

CHOSEN FOR THERMOPYLAE

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Palace of Trachis, region of Thermopylae 8th waning, moon of Skirophorion, 509BC

I stood at the window of Alexis' room – which I now shared – and watched as the pale dawn illuminated the stables to the left and mountains to the right. Three moons had passed since Alexis and I spoke of our love for one another and announced our intention to be together. I had had to kill Melanthios and his brothers for the privilege of it, and though my final actions towards Melanthios were not as honourable as I always prided myself on, I knew if I had the time again I would not behave any differently. Not only had I been determined to keep Alexis as my lover and protect her from his cruel nature, I had wanted to punish him for what he had done to her before I found them at the hot springs.

My father had left Trachis almost a moon ago, his wandering nature getting the better of him, though I knew he would have remained to make his home in Trachis as I was if he could. His destination was north, not to Thrace as I had believed he intended when he first spoke of leaving again, but to Konitsa, to visit friends, and a woman who had once been his lover. I offered to join him, but he said it was a journey he must make on his own. In a way I was glad, for I would not have wanted to ask Alexis to leave her own family when she had so recently been reunited with them. She and Queen Melina had started to repair their damaged past and though at first it was difficult for them both, I knew it made each (and King Agrias) glad to finally have the chance.

I turned as the brown-haired mass in the bed beside me moved, a smile lighting my face automatically. “The dawn greets us once again,” Alexis murmured, the bright green of her eyes finding my blue ones in the dimness of Eos' light.

“It does,” I agreed, returning to our bed when she held her hand out.

She trailed her finger down my naked thigh. “Does this mean you are leaving me to join Moeris and Thaddeus at the barracks?”

“I do not have to leave just yet,” I replied, feeling the caress deep inside. I slipped beneath the coverings, stretching out on my side to face her and placing my hand at her hip. I pulled her body against mine as our lips met, my tongue darting out to taste her soft, warm lips. She sighed into my mouth and the deep hunger of desire began in my stomach, quickly travelling down between my legs when she pushed against me. Alexis slid her thigh between mine, her heated skin slipping across my wetness. “Gods,” I moaned.

“Love me,” Alexis insisted, pressing harder against me.

I captured her lips again as I rolled her onto her back, placing my own leg between hers. I moved atop her, my thigh dragging across her sensitive flesh, pushing her towards her end with each measured stroke. She tightened her hands at the small of my back, eyes fluttering shut and I dipped my head to graze my teeth along her collarbone.

After I had killed Melanthios at the hot springs, Alexis had wanted me to make love to her, to help her forget he had ever laid his hands on her. I had been unable to then – too afraid I would hurt her; that Melanthios had scarred her in ways I could not heal with my love alone. But now I held no such fears and there had barely been a night since that we did not spend proving the depth of our love for one another with abandon.

I slowed my movements, silencing her protests when I covered her mouth again.

“Skylar,” she panted when we parted.

“Yes, Princess?” I smirked.

“Must I beg?”

“Mmm ... tempting.”

“Gods, please. I need you to touch me. Now.”

Pleasurable heat ran the length of my spine. I pushed down as Alexis’ hips rose to meet mine. I knew she could feel my arousal against her skin when she captured her bottom lip in her teeth and her hand moved to the outside of my thigh. “No touching,” I warned.

“Skylar,” she pleaded. I smiled again, enjoying the desire and frustration war across her face. “I want to.”

“Not yet,” I insisted, taking both her hands and trapping them above her head beneath one of mine. My other traced her jaw and the length of her breastbone.

She writhed beneath my touch, her hips lifting again in response. Slowly I lowered my mouth to her breast, taking the taut nipple between my teeth and flicking my tongue over its end. Alexis jolted beneath me and I repeated the motion before doing the same to the other. I knew if I attended her in such a manner she would soon find release, but I did not want it to be so today. Today I wanted her to feel me deep inside, to want my touch with every fibre of her being, my mouth on every inch of her body.

I kissed my way lower. She opened her legs, the dark curls tickling my stomach when she lifted her hips. “Down,” I commanded. She exhaled loudly but complied. I rewarded her obedience with my hand; bestowing the lightest of touches between her thighs. “You are so ready for me.”

“Always.”

“Hmm ... should I taste you?”

“Gods, yes,” she groaned, her hips rising again.

“If I release your hands you shall keep them above your head, yes?”

“Yes. I give you my word. Just ... please touch me.”

I smiled and lifted my hand. Hers remained where they were as I kissed the soft skin just below her hip. I felt the sharp intake of breath above me as well as the increase of her heartbeat and shifted lower still.

“Skylar,” she whispered, her hands clenching at the pillow beneath her head.

I leaned forward. Her hips rocked upwards again as I ran my tongue the length of her. Tasting. Revelling. I slipped inside the waiting warmth and Alexis’ will broke. She gripped my head hard, pulling me against her heated flesh. My hunger for her exploded and I did not order her to release me. Instead, I possessed her – body and soul.

“Skylar, oh gods. I love you,” she cried, her flesh tightening around me as she surrendered.

When she quieted, she put her hand beneath my chin. “Come here.” I moved up until we lay face to face again, Alexis’ hand immediately straying to my chest.

“I believe it is time I made you beg,” she smiled.

I returned her grin but shook my head. “I would not last long enough.” I took her hand and placed it between my legs. “I am so close already.”

Alexis massaged my sensitive flesh as the first ripples gripped me. “Then be quick,” she demanded, slipping one finger inside.

“Gods! Alexis please!” I cried, losing myself to the wave as she worked my body relentlessly. When she felt my muscles relax again, she drew out, resting her hand on my hip. “Gods,” I muttered.

“Indeed,” Alexis agreed with a grin.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” I whispered, resting my forehead against hers.

“Not since I woke,” she replied, tracing one finger over my ribs and across the straining muscles of my stomach.

My heart continued to race beneath my chest, the familiar stirring of desire beginning again as though we had not just revelled in one another, nor spent most of the night doing the same. “How remiss of me,” I grinned, leaning forward to kiss her. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she replied, adding in an urgent whisper, “I want to have a child with you.”

“What?” I asked, my body instantly tensing, the flutters of desire replaced with a different type of adrenaline.

She tightened her grip at my waist. “I want to have a child with you,” she repeated.

I shook my head and pushed back the light blanket as I threw my legs over the side of the bed. The cold marble floor was a shock after the heat of our passion, but I paced naked across it between the bed and the high window.

The initial shock of Alexis’ words began to wear off, replaced instead by too many questions and an underlying fear I could not quite name. She allowed me the stiff movements and the time to arrange my thoughts without interruption. I could not look at her. I knew if I did I would not ask her the questions I must. Questions that could not be overlooked or dismissed so easily. Questions I knew would hurt to ask if she gave answers I did not wish to hear.

Finally, keeping my eyes on my feet and the marble below them, I spoke. “It is not as simple as me taking you to bed, of making love to you. I cannot simply lie with you and put a child inside your belly.”

“I understand that Skylar, but there are ways for us to have a family together.”

“How?” I asked, looking up and watching her carefully.

“Thaddeus,” she replied, colour rising in her cheeks.

I stopped pacing. “Thaddeus?” I repeated, anger flaring in my chest.

“He has offered to aid u—”

“You spoke with *Thaddeus* before you spoke to me about this? Before we could discuss how I felt about having children? A family?” My hands clenched and unclenched, the fear growing within. “What if it is not what I want? What if I say no?”

“Nothing has been decided. You can say no if it is not what you wish for,” she murmured, dropping her eyes.

I stared at her a long moment, willing the racing of my heart to calm before I spoke again. “Why now when we have only just begun our life together? Why must we rush to add children?”

“If we were betrothed, it would be expected of us.”

“So, you wish for us to be betrothed?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. “I have travelled to many places and known many ways, but I have never heard of two women being betrothed before. Besides, you are a *Princess*, how would that be viewed by your people here in Trachis?”

“It is not betrothal with you I seek, Skylar. I do not need to be called wife, or call another the same to want children,” she replied, raising her eyes to mine again. She crawled across the bed and joined me on the floor, taking a deep breath before she reached out to lay her hand on my arm. “You know that Basileios and I could not have children of our own. I do not know why that was, but perhaps it is as you once said to me; that he was not the one worthy of that gift.”

Perhaps I have always been waiting for someone who truly loved me; someone who wanted to be with me because they loved me so completely, not because it satisfied someone else's strategic alliance."

I shook my head in frustration. "But *I* cannot give you what you want Alexis ... and I would rather spend eternity in Tartarus than allow Thaddeus to lie with you."

"Skylar, it is the only way."

"No. I forbid it." I shook her hand from my arm and took up my pacing once more.

"You forbid it?" she asked, her eyebrows rising high on her forehead.

"Yes."

"Why? If he can give us what we want, why would you not allow it?"

"I should not have to explain my reasons to you," I shouted. "You should know I would *never* allow anyone else to put their hands on you in such a manner. It is torturous enough knowing Melanthios did."

"Skyl—"

"No. You are *mine*, Alexis. You encouraged me to claim you from Melanthios and I did. I killed him so we could be together. So why do you think I would now allow someone else to take you to bed?"

"I could have just gone ahead and done it; not told you until I was with child," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I spun to face her, my feet as heavy as the marble beneath them. Every hair on my body stood on end. Hot anger infused my stomach, clenching against her words.

Was Alexis truly capable of such a betrayal? I had not believed it to be in her nature. This was the woman who had asked me for protection before she asked me for love; whom I gave my unquestioning protection to before I truly loved her. Perhaps some of Melanthios' cruelty had been left inside her. My jaw clenched at the thought.

"You considered the action?" I managed, pulling my tunic roughly over my head and picking up my weapons.

"Of course not ... Skylar, wait, please," she began, reaching out for me.

I kept out of her reach, yanking open the door and slamming it behind me as I left. I headed out of the central chamber and made my way to the barracks. I needed to spar, to sweat and ache from the physical exertion training had always brought. I needed to silence her words and my own thoughts. My anger burned hot and I wished Father was still in Trachis. At least he would understand my unwillingness to have Alexis lie with another, to share in my rage that she could even suggest such a thing. But I did not know when he would return. I was alone with Alexis' request, with her desires. It was true that I had never been able to deny her anything she wanted, but this ... how could I gift her this when I did not have what she needed and could not allow what she asked of me to make it so? It was impossible.