

PRINCESS OF THERMOPYLAE

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Xiokambi, Southern Peloponnese, Greece 3rd waning, Moon of Gamelion, 528bc

The dark, three-sided shape burned bright against the pale olive skin of her left shoulder, mocking me with its presence. Her mark was the same as mine, the same as my mother's and her mother's before and her mother's before that, all the way back to the beginning of our line. I did not know how many there had been before me but I had wished, hoped, there would be none after.

I held her as she cried, so tiny and fragile. She quieted when Leandros wrapped her in a blanket. She was mine, ours, theirs; the knowledge of that last truth terrified me.

With eyes of the brightest blue, they matched her father's and she stared up, capturing my red ones with such intensity. Tendrils of dark hair lay across her brow and down to the nape of her neck, slick with the memory of her birth. She had the roundest cheeks and most perfect lips, both tinted in hues of pink. But that one symbol, that dark mark on her skin, haunted me. It reminded me of where I had come from, of who I truly was. Of who *she* might one day become.

Those who did not know of my past would assume it was a birthmark, matching the one on my shoulder. How many nights had I laid awake while Leandros slept, wishing and hoping that our child would not bear it? I had allowed his love, his words, to convince me that she would not. I had wanted to believe him, to believe that our union would alter the line. But it had not. I would always know the truth, as would he, and we could never tell our daughter what it truly meant.

Leandros' voice brought me from my thoughts. "She is beautiful," he whispered.

He gazed at our child with such adoration that for a moment I forgot my fears and simply basked in the ardour that shone from his eyes. He was my dearest love, the only man I had ever wanted. The only man I would have dared flee my family with. He was everything to me.

"She has your eyes," I said with a smile.

"And your mouth," he replied, returning my grin.

I dropped my eyes back to our child, my smile fading. "She also has my mark. We can only hope that with half-mortal blood, she is free of the curse."

Leandros drew the small blanket away from the baby's shoulder and nodded.

"We agreed that if she had it, we would never tell her what it meant. You *are* still prepared to keep the knowledge from her, are you not?" I asked desperately.

"Of course, Zita. We shall keep her safe and far from your family, protecting her no matter the cost," he said, resettling the blanket.

I exhaled. I should not have doubted him; he loved me as deeply as I loved him. He would do whatever he could to keep us all safe. The arrival of our daughter only strengthened that, I saw it in the set of his face.

"We should name her Skylar," I said with a smile.

"Skylar," he repeated. "It is as beautiful as she."

Fierce agony suddenly plunged deep into my back, high up on my shoulder blades. The mark on my shoulder burned hot. I screamed, thrusting Skylar into Leandros' arms. No! They could not know of her, they must not find her.

"What is it? What is wrong?" Leandros asked; his hand immediately at my shoulder.

“My family have found us, they are coming. I can feel it.”

“How?”

“My mark. It burns with the knowledge.”

“How did they find us?”

“I do not know. There is little time before they arrive. They shall make me kill you.”

“They cannot, they gave their word to Ares th—”

I shook my head. There was no time to tell him all I could feel. I cried out again, clutching at my arm. “He has given them permission,” I replied through gritted teeth.

“Do they know of our child?”

I shook my head, rocking back and forth against the pain. “I cannot tell, but they shall be here at any moment. You must take Skylar and go far away.”

“But ...”

“Take her. Keep constantly on the move, just as we have these past moons, never stay in one place for too long. Please. If they find her with the mark, they shall take her back and raise her as one of their own.”

“Then you must join us as soon as you are able,” Leandros said, lifting my chin with his finger.

“Of course,” I replied, knowing it would not be so. Leandros handed Skylar back to me and rushed about, collecting items he believed we would need. “Hide the cloths from her birth,” I added.

He only nodded in reply, throwing the bloodied material into the fire before returning to his task. I held Skylar to my chest, kissing her soft forehead and taking in the smell of her.

“I am so sorry. This is not how I wished for it to be. But you must know this: I shall never forget you. I love you my darling. Forever.” I whispered the words to my daughter, knowing there would be no more between us in this life.

Leandros returned to my side. I passed Skylar to him. He bent down, kissing me fiercely on the mouth, and I felt the slight tremor as his lips pressed against mine.

“I shall see you soon,” he said quietly.

I managed a smile, nodding as he crossed to the door. He looked back once, then drew a deep breath and walked out, the wood shutting behind him with a soft thud.

The sharp, stabbing pains at my back increased in intensity the closer my family got. Even from such a distance, I could hear the flap of their wings. Mine threatened to emerge in response, but something held them beneath the skin. I realised it was that action causing the torturous discomfort.

I screamed again, digging my nails into the earth beneath my fingers. The owner of the house, Sotiris, entered the room.

“What is it?” he asked. “Is it the baby? Where is Leandros?”

“You must run, please. Go far from here.”

“What do you speak of? What is that noise?” he asked, lifting his head to search the empty air above him.

“Danger,” was the only reply I gave.

My family arrived outside, announcing their presence with a deafening screech. The small room lit up. Through the window, tall flames leapt, and though I could not see their tops, I knew they would reach high into the sky. “Go,” I told Sotiris again, and this time he did not hesitate.

The straw roof ignited above me, the unseen force censoring my wings and rendering me unable to move. Such power could only be wielded by our master, though I could not feel him nearby.

“Find them!” a voice commanded.

I did not immediately recognise the speaker but three of my kin entered the house. Two hoisted me up by my arms and dragged me roughly outside.

A large group had come, twenty at least; I looked for my mother, but she was not among them. With hair the colour of ravens, long and as tangled as my own, their faces and bodies resembled women. Large black wings erupted from their shoulder blades, flapping as the wings of birds did, mine remaining trapped beneath my skin.

I was swept up into a vertical sphere of wind; my cousin Canace commanding the element (though I had never known her to be able to do so before) and the Keres around her.

“Where is the boy you defied your family to be with?” she asked, smiling wickedly, her hair whipping about her face.

I did not answer. Canace would take much pleasure in my demise, of that I was certain. We were of similar age, but Ares had said it would be *my* mother’s line that would carry his Chosen One, not hers. Over the winters Canace had attempted to obtain my power for herself. I had always had Ares’ protection from her. Clearly tonight I would not.

Canace turned to the gathered group. “Find him!” she shouted.

She had barely uttered the words when the third Ker who had entered the burning building emerged with Sotiris. The roof collapsed behind them, the walls crumbling beneath its weight as the fire consumed all with an unstoppable need.

“Forgive me,” I whispered to Sotiris.

He did not hear me over his frightened pleas for life.

Canace approached, picking him up by the back of his ash-smudged chiton. “So, this is the boy you defied us for?”

“No, I am not the one,” Sotiris said. “She came to me w—”

“He is my Leandros. My lover,” I cut him off. “He is the one I defied my family and the proud history of the Keres for.”

Grandmother Rizpah stepped forward, the usually black symbol on her left shoulder that marked us as kin glowing red. Canace gave her a triumphant smile. Grandmother nodded in return and sent two long flames to engulf myself and Sotiris. I writhed as the heat singed my skin.

“No!” I cried, attempting to call forth my wings and break free of the wind and flames.

Tears wet my cheeks. I knew this was to be my end. I hoped Leandros had gone far and fast. I prayed our daughter would grow outside the reach of my family, never to know what had been foretold.

My grandmother recalled the flames to her hand as Canace addressed me again. “You shall kill this boy who has brought you such shame and you shall experience his pain as your own. Do you understand?”

I nodded and Canace released me from the wind.

“Do it now,” she commanded.

At once, my wings sprung from my shoulders. Sudden hunger flooded my veins.

“I am so sorry,” I murmured.

I leapt, ripping apart Sotiris’ flesh with sharp claws and pointed teeth. His blood filled my mouth, soothing and sating me at the same time as it scalded my throat and stomach. Where I

drove my teeth into his skin, my own body stung, but I did not stop until his head and limbs were separated from his body.

Panting, I straightened, wiping blood from my face as my wings retreated again. The group clustered around me. Canace rested her hand on my shoulder. A sneer creased her features as she ran her finger across my collarbone.

“Pathetic,” she muttered, ripping the amulet from my neck. “You do not deserve to carry the Chosen One’s line. Kill her,” she ordered.

The pack, led by my grandmother, dove on me in a frenzied feeding attack.

My kin. Those I had once called friends. Those I had spent days over the battlefields with. Those I had celebrated with. Those I had loved. They bit and tore at me as we had once torn at the mortals together. Charged. Feverish. Insatiable.

I felt the pain as their teeth shredded my body, but the tears in my heart were far greater than the physical wounds they inflicted. I screamed, kicked, scratched. I knew I could not overpower them, yet I fought all the same. I fought because once it was all I had ever known. I fought because I would never see my daughter grow. I fought because I would never kiss the man I loved or make love to him again. I fought for as long as I could, but soon my limbs were severed, my blood drained. My screams no more than gasps.

I closed my eyes, succumbing to my death with nothing louder than a whimper.