

**FAR FROM THERMOPYLAE – SPOILERS – DO NOT READ UNLESS YOU HAVE
FINISHED BOOK 4: DARK THERMOPYLAE**

1

**Pass of Coela, Southern Thessaly
5th rising, Moon of Anthesterion, 489BC**

“Sander, you are no good to us here in your current state. You have to go back to Trachis. In a moon your body will be healed and you can return,” I told him.

“No, please, I can stay, I ca—”

“This discussion is over. We cannot worry about you as well as any approaching enemies. Kleitos will take you back,” I insisted, softening when I saw the flash of anger and pain dart across his features. “Look, I understand your frustration, I am sure you remember when I suffered from broken bones and had to stay in my room at the palace.”

“I remember,” he said, unable to keep the grin breaking out. “You were obnoxious and demanding and Skylar had to find endless patience, and new stories to keep you occupied.”

I returned the smile. “I am sure you will not be quite as annoying for your wife and daughters.”

He blew out a breath and nodded. “I suppose I should be grateful to see them again so soon.”

“An excellent way to look at it,” I agreed, squeezing his shoulder.

Sander and Kleitos had been out scouting for enemies when Sander’s horse had slipped on the slick ground and he had fallen off, crashing onto a sharp rock and injuring his leg. The rest of us had been at the Pass, the constant rain and immobility grating on everyone’s nerves, and it was almost a relief when Kleitos brought Sander back and we had to spring into action to attend his injury and get him ready to transport back to Trachis.

“I am ready,” Kleitos announced, leading his and Sander’s horses to where we stood, a cart attached to the back of his, and filled with material and straw. Sander would be travelling the day’s ride south to Trachis in the cart in what we hoped was relative comfort but Lysistratos had also prepared a mixture of herbs to dull his pain.

Moeris and one of the younger epebes helped Sander into the cart and I lay a blanket over him, placing his sword within easy reach. “Safe travels to you both,” I said, taking Kleitos, and Sander’s arms and squeezing.

“I shall return as soon as I can,” Kleitos nodded, Sander echoing his words.

I stepped aside to let the other soldiers offer their own wishes or exchange a last joke with their friend and headed back into the tent, welcoming the warmth and dryness the heavy leather overhead afforded. Torches had been wedged in the ground at regular intervals so it was not only warm, but bright as well – a stark contrast to the darkness outside.

I stood in the doorway and watched the cart pull away, recalling when Thaddeus and Hesper had visited me on one of those boring days when I had been confined to my room. I had been frightened to face them the first time I woke, sure they would be angry with me for Tritonos’ death. But they did not blame me at all, wanting only for me to get well again. Hesper left to tend to their other children but Thaddeus remained, sharing his own tale of a similar injury a winter or so before I was born, and the perils of animals frightening other animals.

He told me he had been travelling with my mothers when a hare jumped across in front of his horse, Darko. The hare was trying to escape a snake, and when Darko caught sight of the slithering beast, he reared up onto his hind legs. Thaddeus had been walking beside his steed at the time, and he overbalanced, slipping down an embankment, breaking his leg and getting knocked out. He told me then, that no matter how careful we are, sometimes accidents happen – especially when serpents and horses are involved. He had hugged me and placed a kiss on my forehead, telling me to get some rest and that he would stay with me until I fell asleep. I closed my eyes, not quite asleep some time later when he whispered that even though he mourned deeply for Tritonos, he was glad Nikomachos and me were safe. I had not thought to ask Thaddeus at the

time where he and my mothers had been going, but I wondered it now and I frowned; it was just another question about them I had no answer for.

The soldiers returned to their posts outside or jostled past me and into the tent. I wished for nothing more than to be alone and try to remember the other stories Mumma had shared with me while my body healed, but I joined them around the four torches clustered together in the middle of the sleeping area. Moeris and Lysistratos were the last to arrive, the former closing the flap of the tent behind them and gathering four amphorae. Moeris settled himself beside me, pouring the wine into cups Lysistratos brought over and handed out.

“We have neither heard, nor seen enemies for days. No doubt they have been kept at home by the rain and sodden trails we find ourselves amidst on this gods-forsaken night,” our commander said, draining his cup and pouring another.

He had already had consumed at least two or three amphorae before Sander and Kleitos arrived back, not that I could not blame him, having taken one myself to sit alone with Philo for most of the afternoon. Both of us were only too aware of what today was. I had carefully avoided a number of the older soldiers, not wanting to be drawn into their memories and stories. But sitting beside them all now, and hearing the tone of Moeris’ voice, I knew I would not be able to avoid it any longer.

“My friends, it is with heavy heart that we come together this night,” he paused, draping his arm across my shoulders. I allowed him the gesture, knowing it was more for his sake than mine that he held me so close. “For those of you old enough to remember, it was ten winters ago this night that our beloved Princess Alexis, and her wife, Skylar, were taken from us by the Persian scum who would seek to take our lands. Our king’s favoured guard, Thaddeus, also lost his life as he attempted to save his friends. We mourn for them now, as we did then, never forgetting what they did for our city, nor the way they touched us so deeply.

“When our princess needed rescuing, Skylar was there for her. Skylar saved her from betrothal to a man who would have treated her with none of the respect or love Skylar did. Skylar ensured our people were safe when that man’s family returned seeking Alexis again. And she did not allow an army to stand between her and her lover – vanquishing the entirety of them alone, fire her only companion.”

I blew out a deep breath. Moeris only ever told *that* story after he had drunk too much. I did not know if it was true, but none of the other soldiers who were there ever corrected him. I had never asked for details. Had never wanted them; angry with Mumma that if it *were* true, why she had not been able to save herself or Mother Alexis when a mere five Persians came to the palace winters later.

“I ask you all now to raise your cups and join me in a toast.” Moeris paused and took his arm from me so I could lift mine, waiting for everyone else to do the same. “To Thaddeus, who stood beside our king before he was known as such. Best friend, favoured confidante when they were boys in Macedonia. He chose to join Agrias in the south, to stand beside him as protector and friend as he faced my people – the Malians – and spoke of his plans to create a thriving town and prosperous trade route at Trachis. Together they built what they had promised and I too came to call them both friend; pledging my sword to Agrias and leading his soldiers when he asked it of me.

“Thaddeus, who stood bravely by Alexis and Skylar’s side the night they were taken, his own sword not enough to fend off the attackers and save himself. Thaddeus, whom Lysistratos’ wife called Father until he was too early taken by the scourge of those from across the waters. We remember you and mourn you, this night more so than any other.”

“To Thaddeus,” I repeated, the soldiers around me doing the same, each of us taking long gulps of our wine. I caught Lysistratos’ eye and we nodded to one another in respect. I lowered my cup again, preparing for Moeris’ next words, having heard them every winter since that night, but feeling the sting of them just the same.

“To Princess Alexis, the beautiful daughter of our king and queen. A friend to all who met her, her gentle nature capturing many hearts. She left for Epirus as a child, her betrothal meant to keep our town safe. It was not to be though and when she returned to us, that danger followed her. Were it not for Skylar, and the love she found with Alexis, our princess would have been lost to us far earlier than she was. We called you friend, as well as Princess and we remember you and mourn you, this night more so than any other.”

“To Alexis,” I managed, my throat closing up as I recalled the quiet songs she used to sing me before bed. Moeris drained his cup, his eyes on me as the man beside him refilled it. He reached out to lay his hand on my forearm. I swallowed and nodded to him, dropping my gaze.

“And to Skylar, who was not seeking love when she arrived in Trachis, yet embraced it when it found her. She fought without fear for herself, her only thought to keep her princess, and then her daughter, Ava, safe from those who would attempt them harm,” he paused again and reluctantly I raised my eyes to his and took up the words.

“She commanded the army jointly with Moeris until her last day, never faltering in her duty to the people of Trachis. She joined the army in their campaigns to make sure threats did not come to the palace.”

“Until that last day,” Moeris murmured. “It was only the trickery of the Persians which saw Skylar caught unawares. So we say now: to Skylar; the vanquisher of armies ... and Alexis, the princess who loved her. We mourn you this night more than any other.”

“To Skylar,” the men shouted, my voice lost among theirs. I finished the last drops in my cup and pushed myself to my feet, a number of the newest recruits descending on Moeris. I heard their requests for the details of the fire Mumma used to destroy the army, but pushed through the flap of the tent before I heard his reply.

The cold outside hit me as it had on the beach as I stood by their pyres so many winters ago. I let the tears come, their heat stinging my eyes as they escaped and slid down my cheeks. A gentle arm around my shoulders announced Lysistratos’ arrival.

“I wish we were with Eumelia – she must mourn for her father alone tonight,” he said quietly.

I swiped at my face, knowing Lysistratos would never tease me about my tears, but still not wanting him to see me cry. “She will be reminded of her mother also, for with Thaddeus’ death, so came Hesper’s,” I nodded, pleased my voice was even.

“Indeed,” he agreed.

“It is good she has Phaidros with her; a helpless child who will keep her strong until you return to her side.”

“Until we both return,” he corrected me.

I inclined my head again, the hint of a smile on my lips. “I am not the one she wishes for most.”

“Perhaps not, but she wants you safely back in Trachis just the same.”

“I know,” I murmured.

The tent flap opened again and Moeris stumbled out. He nodded to us both before gripping me tightly in an embrace. “I miss her, miss them both so much,” he slurred.

I held him fiercely as I replied. “Me too.”

With effort he released me, adjusting his cuirass and placing his hand atop the pommel of his sword. He cleared his throat, his voice gruff, but not unkind, when he spoke again. “Go get some sleep, both of you. I shall take first watch.”

“It shall clear your head,” Lysistratos grinned.

“Go,” Moeris warned, swiping at the younger man. Lysistratos laughed and held the leather open for me. I made my way beneath the sagging roof of the tent to the small area I had made for myself among the other soldiers.

Ten winters had already passed since the night my mothers were killed. I could not imagine what the next ten would hold for me and those I loved, just as I had not known what it would then. I lay down on the hard ground and closed my eyes, hoping sleep would find me quickly and that the light of morning would bring with it clearer weather and a lighter heart, though I did not hold out much hope for either.