sorceress, Red? Bring out the luscious one, the one with all the curves.”

Stricken, Achilles caught up a pebble and flung it out blindly toward the waves where the whistling clicks had come from. *No good comes from talking to dolphins!*

“I told her not to teach me all the languages of the earth and sea,” Patroklos said. “Dolphin clicks are just dolphin clicks to me, and that is for

the better, perhaps.” His shoulders were slumped; his body lacked its usual martial bearing. But his eyes were dry and his face was clean and his beard was freshly trimmed. “How are you holding up, Red?”

“Me?” Achilles laughed bleakly. “I’m invincible. Your wife’s been better, though.”

Patroklos gave her an unreadable sidelong look. “She left supplies and instructions,” he said at last. “She translated them into military writing on the trip from Phthia.”

Achilles stared at him blankly. What was he talking about?

“There is natron salt to dry her flesh and keep the worms away,” Patroklos said, “and a rare resin to protect her skin from water. There are jars for her stomach, intestines, lungs, and liver protected by four goddesses. There is a special powder to preserve her heart in her chest, an essential metallic salt that is even purer than natron. There are knives of obsidian glass to make the incisions and bandages covered with spells that were prepared in Hundred-Gated Thebai before the wedding. They are all kept in a double coffin in *Delphini*’s hold.” His voice was flat, affectless, but his throat worked, and his larynx bobbed with effort. “I ask your permission to put Phoinix in charge of logistics so I can supervise the preservation process.”

“You want to cut her up,” Achilles said numbly. It was the last thing she had expected. She thought he might share jagged memories of Meryapi, or weep, but not this heartless litany of funerary equipment. “You want to salt her body and pack her away in the dark. Then what?”

“Then she must return to Egypt,” Patroklos said heavily. “That was always agreed upon. How can I bury my wife in a land she never knew? If I die, burn me like the others; but she’s Egyptian royalty, Red! They have customs older than time itself.”

“So quick to give up on her,” Achilles sneered, suddenly furious. “I am a goddess’s daughter and she is a sorceress, and we have seen that there is life after death. Kiya’s soul has survived for more than a century. My own mother, Pallas Athena, has devoured tens of thousands of souls, and they live on in her. How dare you talk of preservation and customs?”

“It was what she wanted.” Patroklos’s voice was flat. Clipped. And colder than she had ever known. “She is *dead*, Red. *You* can refuse to accept the laws of fate because *you* have the power. *We* are just flesh. We live, then we die.”

Achilles stood. "I'll burn *Delphini* before I let you desecrate her corpse."

Patroklos stood too, staring at her with hurt burning in his eyes. "I never ask you for *anything*. I let you do whatever you want, and I support you in everything. But Meryapi was my wife, and she *told me to*." The tears sprang into his eyes now, but he blinked them away, firming his jaw, setting his shoulders.

Achilles stared at him, still furious, but—what was she to do?—this was *Patroklos* defying her. She put her hand on his shoulder and stared into his eyes. He stared back, wearing his pain like armor. She could see no opening, no way to break through his resistance.

But he was wrong.

"Please," Patroklos whispered. "We *should* be on the second day of mummification." His shoulders trembled. "If she rots—"

"She will not rot," Achilles growled. "Give us time—a little time."

A vein throbbed on Patroklos's neck. "While you were weeping, I dragged myself out of the tent. I gave orders to cut wood, stoke fires, make food. Everyone was crying. I begged them to be silent. For you. We grieved alone. For you. *We let you have time*. Let me bury my wife."

"I will preserve her body with magic," Achilles said hollowly. She did not know how. She did not understand magic; Meryapi had taken to it as a poet takes to verse, but for Achilles there was no connection between word and action, no explanation for *why* or *how* spells worked. "Give me one more day, two at most. I will speak to the gods."

"As if the gods will listen." Patroklos's voice was heavy with defeat. "She told me that the gods had turned against you both, that she contended with powers of heaven. I was so afraid—but I thought it would be divine thunderbolts that brought us down, not *childbirth*. I thought we would all go together."

Achilles laughed shrilly. "You have no faith in me! Well, think how the Myrmidons need you, then. I deny your request. You can't be spared. Ask me later."

Patroklos forced himself to look away from her. She knew what she would have seen if he had dared show her his face: rage, anger for all the times she had presumed on him. She had dragged them around the world, to Lazpa, to Egypt; she had whisked Meryapi off for hours or days at a time, always displacing him, and he had borne it cheerfully, for he had always made allowances for Achilles and her disruptive ways; but he had

remembered. She could see it in the set of his shoulders, in the way his hands shook at his sides.

“If I fail to produce a miracle,” Achilles said scornfully, “you can peel Meryapi like a grape and pull out her organs.” Then she turned on her heel and stalked back to the tents. She knew she was being cruel, but without rage, she would not have been able to move.

The slaves had covered Meryapi with a linen sheet and dead Sekhem with a tiny wool blanket. As for the infant corpse, Achilles could not bear to think about it; it would make her think about the darkness growing inside her, Neoptolemos, the assassin who was going to kill her from inside if her enemies failed. But as for Meryapi—the linen sheet was comforting, the knowledge that underneath it, she was only resting.

A man put his head through the tent flap. “Mistress Achilles,” he said, “I am Kalkhas the Seer.” He said other things, but Achilles did not hear them, for the man stood in the shadow of an enormous insubstantial being. He had the look of a man drowned for years, bearded with seaweed, with the black eyes and the peg teeth of a dolphin. His crown was lost in the darkness near the tent ceiling; he swayed slowly as if moved by the waves of the sea. She knew him: Poseidon the Earthshaker.

The armies are fighting. You should be among them, devouring sacrifices. Kill, and let your name be exalted so that the Achaians worship you with hope, the Hittites with fear.

“I do not care what the armies do,” Achilles said coldly. “The gods have failed me. Why should I perform tricks? Why should I risk my life when I get nothing for it?”

To survive, you must have sacrifices. Feed. Become like us. We are still weak and thirsty, and this is your chance to grow stronger.

“There is only one thing I want,” Achilles whispered. “Whoever can give me that, I am theirs.”

The drowned one, the Earthshaker, said nothing, only stared at her in silence. Finally he shook his bloated head. *I hate your mother, but you do not deserve to share her fate. Why do you think I gave you a dagger of sideros all those months ago? It is a hard thing to be a young god, and I took pity. Make yourself stronger or you will die.*

Achilles sneered. “Come back when you have what I need, or leave me be.”

Kalkhas the Seer backed out of the tent, his face ashen with fear. The Earthshaker shook his head again and faded away.

It was quiet in the tent for half an hour, and Achilles stared at the tent flap, which Kalkhas had never properly closed. The wind tugged at it, pulled at it, fluttered it.

I could recover her memories, the Silent One whispered in her ear. *She would live again in me—*

“If you dare,” Achilles hissed, “I will fight for Zeus, and only Zeus, for the rest of this war, until all of you are laid low. Maybe *he* will meet my demands.”

The Silent One’s presence faded away again. Achilles lingered in the dark, brooding, scowling, teeth bared. She would have to move everything out of her own tent and into here with Meryapi. Her bloody bronze armor; her sideros gear; Tooth-of-the-Dragon; the reclaimed black metal dagger-turned-spearhead-turned-spike; everything would have to come in here.

“Don’t worry,” she told the sleeping body, “I won’t let anything happen. Patroklos doesn’t realize yet, but he will. This is for both of you. You will be together again. He will thank my stubbornness.”

Morning came, and old Phoinix stepped into the tent. “The Myrmidons are ready to fight.”

Achilles shook her head. “We aren’t fighting.”

“What?” The old man stared. “Why not?”

“Because I’ve been robbed. When I get Meryapi back, I will fight.”

Achilles bared her teeth. “That is my price. Let it be known to all.”

“We came here to fight!” Phoinix said. “People die in wars. People die all the time! We had to fight *two days* after your mother died; raiders from up north attacked, and the Myrmidons dried our eyes and went to work.” The old man had gone red in the face. “Would she want you malingering?”

“Quiet, old fool,” Achilles snapped. She waved for him to go. “My quarrel is not with you. Just stay out of my way and follow my orders.”

The old man’s face mottled purple. He backed out of the tent, shaking. It was strange how rapidly mortals lost their tempers. Gods, at least, were more predictable, if predictably useless.

I wonder how many people I would have to sacrifice to make myself a goddess strong enough to raise the dead, thought Achilles. But she had no

knack for sorcery. Knowing her, she would only make herself the world's most powerful butcher.

It occurred to her that Meryapi would know what to do. She turned to ask her advice—then sank to her knees in sudden shock, laughing weakly at her own idiotic impulse.

Oh yes, please rise from the dead to talk me through this. Tell me how to handle your death. Tell me how to convince everyone I'm not mad, that they should trust me, that they should bring you back. Just five minutes, Meryapi—just a few words—

Meryapi lay motionless.

Achilles laughed bitterly and paced the tent, waiting.

Brisewos burst into the tent a while later, glowering at her. He started in on her in Achaian almost immediately, and *him* it was hard to simply ignore. “Achilles, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

He grabbed her arms, glowering up at her. “The armies are in the field. All the Achaians but your men are fighting by the river. And you are holding back your soldiers so you can mope. No Amazon would ever be so weak. When one of the sisters died in childbirth, we howled for a night, and then we killed to feed her ghost.”

Achilles twisted her arms free and bared her teeth. “I am a goddess, little man.”

“You are a spoiled child.” He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms on his tattooed chest. “Why? I see the rage in you. Why aren't you fighting? Has the mighty Achilles surrendered to some sort of nesting instinct?”

Oh, they were good, these gods. She could sense the divine presence lingering just outside the tent; she could sense the invisible tendrils tying man to god. The Queen of Kings, perhaps, or Mother again, trying to taunt her back into the field. Clever gods, but she was on to them. “I called on Athena and Hera and Aphrodite to spare my sister's life, but they did nothing. Why should I fight their war?” She spat on the tent floor, grinding the spittle into the cloth with her heel, an old island curse she learned on Skyros. “I have no quarrel with Amazons or Hittites. As for Zeus, I don't even think he's my enemy! And as for Helen, why would I play her vicious game? ‘Achilles, Achilles, murder for the gods, make a great big offering of

piled corpses, let the earth drink their blood!” She burst out laughing. “If you’re so desperate to murder Amazons, you have your own spear. Go.”

Brisewos turned away without a word. He paused for a moment, as if weighing possible responses; then he slipped out of the tent and did not return to the Myrmidon camp.

In later days, the Myrmidons would murmur among themselves that Brisewos had gone to the Mykenaian camp and installed himself in Agamemnon’s tent, whispering of the cowardice of Achilles, of the way her nerve had failed, that it was fear and envy that kept her out of the fighting, fear lest she should die like Meryapi or be skewered on the spears of the Hittites, or envy of the Great King’s preeminence among the Achaians.

Whatever the reason, Agamemnon came to the Myrmidon camp at sunset.

“**Achilles,**” thundered the herald, Stentor. “Come forth. The Great King has come.”

She was sitting in the dark, waiting for the gods to show their faces and make their offer. And soon, before Patroklos revolted again. Mortals kept coming to waste her time, flies buzzing along, their life visibly draining away in the short time it took her to turn them away. She did not move until Stentor’s third shout rumbled through her tent, amplified by the power of a god. *Meddlesome gods.* The sheet draped over Meryapi vibrated to the rumble of Stentor’s bass, and Achilles finally rose to her feet. She buckled on the sword of sideros that Meryapi had consecrated for her, then went outside, blinking at the torches blazing behind the Great King.

Agamemnon had brought a hundred Mykenaian spearmen. Patroklos, red-eyed and exhausted, stood opposite him, and the Myrmidons were drawn up in formation, saluting the Great King with their spears—but armed nonetheless. As for Agamemnon, he was fully armored in battle-scarred bronze, spattered in other men’s blood from the day’s work, and he carried himself with grim majesty.

“Great King,” Achilles said, deadpan. “It is a great honor.”

Behind Agamemnon soared the horned shape of the Queen of Kings, cow-eyed and majestic, golden-clawed and terrible. *A monarch I could never trust again.*

I did not kill your friend, said the Queen of Kings. I helped in every way I could.

“Why weren’t you on the battlefield?” Agamemnon demanded. “Aren’t we allies?”

“Are we?” Achilles sneered. “I needed one thing. *One thing.* And that was taken from me.” She stared up past Agamemnon at the Queen of Kings, directing her words to the cow goddess, smiling her scorn, measuring out her bitterness. “What glory is there now in killing Hittites? I am almost seven months pregnant. Soon the same thing will happen to me. Why should I spend my last weeks slaughtering men for you?”

Not for me, for yourself, answered the Queen of Kings. *You and Meryapi fought hard to obtain weapons to use against the Apple. That sword at your side represents all you labored for together. Now you will simply step away and let Zeus win Helen?*

But the Great King only bared his teeth. “You can go home if you want,” he said scornfully. “I didn’t think you were a coward. I thought you had as much courage as any man. Perhaps pregnancy has weakened you.”

It is your child! Suddenly it was all she could do not to tear out her sideros sword and strike him down. He was a strong warrior, but she could be on him like the wind, could pierce him thrice before he moved. *Your child will kill me, just as Patroklos’s seed killed her.*

Aloud, all she said was, “I didn’t think you’d believe such foolish things, much less voice them.” She shook her head. “I see you’ve been talking to Brisewos.”

“He has been talking to me,” Agamemnon said. “I have accepted his parole. He is my captive now, and will fight in my shield wall, and will counsel my soldiers, and will advise me in my tent. We don’t need you. We can win this war without your help.”

I cannot resurrect the dead, said the Queen of Kings, *and I will not beg, infant daughter of Pallasu. Do you know how many hundreds I have lost in childbirth? Women I loved, women I desired, women I would have made immortal if I could. Death kills whom it kills.*

But fine. So be it.

I will take away your friends, and your allies will despise you. I will fight the Thirdborn with your mother. He is stronger than we are, but we are still gods.

Achilles waved Agamemnon away in a fury, and as she waved her hand, the wind from the sea picked up, and the enormous insubstantial shape of the Queen of Kings blew away like mist, her cow-eyes glowering till the

last. With the goddess gone, the Great King turned, trembling with anger, and stalked away, and his spearmen followed.

Night fell. No one dared bother Achilles in the tent. She could *feel* them now, her Myrmidons and slaves, Patroklos and Phoinix and Glyke and Melia and the others. They were drinking and brooding, unsure what to make of what they'd seen. They had seen no gods, only Achilles defying Agamemnon without explanation, muttering something about Brisewos and waving the Great King away. They were all confused, poor fools, but that was the way of mortals.

Achilles waited, for the most important visitor had not yet arrived. Finally, the moon gleamed in through the moth holes in the tent cloth, and the wind shifted, howling down from Mount Ida, carrying the forlorn wail of ghosts. Achilles smiled, for she knew he would not keep her waiting any longer.

Between one breath and another, the Thirdborn appeared. He was smaller than the other gods and even less substantial, the bronze of him reflecting only a ghostly inner light, but she could feel his power in the air. The hairs stood on the backs of her arms and neck, and her scalp prickled, and the crackling of his movements seemed to ripple through them both.

"Lord Taru?" she said.

"Your mother called me Dhios," he answered. "Dzios, Zeus, Du Pihassassa, Taru, Tor, Lord of the Storm, Thunderer—take your pick."

"I suppose you are my foster brother," Achilles murmured, giving the god a faint sidelong smile. She let the smile drop after a moment but maintained the stare into his electric blue eyes. "Have you come to give me what I want?"

The Thirdborn studied her quietly. Then he stepped past her and stood over the linen-draped figure of Meryapi, and turned back. His beautiful cast-bronze face was full of ancient sorrow and fresh hurt. "They are both dead," he whispered. "Ah."

"For now," Achilles said icily.

"My mother could resurrect herself," the Thirdborn said, "though it changed her. As for me—I know all things, and I and my brothers have each mastered a third of the magic of *our* mother and a third of the lore of *your* mother. I *could* bring life to the dead—but I cannot yet."

Achilles stepped toward the Thunderer. She placed her hand on the hilt of the sideros sword. Let him remember it was there, that she did not fear him. "And if you could?"

"I am willing."

"Tell me more."

The Thunderer let out a sigh. "You saw the fall of Tiri," he said, "and the destruction of my father, the Lord of Light, whom your people call Kronos and hers call Ra. When there is enough battle, enough sacrifice to satisfy the Apple of the Sun, she uses her power to reorder the universe. She slaughters millions, reshapes continents, rewrites history, and then burns out her own memories so she can awaken fresh in a few centuries, emerging from her golden egg wide-eyed and innocent, to do it all again."

"I did not ask you about Helen," Achilles snapped. "I asked you about you."

"It hurts to see the world broken again and again. I want to restrain my sister. I want to rule. Give me a free hand, and I will work your miracle." The god's voice was soft and earnest, gentle and almost sweet. "All you have to do is continue to stand aside."

"Gods are not typically worthy of trust," Achilles said.

The Thunderer bowed over Meryapi's linen-draped body. "True," he said. "We are a monstrous people. We destroy without trying. We shatter lands as easily as breathing." His soft voice rang out gently in the dark tent. "But if you fight, the sacrifices will go to my sister. This is her war. The world will become hot with destruction; the power of the gods will increase; the power of the Golden Apple will increase most of all." He held up a bronze hand, summoning up images of ancient worlds, of war, sacrifice, devastation. "She has ended the world three times. First," said the Thunderer, "when we melted the ice and killed the other races of gods."

Primordial mountains groaned under massive glaciers. A woman like the night sky stood in the snow, surrounded by her children, and the stars blazed out from her midnight-blue skin. The Apple was a gold-haired, gold-skinned child, and the Weapons were her brothers. Joining hands with the Great Mother, they rose into the sky, and all around them burned a terrible blue fire. Silver blood splattered the melting snow. The glaciers slid south.

"Once," said the Thunderer, "when we overthrew our Mother."

A city on a vast lake. Primitive were its pyramids of wood and mud and stone, and above them all floated the Goddess, the Great Mother, the

Creator of Gods. She grew in size until she was a mighty black dragon armored in chitinous plates. One by one her children rose to face her, and she tore them from the sky. Then a man with wings like an eagle soared up from the earth, bearing a golden orb full of burning wolfish eyes, and from that orb came spears of fire. The Lord of Light pierced the dragon's breast with Helen-the-Weapon, the Eye of Ra. Golden flames cut Great Mother's head from her body. Her enormous bulk fell back to the earth, and the city was broken, and the seas rushed in, and the people screamed and drowned.

"And then when she destroyed the Lord of Light."

The vision from the Tombs of the Queens. A war all across the sea. Amazons dying on the waves. An eruption brighter than the sun.

Achilles trembled. Despite everything, these visions were terrible to imagine. "Helen goads me. She wants me to keep killing men in her war."

"And I beg you not to." The Thirdborn's voice was still soft, low, and full of sadness. "If the Apple of the Sun does not get her sacrifices, I can subdue her. Instead of apocalypse, there will be a king. Instead of chaos, order. Instead of death, I will bring life."

Achilles touched the golden collar on her neck. "You will bring back Meryapi."

The god nodded. He reached out a hand, and his bronze fingers hovered insubstantially over the linen shroud. "When I am strong enough to manifest my body, I will seize Helen. Together, we will wield her power and call life back to your friend. She will be weak at first and confused, but then, as the soul is rekindled within her, she will know you and whisper your name." Zeus ran his fingers over the shroud, then paused. "I can feel the pattern engraved in her brain. The first thing she will say is—" The god paused. His voice took on a bittersweet amusement, and then mimicked Meryapi's lilting cadence. "'—My Achilles! It seems I am invincible, and love itself is magic.'" The god shook with a soft metallic sigh. "I see why you want to rekindle her."

Her words, they had to be her words, though in the Thunderer's voice. Achilles's heart leapt within her, but the darkness in her belly collapsed in on itself, bitter with ancient disappointment and permanent distrust. Caution, at least. Caution. "Everyone I've met says not to trust you, Lord of Thunder."

"I will earn your trust." The Thunderer turned back to her. His eyes were wet with tears. He wiped them with one insubstantial hand, and droplets of

amber fell to the floor. “Take my tears as a sign of good faith. Place them in her eyes and mouth, and I swear her flesh will not rot.”

Achilles bent to take the amber tears. When she rose, the Thunderer was gone.

She peeled back the linen. Meryapi was so ashen, so rigid, her skin devoid of all its rich colors. She placed the droplets of amber in Meryapi’s eyes and between her lips, forcing herself to see her friend’s body only as an empty vessel. *Come back to this home, Meryapi. Take this body back. The Thunderer and I have made arrangements.*

The body softened slowly; some of the stiffness left Meryapi’s corpse, and the waxy color faded from her cheeks. She did not look four days dead; she looked asleep, as if her soul had stepped away for a moment. The tiny corpse of Sekhem in her arms looked almost like a baby now, not a scrap of miserable bloody squashed tissue.

Achilles slumped down beside Meryapi’s body, fighting back sobs.

There was nothing to be done but wait and see now, see and wait. If the Thirdborn kept his promise, perhaps there was still hope. And if not—

*You gave me a sword of sideros
black metal, the metal of the end.
If the Thirdborn should betray me, let Aletheia be
the end of me and the end of him.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Melia had dutifully tended and fed Balios and Xanthos for all the days when Achilles's sorrow had narrowed the world to the twin points of Meryapi's body and her own abdomen swollen around the rigid cyst that she tried to call Neoptolemos. One night, Achilles woke suddenly from a dreamless slumber, full of guilt and sorrow that she had abandoned her horses to grieve alone.

They stood forlorn under the moonlight, in all their forsaken beauty, brushed coats gleaming, and at once she saw that they were lonely and sorrowful and confused, for everything and everyone had suddenly changed, but no one had explained why.

"I have wronged you, old friends," Achilles told her horses.

Balios, usually reliably petty, turned his head away to peer at her sidelong with one somber eye, and Xanthos waited, flicking his tail. The two might as well have said, *Go on, we're listening*.

She reached out her hands and touched their necks, ran her fingers along the glossy coats. Splendid gentlemen they were, and she had left them here to wonder why Automedon came out to the ridge to sob alone, why Phoinix woke up before dawn to train with spears and ended up drunk by midday, why Patroklos always brought them apples and always hurried off, why Achilles never came to see them, why everyone always smelled like death and wine.

"I am a selfish, cruel woman," she told them. "When I grieve, I forget that others grieve too. I thought nothing of you, my horses, or what confusion this must have been for you. Meryapi is dead, and I have been trying to extort the gods to bring her back. I will probably get us all killed. I

have never at the best of times been *reasonable*, old men. Now least of all. If you had a choice which mistress to serve, I would recommend anyone but me, but you are stuck with Achilles.”

They looked at her somberly. Then Balios flared his nostrils and stamped his feet, and Xanthos snorted, a sound curiously like a forlorn laugh, and she wondered if they understood her better than she thought.

“My dear horses,” she whispered, and drew them closer. They let her rest her face against their faces and sob against them. It seemed they understood grief well enough.

The next morning, she had the Myrmidons bring up the double coffin from *Delphini* and put Meryapi and Sekhem inside it for safekeeping, then moved them from the spinning tent to her own tent. Let the slave women have their looms back, at least until it came time for Achilles to die like Meryapi, clinging to the loom uprights and screaming. Or perhaps her premonitions were all wrong; maybe she would give birth with all the ease Meryapi had expected to have, and a goddess’s daughter had nothing to fear after all.

She sat in the dark of her tent, brooding. All the cosmetics were where Meryapi had left them scattered in front of the silver mirror—*We were both messy, chaotic, careless*, Achilles thought, and smiled—and it seemed a shame to move them and destroy the evidence of their last spell.

Patroklos entered the tent with a jar of wine and sat down next to Achilles on the floor. “Wine?”

“Goddess, yes.”

Patroklos smiled faintly and unstopped the wine jar, offering it to her with both hands.

Achilles took it, sipped it: bitterly strong, syrup-thick, intoxicating. Meryapi had advised against drinking while pregnant, but all Egypt’s wisdom had not saved her, and the bitter wine felt good.

“Remember when you tried to kidnap Helen?” Patroklos said. “Vanished for a month, we all went looking for you?”

Achilles made a face. “Yes.”

“Meryapi was furious,” Patroklos said. “She guessed where you had gone immediately, while the rest of us imagined you’d been ambushed, or gone fishing, or any number of other rational things gone horribly wrong.” He chuckled. “I’m sorry, Red. I haven’t been fair to you.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “I’ve been a vicious bitch. The things I said to you on the beach—”

In the dark of the tent, his faint, sad smile nearly vanished. “Well, you’re not wrong. But that is who you *are*, Red. You’re vicious, stubborn, willful, impossible to control. It’s what she liked about you. Don’t hog the wine.”

She handed it back to him. “So you’re saying you should have expected me to be unreasonable. Thank you for that, old friend.”

Patroklos snorted and sipped the wine. “I’m saying that you grieve like yourself, Red, not like me.” His face changed, and he drank faster, as if fortifying himself for something. She saw him working on the words he had not yet spoken, fashioning them carefully—and then they all spilled out in a rush. “Melia told me you preserved them. Just like you said. May I see them?”

Achilles nodded shakily. She rose, took the wine jar from Patroklos, and set it down.

He stood to lift away the heavy coffin lid. His eyes were wet. His lips worked silently. He set down the lid, then reached inside the coffin and brushed Meryapi’s cheek, whispering something without words, his lips moving without ever forming sounds. The longing, the loss in his eyes, were terrible to see, and Achilles moved around the coffin to his side.

Patroklos leaned closer to the coffin, touching the little corpse on Meryapi’s breast, and his face crumpled up. He shook with silent sobs. Achilles put her arm around his shoulder and drew him close, and he shuddered into her chest and shoulder, never giving voice to his weeping. It was like Patroklos to weep silently even now, to hide his tears so that few could hear them, and Achilles thought perhaps she understood why: when he wept, she ached with twice the pain she felt before, and her eyes stung again—and Patroklos always thought about his effect on others.

“You have been too strong,” she murmured. “And I have not been strong enough: a weakling demigoddess rampaging around in tears.”

Patroklos shook again. A laugh mingled with the sobs. “That’s true enough. And yet—” He pulled away, replaced the lid on the coffin, and sat down again with the jar of wine, patting the ground beside him. “Sit with me, Red.” She sat, and he put his arm around her. “When she died, all I could think of was *doing my duty*. It was like a spell I recited over and over: perform the steps one by one, keep the camp in readiness, keep everyone fed, follow her instructions, complete her funerary rites, obey her orders.

You stopped me from doing that. It hurt. I was furious with you, and I'm still"—he sipped, then offered her the jar—"rather angry."

"You have the right to be." She drank too, then drank some more. "You were right: you never ask me for anything, and you always stand with me no matter how foolish, how stupid, or how ruinous my ideas are." She smirked. "It's a terrible flaw in your character."

"No," Patroklos said softly, "it is the best part of me." His voice sank lower, gentle and silent. "What I meant to say was this: we Myrmidons grieve like men, Red, and I expected you to do the same, like a prince, or a captain, or your father. But you are not a man. You aren't even mortal. Your form of grief is a love that refuses to die, a love that finds a path where no path should exist. The proof is here in this tent: you have preserved them whole and untouched, more perfect than any mummification could—" His voice broke off, suddenly choked with feeling. "I didn't understand, I refused to understand—but you were right."

"I was selfish and cruel," Achilles said, leaning her head against his shoulder. "But also I was right. I want her back. I want *us* back. What's the point otherwise?"

"That's what makes you a hero." Patroklos pulled her closer, and his beard tickled her cheek. "I'm a good right-hand man. But heroes have to be crazy, selfish, infected with romantic foolishness—gods! The two of you were going to conquer the world together."

"We still will," Achilles promised.

"If anyone can bring her back—" Patroklos snuffled and stirred, trying to clear his throat. After a while, he asked, "She had Achaian names picked out for the baby?"

"Aktor or Aigina." She felt him tremble against her and wondered at the question. The quivering of his breath, the twitch in the fibers of his muscles, the hum of lightning through his nerves and brain—all whispered to her a reason, and when she listened to his body, the reason became clear. "You are not to blame for any of this," she said after a moment. "Meryapi chose this path when she stopped taking silphion."

"Our family do have big heads," Patroklos said softly. "I told her about Thetis, but—"

"It was not the head, but the position of the infant, and that was down to luck." Achilles smiled mirthlessly at the darkness. "And what is luck but

divine will? I blame the gods, Patroklos, and so should you. Stick with me and we'll make them make this right."

Patroklos snorted out a laugh. "Most likely we're going to die."

"What, and ruin my dreams of an immortal life with my sister? Pff." Achilles snorted and took the wine jar, tipping it into her own mouth and then holding it up to his. He took it.

"Should I be drinking wine?" Achilles wondered again. Expectant mothers always did in Achaia, but Meryapi hadn't touched the stuff since before Lazpa. "I wonder if the baby inside me is getting drunk too. Will he fly into a Heraklean rage and try to butcher me from the inside?" She poked her belly, and the tiny thing inside kicked back sharply. She laughed. "It would serve me right. Slain from within by a tiny warrior."

"I'm terrified," Patroklos said bluntly. "You must be too."

"I was. I'm more resigned now. Either I find a way to bully the gods and cheat death, or else—" She sighed. "His name will be Neoptolemos. The name is Deidamia's grandfather Ptoleμος—Damia was my girl on Skyros —"

"Meryapi told me about Damia," Patroklos said softly. "I'm not sure why you never did."

"Well, because—" Achilles laughed suddenly, poking her stomach again. There was no reason that was not stupid. She had told Meryapi everything at first because she wanted to impress her with her own strange life, and then because the Egyptian was always interested, and then because it felt so good to trust. But she had kept things from Patroklos almost as a reflex, because he already knew her and she feared being known too much.

"Because I'm a fool," she said with a shrug. She sipped the wine again, and Neoptolemos hit her again. Perhaps he did not like wine, or it *was* bad for babies, or perhaps he too was an argumentative drunk.

"If you do die," Patroklos said, "what do you want me to do?"

"Bring Neoptolemos to Skyros," Achilles said instantly. "Tell Damia another Phthian exile comes begging for a home." The answer surprised her, but it was strangely pleasing. Oh, Damia would be annoyed at first, and furious at Achilles's presumption—that irresponsible Red, always rearranging others' lives without the slightest care in the world—but she would warm to him.

"You are not a reasonable woman," Patroklos observed drily.

“Oh no,” Achilles agreed, “not in the least. It is an Achilles custom to break all the rules.”

“Thank you for that,” Patroklos said. “Thank you for bringing me into the tent, at the end.” He broke off, then took the wine jar back, drinking deeply. “When your mother was in childbed, all the men and boys were waiting for days outside. You were brought out by the midwives, but Peleus never saw Thetis again. It’s a cruel custom, and I am glad you broke it.”

“It’s meant to be cruel,” Achilles said softly. This was the Silent One’s knowledge, not hers, unspooled from the archives of stolen lives and devoured memories. “Wherever it is customary for men to fight in wars while women wait in fear, it is also custom for men to wait in fear while women cling to looms and fight on the battlefield of our bodies.”

“Meryapi would know if that’s actually true,” Patroklos said after a while.

“It feels true.”

Patroklos chuckled. The tears stood in his eyes. “I keep wanting to ask her things. Every time I feel like an uneducated barbarian fool, I look for her by reflex—”

“Me too.”

“Even if the gods do strike us down,” Patroklos said at last, “I’ll follow you. I have known enough grief in my life that I accepted, took into myself, and rebuilt myself around. Now is a good time to stop. But what exactly is your plan?”

Achilles shrugged. “The gods want me to fight. Except Zeus. Each day they all grow stronger from the carnage on the battlefield; it’s all a sacrifice to them. Eventually, either Zeus will bring her back and win my loyalty, or one of the others will bring her back and win my loyalty—or everything will go horribly wrong, and you and I will die.”

Patroklos snickered. “That’s not a plan. It’s a vague general policy.” A strange, mocking smile played over his lips, then softened to a great tenderness. “But I can think of worse ways to spend my final days than drinking with you and daring the gods.”

That afternoon, they stood on the ridge and watched the armies clash on the Skamandrian plain. It was strange to be all the way back here instead of in the thick of the action, but it was enlightening. Patroklos watched through Meryapi’s seeing crystal and told Achilles which generals were fighting,

which men were throwing spears or pierced with arrows. Achilles stared with her unaided eyes and watched the gods swirl insubstantially over the battlefield, plucking the puppet strings of mortals to extract their spear-won sacrifices.

Again and again the armies clashed on the plain, then drew up to face each other across the ford. Alaksandu came forth in a leopard skin, brandishing spear and shield, and Menelaos went out to meet him. Behind Menelaos loomed the Queen of Kings, Hera-Rhea, Cow Goddess, and behind Alaksandu towered Apollo, Appaliunas, Snake God, the Lord of Plague.

A messenger came and told Patroklos the duel was meant to settle the war itself, once and for all. But the gods were equipped for ritual slaughter, to make their sacrifices one by one. *In war, the sacrifices sacrifice themselves*, whispered the voice of the Silent One, *and it is thus sweeter and richer and hotter than any other form of sacrifice*.

The duel, the dance of spears, wounded both men; but the gods withdrew, whispering to the warriors in both lines, stroking their hair, caressing their cheeks, murmuring their names, and a madness spread through the Hittites and the Achaians and the Amazons. As the dueling princes parted, the armies rushed at each other, screaming betrayal, blinded by illusions.

There was a shimmering of heat above the plain, a literal warming of the stuff of reality, and Achilles marveled at it. Everything felt more ductile, more flowing, more easily manipulated. She stared across the plain at the walls of Wilusa, at the towers of Wilusa, and then still higher, and there on the summit of the palace stood Helen, the Apple of the Sun, staring back at her with covetous wolf's eyes and such absolute and utter longing Achilles stumbled back.

"What does Helen want?" she whispered. "What does she *really* want?"

War raged on the plains. The Hittites and the Lukkans and the Amazons were flung back all the way to the gates of the city. On the walls of Wilusa above the Skaian gate, Andromakhe the Amazon paced in full armor, looking for someone—Hektor, who fought in the mud below, shining like a star. A life was growing in Andromakhe, a son for her and Hektor, half-Hittite and half-Amazon. As the Amazon shouted orders, committing the Amazon reserves to the defense of the city gates, the life in her began to stir and quicken and kick.

"You can see everything from here," Patroklos marveled.

“No,” Achilles said. “I see mostly gods, and a few mortals I have met before. To me, the rest is a mass of crawling ants.”

“Each one is a man or a woman with a mother and a father, with twenty fat summers and twenty lean winters, with a pet dog or ferret or cat, a name, a house, a story—” Patroklos shrugged. “Perhaps they blur together when you are becoming a god.”

“Probably,” Achilles said. “The gods lost all their friends a long time ago. Without friends, humankind are little more than roaches.” She chuckled, for the rich bronze armor that shone in the afternoon glow was so much like chitin from here, exoskeletons around mortal meat. “If torturing insects gave you cosmic power, wouldn’t you do it?”

She took the seeing crystal from him and held it up. The sunlight came through it narrowed to a brilliant burning point, which she turned against the drying beach grass and the ants and beetles of the ridge. They smoldered and burst, proving her point. Patroklos stared at her in horror.

“Now I understand the appeal of atheism,” he said at last.

“I used to be such an optimist,” Achilles agreed.

“Why should we trust Zeus?” Patroklos asked. “What god would keep his word to ants?”

“I *don’t* trust him,” Achilles said absently, handing him back the crystal. “I’m just waiting to see what happens.”

“Still, if they are feeding on these sacrifices—” Patroklos broke off, a strange note in his voice. “Shouldn’t we be out there? Shouldn’t you be killing too, and gaining all the power you can gain?” His eyes were large with horror, his expression difficult to read.

“Mother,” Achilles said coldly, “show yourself.”

Suddenly the Silent One was there, no longer hidden in Patroklos’s shadow but floating behind him, one white-taloned hand resting on Patroklos’s neck. She turned her head toward Achilles, staring blankly, and then withdrew her talons, and Patroklos sagged forward onto his knees.

“Stay out of my friends,” Achilles said flatly.

“Dhios is growing bigger,” the Silent One hissed. “You are a fool, daughter. Grow stronger. Fight. You need sacrifices too. They will never treat you fairly.”

“I *expect* gods to manipulate and use me.”

“They will destroy you to hurt *me*,” the Silent One said. She was half-formed now, her body almost physically present. Patroklos was staring at

her as if even he could nearly see the Silent One revealed by daylight. His face was blank with incomprehension; he could not hear her, then, only what Achilles said.

“What a waste of effort that would be,” Achilles said. “Nothing can hurt you, Mother.”

“The Three were sons to me,” the Silent One whispered. “You have no idea what I did to them. They will do worse to you. You need sacrifices. I gave you sideros enough to kill us *all*, but without power, how can you wield it?” Then Athena was gone, and the air howled as it rushed to fill her sudden absence.

Why can't they understand I don't want their power?

Right—because they're gods, and we're ants.

Patroklos took Achilles's hand and clasped it close, holding her tightly.

That night, Menelaos came down the ridge covered in blood and dust and grime, escorted by half a dozen Spartan spear fighters. “May I come in?” he called out. “Achilles? Patroklos? Are we still friends?”

“Let him in,” Achilles told Phoinix, and the old man led the Spartan king into the camp. The wine had ultimately soured Achilles's stomach. Neoptolemos had settled into a drunken stupor in her belly, which had led to a few inconvenient trips to the latrines, but she summoned wine for her guest, and Melia brought Menelaos a bowl of bean stew, and the Achaian king tucked into it ravenously. When he had finished wolfing it down, he drank wine from the jar and offered it to her. “Come on, don't make me drink alone.”

“Patroklos, drink with our friend.” Achilles patted her stomach.

“Pregnancy has made me weak and proved you right, Lord of Sparta.”

Menelaos peered at her. “Is that why you stopped fighting? Too fat? Too far along, I mean?”

“I can still fight. I just won't.”

“Hmph. Well, you look as strong as ever. How many months along are you? Six?”

“Almost seven.”

Menelaos grunted. “You really are half-goddess.” As Patroklos settled in to drink, Menelaos began to grumble about the duel. “I could have used you today. Alaksandu came up shouting we would settle this man to man, like we should have from the beginning. I was fool enough to think he meant it.

We dueled, and I was winning, but he made a cloud of glittering dust appear with magic—probably his father’s sorcery—and their archers nearly did me in. One of those javelin throws of yours would have settled him.”

“Was Helen watching?” Achilles said idly. She felt a sudden wave of pity for him. She had never told him she had seen his wife in Wilusa, never told him anything about Helen’s evil tricks—and now she knew it would not matter. No one would believe her. The gods played their music, and mortals danced all the way to the sacrifice.

“It felt as though she was,” Menelaos said slowly. “I think that’s why I came to drink tonight. I’ve never felt so strange.” He drank some more, lapsed into a silence, told Patroklos dirty jokes about his slave girls, then fell silent again. Finally he spoke in a low, wistful voice halfway between whimsy and despair. “I keep having these dreams. I keep dreaming that we are all the cattle of the gods, penned up in the Skamandrian pasture, chewing the cud and locking horns and waiting for the butcher to come.”

“Your dreams are true dreams,” Achilles murmured.

“I dreamt of an endless city,” Menelaos said as if not hearing, “on the northern shore of the sea beyond the Bosphoros. Past Dardanos, past Tamiskuriya, it floated on the waves. It was ancient, built of wood and stone and brick in three concentric rings, and there was an artificial mountain in the center where the goddess ate the hearts and bones and fat of slaughtered cattle. Then I became one of the bulls and they led me to the horns of the altar.”

That was a true dream too, whispered the soundless voice of the Queen of Kings. She loomed above Menelaos silently, dripping in the blood of the battlefield. Her golden horns were red; her golden claws were stained with human gore; her lips were smeared with blood. *I invented human sacrifice. As with everything we made, it was for Great Mother. You have never loved anyone the way we loved Great Mother.*

Nor will I, Achilles thought with a sneer. *Monsters are real, but I will never love them.*

Patroklos and Menelaos laughed and drank, unaware of the blood-spattered goddess looming half-formless over them, her horned head crowned with the stars of the Milky Way.

She was no monster. The Queen of Kings’ mental voice was cold and rang with conviction. *For ten thousand years I loved her, I worshipped her, I built enclosures and cities for her, I built the Great City of the Mother on*

the shores of the Central Sea, I summoned all the races of the world to worship at her feet, I built her a tower to the stars—

Achilles kept her face neutral lest she should alarm her friends, but she allowed contempt to seep into her mental voice. *You have history. I understand that.*

Hera, Rhea, Hathor, Isis stared into her eyes, and ten thousand years of memories detonated like exploding stars in Achilles's mind:

A world shrouded in ice. Vast monstrous hairy gods armed with spiral lances like narwhal tusks, their fingers bladed with flint nails, their eyes burning with an antique fire, and the dark Goddess, the Mother, rising armed and armored with her children to go hunting. Giant hairy elephants they speared, and shot enormous woolled beasts with single great horns on their noses, and birds large enough to lift an ox, and oxen big as houses, and bears so large that their outstretched arms could encircle a whole chariot and team. One by one, Great Mother and her children butchered them. The Wild Hunt raged across the earth. The rival gods were slaughtered. Mountains erupted. Stars rained down. Bear Goddess and Cow Goddess guarded Great Mother's flanks as she speared enemy gods and turned their bodies into a bloody feast.

Cow Goddess spoke without words: *Our magic burned hot. We raised mountains, shifted seas, built gardens of forests, flew to the moon, explored the outer planets, rampaged through the icy cold above the sky. Then the world began to cool. Bear Goddess proposed a fresh Hunt: roam the forests, kill or be killed, war among ourselves for power. I proposed the cities of sacrifice.*

Artificial mountains drenched in blood. Humans cloistered in tiny, filthy hovels, their lives consumed with worship, awe, and love. They stretched themselves on the altars. They pleaded to be chosen. They bled. Their hearts burst in the jaws of the goddesses like fresh roe; their bones were sweet with marrow; their blood was richer than any wine.

And then Great Mother fell from the sky, shattering the city under her broken wings. Something of her had survived that death, but she had changed. Great Mother was no more. The sweetness of sacrifice meant nothing to her now.

The world ends each time, and we lose some of our family forever. It is always like this. I thought I had found a way to sustain us for eternity, but instead we are always at war. Cow Goddess smiled a bloody smile. The

emptiness in her would ache until her own death came in turn. *Still, each cycle brings new faces. Fresh blood, like you. The Three once stared at me with the same horror you do, spoiled child, and now they will win this round because you won't play your part. Maybe in a thousand years you'll be where I am standing, telling some new idiot child to fight, to feed, to feast on sacrifices—*

Or maybe not. The Apple has big plans for you. Her soul keeps crying out, "Where is Achilles?"

By now Menelaos was half-asleep, and Patroklos was folding a blanket over the blood-spattered warrior. "You've been awfully quiet," he said.

"The gods keep coming to talk. They all want me to fight."

"You *should* fight," Menelaos said sleepily. "Don't be mad at Agamemnon forever. He'll give you your Amazon boyfriend back. You just have to ask."

Achilles sighed and put her arm around Menelaos, squeezing him tight. As long as one person understood—as long as Patroklos understood—it was enough. Poor Menelaos. Poor Achaians, poor Hittites, poor Amazons.

What, sneered the Queen of Kings, no pity to spare for the gods?

No. Achilles waved her hand. You spare enough for yourselves.

The Cow Goddess dissolved into the night.

The Skamandrian plain twinkled with watch fires. Tens of thousands of Amazons and Hittites from Wilusa and the east and Lukkans from the south were all drawn up on the plain. The Achaians had been repelled once again. Another stalemate; another sacrifice; another turn of the ritual. A red light glowed on Mount Ida. A golden one shone over Wilusa. But the Achaian camp was covered in darkness, and the darkness was centered in Achilles.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Melia came to Achilles in the morning and stood over her bed silently for what seemed like hours. Finally Achilles roused herself, blinking against the sunlight—and recoiled. Melia had hacked off all her hair and stood numbly in front of Achilles in a man's short tunic, chest covered, and everything was wrong about her stance and posture. Her arms seemed to hang from her body; she dangled below her own shoulders like a doll; and then she looked up at Achilles and smiled, and her yellow wolf's eyes glowed. "You thought you'd shut me out for good, didn't you?" purred the voice of Helen.

Achilles lurched out of bed, thrown off by the weight of her own belly. "How dare you?" she growled, reaching for her spear—

Melia held up her hands helplessly with a horrible grin. "What? You would skewer your own slave? Haven't you done enough to this poor creature?"

"Get out of her." Achilles found her feet, met Helen's mocking stare.

"I thought of cutting her face up," Helen said sweetly through Melia's lips. "I decided it would be more interesting to start with her hair and see how you react. I miss you."

"You *miss* me," Achilles spat. No, no, she told herself, be calm, don't react, she'll hurt her worse if she sees how much this bothers you—but it was no use. It was horrible to see a kallai with her hair hacked off, in men's clothes, without any of her jewelry or her cosmetics, and—

"I can see it on your face," Helen said cheerfully. "Good! Let me get a little stronger and I'll give her a beard, chest hair, rough skin—then I'll leave her alone, and every time you look at her, you'll hate me a little

more.” Melia’s face twisted up in horror or disgust, and then her eyes widened in surprise. “Oh my. Your slave would sooner kill herself than be a man.”

“That is because she is kallai.” Achilles reached out and seized Melia’s hand; the wolf-eyes widened with pleasure and Helen parted the slave girl’s lips in anticipation, but Achilles pulled Melia’s fingers to her throat, touching the nebusnekhen—

—and the yellow vanished into black. Melia stumbled forward against Achilles, shuddering soundlessly, her eyes her own again and dilated with horror.

Achilles held the girl close, too angry, too horrified, for thought. If Zeus kept his word, she would punish Helen for this. No, she would destroy her. No, she would show her what it was like to be broken and twisted, to lose your body, to watch yourself warp and twist and become hideous. If Helen wanted to experience suffering—

After a while the tears came, and Melia sobbed. “Please let me kill myself,” she whispered. “I can’t do that again. I can’t do that again.” She clawed at her own hair, groaning at the hacked-off mess of it, and Achilles held her close. Finally, Melia slipped into an exhausted sleep, worn out by Helen’s magic, and Achilles went to find Patroklos.

Patroklos was chopping up firewood with Automedon; the two men were both bare-chested, in kilts, setting up the rough dry logs and splitting them with a maul, switching off whenever one got tired. Achilles was still trembling with anger, but she told Patroklos what had happened.

“We should send her away,” Patroklos said immediately. He put down the maul and wiped sweat off his forehead, slicked his hair back, scowled. “Poor Melia. Helen is only interested in her because she’s near you. Skyros is maybe two days away if the wind holds.”

“Or Lazpa,” said Automedon.

Achilles and Patroklos turned to stare at him, and Automedon flushed red. “I—asked her a lot of questions. I was curious, and I wasn’t going to ask *you* any more. There’s a girl she likes named Kukunna, a midwife with a house. I could nip her down to Lazpa today, be back tomorrow.”

Achilles blinked. Somehow the idea that Automedon cared enough about the kallai slave girl to volunteer was a shock to her, and she found herself wondering if he just wanted an excuse to go to Lazpa, but—no. She could feel his sincerity in the tiny furrowings of the muscles of his forehead, in

the electrical impulses of his brain, and even glimpsed—a flash of vision, a window into his mind. He saw himself on the ship, one arm around Melia, telling her she would be all right, telling her she was still pretty, even if she did have strange short barbarian hair, and that her girl was still going to like her back.

Automedon blushed again and looked away from Achilles. “I keep thinking you can peer into my head, boss. Can you? Please don’t.”

Achilles stared at him, then laughed. “I am the all-knowing Achilles.” She put her arm round his sweaty shoulders. “You’re a good man, Automedon. Take some of my gold and copper with you, and when you get to Lazpa, give it to her. I want her received properly.”

When Automedon left to get Melia, Patroklos turned to Achilles with a smile. “I could have told you he was a good man. The Myrmidons are a rough crowd, but they’re not bad men.”

Yet her body remembered their cruelty. She understood far more of it than she had as a child: the welts and bruises of their upbringing, the loss of mothers on bloody childbeds, the sisters traded away to other Aiolian tribes. Each of them had the fist marks of Kheiron or Herakles or Peleus on their psyches; all had been called cowards when they cried and weaklings when they whimpered; and their own tormentors had been raised on an earlier generation’s horror and sorrow in turn—but there was no excusing their cruelty.

And yet the Myrmidons were no longer the men who had hurt her. Something old had died in them, and something new had been born: something worthy of Patroklos’s love. Automedon *was* a good man, and Melia was safe on his ship.

The Myrmidons had changed. Just as Achilles had changed.

That evening, as the sun went down and the armies pulled away from the battlefield after another indecisive clash, Achilles and Patroklos sat together with Patroklos’s lyre, and Achilles tried her hand at playing it.

At first, she could see why Patroklos was so careful with the instrument, but as she let her fingers roam up and down the strings, plucking them, stroking notes out of them, controlling the vibration and sustain of notes with careful touch and almost-touch and tap, she began to understand the sounds so much more clearly, so much more deeply. She could see and feel and hear it: when she plucked the string, the string struck the air a hundred

times in an instant, and the air rippled out in waves, and the waves struck her inner ear, and the music turned into a sweet pulsing lightning in her brain, behind her eyes, between her ears—oh, it was sweet, sweet, this music deconstructed, as if she had never truly heard music before, and she made the lyre sing of Deidamia on Skyros, of Meryapi and Patroklos, of Kiya and her King and Queen, of love and loss and grief and hope, of childlessness and childbirth and life after death—

She let the last notes die away. Patroklos was watching her with wet eyes, and beside him was old Phoinix, openly weeping. And—Nestor was there too, and cousin Aiwas, covered in grime from the battlefield, and handsome quiet Diomedes, and loud grinning Odysseus, and a dozen armored Mykenaian warriors bearing open chests full of gold and bronze and silver and jewels. They were all staring at her in wonder.

“Friends!” she cried. “Welcome. I missed you.” She flung her arms around cousin Aiwas’s neck, which required some maneuvering around her belly—*that* was only going to get worse before it got better—and hugged old Nestor, and clasped the hands of Diomedes and Odysseus, and blinked back tears of joy. How she had *missed* them. “Why on earth are you here?”

Odysseus cleared his throat. “We had a hard day in the field, and—it’s no use pretending—we want you back out there. Agamemnon says he was out of line. He sends you this treasure as an apology, and he will send you back Brisewos too, just—help us.”

“The Hittites are no joke,” cousin Aiwas said. He rubbed his shoulder. “Two men in particular. That fucking Hektor nearly skewered me today, and Tudhaliyas’s chariot commander—a Lukkan named Sarpedan, Sarazzipedan in the Hittite court—*shot my horses*. Both of them.” For a moment grief passed over his face, but he hardened his expression. “Come on, little cousin. Show them what you’re made of. Just kill those two, we can handle the rest.”

Achilles put down the lyre. It was impossible to explain her arrangement with Zeus, of course—it was insane, for one thing. She imagined herself declaring that she was letting Achaians die because the Lord of Thunder had promised to enslave Menelaos’s immortal witch-wife to resurrect Meryapi.

Tell them you haven’t forgiven Agamemnon. The Silent One was there, staring at the Achaians with her huge, unblinking owl’s eyes. *Let them think*

what they already think. If you are going to be a fool, my daughter, do it right.

Achilles took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “You came all this way, friends. Stay for dinner, but don’t get your hopes up.”

Patroklos built a roaring fire from the wood he’d split that day, and then raked out the coals onto an even, glowing bed and set up a rack for the spits, while Achilles cut aged beef and goat and pork and mutton into manageable cubes and spitted the cubes on long sharp sticks and set the spits up on the rack, sprinkling sea salt over the meat. The smoke of the fire was sweet and dark and rich, and her mouth watered. *If life were only music and eating—no war, no death—*

“Look,” Diomedes said, “I know Agamemnon can be an ass sometimes. There, I said it. He is proud and headstrong, and he never listens to anyone else once he’s made his mind up. But we’re *all* dying out there. Not just Agamemnon.”

Achilles sat in her chair, turning over the spits. The meat smelled so tempting, and the darkness inside her began to kick, hungry for external nutrients. “Neoptolemos,” she whispered, patting her belly, “stop it. I will eat in a moment.”

Old Nestor was eyeing her shrewdly. Now he cleared his throat. “If it’s not indelicate, can I ask a sensitive question?”

Achilles sighed, pulling a skewer off the fire to cool. It was all she could do not to stuff the meat in her mouth directly, but it was still sizzling hot, and even though she felt strangely invincible, more god now than human, she imagined she was probably mortal enough to burn her mouth. One by one, she pulled the others off the fire.

“Some of the men,” Nestor said, “have heard a rumor that it is not the Amazon captive who has angered you so, but rather—ah—the father of your child. I do not mean to speculate about how a goddess’s daughter has become a mother, for your lovers are no business of mine, but—*did* the father offend you? Can he make it right by recognizing the child?”

“Wait,” said Achilles, “is there a rumor I’m pregnant with Agamemnon’s bastard?” She laughed. She had thought they were discreet, but in retrospect it was easy to imagine they had been seen. Or overheard; they had been loud enough, a time or two.

“I don’t think this line of questioning will help,” Odysseus said. “Sorry. We don’t mean to ask prying questions. Unless it *will* help, in which case

we'd love to know."

"Gentlemen," Achilles said, "I will not be fighting at this time." She handed her guests skewers full of meat, and Patroklos poured them bowls of strong wine, and for a moment, as they fell to, everything was like old times. Meat, fire, smoke, wine, all mingling in a sweet aroma, and she felt herself relaxing, smiling—then she realized all eyes were on her again. "I will not be fighting," she said again. The Silent One was right. "I will not explain myself again, either. I have not forgiven Agamemnon, so you can take those gifts back with you."

"They're planning an attack tomorrow," Aiwas said. "They're camped on the plain. Our men are tired. It's getting harder to hold them off. They could end up on the ridge soon, or even in the camp. Do you think they'll leave you alone just because you turned your back on us?" He sounded confused, hurt. "If they burn our ships, are they going to let yours be?"

"Don't fight them. Hold off. Defensive formations on the ridge, fall behind the palisades if they try to push up too far, and—sit tight."

"Why would we do that?" Aiwas exclaimed. "We're here to fight a war, not camp!"

"Just at present," Achilles said coolly, "I'm here to camp."

You are here, said her mother, to watch these men die and consume their sacrifice, just like all the other gods. Pretend to them; suppress your guilt; but do not pretend to yourself.

"It's because you're too pregnant, isn't it," Aiwas said. "You could just say *that*. I don't mind if that's the reason. But I would take a fucking spear for you, cousin. I don't like thinking you're just going to let me die out there while you sit here playing music."

Achilles chewed the roasted flesh of the spitted cattle, lambs, pigs, and goats. It burst under her teeth, full of life and flavor, full of the souls of the animals, full of all the life they had eaten. For an instant, she was one with them, these great lumbering cows, these bitter lambs, these clever truffle-hunting root-grubbing pigs, these tenacious goats, and their lives streamed past her, most of them raised in the Skamandrian plain under the Dardanian sun: a few short turns of the seasons, brief youth, short animal friendships with others of their kind, bleatings pangs of animal lust—and they became one with Achilles.

So, you do understand, the Silent One whispered. Still, I wish you would fight. I like these mortals in particular. I want them to have long lives.

“The Silent One likes you all,” Achilles said. “She thinks of you as cherished livestock.”

“Livestock?” Aiwas grumbled. “What are you on about, Red?”

“She too wishes I would fight,” Achilles said. “My mother has great ambitions for me. The gods have plans for us.”

Why do you do this? The Silent One fixed Achilles with her cold gray owl’s eyes. *Why alarm them? They won’t believe you, anyway.*

“One day, I imagine,” Achilles said, “when you die, she will eat you, just as we are eating these delicious animals we raised and tended lovingly. Then she will understand you at last, and you will become part of a goddess. Isn’t that nice?”

“You’re drunk,” Diomedes said quietly. “Please remember that we are mortals. You might not be punished for blasphemy, but we will be.”

“It’s no use,” Odysseus said grimly. “I can tell when her mind’s made up. She starts talking like this when she wants the conversation to end.”

“I’m trying to warn you,” Achilles objected. “My mother will drink your brains one day, if she can.”

The Silent One was still staring at her. Her thin lips twisted in annoyance. *Of course I will. I can’t let such interesting men cease to exist. This is the best I can do.*

Odysseus sighed heavily and stood up. “Thank you for the meal. Diomedes, we’re doing the other plan.”

Diomedes rose too, bowing to Achilles. “I hope you change your mind,” he said. “We could use you out there.”

The two departed, and the Mykenaiaans followed them uneasily, carrying away the boxes of loot.

“What’s ‘the other plan’?” Patroklos asked.

Nestor sighed. He looked very old and frail now, wizened by time. “They’re going to lead a night raid. With some luck, it’ll slow the Hittites down.”

“I mean it,” big Aiwas said grimly. “We’re getting slaughtered. If some fucking Hittite killed Balios and Xanthos, I’d be out there for you, cousin.”

“I’m sorry,” Achilles said softly. She stared into the eyes of her mother, and the Silent One stared back.

Diomedes and Odysseus will probably die tonight, the Silent One told her.

Nestor and Aiwas were saying goodbye; there were tears of frustration in Aiwas's eyes; Glyke went after him, a strange look on her face, and Achilles could read her brain like a cuneiform tablet. She read Glyke's frustration with her mistress, envy of her station, longing for big Aiwas—oh, that was interesting—and a determination to warm his bed tonight and show him some appreciation now, lest there be no other chance.

Mortals become very easy to read, said the Silent One. And hard to love. They are so procedural. So predictable. If this, then that. Unless this, in which case that. Gods are predictable too. Just bigger.

Achilles closed her eyes. Time slid past her. The Silent One hovered by her side.

She was one with the night, floating above the Skamandrian plain. She was floating above Odysseus and Diomedes. They crept through the darkness with a small picked band. They came upon a Hittite; they caught him, whispered to him for a few short minutes, then cut his windpipe.

They reached an outlying Hittite camp. Silently they murdered the guards. Blood ran down into the soil. They crept from tent to tent, piercing throats, crushing tracheas.

Further out in the darkness, gods lingered, waiting. The Three sat on Mount Ida, watching in silence, and the Silent One felt them watching and knew they were watching her watch them. Eons of memory lay between the Three and their foster mother; Achilles felt their minds touch Pallasu's mind; what surged between them all was too subtle, too simple, too murderously bitter for her to grasp; but she recoiled anyway.

Closer at hand was the Snake, Apollo, Lord of Poison, King Venom. He aimed his arrows at Diomedes, at Odysseus—

Protect them, Achilles shouted to her mother.

I am, the Silent One whispered. *Why do you think the Hittites are still asleep?*

A scream broke out. Diomedes and Odysseus looked up from their bloody work and ran. A din went up in the Hittite camp. Alarms were raised. Drums beat. Horns blared. Armor clattered. Hektor mounted his chariot, bellowing to his men; Sarpedan, the Hittite chariot commander, answered with a cry of his own; and Pattasilya, queen of the Amazons, woke from her sleep with a shout.

Achilles was everywhere and nowhere in the dark, spread out across the entire plain, bodiless, following her mother's formless wings. Hittites and

Amazons alike began to muster, preparing for a dawn attack, and all their eyes gleamed wolf-yellow.

Almost time, whispered Zeus, his deep metallic voice caressing her inner ear, her neurological ear, the same way the electricity of music played in her brain and not merely in her eardrum. *A day or two, no more. Helen is too confident. Let her overextend; we'll take her together.*

He made it sound so easy. A day or two of her friends getting killed. Of all this death, all for the *hope* of a promise.

And yet hope was all she had.

Achilles waited.

Chapter Thirty

*I dedicate this day to myself, for I am the Apple of the Sun.
I sacrifice these Hittite lives to me.
They fight for me; let them die for me.
Let the blood that is drunk by the ground be mine;
let the sweat that evaporates into the air be mine;
let the meat and fat and bones be mine;
for I am the Lastborn Weapon,
for I am the daughter of Great Mother,
for I am the Scourge of the Gods.*

Through the thin cloth tent, through the flimsy wooden palisade, Achilles could hear the wind, the creaking of chariots, the snort of horses, the stamp of feet, the rattle of bronze. She could hear the shout that went up from the Achaian armies as Agamemnon and Menelaos and Diomedes and Odysseus and Idomeneus and Aiwas, and the kings of Athenai and Thebai and Boiotia and Lokris and sandy Pylos and Aiolia, went out onto the ridge to face the Hittites and the Amazons and Alaksandu and Hektor and Sarazzipedan and Pattasilya and Andromakhe and Anyasha and their gathered armies that blazed in the sun. It was so loud, so immediate—she could hear them all *breathing*, cursing, shouting, marching, shouldering spears, bending bows, lifting shields—

She could *see* them too: the palisade, the tent, even her own clenched eyelids no longer concealed things from her sight. Men screamed and died in the first searing hours of the morning, and with each scream, she felt at once stronger and weaker, rising and tethered, omnipotent and frail.

She turned inward, staring at her hands. They had changed during the night. Now her fingernails were claws, retractile, each one a rusty ochre red

around a core as black as the darkness between the stars, as black as sideros itself, and if she looked *closer* each was a lattice of hexagonal crystals, mutually reinforcing, with inclusions of glittering nickel. Power crackled between them, and a charge gathered all around her. And if she looked *closer still*, her claws were not solid at all—nothing was solid—everything was a dance of motes of golden light linked by lines of invisible force, a universe bound together by attraction, held apart by repulsion. She began to laugh in horror, and her laughter restored sound to her. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

Only it was not thunder. It was the sucking, pulsing swish of a muscle pumping fluid through wet walls of semirigid tissue, fluid swirling through channels and canals, fluttering through valves, and her hands were fractals of blood flowing in a bound loop, and so were her arms, her heart, her belly, her womb. A huge blood vessel lanced through her liver, linking heart to womb; enormous arteries rose up from within her thighs, pumping blood upward; everything was gorged with blood, and the vessels were dilated to a horrific size to feed the thing inside her. She could see him too, now, a sponge of sucking hunger feeding off the richness of her blood, demanding more and more and more and more, and the slightest nick, the slightest tear in any of these delicate swishing pumping fluttering walls—

Nausea surged up in her. *I cannot fight anymore.*

It was impossible not to imagine that fragile, half-soft head crushed by a kick or a shield bash or a spear caught on her bronze; those matchstick bones would shatter, lance her uterus, rip those huge, fragile veins. She hated Neoptolemos, despised this mindless hungry sucking void, and she gagged, caught hold of Meryapi's double coffin to steady herself and saw *within*—saw her friend's torn blood vessels, her still-distended womb, her slack muscles, everything emptied out and perfectly preserved. Achilles slipped and fell back on her buttocks.

The thing in her kicked indignantly.

If gods are watching me now, they know. I'm helpless. The nebusnekhen would protect her from Helen's eyes, at least. Bile surged up, and Achilles choked it down. *Mother*, she croaked soundlessly.

But the Silent One did not come.

Mother, she begged.

But Athena did not answer.

And then, as the din of battle came closer, an eagle appeared in her tent. He was as large as a man, majestic and bronze, and his wings spread over her, crackling with electricity. *He* had no blood vessels; he was beyond blood, all metal. The Thirdborn peered down his hooked bronze beak at her with a single jeweled eye like blue lightning. He turned his head left, and his left eye was red as the red star.

Achilles reached for Tooth-of-the-Dragon, certain that the Thirdborn had come to break his vow.

But instead the eagle closed its wings around its body and rose up a man of bronze, barely taller than her, as handsome as Brisewos and as scarred, but his scars were branching sear-patterns welded shut, healed injuries in the metal of his form. Zeus held out his hands. “Child, I am not here to fight you.”

“Good,” Achilles growled.

“I want us to be partners,” said the Thirdborn. “Not rivals.” If he understood her helplessness, he gave no sign. “You would be a fool to trust the gods after all they have put you through—but I am different.”

“The Silent One thinks you will destroy me to hurt her,” Achilles said warily. It was impossible to read this brazen god. “I assume she has reason to fear you.”

Zeus shook out his grand golden mane and turned his magnificent head. His face darkened. “You were once helpless, and the people who should have protected you tortured you instead; they lied about you, blotted out your name, called you a faggot, porni, weakling, proktos, malaka—” The words rang out bitterly in the god’s metallic voice. “You punished some of them and spared others. All still fear you, and rightly.”

Achilles snorted. “Did Mother call you a faggot?”

A blue spark crackled across the god’s pale right eye. He smiled coldly. “I am trying to open myself to you, Achilles, to show you that I understand. As for the Silent One—” He curled his lip. “I loved her. I trusted her like an idiot child. She broke me to make me useful.” His body was all armor, perfect armor, containing only lightning. “But I don’t want to hurt her.”

Achilles narrowed her eyes. “Why not tell *her* that?”

Zeus shrugged his great bronze shoulders. “My brothers *do* want to hurt her. They are more broken than I am, in ways you can’t imagine. But I just want the power to heal my family.”

“How noble,” Achilles said. “I was already going to help you; you don’t have to play idealist.”

Zeus turned his head away, and his red left eye glowed in the dark of the tent. “I want you to understand me, child. There is a cycle of destruction among the gods: each generation destroys the last, seizes power, controls my sister, rules the world, and is destroyed. Our Great Mother left a deeply dysfunctional family.” He chuckled ruefully, and his grim laugh filled the tent. “I want that to end with us.”

“Perhaps that sounds too good to be true,” Achilles said.

“Someone has to be the first to trust.”

The shouts of battle were coming closer. Achilles tried to glimpse through the tent wall, but she found she could no longer stare through walls, no longer stare through her own skin and blood vessels. The nausea was ebbing. She still felt frail with this hungry eggshell void inside her, this parasite called Neoptolemos, this soulless thing that had no mind yet—

“I want to heal her,” Zeus said softly. “My mother. *Your* mother. She is profoundly broken, and while I hated her for eons—” He closed his eyes. “A century ago, she drove me out of Egypt and off this planet. In exile, I asked myself what made Pallasu-Atana what she is.”

Achilles’s eyes stung. She remembered the dream aboard the ship, the lives the Silent One had shown her, the eons of suffering, the drinking of memories from shattered skulls. “You are a better child than I am,” she said softly. “I have hated her all my life, and I can’t seem to stop.”

The Thunderer smiled softly. “Your life has only lasted twenty years. Give it time.”

The tent flap opened abruptly and the pale, stick-thin form of Iphianassa thrust her way inside. In the voice of Hera-Rhea, she screamed, “*I thought* I sensed you here. Do not listen to a word he says, Achilles. Zeus is a vicious liar. All he wants is to keep you out of battle.”

The bronze god stared coldly at the goddess-ridden child. Then he reached out his hand and touched the child’s forehead. There was an electric crackle, and Iphianassa fell backward.

Achilles raised her spear.

“Wait, child,” Zeus said softly. “I only broke the goddess’s hold on her body.”

Iphianassa lay on her back, sprawled out like a broken spider, babbling incoherently in no human language. She shrieked and clawed at her face

with her gaunt hands. She twisted herself up and crawled across the floor. She grabbed blindly at Meryapi's coffin and lifted herself to her feet and stared at Achilles with a look of mindless, uncomprehending horror.

"Eeeh," she groaned. "*Eeeeeeeh.*"

"She doesn't seem to be doing so well," Achilles said flatly. She kept the point of her spear between her body and the god.

"If I meant to hurt you," said Zeus, "you would not still be alive." His blue eye pulsed with sparks. "Your infant's brain would have burst, flash-charred in your womb. The blood in your body would have vaporized. The very metal you are holding—even that witch's collar on your neck—would channel my lightning into your body, and every cell would burn. I am a *divine weapon*, Achilles. I was created to kill gods."

"I was waiting for a threat," Achilles said.

The god's lips twisted into a half-smile. "Actually, I meant to reassure you. We forget mortal perspective so quickly. We become such nightmare things. This is why I need your help, Achilles. I don't want us to be monsters anymore."

Iphianassa whimpered wordlessly in the corner of the tent, her eyes wild, confused, bloodshot.

"Start with her," Achilles said. "Whatever you did to her, reverse it."

Zeus regarded Iphianassa, and his expression softened, darkened. "Cow Goddess makes permanent structural alterations to the bodies of her hosts. This girl will never eat anything but blood again. Her mind is gone. She has no stomach. If she is not fed blood, she will starve."

Iphianassa stared blankly around her, still whimpering. Her gaze passed over Achilles and Zeus without recognition. "Eeeeeeeeeeh," she breathed. "Aaaaaagh."

It was easy to believe that the Queen of Kings was such a monster. The gods were so cruel. But something bothered Achilles; some cold, rational corner of her brain was doing calculations and wondered: Cow Goddess had appeared before her recently by sheer force of presence, hostless, in her own form. Why send her host?

"Because I am blocking the other gods' magic," the Thirdborn admitted calmly.

"And reading my thoughts," Achilles said softly.

"I did not realize you hadn't spoken. Everything you think is written on your forehead, in the movement of your eyes, in the tension of the muscles

of your face, in the electrical impulses that flicker across your prefrontal cortex.” The Thirdborn looked rueful. “I try not to show I can read thoughts because it horrifies the mortal mind. The illusion of separate selfhood withers away; the networked nature of reality reveals itself; and we are shown to be different parts of one dysfunctional cosmic brain, a self that embraces all. That is a horrible thing to realize prematurely.”

Well. Achilles smirked. I suppose you’re a philosopher. Why are you blocking their magic?

—I wanted to talk privately. That’s all. I wanted to tell you the truth.

My friends are fighting for their lives. If your plan really is to delay me forever, it won’t work.

—No, Achilles. I am here to help you. We need each other.

If he was truly her ally, he would have to prove himself, and soon. He had already cost her so much time. *I am going outside.*

—Then I will follow.

Outside, the war had come to the palisade. The Myrmidon encampment was the furthest north; Cousin Aiwas’s was the furthest south; the battle raged between, right up to the wooden wall, in the ditch below, and all along the slope. Wounded men came running into camp, screaming and clutching protruding arrows, holding ragged wounds shut, bleeding from their eyes and ears. Dead Achaians had been dragged inside by friends to protect their corpses from desecration. The Myrmidons were restless, armed and armored, cursing and whispering.

“Let us fight,” old Phoinix begged. “Even Nestor’s fighting. Hektor’s murdering us.”

The battle was going poorly, the Myrmidons said. Agamemnon was shot through the arm; Odysseus was shot through the foot, and his howls could be heard all the way from here; Diomedes was wounded too. Cousin Aiwas was holding the main gate with six of his men, bellowing like an enormous bull. His huge shield was full of enemy spears.

“Where’s Patroklos?” Achilles demanded.

“Helping bind wounds. We followed your orders,” Phoinix said grimly, “but *let us fight*. I don’t care what Agamemnon did to you, girl, I don’t care what the gods have planned, I can’t face my friends if I don’t help them now—”

Every Hittite death today has been dedicated to the Apple of the Sun. Zeus's thought echoed in Achilles. Killing them only makes her stronger. You have to wait this out.

Achaians are dying too, Achilles thought back, furious.

Unfortunately. But right now, my sister is stronger than I am, a sorceress of unmatched power. Soon, these sacrifices will make me the strongest, for a short time, until her sleeping divine power fully wakes. There was determination in Zeus's thoughts, but also fear. We must cage her within that window. You cannot focus on mortals. And even if you did, Hittites are human too.

The other gods ranged across the ridge. The Lord of Plagues, toxic Apollo, rose up in a wall of darkness behind the gleaming bronze of Hektor and his warriors, and suddenly a golden light dawned around the god, and the will of Helen crackled on the wind.

The palisade burst inward. Achaians screamed as splinters and chunks of wood impaled their wounded, spiked their dead. At the southern end of the camp, the Amazons had broken through the south gate with Pattasilya and Andromakhe at their head, and the tents near the south gate began to burn. Closer, Menelaos and his Spartans were still anchoring the northern end of the camp, protecting the Myrmidon tents, but the Hittite forces were pushing in on them, and Achilles glimpsed a general with long black hair roaring like a lion to his soldiers: Sarpedan the Lukkan, Sarazzipedan, Master of Chariots to the Hittite King of Kings.

And each scream, each death, each dart piercing through muscle, each sword scything clear fat, each axe breaking bone, each spear shattering ribs and piercing lungs, all of it fed the gods. All of it fed Achilles, Zeus, the Silent One, the Queen of Kings, the Lord of Plagues, the Honey-Eater, and, most of all, the Apple of the Sun. The golden glow of Helen filled the air. Wolf's eyes watched from every side, and sweet laughter filled the burning camp.

Achilles ached to put on her armor, to lift Tooth-of-the-Dragon and shout challenges to the enemy and their gods. But her body was so fragile now; she could be torn so easily; Neoptolemos would be crushed out of existence before he ever breathed, and she would die.

She wants you to fight, child. She wants sacrifices. She wants to kill you before we are strong enough to take her.

Patroklos came running up, smoke-smudged, hands covered in other men's blood. His face brightened when he saw the spear in her hand, then darkened when he saw the look on her face. Finally he stood before her, red hair and beard whipping in the sorceress's wind. "I'm going to fight. I cannot sacrifice the whole Achaian army to resurrect my wife. No matter what the Thirdborn tells you, it is wrong."

Neoptolemos kicked desperately inside Achilles. Fear surged up inside her. "Helen will murder you."

"The enemy is in the camp. Helen may murder me anyway." Patroklos gave her a tired smile. "We have to take our chances. Thunderer or no. Are you coming?"

Wait, said the Thunderer. We already have a plan.

"I'm not letting Patroklos fight alone," Achilles growled. Let Helen kill her; let Helen kill the little hungry thing inside her; let them all die together. It would be better than letting Patroklos stand by himself.

"Talking to someone I can't see?" Patroklos said. They walked toward the tent together where their armor was kept, matching strides. "What god is it now?"

"The Thunderer," Achilles said. "I can't see him anymore, but he can hear my thoughts."

Patroklos snorted. "Compared to your other family, the Myrmidons aren't half bad."

You'll only make her stronger. Every man you kill is a sacrifice to her. There is another way.

"He wants me not to fight," Achilles said. "He has an alternative."

They stood in the tent together by Meryapi's coffin, gathering their armor. Even lifting it sent twinges through Achilles's abdomen; her belly muscles were not prepared for this bulging sack of parasite inside them, forcing them out and apart, and the heavy bronze sent shocks through the strained muscles. She retched. Patroklos caught her arm.

You mortals never listen to me. There was frustration in the Thunderer's thoughts. You are so impatient. Here's what I propose: stay here, don't risk a duel with Helen, and send your right-hand man. I will guard him with my own right arm. My lightning will crackle across the sky behind him. When the Hittites see him, they will fear him and flee. Helen will lose her sacrifices, the Achaians will be spared, and you will know you can trust me.

The anger in his thoughts was in some ways more comforting than the calm had ever been. Achilles turned to Patroklos and told him what the god had said.

Patroklos nodded slowly, half-buckled into his bronze. “I *would* like to know if we can trust him.”

Achilles turned to the Thunderer, who stood half-insubstantial in the tent, regarding her with his mismatched red and blue eyes. “I would like to know that too,” she said. “If Patroklos is so much as *wounded*, our deal is off, and I will cut off that beautiful bronze head.”

The Thunderer inclined his head gravely. His voice, when he spoke, was audible in the tent, deep and brazen and majestic: “Patroklos, son of Menoitios, son of Aktor and Aigina, brother in spirit to Achilles Pyrrha, I vow to you by my own infallible word that I will protect you. We will drive back the Hittites and the Amazons. Only you must not pursue them beyond the camp; we must sacrifice as little life today as we can.”

Patroklos’s eyes widened as the god spoke, but he nodded agreement. He reached for his helmet, but Achilles thought better of it and handed him hers. “Take this; Helen will know you are not me, but the Hittites will see it and fear you.”

“I think they know you don’t have a beard,” Patroklos said with a smirk, “but all right.” He put on the helm and her shield, and then she gave him Tooth-of-the-Dragon. He lifted the spear and sighted down it, admiring its flawless balance. Outside, Phoinix had readied the chariot. Balios and Xanthos were waiting, and all the Myrmidons were fully armored, spears at the ready. As Patroklos climbed into the chariot, Automedon ran up from the beach.

“I go away one day and the camp is burning!” he shouted.

“Get in,” Patroklos said, rapping Tooth-of-the-Dragon against the metal of the cart.

Automedon grinned and vaulted onto the chariot.

“We’re putting in a show of force,” Patroklos shouted to the Myrmidons. “Just drive them out of the camp; I don’t want any stupid heroics. Red’ll be watching, so show some fucking discipline.”

The Myrmidons shouted back and clashed their spears on their shields as one, and then, with Balios and Xanthos at the head, stamping their huge hooves and snorting and swishing their tails, the Myrmidons went down into the camp to face the Hittites and the Amazons. They blew their horns;

their battle drums rolled; and Patroklos let out a shout as loud as Agamemnon's huge-voiced herald Stentor; and when Patroklos shouted, the Thunderer shouted with him.

High above, brazen eagles wheeled and screamed, and sheets of lightning crackled across the sky. Dark clouds blotted out the sun, and it began to rain.

This was the final test. Either the Thirdborn would prove his word was good, or he would reveal that he was just like the others, one more god trying to wield Achilles as a weapon.

Achilles watched Patroklos descend. He was so beautiful, his beloved body shining like a red star, rippling with life, glowing with the power of the god. She could read the lightning in his nerves and brain, the passion and the focus of his thoughts. Tooth-of-the-Dragon in hand, he thundered down toward the battle, shouting, "Elasate, Myrmidonés!"

Charge, Myrmidons . . .

Chapter Thirty-One

The Myrmidon, Patroklos Menoitiou

I wear her bronze. I am taller, broader, but in her helmet, with her armor and shield, on her chariot and wielding her spear, I look something like Red, a warrior of fire. Balios and Xanthos snort and stamp, and next to me Automedon is deadly quiet.

Before us is a thin line of Achaians, and beyond them Amazons on little ponies and Hittites on foot sheathed in bronze, shining like the stars. Three ships burn already, but the rain comes down heavy, flowing down the sandy beach into the surf. It is cold and sweet.

Charge, Myrmidons, I cry. The Achaians part, and we rush into the gap. Cousin Aiwas screams from where he stands by his ship; a Hittite's spear has pierced his thigh. I leap from the chariot and stand over him with my shield.

Red? he calls out, and then, *Patroklos!*

Today, I say, *I am also Red.*

A Hittite comes forward again, rain pattering off his conical helmet, his eyes burning with rage, and I strike him through with Tooth-of-the-Dragon, shattering his shoulder and piercing his mail. He falls to the wet sand. Thunder roars overhead.

We all rush forward, pushing the Hittites back from the ships. We stand in shield wall, thrusting our bodies against our shields, and they stand against us, grunting and straining, and I lash out over my shield and around

it, piercing feet and heads and shoulders. They scream and fall back, and we push forward. The loose soil crumbles under our feet; everything is mud; and suddenly the Hittites are fleeing. I throw Tooth-of-the-Dragon, and it slices through a man like a thunderbolt, pinning him to the earth; I leap on his body, pull the spear free, and Menelaos is by my side, shouting my name. *Patroklos! Patroklos! Thank the gods!*

Now we are rushing onward, pushing them back to the breach, where Hektor stands shining like a star. A golden light surrounds him; his eyes are the eyes of a wolf. Aiwas throws a spear at him, but it misses; Hektor shouts in Hittite to rally his men, but they are edging back as we come on. We push them through the gap and they break, running headlong away from us, as sheets of lightning flash across the sky. The Thunderer is with us—the god of the Hittites is with us—his power surges up inside me, burning in my muscles, raging through my blood. I leap back into the chariot, pointing Tooth-of-the-Dragon at the Hittite lines.

Automedon understands me, and we charge. Behind us, the army surges through the gap. Hektor is fleeing in his chariot down the slope, and torrents of water roll beside us. The rain is turning everything to slurry.

But Balios and Xanthos move too cleverly to be caught, and our light Egyptian chariot skims onward. Amazons rush in beside us, thrusting spears and firing arrows, but they bounce off Red's shield and helmet. A thunderbolt lances down and obliterates three Amazons, leaving a smoldering crater. The Hittites scream. Hektor's horses whinny. It has become a general rout.

We are faster than the Hittites. We cut along their left flank, stabbing with spears, hemming them in. Lightning stabs down again, blotting out dozens of men and leaving behind seared skeletons with the meat cooked to the bone. The Thunderer roars at the Hittites. Our Mymidons are hot on their heels; our armies are rushing down from the camp screaming revenge. The Amazons are in full flight too, and my ears ring with bronze and Hittite screams and my own pulsing blood. I fling Tooth-of-the-Dragon and pierce another captain where he stands trying to muster his men; I leap from the chariot and hack apart his lieutenant with my sword, cutting his arm clean through the bone. Another of them is flung from his chariot and sits witless on the ground, staring at his hands, and I grab Tooth-of-the-Dragon and swing it through his face. Breath burns in my lungs. My heart beats like

thunder. A man rushes in on me and knocks me back; I slide through the mud, catch up a stone, and fling it into his helmet, crushing his face.

Combat has never been this much like a dance. I hear music in the thunder, the hammering of the lightning god. I rush in with my sword, hacking and cutting and cleaving; Automedon throws me Tooth-of-the-Dragon and I run another one through; I leap back into the chariot and we plunge on after them, gaining on Hektor.

A Hittite chariot rushes out in front of us, cutting us off, and we are all fouled in the mud. Balios and Xanthos fall on their horses in a fury, kicking and stamping. I leap from the cart into theirs, crushing the driver beneath my shield and then flinging the archer down into the mud and stabbing Tooth-of-the-Dragon in and out of his neck. The third, the warrior, was flung out of the chariot when it fouled, and he rises, staring at me with burning wolf's eyes.

He wears the magnificent armor of a Hittite senior commander. He has the tall helmet of a general, and the black horsehair is stiff with mud and rain. I know him from the court of Hattusa: Sarazzipedan, general of the armies of Tudhaliyas. We circle each other, choosing our footing carefully in the muck; but today luck is not on his side. His foot finds a waterlogged hole, his balance sags abruptly left, and that's all the opening I need.

I throw Tooth-of-the-Dragon like a thunderbolt. It pierces the Hittite general through the solar plexus, bursting through his armor, and he falls back hard, pinned to the wet soil. Lightning connects earth and heaven, the crackling clouds and the body of Sarazzipedan, and for a moment I can see his skull through his face. When the crackling stops, I step forward, set my boot on his chest, and pull out the spear.

Now men scream in Lukkan and Hittite that the general is dead, and the Hittites flee across the muddy fields.

As I give chase, we cross the morning's battlefield, where Hittites and Achaians lie dead and carved. Here I should stop, but—I have lost too many friends already in this war. There's Epeigus, dead and stripped in the mud, probably killed this morning. There's Stikhios and Arkesilaos, crushed and broken, naked, and scoured clean of blood by rain. Medon still has an arrow in his throat. Deiokhos has no arm, only a pool of blood that the rain is turning into a pink bloom.

I rush on until I reach the nearest Hittites. The Myrmidons are howling at my heels; my anger is their anger; the thunder roars above us.

We reach the river.

Hektor's chariot slows, and he turns to guard the rear, shouting orders in Lukkan. He brandishes his spear, making a great show of courage, trying to pull together a shield wall.

I pick up a huge jagged stone from the mud and advance on him. When I am within a stone's throw, I throw the stone, and it crushes his charioteer's skull. The driver falls limply over the railing and the horses scream, startling into the mud of the ford.

I advance, Tooth-of-the-Dragon in hand.

Hektor falls off the chariot into the mud. For a moment he is frozen on hands and knees as I advance, but then he rises, shaking with rage, and curses at me in Lukkan. I close in on him.

Suddenly the world spins. Something roars in my ears. Suddenly the rain strikes my face and mud slaps my cheek. I try to stand, and the breath bursts from my lungs. Some vast thing engulfs me, roaring, roaring, and when I tumble free of it, a jagged cold pierces my back. I spin and drive Tooth-of-the-Dragon into a Hittite's belly, but as I pull it out—

—the spear shatters in my hand.

Thunder explodes in my ears. Light flashes brighter than the sun.

Hektor has a spear in my stomach. It feels warm. The world spins again, and he leans over me, his eyes glowing like wolf's eyes. "You thought you could take everything from me, you filthy gods-damned— *Oh!* You're not even *her*. You're her fucking cousin."

I would laugh, but my lungs won't fill. Suddenly everything seems so absurd. I can see them on every side, staring down at me: Achaians, Hittites, yes, but also gods. So many gods. Ten thousand gods. My blood is sweet to them.

The Thunderer stands over me. His face is inscrutable; his lips are full and beautiful and formed into a sorrowful smile. Hektor gloats in his shadow. My heartbeat swishes in my ears, rapid and fluttering, and darkness closes in.

Will that be enough, do you think? the Thunderer murmurs.

I certainly hope so, a woman chuckles. *He is the last one she loves.* Her voice is rich and throaty, coming from somewhere behind Hektor. The world is darkening, but beyond the darkness, a golden light is growing brighter.

I close my eyes and wait for whatever comes next.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Thunderer and the Lord of Plagues enfolded Patroklos from both sides, two dark mists swirling around Achilles's one friend, shattering the scales on his belly and the spear in his hands, flinging him backward into the mud. The Lord of Plagues guided a Hittite spear into Patroklos's back; the Thunderer flung Patroklos forward onto Hektor's lance. It plunged through his belly and out the other side, and Hektor pinned him to the earth.

Everything was cold. In an instant Achilles understood the betrayal, the loss, her enemies' plan.

Battle raged around Patroklos's body. The Achaians had surged forward to drive the Hittites back, but Hektor stood with his boot on Patroklos's chest, fending off Automedon and Menelaos and wounded, bellowing Aiwas, while ranks of Hittites formed behind him.

Achilles let out a scream so shrill and loud it flung her to her knees and rang out over the plain. The soldiers looked up, shaken, and Hektor and his men fell back. The Achaians surged in, covering Patroklos with their shields as they dragged him to the chariot.

It would take them time to cross the plain, so Achilles picked herself up, rubbing her throat, and went quietly into her tent. There was no point in wearing mortal armor. Neoptolemos would not survive so much as a good kick, and Hektor's spear had punched through Patroklos's bronze like it was barely there. She opened the chest where she kept the sideros, taking out the black metal spearhead Deimos and the black sword Aletheia.

She regarded her sideros armor quietly: the greaves Kion, the breastplate Philos, and the crowned helm Drakon. They were stained red where moist air had entered the box; she took the sword and scraped at the red until it

came away in a powder red as ochre, but deader, colder, more brutal. Rust, it would be called in later years. She mixed it with Meryapi's skin cream and rubbed it into her face and neck, shoulders and arms, breasts and swollen belly, thighs, and, with some effort, ankles. Stained the red of drying blood, she *burned*. The goddess in her hissed with pain; the woman laughed.

Daughter, whispered the Silent One. *The Thirdborn and his sister want you to do this.*

Achilles smiled bleakly. "Of course they do. Every man I kill today is a sacrifice to Helen and makes them stronger. Isn't that right?"

They are already too strong. They played you for a fool once, daughter. Be careful.

Achilles fitted the greaves and the corslet, set the crowned helm on her head. The armor burned, but she only smiled. She gathered a dozen javelins, her bow and quiver, and a pouch full of the red sideros dust from when they had first cleaned the weapons together. Outside, she found a spear haft and jammed Deimos down onto it, bashing it tight with a rock. Neoptolemos kicked in terror. *Be still, little thing*, Achilles whispered.

Automedon reached camp and pulled Patroklos down from the car, laying him out by the firepit. The Myrmidon was red-eyed and wailing, and when the slave women saw Patroklos they screamed and wailed too, and hit themselves and covered their faces. Achilles only looked down at her friend with dry, cold eyes, counting his wounds, noting the muddy bootprints on his chest, the spattered Hittite and Amazon blood on his face, the ragged wound in his stomach, the spearhead protruding from his abdomen, the look of surprise frozen on his face. She closed his eyes, but they fluttered open. She ran her fingers through his hair, stroked his cooling cheek, kissed him on the forehead, though she knew that his mind had departed.

"Automedon," Achilles murmured, "get the horses ready."

Balios and Xanthos snorted and stamped. Both were spattered as red as Balios's coat, but it was blood, this time, not markings. Patroklos's blood was in their nostrils, and their eyes blazed to match Achilles's cold wrath. They were ready.

She mounted the chariot and racked the weapons. Automedon, still sobbing, got up beside her and took the reins.

The Achaian counterattack had been forced halfway back to the ships. Now, as Achilles descended onto the plain, she noted the gods massing in the air. They were so numerous, gathered from the corners of the world.

On her side, the Silent One floated in skeletal owl's armor, armed with darts and a spear made of the bones of an ancient serpent. The Queen of Kings stood armed with her horned decapitating labrys, dripping the blood of ten thousand years of sacrifice. The Earthshaker had risen from the sea. There were other gods besides, old gods with hungry red mouths, gods from Libu and Kolchis, Punt and Ind; perhaps Dionysos was the one crowned with thorns and vines, wearing the flayed skin of a man and wielding an obsidian-tipped spear.

The Thunderer wheeled above the stormclouds in the form of a brass eagle. His brothers stood over the Hittites with the Lord of Plagues and the Bear Goddess, and younger gods from across the world were joining them, splendid in their power, armed with silver bows, drawn by the promise of sacrifice.

The gods were thirsty. Achilles rode out to face them.

When the Achaians saw her, they went silent, lifted their shields into place, and held their ground against the Hittites and the Amazon cavalry. It was still raining. Lightning flashed across the sky, trumpeting Zeus's triumph.

Bronze ranks clashed again. Achilles bent her bow, aiming carefully through a gap in the line at an oncoming Hittite. He had bronze greaves and tassets and corslet and pauldrons and helmet, but the tassets swayed with his advance, uncovering the angle of his right leg with each forward stride, and when she had the distance right, she let her arrow fly through the momentary gap, shearing through the femoral artery. His leg buckled and he fell, not yet aware he was dead. The Achaians made a gap in the line, and Achilles drove her horses over the Hittite.

Three amber-eyed men advanced in shield wall against her, but one lifted his shield too high, and she shot him through the foot. He reared up screaming, and she shot him through the underarm. She threw her javelin through the second man's shield, piercing bronze plate, rawhide, arm, rib cage. Balios's hooves lashed out at the third, crushing his chest, and he drowned in his own blood.

Achilles descended from the chariot and touched the men with the nebusnekhen. The yellow light left their eyes. They sobbed and pleaded for

mercy, but she pulled the javelin from the second man's body and let the blood spurt freely, then rammed it through the third man's throat.

As they died, the world became cooler, clearer, crisper. Time slowed down. She ducked an Amazon's black-fletched arrow, leaned out of the way of a Hittite javelin, and flung her own at the spear-thrower, piercing him through the belly. "Myrmidonés! Ferei tous ekhthrous sto ploio mou!" she roared. *Take the enemies to my ship, my Myrmidons.*

These sacrifices were not for Helen.

Another Amazon arrow whirred past her ear. She turned. Six women in full bronze battle armor were plunging toward her on horseback, bending their bows; the plumes of their helmets were tall and rich and royal-red, and their faces were painted ochre. Their leader had the bearing of a general, thick arms sleeved with tattoos, torso sheathed in bronze, a cloak of leopard skin and eagle feathers trailing from her shoulders—Pattasilya, the Great Queen, eyes blazing yellow.

The Amazons roared out the names of their gods as they shot their arrows. AITA! KALU! APLU! ARTUMI!

Yes, I've heard this all before.

One missile would not have hit her at all; it flew wide. Three others she avoided with a single sidestep toward her chariot, ducking her head to evade the fifth. The sixth she hacked from the air with Aletheia. Before the Amazons could fire again, Achilles caught up a javelin in her left hand and twisted, flinging it into the knot of Amazons as they swept past her.

The javelin struck where she aimed it, piercing Pattasilya through the armpit and lodging in her lung. Pattasilya released her bow prematurely and her arrow went wild, slicing through her nearest guard's leg. The woman screamed and fell out of her saddle and was trampled under her own horse. The Amazon queen slid off her horse too and fell into the mud. She pulled herself upright, tore the javelin out of her body, and stood there trembling, red blood foaming from her mouth and nostrils as she held herself up by the spear that had killed her. Around her Apollo and the Bear Goddess rose in indistinct majesty, holding the Amazon queen upright by sheer force of will, as the dying woman snarled a challenge.

"Automedon," Achilles said, "keep the chariot close." She took out the sideros spear Deimos and descended from the car, walking across the mud toward the Amazon queen.

The battle lines were broken here. Ten yards further, the Myrmidons were shield-to-shield with the Hittites, and the four surviving Amazon guards were trying to force their way back to Pattasilya through a line of Spartans. Their ponies kicked wildly as they speared and shouted and were pierced with spears and dragged from their horses, overwhelmed by sheer numbers of Achaian infantry.

Pattasilya stared at Achilles with Helen's yellow eyes, but she spoke in her own Amazon tongue. "You have been a scourge to my people, destroyer of towns. Come on, do your worst. The gods are thirsty." Behind her, the Bear Goddess and Snake God bared their teeth, more solid than ever, gathering themselves to strike.

Achilles laughed at the gods. *Now you want to fight me?*

Enough blood has been shed, said the God of Poison. *We have the power.* He set an arrow like a serpent to the string of his silver bow, aiming it at Achilles, trying to find a gap in her armor.

You have nothing but the lies you tell.

Achilles held Deimos to one side, circling toward Pattasilya's wounded side and the spear she was using for a cane, toward the Snake God. She dipped her left hand into the pouch of red dust, then flung the sideros rust at Apollo.

The god dissolved into mist with a scream, and Pattasilya sagged to her knees. Bear Goddess rushed in with a roar, but Achilles swept the sideros spear through Pattasilya's head. Deimos punched through the helmet and the left ear and burst out through the right, transfixing both Amazon and Bear Goddess.

Artemis shrieked and rushed away, a formless turbulence fleeing from the metal of the end. Pattasilya convulsed, and her brains streamed out of her shattered skull.

Achilles took the nebusnekhen and touched it to the body. *This sacrifice is mine too, Apple of the Sun.*

A scream of frustration rang out across the plain. Achilles laughed and tore Deimos free, flicking the blood off it. Balios and Xanthos pulled up, Automedon struggling to restrain them, and Achilles climbed in. She scanned the Hittite line, looking for Hektor's tall helm, for his bright bronze scale mail, for the proud head with the long black hair. She found him rallying his men in front of the bridge.

She pointed the black spear. "Automedon. Take us through their line."

“Even these horses cannot run through spears.”

Achilles picked up her six remaining javelins. “They won’t have to. Break through there—” She pointed at a knot of desperate-looking Hittites streaked with blood and mud, tired men with smoke on their faces from the ships they had so recently been burning. Hektor’s finest. The golden wolf-light of Helen burned in their eyes, keeping them on their feet as they repelled charge after Achaian charge.

They would not deny this one.

The chariot surged, and Achilles looked up. In the sky, the pale green Firstborn and the Queen of Kings surged about each other in battle. The red Secondborn and the Silent One wheeled like birds of prey, coming together in a flash of combat and parting, coming together and parting, their battle punctuated by thunderclaps. Over it all, the Thirdborn soared as an eagle, growing ever stronger, feeding on death.

As Automedon charged the Hittite line, Achilles flung her javelins one by one. As before, she aimed to inflict crippling, slow death wounds, not instant sacrificial ends. She caught one man in the belly, breaking the scales over his intestines; she hit another high in the arm, severing the brachial artery; two turned to flee and caught javelins in the back. By the time they reached the line, only two spearmen remained. One thrust at the horses, but her javelin went through his spearshaft and his hand, severing weapon and fingers alike; one flung his javelin and it flew wide, but her answering spear thrust knocked him on his back with all the force of the onrushing chariot, and she dropped from the car and pinned him to the earth through a gap in his armor, leaning on Deimos to fix him there, then pulling it free.

As she expected, the suddenness of her charge had broken the Hittite line. Now they all fled toward the bridge. Even Hektor was running full speed from her. She followed him out onto the bridge, and behind her, Balios and Xanthos whinnied and kicked, stomping fleeing men into the mud, crushing skulls under their hooves. Their anger was hot. Hers had never been colder.

Suddenly a man stood before her fully armored, eyes wide with terror. The light of Helen was not in him; he stared at her with the ice-blue eyes of Anyasha, son of the goddess, so many times her enemy, so many times a threat to her, and now merely an obstacle.

She gestured with Deimos. “Get out of my way.”

He sheltered behind his shield, holding his spear carefully back, watching her for the first hint of an attack.

She was opaque to him, she knew; the icy red sideros dust that burned her skin would be torture to the eyes of gods, and whatever aid the gods might wish to give Anyasha of Dardania, he was on his own.

She gave him a small, ironic salute. Then she stepped right, trying to bait him into committing his shield. He was larger than she was, and infinitely less pregnant; the obvious move was to bull-rush her with his shield and trust to size and weight and the frailty of the thing inside her.

Oh, how she wanted him to take the bait.

His eyes widened with fear, and he edged back a step instead.

So, he could see her anticipation. She grinned and took another step beyond him to the right, so that he must turn and commit or else let her pass.

He turned, trying to bring his spear around.

She switched Deimos to the right hand and brought out her sword, gliding in under his shield as he turned, dragging Aletheia up his forearm, cleaving his skin and muscle to the bone.

His bronze shield fell, ringing, onto the bridge. As he staggered back, she kicked his leg out from under him and brought her spear down at his throat.

Suddenly a woman stood between her and her prey, a vast indigo woman spangled with stars. Deimos pierced the Queen of Heaven in her left breast and tore through the clear fat, and silver blood spurted out of the wound. The goddess cried out, spreading black wings over Anyasha as he fell, and the world shook with her silent scream: *Spare my son!*

Spare my sister and my cousin, Achilles thought bitterly.

When Achilles brought Aletheia down, it was to cut through the goddess's wing and deep into her right arm. Immortal Aphrodite burst into a blue mist, swirling off in every direction, howling with divine agony. Alone again, Anyasha knelt before Achilles, glowering defiantly up at her.

She regarded him and his mother's plea and struck him in the head with the pommel of her sword; he fell onto the bridge in a swoon. "Automedon," Achilles growled. "Take this one back to the camp." *Another sacrifice for us, Patroklos*. "Balios, Xanthos—we have one more man to kill."

She took the reins and guided the chariot across the bridge. The Hittites were in full rout, and the Skaian gate was choked with fleeing men. Hektor stood at the back, a responsible rearguard to the last, but as Balios and Xanthos came to a full gallop, careering toward Hektor with Achilles and

chariot roaring along behind them, Hektor turned and ran. He leapt into a nearby chariot and lashed the horses, clattering off in a panic.

“Hektor!” Achilles called out. “Stand and fight. Helen wants to watch you die.”

He lashed his horses and fled faster, churning up mud.

She looped the reins around her arm, bent her bow, and aimed an arrow in an arc up over his head, over chariot and yoke-pole, into the neck of his left horse. The horse screamed and fell; the chariot twisted; Hektor leapt free and skidded in the mud. He rose to his feet, spear and shield in hand, as Achilles brought her horses to a halt.

On the tower overlooking the wall stood Helen, staring down at Achilles and Hektor. Her eyes blazed. The eyes of her champion burned with the same light. Yet Helen’s brow was furrowed; there was uncertainty on her face, hesitation for the first time. *I accept your sacrifice*, Helen mouthed, but there was no triumph in her eyes.

Achilles laughed. She stood opposite Hektor, admiring the figure of the man who stood against her. His armor was magnificent; his body was splendid, broad-shouldered and tall, the beautiful form of a man who had known nothing but abundance, love, and kindness, until war came to destroy his world. His beloved was on the walls, the Amazon Annasu, wounded in the fighting, watching in terror, pregnant with their child. Alaksandu was with her, and Helen was with them, and an old man and old woman too: Hektor’s parents. And she, Achilles, destroyer of families, stood ready to sacrifice this son, this brother, this husband, this weapon of Helen that had killed Patroklos.

“If I kill you,” Hektor was saying, “I will let your people have your body. I will treat you with respect. Please do the same for me.”

“I am going to kill you in front of your family,” Achilles said quietly, staring up at Helen on the walls. “Perhaps I will eat your butchered flesh and burn the bones and fat as a sacrifice. The gods are hungry, and so am I.”

“That is blasphemy,” Hektor protested in a voice weak with horror.

“How can a god blaspheme?” Achilles said sweetly. She took her last javelin from the chariot, and her sideros spear, and stood before him. He stared at her with Helen’s eyes, frozen in place.

She flung her javelin at his shield, embedding the weapon deep in the bronze, and the metal rang from the force of the throw.

As she threw, he threw. His spear arced cleanly toward her, and she leaned aside to let it miss her—when it began to glow. Golden light filled the weapon, bright as Helen’s eyes, and it shot forward, arcing back toward Achilles, aimed for her belly, moving faster and faster. Her armor might blunt the blow, but sheer force would crush Neoptolemos like twigs and his shattered skull would shred open the veins of her womb. Time slowed to a frozen instant; the spear hung poised in front of her, inches from Neoptolemos suspended in dark slumber, and though she tried to twist away, there was no moving fast enough.

Then a dark shape appeared between her and the spear. The dark goddess with her body full of stars, already bleeding silver from two wounds, caught the spear in her stomach. Again the Queen of Heaven vanished, and the spear fell harmless in the muck.

Hektor stared at Achilles in horror. He dropped his shield and drew his long bronze sword, which gleamed pale silver in the rain. Lightning flashed across the sky. High above, the Thirdborn wheeled away from the battle, suddenly wary, and the Secondborn and Firstborn parted from the Silent One and the Queen of Kings.

All the gods drew back.

Except for the one with flaming-red hair.

Hektor charged in at Achilles. He moved deftly and with skill, trying to bait her to commit, but she held her spear back as he tried to close in, tried to circle round, tried to force an opening. He swung—

And she drove Deimos through his neck.

The sword slipped out of his hands. He hung suddenly limp. His body convulsed as she lowered him to the mud. Air whistled through the tear in his windpipe. He tried to speak but could not form words. Blood bubbled forth.

She pulled out the spear, then took the nebusnekhen and placed it around his neck.

I dedicate this sacrifice to me.

The yellow-eyed Hittite witch on the walls stared down at her in horror. Perhaps it had been the Queen of Heaven’s sudden intervention—something to think about later, not something to bother with now—or perhaps it had been the way Achilles looked at her and smiled. Without the nebusnekhen on her body, Achilles could feel Helen again all around her, could smell her hair and almost taste her skin, and what she felt from Helen was fear.

Achilles smiled up at Helen and knew that her own eyes had turned as merciless and red as the sideros dust on her skin, that her hair burned like flames, that the blood of Hektor covered her hands and face and arms and thighs like war-paint.

Annasu shrieked from the wall.

Achilles bent over Hektor. *The Amazon said she would drag me from her horse.* She smiled. *Witness, Helen, what happens to your toys.*

She took a spare tracer from the chariot and pierced it through Hektor's calves, fastening the rope around his forelegs. He groaned and gurgled, still alive. She tied the tracer to the rear of the chariot, then turned to Balios and Xanthos.

"My horses," she whispered, for their rage burned as hot as hers. "This man killed Patroklos."

Balios and Xanthos began to walk through the mud, quietly at first. The dying man bounced behind the chariot, gurgling and groaning, his black hair streaming through the mud. They moved faster, and his body struck rocks and shrubs and roots, and his arms flailed. A smear of blood began to streak the mud outside the walls of Wilusa.

They made a full circuit of the city, just outside of bowshot. The entire time, Achilles glared up at the walls, up at the people who knew this man and loved him, and whispered, *Do not look away, Apple of the Sun, not even for a moment. This is everything you wanted. I am a puppet in your hands. Watch him bleed. Watch him break, watch him tear, watch every bone shatter on the rocks, watch him drag over the dead—watch until he dies, and then I'll let you go. You wanted an enemy, Apple of the Sun? You have one. You wanted to be hated? I hate you. You wanted to be hurt? Wait till I climb that fucking wall.*

She felt him die. The sacrifice was hers and hers alone, kept to her by the power of Kiya's golden collar of control. In the instant Hektor died, Helen's mind broke away, and the Hittite witch fled from the walls.

The gods faded away. The wind died down. Rain still fell in sheets from the dark skies, but there was no more lightning. Achilles turned her horses back toward the ships, dragging her enemy's husk behind her.

She felt nothing but an icy wrath that could never be satisfied. There was no one left for her.

Chapter Thirty-Three

It rained for days. The sun never came up; the pall of clouds never broke; sheets of gray rain sluiced down from the purple-black sky, and the world became muck and running streams. The Skamandrian plain was reduced to a fen; the Skamandros swelled and burst its banks, carrying the bloated corpses of the slain down to the sea. The Achaian camp flooded, and the ships had to be moved up the shoreline. The Myrmidon tents were on high ground, and the flood drained downhill without disrupting them, but rain scourged the naked corpse of Hektor, washing out his wounds and leaving him pale and swollen, bloated with gas. The prisoner Anyasha did not eat, but covered his face to avoid the sight of Hektor. The corpse of Pattasilya stared blindly up into the rain, which leached the last fluid from inside her skull.

Achilles sat brooding in her tent with the rain drumming down on the oiled cloth. She had cleaned Patroklos's wounds with oil and water and salt; she had closed his eyes at last; she had laid him down beside Meryapi's coffin, and her family lay united in death. Like the family of Annasu the Amazon. A poetic justice, perhaps, but it felt like emptiness and the endless drumming of rain and the slow stirring of the child in her stomach, who would never know the love she had known. She could never love him as Patroklos and Meryapi had loved her.

"You will not have to," the Silent One said softly, and it took Achilles a moment to realize that her mother had spoken with an actual voice, and stood next to her in a physical body, tall and powerfully built, but made of flesh and bone and metal, not light and spirit and shade. "The Thunderer has everything he wanted. Helen fears you; she will let him have his way.

Now he only has to wait until your labor begins, and you will be defenseless.” The goddess’s huge gray eyes stared at Achilles with a strange, quizzical expression—and then Athena let out a soft hiss, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand and blinking rapidly. “I have failed. The lacrimal glands are so efficient at lubricating the eyes, and mine have been optimized to service the nictitating membranes, but I cannot sever the involuntary neurological link to my amygdala. Emotional reactions still compromise my eyesight.”

“I did not know you had emotional reactions,” Achilles said dully.

“I try not to,” said her mother. “You have seen how easily they are manipulated.”

Achilles nodded. “He said exactly what I wanted to hear.”

“I taught him that.” The Silent One stared blankly into the dark. “When the time comes, I will stand over you and protect you with all my power, but he will break through anyway.”

Achilles laughed flatly. It was a strange, tinny sound. “Wasted effort on your part.”

“It is irrational,” the Silent One agreed. “I may die with you. You will die anyway.”

“Why bother?”

The Silent One considered the question, tilting her head right and left. “I cannot make another you. Dhios is my perfect creation, but you, who never took my advice and always did such stupid things—” The owl-woman’s voice caught and she swallowed, then made a disgusted face. “It has been too long since I have been so much embodied. With this power comes great vulnerability. How do you tolerate *swallowing*?”

“It won’t be for much longer.” Achilles wondered if there was a way to save Neoptolemos. Maybe—just maybe—Helen and the Thunderer would show no mercy, of course, but maybe—

“I could cut him out of you,” said the Silent One. “But he would be more vulnerable outside your body.”

Achilles snorted. “Sorry, little one,” she told her belly, patting it quietly. “Yours will be a short life, and not a terribly interesting one.” She smiled dourly. “But you come from a very good family.”

“A great family,” the Silent One corrected hollowly. “Goodness is highly subjective, but our magnitude has never been questioned.” Filling the tent, looming in the shadow of her own enormous owl’s wings, she seemed at

once vast and small, an immortal being who contained multitudes and an ancient woman all alone. Everyone who truly knew her had died long ago, or vanished so far down their own paths of godhood that she was a cipher to them, a symbol of their own lost time. They brooded there for a time, alone together, and then the owl goddess went out into the rain, and Achilles sunk deeper into herself. Every so often, her belly throbbed and spasmed, trying to crush itself around Neoptolemos, then relaxed: early contractions, a threat and a promise.

It rained for days; it rained all night. Helen's mind was hidden, concealed somewhere in the darkened city where no fires burned and no one watched and everyone waited for their dead. Zeus was gone, biding his time, fattened and content. The Queen of Kings concealed herself; Agamemnon stayed away, nursing his wounds, wary of Achilles; Briseis stayed with him, and perhaps was wise to do so. The Myrmidons tried to feed the prisoner, but Anyasha would not eat.

On the seventh night, *she* came.

The tent flap opened. A robed woman entered, slim and small, copper-skinned, with thick black clouds of hair and antique features, like one of the ancient faces in the Silent One's memories, a cast of nose and jaw and cheeks and brow that had not been seen since before there were cities. Her robe was drenched, pink with blood on her stomach and on her breast. She stood before Achilles silently, regarding her with bloodshot, weary eyes and a strange, tender smile, and then she knelt.

"I know you," said Achilles. "Your son Anyasha still lives because you saved me from Helen's spear. I wish you hadn't."

"This is not the first time I have disappointed you," the woman said, "and it will not be the last."

The robe melted from her body like fog, and she grew to fill the tent. Stars glowed under her skin, which darkened to midnight blue; meteors rushed across the surface of her body, and glowing nebulae shone forth, and countless galaxies burned on her skin. She gazed down at Achilles with eyes as vast as the universe and took her by the hands.

"It is time for us to talk, daughter of my daughter."

Darkness engulfed them, and a sea of stars, and the voice of the Queen of Heaven filled the world, calm and enormous as the sea. Behind it all, the rain beat down.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Queen of Heaven, Who Was Once Great Mother

I am Asherah, Ashtoreth, Astarte on the islands, Athirat in Kna'an, Ashratum in Akkad, to you Achaians Aphrodite and Ouraneia, and here in Assuwa Hebat and Evah and Kybele. In Egypt I am still called Neith, eldest, goddess of the unseen sky, and in Babylon, Ishtar and Inanna, lady of the stars you never see. Once, in another life, I ruled the world.

They say that nothing existed before me, that I shaped the heavens and framed the earth—and I did. But I am not as old as the cosmos. I was born in a particular place, at a particular time, and before that time I have no memory. I am the oldest living thing, but I was once a little girl.

It was in Africa that I first breathed, by a lake far to the south of Egypt, in a paradise of trees and flowers. We were protected from the lions and the giant birds by our own insignificance and the benevolence of firelight. We knew where to find every kind of fruit, and after the lions and hyenas and giant birds had picked their prey clean, we crept onto the kills and smashed the bones and sucked out the marrow. There was no toil beyond eating, and in those days we were cautious and seldom hurt. And humankind was barely more than a race of beasts.

I alone had a secret. I alone knew that there were things the eye could not see, secrets you could not touch or taste, for I was like you, Achilles: I was born a girl, but my body was that of a boy, and from my earliest days I knew this unseen reality of my existence and wondered at it.

Before me, no one had needed to communicate an unseen thing, but I was a prodigy, the first to see that what we see is not all there is. I made the first blood sacrifice and gave birth to all unseen things: all thought, all insight, and all gods.

At first, I was met with confusion. I proclaimed to my people that I was a girl, and soon I would bleed and become a woman, and they were troubled as the spark of unseen knowledge began to work its way into their quickening brains.

I took a flint and reshaped my own body before their eyes. See, I said, what you could not see has become visible.

For a day I bled, and the world swam. They surrounded me, my sisters and mother and father and brothers and uncles and aunts and cousins, and wrapped me in dry moss, and waited to see if I would die. But I did not die, and in those times, there was no concept of madness, so when I rose and stood before them, altered as I was, and said, "See, I am a woman," their eyes were opened.

What else do we not see? my brother asked me. What else has been hidden from us?

All things, I said. But we shall find them.

The eyes of my people were brightened. They searched for the unseen everywhere. They left gifts for things without names, and hunted for whispers of covert truth. Their minds were alive, and they were the first people we would count truly human. I was the mother of their souls.

I became a mother many times after that. The unseen taught me that sacrifices were the source of power, so I commanded sacrifices. We traveled north, speaking of unseen things to all we met, and if their eyes filled with light, they joined us; but if their eyes remained clouded, we cut out their hearts and ate them and grew stronger. My body ripened. My breasts grew full. Drunk on blood, I called the men of my people into me one after another, and they filled me with children, and my children were the first gods and the first monsters. We wiped out the first peoples of the world and destroyed the great beasts and built the first villages from their bones.

You wonder at this, Achilles. I am called the goddess of Love, yet I boast of bloody sacrifice. But though you are young, you are a mother and should know better. Love is a bloody thing. It binds the organs of your body into a single whole that pulses with blood; it binds the fragments into a single rock, the rocks into a single mountain, the mountains and plains into a

single world. Reach into the Skamandros and draw out a cup of water, and water rushes in to fill the void—this is love. Kill and roast a calf and eat his muscles and sinews, heart and organs, brain and marrow—this is love, and he becomes part of you. Pull a man into yourself and fill your belly with his struggling, kicking children, and this is love. When they tear free of your body, pull them back to your breast and fill them with your milk, which the Hittites call the lesser blood, feeding them of yourself—this is love.

I and my children never aged, but my people withered. The unseen world, and the light I had called forth in the eyes of humankind, spread to the corners of the world and off its edges into the ocean, and as the world changed, I became its ruler, and I altered once again.

Before they called me Ishtar or Inanna in the east, they called me Tiamat, Thalatte, Great Mother, Destroyer of Ice, Floodbringer, Souleater, Dragon Goddess. In the end I was murdered by my own children, devoured, deposed, and lay dead for long ages.

Then I was reborn by my own will.

That is the only way for the dead to live again. Once the light has left their eyes, there is no bringing it back; but I *am* that light, and everything else has died.

Just as you shaped a new body for yourself out of that which was not your body, so did I, and here I am: no longer the Great Mother you have seen in visions of the ancient world, no longer the Dragon Goddess who devoured the hearts of thousands, but a new being. I have changed myself utterly and given myself wholly to the terrible mystery of love.

Now I cannot be killed, only embraced. I cannot be ruled, but I no longer rule. I do not consume sacrifices, but I freely sacrifice myself.

Now I have come to plead for Anyasha. The son you have taken captive is the only mortal child I still have.

Think of your own son quickening within you. If your mother had been less than a goddess, less my daughter, you would never have felt your son stirring in your belly. Your body would have been barren, as mine was long ago, doomed to follow the pattern of a man's.

But your mother is a child of my children's children, born in my city, nursed to divinity by my guidance, fed on my cruelty, nourished by my own bloody love, and so here you are, a woman with a son.

Please, Achilles, spare my son. Anyasha is a child of my body, a precious miracle, and I do not want to see the light leave his eyes.

“I swore to kill Anyasha long ago,” Achilles said to the darkness. It took her a moment to remember why: a strange promise made long ago to the widow of a man she had barely known.

You killed me thrice in his place. Be content.

“You have other children.”

I know.

“They are lost in fear and anger.”

There was silence in the darkness for a while, and then the thought came softly, from a great distance: *I let them choose their own path.*

“They choose poorly. They torment each other.”

They are thousands of years old. Even the youngest are centuries old. When I ruled them, they stirred against me; they longed for freedom from my power. Now they are free, and they hunt each other.

“They will kill me, which is fine.” Achilles stared up into the darkness, and galaxies stared back at her, quiet and unblinking. “But they will also kill my son.”

Your son will live, the Great Goddess promised.

“Then so shall yours.” Achilles bowed her head, and the stars bowed down to her.

She flew through the darkness, flew through the cold voids between the planets, hurtling faster than a comet, and the Great Goddess flew with her. Then the Great Goddess sang to her an ancient song, and she knew the song, knew the tune and the forgotten words, for the kallai had taught it to her on Skyros, and Deidamia had once sung it while Achilles slept with her head on her lap.

When Achilles woke, the rain had stopped. The pale sun shone through a sliver of cloud, and the whole world was filled with a tenuous light, and there was a delicate scent in her nostrils that reminded her of someone she had once loved very much. Had it been Meryapi’s scent, or some perfume clinging to Patroklos? Or perhaps it was a memory of Damia.

Achilles went out of her tent and cut Anyasha free of his bonds. She told him to go home to his people, and to give thanks to his mother.

Then she called the Myrmidons together and told them it was time to hold a funeral for their friends.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Glyke and the other women joined Achilles in her tent to help her wash their bodies. They gasped when they saw Meryapi, unchanged by weeks of death, still plump and beautiful, with bits of kohl still rimming her eyes and henna still streaking her cheeks—all evidence of Zeus's power and false promises—then they all worked together quietly, sponging away the leftover cosmetics and replacing them with fresh kohl and henna and clay and wax for all eternity. Gently they brought the color back to her ashen cheeks, working together; carefully they shaped her eyebrows with charcoal, taking the time to work hair by hair, until every follicle was in its place. When Achilles painted the customary cat-eyes on Meryapi's face, she had to stop, overcome with crying, before she could steady her hands for a perfect line. She managed at last, and used the ochre wax to redden her friend's mouth one last time and rouged her cheeks and put her finest black wig on her head and placed fragrant wood and incense on her body and dressed her in her finest jewels and robes.

Achilles made up Sekhem in the image of his mother, his huge dead eyes lined in the same black kohl, his tiny squashed newborn features defined with makeup as they would never be defined by life: stern eyebrows, firm lips, a tiny cloth about his head like Achilles had seen on noblemen in Egypt while they sailed down Meryapi's river. She swaddled him in a leopard skin and placed him on his mother's breast.

As for Patroklos, his wounds were cruel and deep, and his face was twisted up in the pain of his death. No god had relaxed those muscles before rigor mortis set in, and even though he had softened, and even though his flesh had not corrupted in the days since, there was still such agony present,

such sorrow. Achilles combed out his long red hair, careful not to comb out the waves too much, and oiled and combed his beard, and put perfume on him. The wound in his stomach was terrible. Though the slaves had cleaned out what they could of his viscera and had wiped his body clean of the fluids of death, there was no hiding the violence of the injury.

“I’m sorry,” Achilles whispered, blinking rapidly. Her mother was right. Lacrimal ducts were poorly designed. She laughed and her slave women stared at her, and then she laughed again because there was no explaining the joke without blasphemy that would terrify them.

Oh, my mother, she thought, if I had a thousand years, perhaps I could understand you; if we had two thousand years, perhaps you could understand me; and if we had three thousand years, perhaps we could learn together what love is.

When she had finished preparing the bodies, she called her slave women together and told them she was dividing her treasures. “I do not know how to be a good mistress, and I do not think I will ever learn now, so I am giving you all away,” she said, “to yourselves.” She gave each of them a dowry of copper and tin, bolts of cloth, silver and gold jewelry, incense from Egypt, spices from Lazpa and Nubia and Ind, and all the treasures she had stolen from the Amazon cities and from the ransoms of her captives. “Stay with the Myrmidons and carry on as you have been, but with Patroklos dead and my fate uncertain, look to your own needs.”

She left them there so that she would not have to suffer through whatever show of gratitude they felt obligated to make. She knew the truth, that she frightened them, and perhaps that was as it should be.

Then she went to Balios and Xanthos and sat with them, feeding them apples while word went out through the whole Achaian camp that a funeral was to be held for Patroklos Menoitios and Meryapi Osymandias. Every hour or two, a shock of pain compressed her abdomen, blotting out all motion, all words, and then ebbing. Between these convulsions, the pressure slowly grew. It would not be much longer now: days, or at most a few more weeks.

Men came up to her weeping and told her stories of Patroklos and of Meryapi, and she sat stroking the manes of her horses, trying to think of a way to tell the two grand gentlemen of her life that she would soon be going away forever. If horses had a language as dolphins did, she could have explained the concept of her own impending destruction, and that she had

some hope that the Queen of Heaven would honor their agreement and save Neoptolemos from death, and that anyway, she would only miss the two of them.

Finally, as the first hints of day began to brighten the sky behind the hills of Wilusa, she clasped both horses close and wept, and whispered in their ears, “My friends. I wish we had lived in other times, and had boring lives in the valley below Phthia, and grown very old and fat together. If I had been queen there in a lush time of peace, perhaps I would have found you both excellent mares who would put up with your insufferable haughtiness, Balios, and your deceptive innocence, Xanthos.”

Balios snorted at her, but Xanthos gave her a reproachful look, as if to say, Stupid woman, I am a warhorse. Both of them stamped the muddy soil, and flared their nostrils, and curved their magnificent necks, and swished their tails, and she knew they would have hated peaceful times. Savage, bloodthirsty horses, just as vicious as Achilles—perhaps they were born in the right time, in the right place, with the right mistress.

“You will be famous,” she promised them, “you fiends.”

While it was still dark out, a stooped old man came picking his way carefully up the slope and into the Myrmidon camp. He moved with slow, deliberate steps, and when he reached Achilles, he sank to his knees.

“Please,” he said. “Send my son home, or send me to him.”

She looked down at him quietly. His hair was thin and long and white, and his face was withered with wrinkles, liver-spotted, red on the cheeks with rosacea from burst blood vessels. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot. He had been crying.

“Are you Piyama?” she asked quietly. “The Sorcerer?”

“I’m no sorcerer.” The old man’s voice was thick, choked. He did not look at her; he kept his face averted; but she could see the veins jumping in his throat, the muscles spasming. Grief and desperation alone suppressed his anger. “Name your ransom. I’ll give you anything I have.”

She had felt his rage, his horror, had *gloried* in it, because Helen had recoiled from it. Even now, Helen was not watching; the eyes of Helen’s magic were closed, and she was afraid to see this moment, afraid to watch this old man beg for his son’s corpse, afraid to watch him die if Achilles should prove cruel, but also afraid to see him see Hektor’s body, afraid of the pain in the old man’s chest and stomach.

None of us are as godlike as we seem, Achilles thought with a bitter smile. “I could ask for your city,” she said.

“It’s not mine to give. My treasure is yours if you want it; my horses are yours; my life is forfeit; name your ransom.”

“Give me Helen,” Achilles suggested. The twinge of fear she felt from here—a few days before, it would have been delicious. Now it simply hurt.

“She is not mine to give,” said the old man, though the hitch in his voice said he would do so in a heartbeat if it *were* in his power.

Achilles touched her stomach. “Then bless my son, and take yours home.”

The old man looked up at her with bright pale eyes, his expression stricken. He did not show fear or horror, only stared at her for a long moment, then nodded, as if he understood far better than a mortal should have. He placed his hands on her belly, and Neoptolemos pulled away from the touch, kicking against the hands with an infant’s insolence.

“May your days on earth be many and sweet,” the old man said, “and may you be as good a man as my Hektor was, child of the child of the Silent One. May you come to a better end than any of us here.”

Achilles led the old man to where she had left his son. She took the nebusnekhen from his neck and put it away, then took one of her own cloaks and laid it out in the mud for the body, and helped the old man roll his son onto the cloth. She summoned Automedon and asked him to escort the old man to the bridge over the Skamandros, and then to return for the funerals.

Old Phoinix took charge of the ceremonies for the Myrmidons that day, and all the living Achaian kings and men gathered together, many with dead of their own to mourn and burn. Now that the rain had finally come to an end and the wood was beginning to dry enough for proper pyres, the hundreds killed around the ships and on the plain were gathered, and the Achaians broke into many little groups at first to mourn their slaughtered friends. But after they had mourned they began to drink, and then they gathered to celebrate the greatest of the dead.

Achilles lingered with the body of Meryapi in its coffin and the body of Patroklos ready for its pyre, breathing in their scents one last time. She inhaled the smells of them into her body, and like the Silent One she tasted their memories, though in a strange, broken fashion.

She was there in Phthia watching through Patroklos's eyes as Peleus wept for Thetis; she was holding herself, an infant, tenderly. She was Patroklos training horses, and Patroklos training a flame-haired, foolish girl who raged and raved and beat her slaves and yelled she was not a boy. She was Patroklos sailing to Egypt, marveling at the dolphins of the sea; she was Patroklos gawking at the sheer size of Egypt, Patroklos negotiating grain licenses, determined not to make a fool of himself or his king, Patroklos hunting ibises with the Great King's household, Patroklos wandering outside the temples of Waset trying not to gape like a complete peasant. She was Patroklos gazing up at the pylons of Hundred-Gated Thebai, and then up at the girl sitting atop the pylons peering down at him with bright, curious cat-eyes, grinning as if she had discovered a new species and was not sure what to name it.

She was Meryapi sitting at the feet of her mother, lisping in three languages, trying to work out why so few of the servants knew Hittite or Akkadian and how it was possible for marks on papyrus to tell stories and whisper secrets. She was Meryapi swimming in the river, scheming with her servant to capture baby water-horses. She was Meryapi staring at the torn-up bodies of her friends, wondering how a mere water-horse could kill a person with a name. She was Meryapi studying baboons for clues to their language. She was Meryapi meeting ambassadors from Assuwa and Europa and demanding information on their lands. She was Meryapi helping Uncle Khaemweset systematize the Great Archives of Awen and nearly going blind from reading ten thousand books in two months. She was Meryapi eyeing a strange red-haired water-Hittite with a funny beard, trying to figure out if he was actually interesting or if she was merely fascinated by his unusually bright hair, if he was simply another pet or a man she could love.

Achilles sobbed over them, kissed their faces, begged them to come back, but they were dead.

They brought Patroklos out to a great wooden bier and heaped the firewood high, and she put a torch to the pyre, and turned her friend into fire. Then she commanded Meryapi be brought down to *Delphini*, and had a crew formed of volunteers, and told them to sail her home to Pi-Ramesses, as had always been the plan, but first to stay for a feast and funeral games.

Old Phoinix presided over the games to honor her dead Patroklos, her dear friend, and his dead family. There was a chariot race, and Diomedes won. Some men quarreled, but old Nestor talked them down. There was a

footrace, a discus throw, a wrestling match, a javelin throw, and all sorts of other competitions, and afterward, there was a feast of fresh pig and ox and goat and sheep all roasted up, and rich stew made from their bones and beans and seaweed, and fresh-baked bread with oil, and so much wine. Achilles did not drink the wine anymore, for her time was near, and she thought Neoptolemos did not like wine; but her Myrmidons drank, and Odysseus and Diomedes drank, and Nestor and Menelaos drank, and at length she was sitting by a campfire with Agamemnon and Brisewos, not saying anything.

Finally Agamemnon said, "I am sorry, Pyrrha. I don't know where things went wrong, but I should have been better."

"It was all her fault," Brisewos said quietly. "Wasn't it, Achilles?"

Achilles laughed bitterly. "I blame the gods."

"As is your right."

"Are we friends?" Agamemnon asked warily.

Achilles nodded. "I was angry at the Queen of Kings," she said, "not you."

Agamemnon sighed heavily. "I would not presume to be angry with her, but I wish she had spared Iphianassa. Her mind is not well. She's alive, at least."

"Zeus did that to her," Achilles said hollowly. "Or maybe I did."

"The gods are vicious scoundrels," Brisewos said with a sneer. "I hope they choke on us."

"They already have," said Achilles.

"You could have handled almost everything better," Brisewos said to Achilles. He put his hand on her belly, massaging it gently, and Neoptolemos leapt, apparently pleased to be petted like some kind of hidden puppy.

Maybe it's for the best that I'll die, Achilles thought. I would not get along with this child. He would sell me out instantly and befriend Brisewos instead. Her thoughts must have shown on her face, for the Amazon smirked.

"I hear you let Piyama have his son back," Agamemnon said. "Good choice."

"The Amazons are in full retreat," said Brisewos.

"Could be time for peace talks."

"Could be."

They drank more and talked less, and eventually she got up and walked down to the beach, and they joined her, watching the waves roll in and out. She liked this better than talking, even if it was growing difficult to walk, even if her stomach was beginning to rebel at the feast.

Delphini had gone out, bound for Egypt, taking her sister away forever. Taking her home.

As the moon was rising over the sea, a small island-rigged ship glided up out of the western horizon. It was painted white and blue, and on its prow was the emblem of a swan. It came closer and closer, clearly a ship of the islands; closer and closer, until Achilles could see the warp and weft of the sailcloth and knew it had been made in the Sporades. She stared at it, waiting, trying to recognize it.

As she watched and waited, the tightness in her stomach grew; the nausea sharpened, and then abruptly became a rolling spasm that rippled through her. The wave rolled through her thighs and stomach, blotting out all thought. Then, as the first wave rolled out, another came on, and after it another, sharp, clenching contractions that left her grabbing onto Agamemnon's arm.

Then she recognized the ship: a Skyrian royal longship, a personal vessel of King Lykomedes. Her heart leapt up inside her; fear leapt up, and a pang of shock, and sudden longing. She could not breathe; her heart was in her throat; her pulse swished in her ears. The ship was gliding toward the beach, and on its foredeck, shining like a star, stood Deidamia of Skyros.

"That's not false labor," Brisewos said briskly. "Let's get you to the spinning tent."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Even before the pain grew from a rippling muscular spasm to a nauseous, bloated straining, as her body tried to push itself out through the bottom of her pelvic girdle, fear surged up to blot out everything. Each moment was separated from the next by the icy, throbbing terror in her solar plexus and in the pit of her belly. Blood pulsed and fluttered all through her body and thrummed in her ears and lungs and thighs and womb and stomach. She was falling.

Achilles crouched on all fours in the sand, vomiting, feeling the sand against her belly and knees. Each time she vomited, her abdomen spasmed. Neoptolemos screamed mindless fear at her. Her terror was overwhelming his tiny, formless mind. She flung her head up and found herself staring at Automedon, who had his hands out. She grabbed them and stood.

“You’ll be fine,” Automedon said, helping her toward the spinning tent. “You’re half-god on your mother’s side. If the divine side of you was a man, I’d like your odds less.”

“That’s not how it works,” Achilles snorted, clinging to his hand hard enough he winced. “If the worst happens, take care of my horses. They’re demons, but I love them.”

“You’re leaving me your horses?” Automedon blinked. “Don’t die, but if you do, thanks.”

Achilles let out a harsh laugh. “How’s Melia? I never asked.”

“Better off than you right now. She’ll be fine.”

At the entrance to the spinning tent, Brisewos growled, “I’m not waiting outside again.”

“You have my divine permission to watch me die,” Achilles said with a grand wave of her hand. Then another contraction ripped through her and the terror submerged her again, throbbing, pulsing, thumping in her blood.

She was clinging to the loom, biting down on a twisted knot of leather Glyke had made, and the freedwoman knelt before her, poking and prodding at her belly. Achilles blinked and shook her head to clear it, shifted her feet to take advantage of the momentary cease of pain, and realized she was dizzy, that her thighs were wetter than before, that she had pissed herself. Behold the pride of Achilles—

Disgusting. The thought was Helen’s, scornful, cruel. *Why did you have to ruin it all by getting pregnant? Now Zeus will kill you and rule me, and the cycle will continue. As always.*

I’m sorry to disappoint, Achilles sneered.

I wanted you to kill him. Helen’s thought had a wistful quality. *You terrified me, what you did to Hektor frightened me—but you should have killed my brother. Now you will die in agony.*

You should like that part, at least.

Yes, I will savor it.

Terror surged up again, and Achilles’s body spasmed, trying to thrust her womb out through the bony case of her hips, a shuddering dry-vomiting of the lower body that left her abdomen spasming and burning and aching. She clung to the loom and swore.

Not yet, Helen was pleading. *Brother, let me taste her pain. Let it be a sacrifice to me. Slowly, slowly, let it be slow—let me have as much as I can, or I’ll make you regret it.*

I will wait, said the cool metallic mind of Zeus.

A spasm flung Achilles’s head back, and she saw them abruptly, in a flash of lightning that blazed across the insides of her eyelids or across the sky: the gods were arrayed all around her tent, filling the heavens. Nearest to her were the gods she knew: the Thunderer and the Secondborn and the Firstborn, Cow Goddess and Bear Goddess, Snake God, and Earthshaker, and others—Dionysos, Hermes, Demeter—and hundreds more, thousands more, the Ten Thousand Gods gathered from the corners of the world who had fled from her on the battlefield just days before, clad in images of terrible power, winged and clawed, scaled and fanged, maned and horned, hooved and taloned, vast and terrible, both more and less than human—all watching her, all waiting to see her killed.

This was to be a sacrifice to all the gods.

But . . . no. The Silent One was missing. The Queen of Heaven too.

Snake God bent his silver bow, and an arrow lanced down from the sky, piercing Achilles's left heel, pinning her foot to the earth. It was intangible, invisible to mortals, but pain shot up her leg, and lightning stormed through her nerves. She screamed.

"At least this one's head is pointed the right way," Glyke said, oblivious to the gods above her.

Make it slow, Helen commanded. *I am the Apple of the Sun. Do not incur my wrath.*

Slow, Snake God agreed. Apollo shot another arrow, and pain exploded in Achilles's shoulder. She clung desperately to the loom while the throbbing localized itself to the junction of her collarbone and neck, every muscle so tight she started crying, struggling to get control of her shoulder back. *Stay out of this!* She flung the thought at the sky.

They ignored her.

The god shot again and again, piercing her arms and legs with his invisible arrows, making her stagger and slip, hanging from the frame of the loom while Glyke and the other women tried to hold her up, wiped sweat off her hands and forehead, told her to bite down, babbled on and on in a language she could barely understand—

Brisewos's strong arms were under her, holding her up when she almost fell. He was breathing hard. She could feel his horror. He had been where she was; it had hurt him; he was here again for her, and he didn't even like her. She laughed wildly between contractions, and for a moment, the arrows stopped coming.

Then Deidamia was standing in the tent, dabbing at Achilles's forehead with a cold cloth. Achilles was on her knees looking up, somehow still clinging to the frame, and Damia was gazing down at her, brow furrowed, eyes wide, and the *relief* on her face as she saw Achilles seeing her—it almost hurt, but everything already hurt too much to register mere emotional pain.

"Damia," Achilles groaned. She tried to catch her breath, tried to breathe ahead of the oncoming spasm. "Why are you here?"

"The Silent One came to me in a dream and told me to come." Damia's expression was tender, but her eyes were brittle. "She said I could choose to watch you die or stay away, so I choose to watch you die."

“How cruel,” Achilles laughed. “That’s what it took to get you to visit?”

“I wasn’t going to come at all.” Damia held up a bowl of water, tipping it toward Achilles’s mouth, and Achilles drank it greedily.

When Achilles had finished, she asked, “What changed your mind?”

Deidamia brushed Achilles’s hair out of her face. Her hand was cool, and paused at the back of Achilles’s head, touching something there—the copper-and-malachite comb, which Achilles had forgotten, tangled in her hair. Damia’s eyes were suddenly wet. “She told me the name of your son. I remembered why I first loved you on Skyros, before you were beautiful, when you were lonely and afraid. I realized that you are still kallai.”

Pain exploded again, the jarring sensation of being forced against her own bones, and Achilles flung her head back, howling.

“How—” Damia began, her hand settling on Achilles’s shoulder, stroking away some of the spasming pain. “How does it feel? Tell me and I will bear it with you.”

Achilles sank back into her body as the pain receded again. The fear was less with Damia here, still present, a pallid, awful undercurrent of cold. Achilles said, “You know how it feels.”

“I don’t.”

“You *know* how it feels,” Achilles repeated. She let go of the loom and planted her feet, then touched Damia’s belly, running her fingers over the smooth muscle. “Tight *here* and *here*, and then your body crushes itself trying to push your insides out—” She gritted herself as another wave began.

“I *don’t* know how it feels,” Damia said again, but her eyes were wet.

“You always did. That’s our magic, kallai.” Then Achilles was falling again, tumbling back into the pain. She managed to pull herself up out of it just long enough to gasp, “Glyke, get Damia the golden collar,” and then she was flung back into the whirlpool of crushing pain and spiraling terror. She caught glimpses of the collar in Damia’s hand, and then Helen’s voice echoed inside her, full of scorn.

She must be important to you. Well! She is safe from me, but you will die with my laughter in your skull.

A silver arrow pierced her throat, and Achilles gagged on her own tongue, fighting to breathe. The Three threw javelins. Where they struck her, bruises erupted, blood vessels exploded under her skin, and she clung to the loom howling at them, screaming wordlessly for her mother,

screaming for the Queen of Heaven to honor her oath. They readied another volley of invisible darts—and a gray smoke swirled around her, shielding her with pale desiccated feathers. As the Three cast their weapons, Athena screamed all around her.

With her.

Achilles sagged down from the loom. She was beginning to feel herself actually opening, actually stretching enough for *something* to emerge, filling the doorway of her body with the struggling mass of a desperate living thing fighting toward the air. She sobbed. She was ripping. She could feel it. Damia clung to her hand. Their eyes met. Achilles squeezed with all her strength. Blood throbbed in her ears. Damia squeezed back.

You care about these kallai too much, Helen sneered. I expect it's because you care too much about your own pathetic origin story. Here's an idea: when you die, I will erase you from history. I will make it so you were never a woman. Everyone will remember you as a man.

Then you'd better make sure I die! Achilles snarled at the ceiling. The stars showed through the moth holes Meryapi had complained about. The contractions kept tearing at her, and Neoptolemos's struggling body ripped further and further out of her, and javelins and arrows rained down from the sky. Athena howled again and again, breaking her silence with a wail like a screech owl, but one by one, the bolts tore through her and exploded underneath Achilles's ribs and in her throat, eyes, ears, ribs, belly, legs, skull. But not her womb. Damia was sobbing, clinging to her hand.

Then Neoptolemos was clawing free of her, drawing a big howling, screaming breath, and the gods flung their javelins down at him and Achilles flung herself forward to block them with her body, and fire lanced down through her head and neck and chest and stomach. She flung her head back and snarled defiance at the gods.

Damia was whispering in her ear, "I love you I never stopped loving you it just hurt too much and I needed to live and I love you—"

Please take my son, Achilles whispered. At least, she thought she had. She could only hear the ringing in her ears, only hope Damia had heard her. If he dies, bury him on Skyros, where I was happy sometimes. If he lives, be his mother—

The world fell away. Everything burned. Everything throbbed. Achilles stared at the sky and Helen's voice echoed through the vaults of her skull, louder than the gathering thunder.

Get up from that tent, you stupid woman. I will erase your entire life from history. I will erase you from the universe. I will destroy everyone you ever loved. You love this kallai? I will make her curse your memory. Get up and fight me. Show me you have more to you than this.

Achilles felt her eyes swelling shut. Some divine poison was spreading through her body, swishing through her blood vessels, bound for the rope of blood and tissue that linked her to the screaming scrap that was Neoptolemos. She sagged forward, grabbing at the blood-slick umbilicus to twist it and seal the poisoned blood in herself. Her head flopped back. All around her the gods aimed their weapons, spears and javelins, darts and arrows, preparing to consummate the sacrifice—and above them all, on high, the Apple of the Sun raised a golden spear, then brought it down.

Everything flashed bright white.

The clouded sky was laid bare. The tent had no roof. Achilles lay on her back, trying to lift her head. She could feel her heartbeat; she could hear it too. Her abdomen and ribs were laid bare, and her beating heart throbbed in the char. Everything was turning red.

Damia held Neoptolemos in her arms. An enormous figure shielded mother and son, a goddess who glittered with stars.

The next thunderbolt gathered in the clouds above, then stabbed down from the sky, white and gold, crackling with the power of the Weapons. Achilles surged involuntarily upward to meet it, and everything was burned away.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The sky rains down.

Even before she opened her eyes, Achilles knew she was dead. It was the quality of the light through her eyelids that told her she was not in the world of the living: gray light, a gradient from pale silver to deep charcoal that barely altered when she forced her eyelids open. She reeled, twisted, and fell over and over and over, for she had no eyes to open and there was no world to fall through, only an infinite collapse inward and down, a spiraling without an end.

*The stars darken
The constellations are shattered*

Then her mind was hurtling through the void. A glowing cloud rushed inward, swirling, spiraling down into itself, colliding with itself, and erupting into white flame, the birth of a star. Glorious, glorious was its beauty. Every fiber of Achilles vibrated to its ineffable song. The light, the heat, the power—all of it flashed by her in an instant, and in her heart the darkness grew, the star-within-a-star, collapsing inward, bursting outward, collapsing inward, bursting outward, until it all erupted in a shower of sideros, the metal of the end.

*The bones of the hell-hounds tremble
The watchers fall to their knees
Seeing Pyrrha dawning as a soul*

She hung in the darkness over the smoldering wreck of her own corpse. Pale shadows were dragging it onto a pyre. There was old Phoinix, and Automedon, and Agamemnon and Brisewos, both weeping, and over there were Odysseus and Diomedes—but they were all far away, in the world of matter, and she was here, in the world of spiritual forms.

*A goddess who feeds on her mothers
A goddess who makes her own name
Her glory is in the sky
Her wrath is in the horizon
Her head is covered in fire, in serpents of fire*

They were burning her body. Damia stood weeping with a baby in her arms and the copper comb gleaming in her hair.

The heat of that fire stirred something in the darkness, and the darkness went into it. A tall goddess with stars under her skin came forth from a broken tent bearing a dark casket, wincing beneath its weight, and placed it on the pyre.

*Sideros
The metal of the end*

The casket burned, and the star-metal armor and weapons inside glowed brighter and brighter, cherry-red and then yellow. It became ductile, soft, pliable, and then ran as liquid, and Pyrrha, the woman made of spirit, entered into it. She stood, spreading her arms to the sky and breathing in the sweet air and feeling the roar of flames inside her lungs as everything went molten and glorious, and the body of her spirit formed itself in liquid iron. Her hands took shape before her, clawed with iron; the blood vessels of her iron arms pumped molten metal through her body; she glowed; she burned; she lifted herself into the sky and let out a metallic roar that echoed from the Achaian camp to the slopes of Mount Ida to the towers of Wilusa, where golden Helen watched in wonder.

*Pyrrha is the Serpent of the Sky
She shatters at will
She lives on the flesh of every god
She eats their entrails
Even of those who come with their bodies
Full of magic from the Island of Flame.*

Pyrrrha spread her wings of molten sideros and ascended, roaring for the gods to come face her. She hurtled upward, leaving Assuwa behind her, leaving the sea behind her, ascending through the cold high air, summitting the clouds, and vaulting forth into the void, bound for the bone-dry surface of the moon.

Look, Achilles!—Our spell worked! Now, though we are dead, we live. We are immortal goddesses!

Pyrrrha stared in wonder at her own hands. They were not her hands alone. She was not alone in her own mind, and her mind was no longer solely hers.

The problem with preserving the soul after death is that embodiment is required to make the soul capable of anything in particular. But you, Achilles—your first miracle was embodying yourself. And even when I died, I found a way to put me inside you. Meryapi's thought was full of tremendous satisfaction edged with sly, subtle glee. Now we have done what only Neith did before us: we have returned from the dead on our own recognizance. And like her, we are transformed.

Meryapi, Pyrrrha sobbed. She flung her arms around herself, embracing herself. I thought we'd never talk again.

Now we will never not talk again. We have become a conversation unto ourselves, my Achilles.

They landed on the white wasted surface of the moon, strewn with the bones of shattered gods slaughtered in eons past. The outside of their body of sideros cooled to a sleek polished jet, but the inside still burned with the heat of the heart of a star.

Behold, Meryapi purred. Watch this. Her thoughts became slower, careful, formal, ritualized, completing another spell:

You came into being as the food of the gods, Meryapi said. But you have power over the gods. And so, my husband, I open your mouth.

It was as though a third pair of eyes had opened within them, a third mind awakening and effortlessly interweaving itself into their conversation. *This is not the what-happens-next that I expected, thought Patroklos. I seem to be part of a metal woman.*

Twin goddesses have devoured you, Patroklos. Imagine that. I have stolen us immortality!

Pyrrrha wrapped her wings around herself, laughing to herself, and the joy of her laughter was hers alone on the airless wastelands of the moon.

Together alone, three united in a single metal form, they came to a throne and sat down.

They waited for the gods.

The Silent One came first, for she was dying. Torn, her wings in tatters, one eye seared from her skull, she collapsed before them, and her talons scrabbled at the rocky moonscape, trying to find purchase. Her single gray eye stared up at Pyrrha, and then bloody golden tears dripped from her lacerated lacrimal ducts, and she reached up to touch the searing metal cheek of the woman made of iron. She winced and hissed from the pain of contact but did not let go.

Daughter, said the Silent One, if I had a thousand years, I might understand you. If I had two thousand years, you might understand me. And if we had three thousand years, we might learn what love is together.

You were reading my mind, Pyrrha accused.

I tried, Athena said. I found your mind almost as confusing as my own.

She sagged forward and laid her head across their lap. Golden blood dripped from her wounds. Her shattered wings beat wildly against the airless emptiness of the lunar waste, then went limp.

Quickly, said Meryapi. You know what to do.

With an iron claw, Pyrrha opened the vault of the goddess's skull and leaned down to kiss her, drinking in her mother's dead mind. She breathed Athena in; she drank her deep; she devoured her, digested her, drew her in deeper.

Then they were four, or forty-four thousand.

Next came the Queen of Kings, horned like a cow, covered in blood. Her throat was cut, and her eyes were bloody, and she laughed a ragged laugh. She put her hand on her throat, holding it shut, but the blood bubbled, magenta and glowing, between her talons. *I thought I'd live through this cycle, she sneered. I had such plans for my kings. If only you'd been a man, Pyrrha, I could have tamed you. I would have made you king of the world.*

The world needs fewer kings, said Pyrrha, but it was Patroklos speaking for all of them. There have been too many sacrifices.

It is simply the eternal dance of biology, said Hera-Rhea. She wobbled on her hooved feet, holding herself up against the moon's weak gravity. Life kills life to beget life. We feed on the universe; entropy itself is a sacrifice to our existence, and our every heartbeat hastens the end of all things. If you

want harmonious noninterference, kill yourself. She laughed, and more magenta blood poured out between her fingers. *Accept my sacrifice, you stupid girl. After everything I've done, I can't go to waste.*

We accept your sacrifice, said Pyrrha.

We? The eyes of the goddess widened as the hands of sideros touched her face, and she lifted her bloody talons away from her throat, bleeding her life out onto the moon.

Now they were five, or vastly more than five, and they waited on the throne.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Firstborn alighted before them, green as malachite, with a second pair of hands for feet, and all about him orbited fine pieces of floating copper metal and brass and bronze, complex arrangements that clicked and whirred and moved against each other, all part of some incalculably vast design. He gazed at them coldly. *What are you?*

The end of a cycle, said Pyrrha. *The apple of the abyss.*

The Secondborn landed in all his redness, armed with flint and dripping gore. He bared his wolf's teeth at them and rasped, *The Silent One is dead, but I see her behind your eyes. Has she abandoned bone for black metal?*

She has died, Pyrrha said, and embraced herself. It was easy to forgive Pallasu-Atana now, enfolding her inside her metal body, feeling her ancient fear and her still-more-ancient longing not to be alone. And now the Silent One was not alone. *She lives. You'll see soon enough.*

The Secondborn laughed mirthlessly, all sound muted by the lunar emptiness.

The Thirdborn landed next, shaking out his golden beard and hair. He raised his hammer, and lightning crackled along his bronze body, charging the great darts in his hands. He was beautiful, this Zeus, this Amun, Thirdborn Weapon, killer of Ra, destroyer of worlds. The craters on the moon matched the weapons in his hands, and when he met Pyrrha's eyes, he looked at her with empty calm. *I should like to know your secret. If death is optional, I would not choose it.*

Then don't choose it.

That would be Achilles talking, Zeus mused. *Always offering simple, impossible answers.*

If you want complex impossible answers, said another aspect of Pyrrha that was Meryapi, wait until you get to know me. Incidentally, you read me wrong. I did not say, "Love itself is magic" when I returned—but that was a nice touch, and you were more right than you realize.

It was a nice touch, wasn't it? Zeus stepped forward, and his brothers took up positions on his flanks, readying their weapons.

Once, said the aspect of Pyrrha that was Patroklos, you said that the only way to restrain the power of the gods is to talk, to agree, to find a path of least resistance and follow it. There was wisdom in that.

Zeus curled his brass lip in contempt. *If it didn't sound wise, it wouldn't have worked.*

Talk to us, Pyrrha offered.

I'm tired of talking.

The gods assembled.

Bear Goddess rose up from the lunar surface clad in armor made of bones, a bear skull on her head, a labrys in her hands, a bow slung over her shoulder.

Snake God stood beside her, bending his bow.

Begin, said the Thirdborn.

Snake God loosed an arrow at Pyrrha, and it struck her in the breast with terrible force. But it did not pierce the metal; the sideros glowed cherry-red, and the arrow burned away.

Pyrrha smiled and rose from the throne. *You pierced me enough on earth, she said. Be content.*

Apollo held up his shadowy hand, and silver gathered there, growing from the light reflected onto the pale surface of the dusty moon. An arrow formed, sharper and more terrible than the first, flanged to pierce metal. *Do not forget, Snake God said, we are gods, and far older than you. Being made of sideros is not enough, child.*

Within Pyrrha, the Silent One began to laugh. Her ancient mind unfolded in their body of meteoric iron, revealing the structure of its crystals, the way they linked and bonded to each other, the latticework of connections that stabilized the metal of the end. *Let me, she cooed, and Pyrrha extended her hand, which flowed and melted and molded itself into a fresh shape: a spear of sideros as white-hot as the core of a dying star. Pyrrha raised the spear to throw it, and Snake God lifted his bow.*

Then Pyrrha brought the spear down on the surface of the moon.

The shock wave sent dust and stone hurtling up into the airless sky, blotting out the stars. The dust wave slammed into the gods. Lightning erupted from the lunar surface, and the gods began to move, circling each other in the dust storm, scanning for each other with immortal eyes.

Pyrrha saw Snake God as he saw her. He loosed his arrow, and she lunged. It pierced her armor, seared through her hollow body, and erupted into glasslike shards behind her as she screamed. The pain was like the pain of dying all over again, but she had died so many times now, and her scream was full of laughter. She drove her spear of sideros into the god, spiking him against the lunar floor. She wondered how used to dying the god was.

Then she swung round, just in time to sidestep Bear Goddess and her sweeping axe. Guided by Cow Goddess, Pyrrha danced in close, raking her iron claws across Artemis's armored face, shattering the bear-skull mask and tearing gaping, bloodless gashes in the goddess's face beneath. The goddess struck back, and the whole world flipped as Pyrrha was flung headlong through the dust storm.

She landed between Firstborn and Secondborn, and a flint axe chipped and shattered on her throat. She laughed and plunged her hand into the Secondborn's chest, breaking through the sternum and tearing out his heart—but he laughed too, for his heart was withered and decayed, and his blood circulated by will alone. Then he caught up an immense lunar boulder and smashed it into her, and she was thrown back against the throne, shattering it.

The Firstborn lunged in close, trying to pierce her with arsenical copper weapons, sending shard after shard down into her, tearing and scraping at her body, heating her up until molten gobbets came off her, but her body reformed around her knowledge of herself, and as the Secondborn came rushing in with another boulder, Pyrrha swung her arm through the Firstborn's throat, tearing his head from his body, pulling his screaming broken mind into herself.

Lightning erupted around her and ripped through her, grounded into the moon—and she opened herself to the Thunderer's lightning, drinking him in, pulling him toward her. He was thrown screaming against her, and she fell on him with iron teeth, devouring his face, his upthrown hands, his throat. Headless, he struggled to tear himself free, but Pyrrha opened herself further, sucking the dust storm into her body, unhinging her jaw, growing to

a greater and greater size, tearing the Secondborn and Thirdborn off the surface of the moon and pulling them into herself. Zeus's screams echoed inside her, vibrating the sideros of her body, and the regolith trembled under her feet. Pyrrha shook with the cries of the Thirdborn, then laughed. As strong as the Thunderer was, in the end he was just noise.

She tore Bear Goddess in half, but half of the goddess fled, hurtling away toward the Earth. She swallowed Snake God whole. She fell upon the multitude of other gods drawn in by hunger and alliances, consuming them, filling her belly with their flesh. She grew to accommodate them. She grew vast, a dragon of black metal who wrapped around the moon. She spread her wings and roared into the void, challenging the one enemy who had not yet come to face her.

A single pearl of golden light ascended from the Earth. Beautiful, beautiful on the horizon of the moon, the Apple of the Sun rose to face the dragon of the metal of the end. Helen shone with golden light. Her eyes were bright as the sun, her smile was impossibly radiant, and when her feet touched the dusty surface of the moon, everything turned golden.

Finally, Helen purred. The real fight. The one I've been waiting for all my life. I could kiss you, Achilles-or-Pyrrha-or-whatever-you-are, my beautiful monster, my beloved enemy. But I will tear you apart instead, limb from limb, atom from atom.

She gazed up at us with absolute love. We gathered ourselves to fight her.

The Golden Apple sang us a song of infinite joy. She had destroyed the world three times, and now it was to be destroyed again. It was *hers*; she had taken it; but she had been so alone, so isolated, forever used as a weapon, forever happy to be a weapon because it meant she could destroy, but now she was ready to do more than destroy; she was ready to *be destroyed* and to *destroy utterly*, and here we were, her partner in the Great Dance of the Spheres.

Here we are, Helen sang, and offered us her hand. She raked her claws across our face.

Here we are, we snarl back, and lunge. She catches us in the throat with a golden talon, but we heal around the cut and plunge closer, closing our jaws on her shoulder, tasting molten goddess blood and the sweet flesh of the Apple as we crush her shoulder. She screams and pierces our chest, flinging us away.

I promised to erase Achilles from memory, says the Golden Apple, smiling radiantly as she turns her words into a sword. I cannot change your body to a man, but I can cut your story from the minds of men, until all that remains is a parody. She darts away, and we pursue her through the dust storm of the moon.

It is that easy for her now, when her full power is awakened, when the world is ending. She weaves her spell on the poor Earth below, and everyone who knew Achilles begins to forget her. Only Damia, wearing the nebusnekhen, remembers the woman who shared her bed and birthed her son, and for a while she will tell the tale to Neoptolemos and their people, but within two generations of her death, Achilles will be remembered only as Akhillewos Pyrrhos, the man who burned the cities of the Amazons.

Doesn't that make you angry? Helen sings sweetly, darting from cloud to cloud, but she lingers too long to gloat, looking for our face so she can savor our rage.

Achilles is dead, we reply, and close our claws around her throat. She grins at us, grins wider as we tear through the gold plating of her throat and fill the air with golden blood. For a moment, we have the upper hand, then she rakes her hand across the surface of the Earth, and darkness covers it. Famine strikes Egypt. The Hittites attack the Achaians in one desperate final push. Odysseus builds huge hollow siege weapons to go over the walls. Diomedes slaughters Piyama. Aiwas kills Alaksandu. Agamemnon and Brisewos massacre the royal family in *our* name, sacrificing their corpses to *us*. Helen laughs, because their sacrifices flow to *her*.

She flings us back and leaps after us, and we hurtle through the void, past the dark orbit of the fourth planet, through the cloud of rocks and dust beyond, past the swollen immensity of the fifth planet where Zeus's mansions were, and out into the icy vaults beyond.

Helen sacrifices the Hittites, and their palaces go dark. Plagues sweep their nations. She sacrifices the Achaians, dooming them to collapse within two generations of their victory, their palaces ransacked. She sacrifices the kallai, dedicating them to centuries of destruction. *Let your sisters be erased from memory too, blotted out, divided, without sisters or friends or protectors, each one a solitary exile, alone in the world, her life a sacrifice to me—*

I accept your sacrifice, we say, for some sacrifices are not hers to take.

On a small rock in the dark void, the Golden Apple pins us, impaling us on spikes of gold. She lies down on top of us, crushing us beneath her body, kissing us with ravenous hunger. *Give me everything you have, she pleads, give me everything, everything is mine is my sacrifice is mine look at me look at me look at me look at me look at me look at me look at me look at me—*

Behind her there is only the infinite night sky, the sea of stars, a void spangled with galaxies and comets, with dust and nebulae and countless suns.

Then the night sky opens her eyes. She wraps her vast arms around us and holds us close, trapping Helen between us and herself.

I dedicate this sacrifice to you, whispers the Queen of Heaven. Then she flows into us like the tide, dragging her golden daughter in with her, sealing us in with the power of the Apple herself, Helen's own infinite might trapping us all inside this cage of sideros, at the bottom of the well.

We are all here together, bounded in iron, compressed into an infinitesimal space, a dark star far from the sun. The Earth is a speck of dust behind us, but we watch it hungrily, full of an exile's longing, as the years blow by us like dust.

Now we are trapped together, and Achilles makes us talk, and Meryapi makes us listen, and Patroklos makes us hear, while she who was once Great Mother embraces her children and whispers that they are not broken forever, that she wronged them from the beginning, that she wants them to be made whole again together, to be more than they became, to change.

In the first thousand years, Zeus watches his name become supreme on Earth. He is king of the gods, lord of all, desired by women, adored by men, worshipped with sacrificial bulls from shore to shore: Amun and Jupiter and Thor and all the other names men can devise. And then his name is abandoned, forgotten, parodied; he becomes an empty thing, a bloviating jest, a mockery, a rapist wandering through men's imaginations, no longer feared or loved. In the second thousand years he rages and grieves. *Let me out of this trap,* he screams. *Let me go back and show them who I am.*

The Earth has few gods left on it, and those who remain are weak. Sideros is dug up from the ground, and everywhere, the metal of the end reigns, restraining the gods. After two thousand years, little gods reign alone over innumerable people they do not know, who do not love them.

Bitterness and rage consume them. They hide at the foundations of the earth, gnawing at it, waking from time to time to torture their worshippers.

Zeus learns pity again, and the Silent One holds him for a century, listening to his memories and giving him her own.

The Firstborn and the Secondborn watch men descend into barbarism, an age of iron and cruelty. Their rage against their mothers plays out on Earth. Mothers, wives, and daughters are enslaved by weak, desperate, furious men who write spells and prayers to make the usurpation sacred, and two hundred generations are born into servitude. This enslavement also enslaves their sons. The twin gods recoil from the earth, for it is possible to see yourself too clearly and for too long. The Queen of Heaven and the Silent One whisper to them, *You are changing*, and slowly they begin to reconcile.

Snake God weeps for the Eagle, for the lost father that they murdered long ago, and the Thunderer holds the Snake close, and as the centuries crawl past, the gods begin to forgive themselves and then each other.

But the Apple of the Sun stands apart, alone and perfect, trapped but smiling, singing her own song of destruction.

I have never suffered, she sings.

Pain is sweet to me.

Hurt me, or I will hurt you.

Hurt me, and I will hurt you.

On earth, the mortals have evolved new games, new tortures; now that their sacrifices do not go to feed the gods, they glut on them instead, and make themselves into little gods that collapse almost immediately into monsters. Insatiable ones roam the earth, devouring each other; a game of sorcerers consumes the world again and again. Slavery rises again and again in ever-more-absolute forms, and certain mortals become a frail new race of the divine.

They build ships to cross the void. They communicate with bound lightning. Their telepathy is strange and universal. They poison the air and melt the ice again, like the Great Mother before them, and soon they will learn the secrets of immortality, and break free of their fragile homeworld, and go out among the stars, looking for fresh sacrifices.

All spells decay.

The Golden Apple stirs, smiling radiant joy-in-destruction at the Earth.

She will break free. She will return. We cannot stop her, for she will not change.

But we cling to her, holding her back, binding her to the well, buying time for the fragile world that birthed us.

You must prepare yourself.

On Earth, people remember my name. They read that I was Pyrrha, Achilles, a woman who lived for twenty years and died, a goddess's daughter, a mother by the grace of Aphrodite and by my own will. The kallai remember their sisters and gather, breaking the old spells laid on them, setting themselves free. And here in the void, the seals on our prison weaken.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Deidamia sat under her umbrella in the gentle autumn rain on the Golden Beach of Skyros, watching the high tide crawl up the sand. Neoptolemos was restless that night. His baby teeth were coming in, and sometimes he would suddenly chew on her breast, vicious little thing, and she would pull him free and stare at him, while he laughed or cried as the mood took him. His hair was so red, and his eyes sparkled green. Now that he had lost the ruddy squashedness of his newborn days, he was becoming very beautiful.

“Still,” Damia said fondly, “you are a wicked child, like your mother.”

She held him to her breast again so he would not shiver, and when he had settled down, she permitted him to resume feeding. Hungry Neoptolemos. She was proud of him, teething miscreant or not, and she let him feed and spit and cough and settle back down in her arms, snoring the soft, wheezing snore of a baby. Her hair comb tugged at her scalp. She wore it daily now, for memories of Red had grown sweet again.

Deidamia had been having the dreams again at night, when she would slip into unconsciousness like a swimmer slipping into the warm sea. Often she would come here in her dreams, wandering the shore with Neoptolemos. Sometimes he was newborn, sometimes a little boy with fiery hair, sometimes an old man with bright twinkling eyes and a rakish bearing.

During these dreams, Achilles would come down from the sky to join them.

“Damia,” she would say, and smile shyly, and reach out her hand, and they would walk together along the beach with Neoptolemos following behind, or would take turns carrying him when he was an infant, or would dance with him on the seashore when he was a dashing old pirate.

The light shifted subtly, and Damia stirred. Her umbrella was gone; she was dreaming again, and the light autumn rain was replaced by warm summer calm. Neoptolemos lay napping on the sand, about eleven years old, tanned and plump with the puppy-fat of late childhood, and Damia sat on the sand with Achilles's head in her lap.

"You were right," Damia said, brushing back Achilles's coppery curls from her forehead and bending down to clasp her closer.

Achilles laughed sleepily, blinking her cat-eyes and yawning. "What was I right about?"

"The best things in life are dreams."

They sat there together for a long time, breathing in the mingled smell of their hair and the salt breeze and the sand, while the horned moon shone on them, and an owl hooted, and the ancient eyes in the starry sky beamed tenderly down.

Then Damia stirred, for Neoptolemos was waking.

Dramatis Personae

ACHILLES (Akhilleas, Pyrrha): Daughter of Peleus the Myrmidon and Thetis of Phthia, born a prince despite her best efforts, one of the kallai. “Little Red.”

Skyrians

DEIDAMIA (Damia): Princess of Skyros, one of the kallai.

LYKOMEDES: King of Skyros, Damia’s father.

SKORPIA: A rice farmer on Skyros.

OTHER SKYRIANS: Lyrkourgos, Dolops, Lykandra.

Myrmidons

PATROKLOS MENOITIYOU: Achilles’s first cousin and childhood protector.

KHEIRON: An older Myrmidon, Achilles’s trainer and childhood tormenter.

PHOINIX: An older Myrmidon, friend of Kheiron and Patroklos.

AUTOMEDON: A younger Myrmidon who never bullied Achilles.

BALIOS AND XANTHOS: Achilles's hot-blooded warhorses.

GLYKE: A slave owned by Patroklos. Meryapi's primary attendant.

MELIA: A slave owned by Patroklos. A kallai once known as Bathykles. Used to belong to Achilles.

OTHER MYRMIDONS: Aktor, Akastos, Eudoros, Menesthios, Peisander, Alkimedon.

Other Achaians

ODYSSEUS: King of Ithaka, husband of Penelope, father of Telemakhos, son of Laertes, Agamemnon's chief fixer.

DIOMEDES: King of Argos, son of Tydeus, companion of Odysseus and war hero.

AGAMEMNON ATREIDAI: King of Mykenai, son of Atreus, heir of the Tantalid house, and Great King of the Achaians, husband of Klytemaistra Mino'o, the heiress of the Kretan Great Kings.

MENELAOS ATREIDAI: King of Sparta, brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen.

IDOMENEUS: King of Kreté, Agamemnon's brother-in-law and Klytemaistra's brother.

IPHIANASSA: Daughter of Agamemnon, priestess of Hera.

STENTOR: Herald of Agamemnon.

BIG AIWAS: King of Salamis, cousin of Achilles and Patroklos.

NESTOR: Elderly King of Pylos and mentor to Agamemnon.

ASKALAPHOS: An Argonaut and the elderly king of Orkhomenos.

LEONTIUS: King of the Lapiths, friendly with Achilles.

LITTLE AIWAS: King of Lokris, had his nose broken by Achilles when they were children.

OTHER ACHAIANS: Epistrophos of Phokis, Thersander of Thebai, Elephenor of the Abantes of Euboia, Menestheus of Athenai, Thoas

of Aitolia, Amphemakhos of the Epeans of Elis, Agapenor of Arkadia.

Wilusans and Hittites

PIYAMA: Elderly king of Wilusa.

HEKTOR: Elder son of Piyama, leader of the Wilusan army.

ALAKSANDU: Son of Piyama, brother of Hektor, husband of Helen.

TARUWILI: Younger son of Piyama.

PANDERU: A Wilusan noble.

ANYASHA (Aineias): Lord of Dardania, son of Aphrodite, ally of Piyama.

HELEN: Daughter of Hittite Great King Tudhaliyas, hatched from a mysterious golden egg.

SARPEDAN (Sarazzipedan): Hittite Master of Chariots.

Amazons

ANNASU (Antusekuririya, Andromakhe): Amazon commander of Kilikassuwa.

SHETRA (Talasuttariya, Thalestris): Annasu's mother, a great Amazon general.

BRISEWOS (Pihassassi): Amazon name unknown. A man who was once a cavalry sister.

HASTIA (Hippodameia): Shetra's daughter, Annasu's sister, Hittite name unknown.

PATTASILYA (Ais, Penthesilea): Great Queen of the Amazons.

VLASKA: Legendary dead Amazon queen, sister of Luspi.

Egyptians

MERYAPI OSYMANDIAS: Granddaughter of Great King Osymandias (Usermaatra Setepenra Ramessu), wife of Patroklos.

HENUTTAWY: Mother of Meryapi and daughter of the Great King, wife of General Hatiay.

KHAEMWESET: Uncle of Meryapi and son of the Great King.

ANKHESENMAAT KIYA: A sorceress who died a hundred years earlier.

MERYATEN NEFERKHEPERURA-WA-ENRA AKHENATEN: Kiya's husband, a murdered Great King who challenged the gods.

NEFERNEFERUATEN NEFERTITI: Kiya's sister-wife and Akhenaten's wife.

Gods

APHRODITE (Asherah, Ashratum, Ashtoreth, Astarte, Athirat, Evah, Hebat, Inanna, Ishara, Ishtar, Kybele, Neith, Ouraneia, Parvati, Tiamat, Thalatte): Queen of Heaven and goddess of love. Mother of Anyasha. In a previous life, she was the Great Mother, Destroyer of Ice, Floodbringer, Souleater, Dragon Goddess. Ancestress of the gods, and mother of Kronos, Typhon, Hephaistos, Ares, Zeus, and the Great Weapon. Killed by her children, self-resurrected.

KRONOS (Anu, Arya, El, Elios, El-Shaddai, Geb, Ilu, Khepri, Koyash, Ra, Shamash, Surya, Utu): The Lord of Light, father of the Three, former consort of Great Mother, former king of the gods. Killed by the Three and Helen.

POSEIDON (Enesidion, Netuns, Nu, Varuna, Yam): The Earthshaker, an enemy of the Silent One.

TYPHON: A son of Great Mother, killed by Amazon Queen Vlaska during the Titan War.

ATHENA (Anahita, Anat, Athana, Aten, Ma'at, Nisaba, Pallasu, Sarasvati, Seshet): The Silent One, Owl Goddess, adopted daughter

of Great Mother and artificer of the gods, divine mother of Achilles.

HERA (Aruru, Belet-ili, Damkina, Hathor, Isis, Nikkal, Ninhursag, Rhea, Soma, Tanit): The Queen of Kings, Cow Goddess, adopted daughter of Great Mother, former consort of the Three, inventor of the cities of sacrifice and ally of Athena.

ARTEMIS (Arktos, Artio, Artis, Artumi, Bast, Britomart, Melissa, Sekhmet, Urash, Urss): Bear Goddess, the Honey-Eater, an adopted daughter of Great Mother who opposed the cities of sacrifice. Aligned with Apollo.

APOLLO (Apep, Aplu, Appaliunas, Djehuty, Ninazu, Ningishzida, Paion, Phoibos, Phobos, Pyssas, Resheph, Rudra): Snake God, Lord of Plague. Aligned with Artemis.

HEPHAISTOS (Enki, Fasta, Mitra, Kothar-wa-Hasis, Paistos, Ptah): Firstborn Weapon, Cunning in Things, the mastermind and artificer of the Three.

ARES (Agnis, Anhur, Heru, Maras, Nergal, Ninurta): Secondborn Weapon, Lord of Red, the wrath of the Three.

ZEUS (Amun, Baal, Dhios, Diwos, Dzos, Du Pihassassa, Enlil, Haddad, Indra, Perku, Taru, Teshub, Tor): Thirdborn Weapon, the Thunderer, Lord of the Universe, Destroyer of Worlds, the leader of the Three.

Acknowledgments

Like a great river, *Wrath Goddess Sing* was fed by almost too many springs and tributaries to count. I thank you all with deepest gratitude, but will single out a few by name: Kelly, my partner in life and battle; my brother Peter, who taught me sail, oar, and kindness; my brother Jeremy, for secret reasons; Ashley, the sister I never had; Christen, my fellow priestess of Apollo; Apollo, for secret cat reasons; Sarah, for instruction in the ways of horses; Kathryn, whose steadfast friendship brought me to this season.

I would also like to thank my fellow writers Alina Boyden and Tessa Fisher, who spent countless generous hours reading my work and giving feedback. My readers Katherine, Eileen, and Gwen read draft after draft. The late Shannon Andrews and A. Tobias Grace made me the writer I am; I will always remember that golden day we three sat together in Toby's sunny parlor and spoke of dreams made flesh. Your memories are a blessing.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who helped transform this book from a file on my computer into a presence in the world: my agent, Jason Yarn, who has cheerfully accepted my tendency to send emails with bibliographies; my insightful editor, David Pomerico, who has brought out the best in this book; Mireya Chiriboga, who has kept us on track through the publication process; Holly Rice-Baturin, who has advocated for *Wrath Goddess Sing* with skill and passion, guiding my spell onto the right desks; and everyone else on the HarperCollins team.

I would also like to thank the generous and kind writers who read *Wrath Goddess Sing* early and vouched for it: this means so much to me.

About the Author

MAYA DEANE (she/her) is a novelist, visual artist, and scholar. If the opportunity arises, she would love to talk to you about the deep history of beer; about Kubaba of Kish, the only woman who became a Sumerian king, who got her start as a bartender and brewer; about Amazons in the archaeological record, with their cannabis hotboxes and tattoo kits; about the three most famous eighteenth-century French trans women and why Lia de Beaumont was no man; about experimental culinary archaeology and ancient Near Eastern food; and about her dear friend Apollo, a cat who is a god.

Maya is a graduate of the Rutgers-Camden MFA program in creative writing.

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FIRST EDITION

Cover design by Richard L. Aquan

Cover illustration by Marcela Bolivar

Cover image © Shutterstock

Map by Nick Springer, Springer Cartographics, LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Deane, Maya, 1985- author.

Title: Wrath goddess sing / Maya Deane.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : William Morrow, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021049109 (print) | LCCN 2021049110 (ebook) | ISBN 9780063161184

(hardback) | ISBN 9780063161191 (paperback) | ISBN 9780063161207 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Achilles (Mythological character)—Fiction. | Trojan War—Fiction. | LCGFT:

Mythological fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3604.E1559 W73 2022 (print) | LCC PS3604.E1559 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20211008

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021049109>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021049110>

Digital Edition JUNE 2022 ISBN: 978-0-06-316120-7

Print ISBN: 978-0-06-316118-4

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
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