

## THE KER AT THERMOPYLAE

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### Trachis, Thermopylae Later 10<sup>th</sup>, Moon of Gamelion, 508BC

Pressure at my forearm pulled me from the darkness. Hot fingers gripped me, nails digging into my skin. "I have only just found you, you changed my life. Do not make me walk alone in this world. I cannot do it again. Come back to me, Skylar. Please, I beg it of you. I cannot do this without you."

Alexis. Fear laced her pleas. I opened my eyes, panic fluttering in my stomach. My neck ached and my chin rested against the smooth leather armour covering my chest. *How long was I unconscious?* I attempted to move my arms, but they were bound, holding me tight against a wooden chair. Pain stabbed at my shoulder blades, reminding me where I was, and what was happening. Ares. The Keres. The baby.

Images returned with frightening clarity and other sounds emerged as I fought against my bindings. I raised my head and the circle of Keres came into view. We were no longer in the courtyard of the palace, but in the room Alexis and I shared. The women all had their eyes closed. Hands clasped together, fingers of the two either side of me wrapped around my upper arms to form an unbroken circle. Their black wings flapped silently, moving the fire-warmed air in the room.

Alexis sat within the circle, grimacing.

The Keres chanted words, almost melodic in their repetitiveness; soft, encouraging. I did not understand the language, but I felt their meaning. They were going to bring the baby inside Alexis into the world. The power swirling about our bedroom intensified. It would not be long now.

I bucked against the ropes, finally breaking free of them, and the hands holding me. I jumped to my feet. Alexis screamed, grabbing at her swollen belly and I sent up a prayer that Artemis would protect Alexis, as well as our child, as she entered the world. I unsheathed the sword at my thigh, driving the metal blade into the Ker to my left. Her eyes grew wide as she grabbed at her injury, dropping to the floor as I wrenched my sword from her suddenly lifeless body. I had no sooner retrieved my weapon than Ares was beside Alexis, his face a mask of concentration as he continued the chant of the Keres. He shouted the foreign words as though attempting to mask the loss of the Ker I had slain.

I turned to the next Ker, slicing her head from her neck in a spray of blood. Ares' voice heightened in response. I rounded the circle, cutting and slashing at the monstrous women before they could mount defence against me. I had counted twenty back in the courtyard, but that number had swelled since I lost consciousness. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck as I drove my blade into body after body, and I only stopped at Alexis' cry of "No!"

I turned. Dianthe held a small, pink child in her arms. She stared in surprise at the bare patch on its left shoulder. Ares too, looked on in disbelief, taking the baby and inspecting every inch of her. My baby girl.

The wispy smattering of hair atop her tiny head matched the dark shade of my own. She cried at Ares' rough treatment and I sheathed my weapon, crossing to them in two strides and snatching my daughter from him. Her howls quieted as I drew her to my chest.

"She is not one of you. Leave this place. Do not return. Ever," I growled.

“She does not carry your mark. She is not your Chosen One,” Alexis panted, reaching her hand up to me. I helped her across to the bed, handing her our child and settling them both on the covers.

“She does not wear the completed mark,” Ares murmured.

“It must be there. Eir told you she would,” Dianthe replied.

I turned and drew my sword on Ares and my grandmother. “Get. Out,” I snarled.

“She is powerful, Granddaughter,” Dianthe said. “With your tainted blood and lack of wings, you may not have felt it, but she is of the line. She *is* the one.”

“No!” I screamed. I charged at Dianthe and slammed my sword into her stomach. Blood spilled from her mouth, dripping to the floor to pool with the blood from the wound. I retrieved my weapon again as she grabbed at her insides, choking on the mucus in her throat before she fell to the ground.

I levelled my weapon at Ares, but he only howled in response, disappearing in a flash of light and leaving Alexis and I alone in the room with the bodies of my kin. I put away my sword and returned to her side, taking our daughter and checking for the mark myself. There was no three-sided shape on her shoulder as there was mine. No indication at all that the blood of the Keres, of Ares, ran through her.

Her eyes matched Alexis’ in their greenness. She looked up at me with those familiar, orbs, innocence and openness written across her small, pink face. I smiled. My daughter. Our daughter. Strong and healthy.

How could I have wanted to end her life before she could show me that she did not belong to them; that she belonged to us? No matter what Ares believed, I would always protect her from him, teach her to be strong and resist whatever he offered her. She would know what I had not when she was old enough.

I kissed her forehead and handed her back to Alexis, crossing to the door and lifting the timber lock. My father and Thaddeus burst into the room, swords and shields in hand, eyes wide as they surveyed the scene in front of them. “Where is Ares?” Father asked.

“Gone,” I replied.

“You killed them all?” Thaddeus added, kneeling beside each Ker, searching for signs of life.

“Yes.”

“Even Dianthe?” Father queried.

“Yes,” I said again, pointing out her lifeless body.

Father’s eyes held mine for a moment before he turned his attention to Alexis. “Are you alright?” he asked. “The child?”

Alexis managed a smile for him. “I am well. Come, meet your granddaughter.”

The smile that split my father’s face could have lit the room on a dark winter’s eve. He dropped his weapons and crossed to Alexis, taking the child and wrapping her in a long length of material when Alexis offered it to him.

His eyes found her shoulder, as ours all had, and his grin widened when he saw she bore nothing there. “My darling girl,” he crooned, drawing in the smell of the small child as he cradled her against his large body.

“How are you?” Thaddeus asked quietly, a hand on my arm.

“Alive,” I replied. “Go see our child,” I added, gesturing in Alexis’ direction.

One side of his mouth lifted in a grin and he gave me a curt nod, making his way to the rest of my small family.

With the three of them occupied with the child, I slipped out of the room. Leaning against the cold stone wall, I blew out a deep breath.

“She is perfect, Alexis,” Thaddeus said, his voice carrying through the still-open door. “Welcome to Trachis, sweetheart.”

*Welcome indeed, I thought. What shall await you as you grow, daughter of mine?*