



*Legends are born,
not made.*

Son of
Sparta

SARA REINKE

SON OF SPARTA

By Sara Reinke

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FOREWORD

Much about the civilization of ancient Sparta is shrouded in mystery. Unlike other dominant cultures of the fifth century B.C., such as the Greek city-state of Athens, Spartans did not rely much on art, architecture or literature to celebrate or document their daily lives or accomplishments. Thus much about what is known about them today is based on anecdotal accounts provided by their contemporaries, most often from Athens. It is important to note that Spartan society differed greatly in many critical aspects from that of Athens, and the two city-states were often rivals, and more frequently, enemies. Theirs was a relationship akin to that of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. Considering, as previously mentioned, Athens is often history's only source for recorded information about Sparta, one may assume that they opted to paint as unflattering a portrait as possible whenever possible.

Sparta itself also tried at times to provide clues as to its history. In ancient Rome, Spartans revived many of their more legendary cultural practices. However, these were more often than not inaccurate variations of actual—but long since unused—practices revised for little more than the shock or entertainment value they provided Roman tourists. Sparta had become, in essence, the Colonial Williamsburg of the Roman Empire—without the meticulous attention to historical detail.

Unfortunately, much of this misinformation persists even to this day. In researching *Son of Sparta*, one of the greatest challenges was sorting through all of the different accounts of the Spartan culture to try and put together what I personally felt was a fair and accurate depiction of this unique and fascinating culture.

One of the bigger historical debates about Sparta is whether they used sodomy as part of the state-mandated training program all Spartan boys underwent. There are many accounts of this being the case. Again, however, since much of the information we have today on Sparta came from its arch

nemesis, Athens, one suspects Athens might have tried to cast as disparaging a light as possible in this respect.

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that in ancient times, sodomy between men and boys, particularly in a mentor-student relationship, did not have the negative social or moral connotations as it does today. It's difficult for us to view such practices with contemporary values and mores and not be offended, but in the classical world, this was common.

In ancient Sparta, if it was employed, sodomy might have been a way to keep boys emotionally distanced from their mentors. Spartan men trained from early childhood to become soldiers, and the boys they entered training with became the soldiers alongside whom they would one day fight and die. Their emotional attachments were meant to belong solely to these fellows in their own ranks. Since adult mentors helped guide and train the children, it's possible sodomy prevented boys from viewing them as father-figures, growing fond of them, and thus potentially weakening the emotional bonds within their own ranks.

I don't know if they did it or why. It's something I find abhorrent, but I found enough anecdotal evidence of its prevalence in Spartan culture that I felt it would be inappropriate not to include its mention in this story. However, I also felt that, regardless of the fact that during that time, this was considered acceptable by adults, the emotional and physical toll it would take upon the children who suffered from it would be no different then than now. I tried to reflect this, as well, in the story.

Ancient Spartans lived in strictly segregated communities, men kept deliberately from women—even after marriages. State laws mandated almost every aspect of their daily lives. And unlike other classical societies, including Athens, Sparta awarded its women unprecedented power and privilege, including the ability to own and manage property.

Although much about Sparta remains, as previously stated, shrouded in mystery, it is certain that this was a culture that impressed emperors of Rome and conquerors like Napoleon—and continues to influence our world even to this

day. The courage of Sparta served to galvanize the world; and in my story, the courage of her least likely son served to inspire her most celebrated and controversial kings.

- *Sara Reinke (2009)*

PROLOGUE

480 B.C.

I stood my ground, planting my heels in the earth I would likely be buried in by day's end. The sun was not even a glowing hint against the horizon as we prepared ourselves, three hundred Spartiates—Sparta's chosen sons—dressed in bronze armor and hefting our shields against our arms. As we gathered beyond the defensive wall, in the narrow channel where the cliffs of Kallidromos pressed eastward toward the sea, a scrap of land known as Thermopylae, the only sounds among us were the clattering of our armor plates as we moved, the thudding rhythm of our footfalls against the ground and the rush of water drawing against the beach.

The phalanxes formed, men flanking one another in tight files, the broad circumferences of their shields overlapping before them. We stood facing north, with the fluttering illumination of torches caught in the breeze draping across our ranks, glittering against polished bronze and sharpened spear points. There was no sound but the sea; the wind rustling our cloaks and the measure of our own breaths to break the heavy weight of silence.

We heard the Persians before we even saw them. The thrumming of their feet came to us faintly at first, like distant drums. It grew louder, reverberating off of the sheer cliff faces to our left, until we could feel it in the ground. The earth beneath us trembled and when the sun began to rise, we could see them. The dawn's first glow struck against their armor, their weapons. They came upon us, filling the narrow channel of the pass, and their footfalls became like thunder.

"Gods above," Dieneces whispered from my left. We stood five rows back from the front line of the shield wall, each of us calling orders to divisions within the phalanx.

"Call the march," one of the senior officers behind us shouted out, his voice carrying like a bell toll on the morning

air. Other seniors picked up the call, barking out the command, and the flutists trilled out sharp, sudden notes.

“Present your shields!” I shouted. From my left, Dienes voice overlapped with mine as we relayed orders to our troops. The men of the phalanxes moved in tandem, shifting the weights of their shields against their arms and presenting the bronze plates in full to the north. The flutes trilled again, and more orders were called. We began to advance, marching in perfect unison.

The thunder of our footsteps could not drown out that of my heart. I could not breathe; my throat had collapsed in on itself, and I do not know how I forced my voice out to call my commands. “Present your pikes!” I shouted, and the first three rows of advancing hoplites shifted again, lowering their spears, presenting them towards the advancing Persians.

I was shaking; I could feel fright and adrenaline surging through me, seizing my limbs, collapsing around my heart. The earth shuddered beneath me, as much from the measured rhythm of the phalanx as the Persians. They were upon us now, near enough for me to see the front line brandished short spears; I could see ranks of archers behind these.

The flute called out, and our pace doubled for the charge. The Persians matched our strides, a low, resonant battle cry stirring as they advanced. The cries were picked up and began to grow, and when they quickened their pace and plowed towards us, they roared together—a din so loud, it drowned out the sounds of the ocean.

We fell together and suddenly this sea of men, this seemingly impenetrable wave of Persians broke before us, smashed by our bronze shield wall. From the sounds of it, the world itself split open along an unexpected seam; the ground beneath me shuddered with the brutal impact, and I felt the resounding thrum ripple back through the phalanx ranks, through my shield and into my shoulder as I closed in upon the hoplite in front of me.

The Persian archers scrambled for position as their front lines were forced back. They launched arrows at us; for

every volley, we ducked our heads behind the shelter of our shields, using the bronze to protect our faces while arrows skittered and careened wildly off our helmets.

The Persian infantrymen were well accustomed to hand-to-hand combat—and armed for it with swords and knives—but we were trained to fight headlong and shield-first; their blades were of no benefit or defense. They could not strike past the overlapping plates, and when they tried, scrambling for footing to draw their swords around, they were crushed in our path, plowed from their feet and trampled under our heels.

Their advantage was the sheer number of these soldiers—their king, Xerxes’ personal fodder shoved forward to greet us, tire us, wear us down. Our own king, Leonidas had anticipated this; that Xerxes would seek no more in this opening round than to exhaust us by the sheer effort of even easily repelling his troops. The challenge would come, Leonidas had told us, when Xerxes dispatched his more seasoned ground troops—those outfitted to challenge us truly, and when we were least prepared.

“Xerxes’ personal contingents are called the Immortals,” he had said. “They are the best of his troops—the finest jewels within the coffer of his army. When he sends them, they will come like frenzied dogs upon a scent, and that is precisely how we shall send them back to Xerxes—rotted curs with their asses whipped and cowed!”

“Forward on!” I screamed. We had advanced so far to the north that now I stumbled over fallen Persians underfoot. They were crushed and trampled; I punted my feet again and again into bellies and skulls. I felt hands grope weakly, pawing at me as I passed. Fingertips hooked into the edges of my greaves, and I let my spear shaft slip against my palm, the tip swinging downward. I shoved the sharpened point in a fierce thrust; blood sprayed against my leg all of the way to my thigh, and when I stumbled forward, kicking mightily, I felt the groping fingers slip away.

We forced ourselves upon this first wave of assault until the Persians withdrew, turning from us and retreating

along the pass. I could hear the commanders screaming not to follow and I shrieked myself hoarse to draw my columns to staggering halts. Leonidas and Talos shouted for the rows to rotate out, to bring fresh shoulders and spear-arms to the lead.

We had barely shifted positions, moving swiftly with the flutists to mark our time before they came again. A new wave surged forward, fresh troops from Xerxes' endless reserves rushing down the pass in a grim and thunderous procession.

"Forward on!" I shouted to the hoplites along the shield wall, as a new cadence bleated out from the flutes, calling them to their marks. "Forward on—present your pikes!"

The front lines lowered their spears as we charged to meet them, and again, their frontlines could not withstand the brutal power of our shield wall. They slammed into us and the phalanxes carved a trough through them like a blade through loose soil; they fell in all directions, their arms flapping skyward, their spears shattering and swords flying, their fingers splayed helplessly as we marched over them.

Xerxes' archers crouched among the bodies of their fallen fellows and began to pelt us again with barrage after barrage of arrow attacks, hoping to cause a man to stumble and break formation, to let the front line falter. For every Greek who fell from his line, the hoplite behind him was there to immediately push forward, locking his shield against his neighbors' and leveling his pike to keep any advancing enemy from forcing through the ranks.

"Hold the line! Forward on!" I screamed, as a man in one of my column fronts toppled gracelessly. The hoplite behind him charged forward to fill the space in the shield wall as I shouted out in command. I could hear the clatter of bronze-rimmed shields slamming into desperate position together, overlapping and interlocking against strong arms as the hoplites held the line.

Again, we drove the Persians north to retreat, and again, Leonidas and the commanders called us back toward the wall. We recoiled in quick time, withdrawing from the channel and back toward our encampments, holding our ranks tightly

as Leondias shouted out for rotations in the front lines. “Fortify the ranks!” the officers behind me barked out. “Fall in line and close them tight!”

“They will advance upon you with little challenge at first,” Cleomenes had told me the night before. “Do not let it stoke your ego—Xerxes is no fool, and thank the gods, Leonidas knows it. They will wear you down with weaker men. Xerxes has plenty to spare, and he will throw as many at you as it takes to draw you away from your defensive wall—to tire you out and give you little room for easy retreat to safety. Then he will send in the mighty among his forces—there will be the test, lad, when you must plant your feet and grit your teeth. That will be the moment when your shield-bearers will be weary—and yet their strength must be their most.”

It is coming then, surely, I thought as I stumbled backward, tripping clumsily over bodies littering the bloodstained ground. I shouted out at my columns to fall back with me; their feet fell in rhythm with the bleating of the flutes as we scrambled for position. *The Immortals—the mightiest among the Persians. They have worn us down and now they will send their strongest.*

I looked down at my hands, at the blood smeared against my skin. There had only been one other time in my entire life that I had borne such evidence of violence, of death. Ten years earlier; the blood had belonged to Pelorus. Surely I would see him again upon the threshold of Hades within moments. I wondered if he would be proud of me this day.

CHAPTER ONE

490 B.C.

Pelorus' blood still stained my hands. I could feel it dried and matted in my hair. I could taste it crusted beneath my fingernails, in the crevices of my fingers whenever I cupped my hands together to drink. I could not waste my water to bathe myself, and honestly, I did not know if I wanted to. It was Pelorus' blood, a part of him left with me and if I washed it away, somehow in my mind, it felt like I would be washing him away with it. If his blood remained, maybe he was still with me. Maybe he really was not dead.

Sometimes I thought I could hear his voice. It would rouse me from sleep and I would open my eyes in the darkness, half-expecting to find myself on the floor of my barrack, with Pelorus leaning over me, his hand against my shoulder. "Echelas," I would almost hear him say. "Echelas, come with me."

And then my mind would stumble out of dreaming and into waking, and I would realize where I was—a small cell in the settlement of Menelaion. Menelaion lies on the eastern banks of the Eurotas River, south of most of the other villages of Sparta proper. It might have been forgotten—just like I might have been forgotten there—except for the shrine to our ancient King and Queen, Menelaus and Helen along one of the sloping foothills of the Parnon just beyond its cluster of houses.

It had been thirteen days since Pelorus was murdered. I knew because I had been marking it on the wall. I could see sunlight waxing and waning through the narrow window at the top of my cell. With each sunrise, I took a crumbled bit of stone I had found in a corner and scratched against the wall.

That evening, long after the sunlight had faded into shadows and darkness, Dieneces came. I do not know what pretenses he had to offer to slip away from his mentor, Thersites on their return from the common mess, or what he

had to give the guards in bribes to get inside to see me, but it must have been something significant.

I heard footsteps shuffling beyond the iron bars of my cell, and saw the golden glow of lamp light spread in circumference against the walls as he drew near. I did not realize who it was at first, and rose to my feet, my heart tangled somewhere between my ribcage and throat.

They are coming for me, I thought, unable to force my breath out. It is time, then. The Ephors have called for me, and it is time.

I blinked as he came into view, as firelight spilled against his familiar features. "Dieneces?" I whispered, my breath escaping me in a shuddering sigh. He met my gaze, taking in my bruised and battered appearance, Pelorus' blood still dried and caked on me.

"Echelas..." he breathed, reaching through the bars. He touched my face, his fingertips trailing against the smears of old blood. "I cannot stay long," he whispered, and I nodded. "But I had to come and see you. Your mother was attacked."

My eyes widened and my breath drew short. "What...? Is she hurt? Is Hemithea hurt, Dieneces?"

"She was stabbed," Dieneces said, and I gasped softly, stricken. "But she will survive."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"Several nights ago," he said. "I do not know for sure. I have only heard rumors at the mess. She was attacked on the south road from Sellasia."

"Sellasia?" I whispered, bewildered. "Why would Hemithea be traveling south from Sellasia?"

My mother, Hemithea was one of the wealthiest women in Sparta. My father died when I was five, and through her inheritances both from him and her own family upon her marriage, she oversaw an enormous amount of ancient lands. Most of it was in the south, though, and while she would often

ride to inspect her holdings, she had no reason to go too far north of Sparta. She owned no property there.

"I hear she left a few days before you were arrested," Dienesces said. "She has been gone all this while, and Demodocus arrived this morning with her."

"Demodocus," I whispered. Demodocus had been a friend to my father, and remained one to my mother. Even so, I could not understand why my mother would have traveled outside of Sparta with him, or what purpose might have brought them to the north.

"They do not know who attacked her," Dienesces said. "Maybe a band of slaves. Some are even saying you are to blame."

"Me?" I asked, blinking, aghast.

"Clesonymus is all over and about, flapping his mouth," Dienesces said, his brows pinching, his mouth turning in a frown. "Maybe you bribed someone to follow her and kill her to claim her lands. They say you are mad—the months alone in Seclusion saw your mind break."

"That...that is not true," I said, wide-eyed and stricken. "How could I hope to inherit Hemitheia's lands? I am not old enough—eight years from it, Dienesces."

"Clesonymus is perched on a pedestal at the moment," Dienesces said. "He will say anything, Echelas. To hear him tell, you would think he wrestled Heracles himself to bring you in for judgment."

"He is lying," I whispered. "His Hunters murdered Pelorus. I do not know which one, but I saw them. They were looking for me, Dienesces, and we fought them in the woods. Pelorus...he..."

"I know," Dienesces said. "I have heard." His fingers brushed against my face again, against aching places where the bruised imprints of the Hunters' knuckles were still fading. "Bastards," he whispered.

"What about Elara?" I asked. "Is she alright? Do you know, Dienesces?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "I have not seen her," he said. "Clesonymus keeps at least two of his Hunters posted at his house. I do not think he lets her leave."

"He cannot keep her there," I said.

"Of course he can, Echelas," Dieneces said quietly. "She is his wife."

"Will you try to see her?" I asked, clutching at his hand, pleading. "Please, will you get word to her somehow? Will you make sure she is safe?"

He glanced over his shoulder and then back at me. I could not see the guards at the entrance of the building, but he could, and one had apparently motioned to him. "I have to go," he told me. He looked pained. "I...Echelas, I do not know if I will be able to see you again."

He pressed his face between the bars, leaning toward me, wrapping his arm around me. He turned his cheek against mine, and I felt the warm huff of his breath against my ear. "Please," I whispered. "Please, will you go to Elara?"

"I will try," Dieneces said.

I closed my eyes. "And to Hemithea?" I said. "Will you tell my mother I know what has happened and I...my heart is with her?"

Dieneces laughed softly as he stepped away from the gate. "She will only tell you it should be with Sparta," he said. He looked at me for a long moment, his eyes mournful. "I will get you out of here, Echelas," he whispered. "I will find a way."

I watched him leave, shoving my face against the iron posts and craning my gaze until he was gone from my view. The light of his lamp faded with him, leaving me in shadows. I listened to the sounds of his footsteps until there was nothing but silence and I was alone again.

I counted thirty scratches on the wall of my cell when they brought another man into the prison. They delivered him in the middle of the night and the sounds of their feet scuffling

against the ground woke me. I raised my head, blinking dazedly and caught sight of a silhouetted figure surrounded by Spartiates hurrying along the corridor past my cell. I heard them open the iron gate of the cell next to mine and then a tussling sound as they forced the man inside.

“Take your hands off me—remove your hands!” he shouted. I heard the soldiers slam the gate closed and then they walked back down the corridor, not sparing me a glance.

I sat up, drawing my legs beneath me. I listened to the rattle of the cell gate as the man shook the iron bars. “You will answer for this!” he shouted, his voice bouncing against the stone walls. “Will none among you summon the mettle to run me through? You would leave me here to waste without the courage to kill me swiftly? Rot to you all—the lot of you! Do you hear me? Rot and pox upon all of you!”

He shook his gate again and then I heard him tromping about, his feet falling heavily against the ground. He muttered to himself, a flurry of quiet, unintelligible words punctuated by occasional giggles or snorts of soft laughter.

I held my breath, cocking my head, curious. *He is drunk*, I realized, trying to make out what he was saying as he stumbled and stomped around.

“Maggots in loam,” he mumbled. “Rotted flesh wriggling and stinking.” His cell gate rattled noisily. “You tell them that! Demaratus tucked his tail between his legs like a whipped and cowed mutt and ran to Ionia, or have they so soon forgotten? We would all be whores in the Persian brothel if he had his say—you mark me at it!”

Demaratus. That name was familiar to me, and I frowned. Demaratus had been the Eurypontid king; one of a diarchy who led the Spartiate army. Last year, he had been deposed, banished from Sparta.

“All that I have done—thirty years—and here is what I have reaped for it?” the man cried out. “False promises and imprisonment? Rot upon you all!”

There was a moment of silence and then a wet, spattering sound. “You tell them here is what I think of their

promises and prison!” the man yelled, and I realized he was urinating out into the corridor. “You tell them!”

His words faded, and he was quiet, huffing for winded breath.

Maybe he is a slave, I thought. Men of Sparta did not get drunk. It was one of the Laws. We could drink, and Pelorus had let me have wine at the mess in his company, but it was wine tempered with water.

“And only enough to loosen your tongue and your smile,” Pelorus had told me. “That is the Law.”

The Spartiates would sometimes bring slaves to the mess and fill them with wine served neatly, as it was called, or undiluted. The slaves would get drunk and dance for the men, bizarre and lewdly choreographed routines that had always simultaneously amused and unnerved me. *Maybe one of them got out of hand*, I thought. *Maybe they brought him here to let him sleep it off.*

The man in the cell next to mine began to laugh, a shrill, warbling sound. I could hear him stumbling about, his shoulder slapping against the wall. “Rot upon you all,” he muttered, giggling. “I will see it. Yes, I will see it.”

Whoever he was, sleeping off his inebriation was not part of his designs. He talked and laughed the entire night through, sitting at the gate of his cell so that the walls did little to muffle his voice, making his words inescapable.

I tried shoving my palms against my ears to sleep, but it did not do much good. As soon as I would nod off, my hands would slip and there would be his voice, yammering away to rouse me.

He was not a slave, that was for sure. The man recited Homer or Tyrtaeus in a loud and droning tone, words I knew all too well from my childhood. Whoever he was, he knew the recitations of a man trained in Spartan ways.

“Now since you are the seed of Heracles the invincible, courage!” he declared, as the first blush of dawn was beginning to seep through my window. “Zeus has not turned away from us.”

Yes he has, that he would leave me to this, I thought, my brows furrowed, my teeth clenched against a groan as he rambled out yet another in a seemingly endless montage of poems.

“Do not fear the multitude of men, nor run away from them,” the man said. “Each man should bear his shield straight at the foremost ranks and make his heart a thing full of hate, and hold the black flying spirits of death as dear as he holds the flash of the sun.”

My heart is a thing full of hate, alright, I thought, opening my eyes and staring at my toes, now visible in the predawn glow. *You have kept me up all night, you rot.*

“You know what havoc is the work of the painful War God. You have learned well how things go in exhausting war, for you have been with those who ran and with the pursuers. Oh, young men, you have had as much of both as you want.”

I have had as much of you as I want, I thought. I wanted to throw my chin back and scream at him to shut up. I settled instead for simply thumping the side of my head against the wall, hoping vainly to knock myself out and escape him.

At the sound of this dull knock against the stones, the man paused in his recitations. I heard his voice float from the corridor into my cell, as he pressed his face between the iron posts of his gate and called out. “Who is there?”

His voice was hoarse, croaking from his throat. I heard him shake the bars of his cell. “Who is there?” he demanded, sharply. I shied against the wall without answering him. The wine within him had faded, and he sounded angry, like a man who called out with his fists clenched and his feet settled in a fighting stance.

“Did the Ephors send you?” he hissed. “Hoping for secrets? That I might share them with the rocks and stones? Give you more kindling for your fire?”

The man struck the wall of his cell hard enough to send a reverberating thrum through the stones against my ear. The clumsy, rambling, drunken buffoonery was gone in full;

this was something new and vicious. I flinched, my breath drawing still, my eyes flying wide. *He is mad*, I thought. *He is not drunk—he is crazy. They have locked me in here with a mad man.*

“Did the Ephors promise you some great reward for it?” he yelled, striking the wall again, making me cower, my hands drawing reflexively toward my head. “Are they hoping my heart will soften like tallow left in the sun and I will reveal myself? I will tell you their lies that they might satisfy themselves as to their misconceived truth? Who are you? Who is there?”

He beat the wall again and again. I cannot imagine the strength of his hands, or the rage behind them as he pummeled the stones, but it was enough to crumble the mortar, to send chips of loose dirt and rock raining down against the cap of my head. I cried out softly, startled, and scuttled away from the wall, drawing my knees toward my chest and pedaling with my heels.

At the sound of my voice, he fell silent, his fists drawing still. “Or were you sent to kill me?” he whispered. “Is that it? Did they send you here to murder me? To wait until I sleep, until my guard is lowered, my mind quiet, and then you will creep upon me with your sword drawn and poised for my heart? Is that it? And let me guess—then you will tell them that I have done the deed myself. A fit of madness came upon me in my despair—for I have never been one who was right in his wits, is that it?”

He...he is mad, I thought again. *His mind has abandoned him!*

“Who are you?” he screamed, pounding against the wall again. The sudden thunder of his fists startled me anew, and I yelped, scrambling backward across the floor of my cell, pressing myself into the far corner of the room.

“I will give them nothing!” he screamed. “You tell them that!”

Please stop, I thought, clapping my hands over my ears, tucking my chin toward my chest. There was no reason in his voice, no rationale in his fists; I was alone with a man who had

gone mad, separated only by a margin of stone, and I was frightened. *Please, please stop it.*

“You tell them they can keep their false promises!” he shouted. “Come before me like proper men of Sparta if they have any honor! Let them tell whomever they please that my mind rotted loose of its moorings, that I slashed my own liver and lights from my guts, but have them stand before me, if no other, with the mettle that suits a Spartan!”

Please, I thought, closing my eyes tightly and trembling. Please stop.

“I will not give them their lies!” he bellowed, the wall shuddering with each resounding blow. “You tell them that, you coward in the shadows! You shade slipping and stealing among the crevices! I will give them nothing!”

For four days, the man in the cell beside me ranted and raved. He seemed to have no need for sleep—or was too convinced in his madness that I would somehow slip into his cell and cut his throat if he dared to try—and from sunrise until sunset, he would ramble.

The guards came on the second morning, delivering our rations of barley bread and water; this incited the man to renewed frenzy, and he shrieked, cursing them for hours after they had abandoned us.

I could not stand it. I tucked myself into the farthest corner of my cell and huddled with my hands over my ears, trying to be motionless and quiet. Even the faintest hint of sound from my cell was enough to send the man into a fit of frenzied shouting. “Who are you?” he would scream if he heard the least little scuff of my bare feet in the dirt, the slightest inkling of my voice or breath. He would launch himself at the wall between us; how he had not managed to shatter every bone in his fists and forearms by now was astonishing to me.

“Still you will not answer?” he would shriek, and I would recoil, cowering in my corner again, shoving my palms

over my ears and waiting for him to finish, his rage to wane. “Still you hold your tongue like a good Spartan? What are you waiting for? I am here! I am right here—draw your blade! Do your duty to your Ephors and for Sparta!”

Finally, after four days and five nights spent with little if any sleep, my mind could politely bear no more. I curled onto my side on the floor, with my knees drawn toward my chest, my hands near my face. The sun was rising, and the man was reciting hymns to Apollo.

“You senseless humans, you wretched creatures wishing at heart for sorrows, hard toils and troubles!” he said.

I closed my eyes and struggled not to weep. He knew what he was doing to me. He had to know that he was breaking me slowly but certainly. Sometimes, like this morning, when my breath was ragged, fluttering against the ground, and I knew he could hear me, I knew that he was smiling as he spoke. He derived sadistic glee from tormenting me.

“Your answer I will give you with ease and put your minds to think on,” the man said. “Let every last one of you grasp a dagger in his right hand and forever be slaughtering flocks.”

Give me a dagger, I thought. I will grasp it gladly, and if I cannot run it through this man, at least let me use it to find some escape from this.

With this, I fell asleep. It was not so much that I drifted from consciousness as my mind simply gave up its efforts at coherency. I passed out with my cheek against the ground, my shoulders and spine pressed against the stone wall behind me.

When a heavy hand closed against my arm, my eyes flew wide, and I jerked awake, yelping in start.

“What are you hiding beneath your cloak?” Cleonymus demanded of me. I was bewildered to find myself in the forests somehow, with Cleonymus towering over me.

“Wh...what...?” I said, blinking in confusion. I wore a dun-colored cloak wrapped about me; the uniform given to me during the tenure of my Spartiate training. My arms were

beneath the cloak, and I held something against my belly. I could feel it squirming; soft fur and sharp claws scrabbling against my skin. It was a young fox.

“What is beneath your cloak, ephebe?” Clesonymus demanded again.

“Nothing, sir,” I said. I felt the fox’s teeth—razor sharp and needle thin—sink into my abdomen as the animal wriggled to get loose of my grasp. I held it all the more tightly, planting my elbow against its haunches and struggled to keep my face expressionless, even as it bit more deeply into my skin.

“Were you stealing, ephebe?” Clesonymus asked, leaning his face toward mine.

“No, sir,” I said. To be caught stealing was to prove your ineptitude and lack of cunning, and you were whipped brutally for it.

“Then tell me, ephebe,” Clesonymus said quietly, his breath pressing against my face. “What is beneath your cloak?”

I could feel blood streaming down my midriff. The fox was frantic, its little snout snapping and tearing me open. The pain was excruciating, but I did not whimper or cry out. I met Clesonymus’ gaze, my face stoic and impassive, even as the little fox uttered a low growl, shaking its head, ripping open my stomach.

“Nothing, sir,” I said to Clesonymus without as much as a quaver in my voice.

“Still you will not talk?” Clesonymus asked, raising his brow sharply. He could see the fox squirming beneath my cloak; he could see the blood stain spreading in a broad circumference against the wool. He was not an idiot; I was not fooling him at all. “What is beneath your cloak?”

The fox burrowed its nose into the gash it had gnawed in my gut. I saw bright pin-points of light dance in a dazzling array in front of my face, and realized I was going to faint from the pain.

“Nothing, sir,” I whispered.

“Still you will not answer?” Clesonymus said. He knew what was happening. He knew what I had done, and the corner of his mouth hooked in a wry, wicked smile. “Such a good little Spartan you are, ephebe.”

I felt my knees buckle. “Thank...thank you, sir...” I gasped as I swooned, crumpling toward the ground.

I jerked reflexively just as my head hit the carpet of pine needles and dried leaves, and I sat up in my prison cell. “What...?” I whispered, disoriented. My hair drooped in my face, falling from the crown of my head and over my brow, and I shoved it back, tucking it behind my ears.

“Still you will not answer?” I heard a voice say, and I whirled, startled, expecting to find Clesonymus behind me. The sun had risen, and soft golden light helped lift the gloom and shadows from my cell. I was alone.

I heard the man in the cell next to mine chuckle. “What a good little Spartan you are,” he remarked. “I will give you that.”

My breath escaped me in a low, heavy sigh. *Dreaming*, I thought. *I...boah, I was only dreaming.*

The story of the fox and the Spartan boy was a popular one. I had heard it countless times in my youth, during the early years of my training. The prefects recounted it in the hopes of instilling its value—the honor and mettle it took to become a full Spartiate. The man had obviously been telling the story aloud as my mind had faded to unconsciousness, and I groaned softly, pressing the heel of my hand against my brow. *Even in sleep, he will not let me escape him.*

“Who are you?” the man called to me. For the first time, he did not scream or demand it. His voice was calm, nearly cordial in tone, as if he met a new acquaintance for the first time. I lowered my hand and blinked hesitantly, warily at the threshold of my cell.

“You have not been sent to spy on me,” the man said. “And you have not been sent to kill me either, have you?” When I did not answer, he chuckled again. “You are not even a Spartiate. I heard you in your sleep. ‘No, sir,’ and ‘nothing, sir.’”

You have the voice of a boy, a young hebon, perhaps, but no man."

I did not say anything as I reached for my water bowl, pulling it toward me. The dream had disturbed me, and my hands were still shaking. I did not want to waste my water, but cupped my hands together in the bowl anyway, splashing it against my face to clear my befuddled mind.

"What were you dreaming of?" the man asked me. "The fox fable, perhaps? Did you dream of your youth, of tucking a fox beneath your cloak?"

I blinked down at the water, watching droplets stream from my face, splashing into the bowl. *Shut up*, I thought to the man, closing my eyes. *Leave me alone*.

"Tell me, lad, in your dream, were you caught?" the man called. "Did you keep the fox hidden against you, lest you be beaten for your clumsy efforts? Did you keep a straight face, little Spartan, no fear or pain in your eyes as you were questioned on it...even as the fox gnawed the soft meat of your gut?"

I would not acknowledge the fox, you rot—and I will not acknowledge you, either, I thought. *You will not break me, sir, who ever you are. Leave me alone*.

"You are a good little Spartan for it," he said. "You obeyed the Laws. That is the Spartan way, is it not? To endure without complaint whatever hardships life, the gods and even Sparta herself may force upon you. No wonder you have held your tongue so well, despite my best efforts to loosen it these past days. I imagine you might have let me drive you mad before you would yield to me, give me answer." He chuckled. "You think I have been your fox."

I opened my eyes, startled by his accuracy. "Though unlike the fox, I know friend from foe," he said. "You have not been sent to kill me, or spy upon me, which leaves only that you have found yourself the victim of some misfortunate circumstance that has seen you here for legitimate cause. If I am your fox, little Spartan, do not fret. I will bite you no more. I will not eat you alive."

I hate you, I thought.

He whistled softly, some cheery melody. “At least, I might find some sleep now, with a modicum’s peace of mind,” he remarked.

Two more days passed. True to his word, the man stopped his incessant recitations and screaming. He did not stop his efforts to coax me into speaking however. He kept asking questions of me, gentle prodding, and seemed unbothered when I would not answer. He let me sleep the nights through, apparently taking his own remark to heart and finding some rest for himself, as well.

On the seventh morning, I dreamed of Pelorus, of stumbling through the forests surrounding the Eurotas river until I came upon our place; the clearing among the trees near the water’s edge where Pelorus had trained me. I imagined him there, waiting for me, genuflecting to add kindling to a small fire. He turned at the sound of my footsteps, and I staggered to meet his gaze, my breath lost to me. “Pelorus...!” I gasped.

“You are late,” Pelorus told me, rising.

“You...Pelorus, you are here,” I said.

“Of course I am,” he said. He glanced at my empty hands. “Where is your sparring sword?”

“You are here,” I whispered again, and then I darted across the clearing toward him. I seized him fiercely, clutching at him. I felt him stiffen in surprise at my embrace. He felt so real to me—the moment seemed so vivid and poignant and real—that I blinked against tears, shuddering against him. He realized I was distraught and his face softened, his brows lifting. “Echelas, what is it?” he asked. “What is wrong?”

“I...I am sorry,” I said, tucking my face against his shoulder. “Please, Pelorus. I am sorry.”

I opened my eyes and realized I had only been dreaming. The warmth of Pelorus against me disappeared, to be replaced by the crisp, damp chill of a spring morning.

I drew my hands to my face, shoving my palms over my eyes, and I gasped softly, my voice escaping me in a low, anguished cry. “Pelorus...” I whispered. I began to cry. It was weak, and I was ashamed of myself, but I could not help it.

“It is alright, lad,” I heard the man say from his cell. “Please do not weep.” He spoke softly to me and I drew in a ragged, hiccupping breath, humiliated that he had heard me.

“I...I am not weeping,” I said, sitting up and pressing my back against the wall. I dragged the heels of my hands against my cheeks and drew my lips together in a thin line, determined to stave my tears.

It did not even occur to me that I had spoken to the man for the first time. If it occurred to him, he did not pause to marvel over it. He spoke again, his voice still kind, filled with gentle sympathy. “He is gone?” he asked. “This man I heard you call for, Pelorus. He is dead?”

I nodded, even though he could not see me. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, he...he is dead.”

“I am sorry,” the man said. “There is no shame, lad; no disgrace in tears shed for fallen fellows. He was your friend?”

“Yes,” I said. “And...and my mentor.” *And my father, I thought, which only brought more tears to my eyes. He...he was Heracles, Castor and Pollux...he was everything...the whole of the Pantheon to me.*

The man was quiet for a long moment. “You are the one,” he said at length, his voice little more than a hush. “Pelorus. I thought that name known to me. You are the hebbon who murdered all of those Dwellers, and then killed his mentor.”

I blinked at the iron bars of my gate, stricken. “I did not kill him,” I said, my voice choked and anguished. “I did not kill anyone.”

“They say you went mad in the wilds on Seclusion; a feral dog, I have heard tell. You butchered nearly a dozen Dwellers—cut the throats of women and little ones. You wrested your mentor’s sword from him and ran him through.”

I do not know why it mattered to me what he thought, but I was dismayed to realize he might believe Clesonymus' lies; that this man, this relative stranger to me might think I was a murderer. "No..." I whispered. "No, I am innocent."

"The Hunters found you with the blade still in your hand," the man said.

"I am innocent!" I cried, seizing my water bowl in hand and hurling it at the wall. The pottery basin shattered against the stone, spraying water and shards in all directions. I tangled my hands in my hair and closed my eyes. "I did not kill him!" I gasped, shuddering. "I...I am innocent. I did not kill anyone!"

"Have peace, lad," the man said. "I know you did not."

I blinked at this, surprised, and lowered my hands hesitantly.

"I do not think there is a Spartiate who believes for one moment that you did," the man said. "But there is what a man believes and what is the Law. The Law is infallible. Beliefs are not."

I did not know what to say. I was still surprised by his candor—and his confidence.

"What is your name, lad?" the man asked me gently.

"Echelas, sir," I said.

"Who is your father?" he asked, and I blinked. We were not supposed to introduce ourselves as kin of our fathers until we had completed our training and achieved Spartiate status. Until then, we were known simply as "sons of Sparta."

"Aeropus, sir," I said. "I...I am son of Aeropus."

"Aeropus..." the man remarked, sounding thoughtful. "Where were you born?"

"Pitana, sir," I said. "My father is of the Dymanes tribe."

"Aeropus of the Pitana Dymanes..." the man said, musing to himself.

“He served under the Agiad King Cleomenes,” I said. “He was killed in the Athenian revolt when I was five.”

The man snorted quietly. “There was a mess,” he muttered.

“You were there?” I asked.

“Yes, like your father—right in the thick of it,” he said. “It might not have been so bad for us, things might have ended differently—your father, friends of mine who fell, they might all yet be with us. Demaratus withdrew his troops, you know, and the Corinthians, too. Not even past the Isthmus, and they decided they would not go further. You might expect as much from Corinth, but from a Spartiate king? We might have held Athens—we made a stand in the acropolis, you know—had at least Demaratus remained.”

“Did you know my father, sir?” I asked.

“I do not know to say with certainty,” the man told me. “Though I wish I did. Boys know so little of their fathers in Sparta, but nonetheless, I think one would enjoy hearing heroic tales told by those who were with them. But his name is familiar. I am sure I know of him, if nothing else. It is a shame when good men die without cause. Demaratus is to blame for it.”

He fell silent for a moment. “Forgive me,” he said. “Like many of my fellow Spartans, I have my opinions of our former king. Unlike my fellows, however, I have never been one to keep my opinions to myself.” He chuckled. “What of you?”

“I...I do not think I have any, sir,” I said. “Of our former king, or...or otherwise.”

The man chuckled again. “I mean what of you, Echelas, son of Aeropus? Tell me about yourself. You said you did not kill your mentor or the Dwellers—and I said I believed you—but circumstances and the Law would seem to have conspired against you.”

“I was made to look guilty,” I said.

The man made a thoughtful, rumbling sound in his throat. "A man who is such a victim is surely one who has made formidable enemies for himself," he remarked. "Enemies in high positions with great grudges to bear. You are only a hebon. How old are you, lad?"

"Twenty-two, sir," I told him.

"Just a lamb," the man murmured. "What offense could you have committed that would make someone see you answer so cruelly? Who did you find to hate you as much as this?"

I did not answer. I kept my eyes upon the floor, my shoulders hunched. I could see my hands in the soft light of morning; I could see the dark stains of Pelorus' blood beneath my fingernails.

"You do not need to be afraid to speak," the man said gently. "I am not the gnawing fox. And there is no one else to hear or judge you, lad. Only me, Menelaus and Helen. None of us shall be inclined to share—much less judge you harshly, I think I can assure you."

I felt the corner of my mouth lift slightly, reflexively in a smile. "Stop smiling at me," Pelorus said inside of my mind, and I remembered him in his Spartiate bronze, as magnificent as a god to me. His words had been gruff, but there had been fondness in his eyes as he had spoken; the corner of his own mouth had lifted slightly, briefly at me.

"Will you not tell me, lad?" the man asked quietly.

I nodded, even though he could not see me. "Alright," I whispered.

CHAPTER TWO

512-505 B.C.

I was born with golden hair. The five Elders of my village tribe, the Pitana Dymanes told my mother it would darken as I grew older. They had seen many Spartan children born with pale hair only to have it yield with time to the darker shades more customary for people from Sparta. Hemithea had nodded, murmuring courteous thanks for their counsel as they bathed me in wine and inspected me from head to toe, pronouncing me acceptable. I think she must have harbored her own opinions even then, whether she offered them aloud or not.

She had nearly died giving birth to me. Hemithea was not a frail woman, but Neda, her housekeeper had told me in later years that my birth had been very hard on her. Her labors had left her womb bleeding and injured; she had been unable to have any more children.

Hemithea did not seem troubled by this, however. "Artemis stilled my womb because she knew there would be no need for any other. She has purpose in mind for you, Echelas," she had told me once, her dark eyes holding me fast.

"All of our great ancestors had golden hair," she had said. "Heracles, Achilles, and even our ancient Queen Helen. It is a mark of favor from the gods and you will be great for it."

I had precious little memory of the early years of my childhood spent in Hemithea's home. My mother seldom spoke or interacted with me, but I remembered her beauty and the sheer magnitude of her presence. She was quiet, beautiful and very intense, like the wind from the Taygetos peaks, some sort of magnificent and unpredictable force of nature.

I do not remember mourning when my father died. Because he had always been a relative stranger, I do not think I had ever appreciated him enough to understand his loss. Though he had died in battle, an honor for Spartiates, he had also been killed during what had ultimately proven a disastrous attempt by Sparta to reinstate an aristocratic government in Athens. The Athenian people had revolted, and Sparta's army had been driven out of the city in defeat and disgrace. It was a rather embarrassing and disquieting set of circumstances that no one really ever discussed. Upon Aeropus' death, his lands became mine; I would inherit them at age thirty, when I had completed my Spartan training. Hemithea tended the property for me in the meanwhile; she had more than twenty plots of rich southern ancient lands of her own, and she was well-accustomed to the task.

It after my father's passing that I remember the Spartan Demodocus began to pay fairly regular call, if only to make sure my mother wanted for nothing. His presence never seemed to trouble Hemithea; in fact, I remember she spoke far more kindly and freely with him than she ever had my father, as if she had held Demodocus in a higher, fonder regard than she had Aeropus.

When I was six years old, Neda roused me one morning and led me outside the front of our house. Here, a group of men waited; I watched my mother present them with rations of barley flour, cheese and figs. I watched Hemithea dole out payment to them, five iron spits. It was not until much later that I understood that these offerings were my tuition to Sparta; my share of food stores that would be paid monthly to feed me during my training, and spits that would apply toward the cloaks I was given as my ephebe uniform.

The men took me away. I did not cry, because I understood what was happening. Neda had explained it to me

on several occasions. I was going into the woods, the lands beyond Sparta's borders, where I would live and learn what it meant to be a true man of Sparta.

Thus, my training began. The men brought me west of the Magoula River and into the pine forests of the Taygetos foothills. Here, I was assigned to my training group, boys from my tribe and village. There were twenty of us in all, sons of the Pitana Dymanes, all between the ages of six and seven years. We were delivered to a deliberate clearing in the woods, a modest expanse between the trees that had been swept free of leaves and fallen pine needles—the place that for the next seven years would be my home.

“From this moment on, your lives will be given in the service of Sparta and her Laws,” said Hegeleus, the twenty-year-old hebon assigned as our group prefect. We all sat before him, shivering with bewildered anxiety. I remember that Hegeleus seemed very tall to me, and his voice had been sharp, filled with imperious command. “You will keep the Laws in your heart and mind, and you will live by them with courage and honor. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” we said together.

“Each of you is expected to conduct himself at all times with the demeanor of a man, not a child, lest you dishonor not only me, you prefect and your fellow camp members, but your father and Spartiate ancestors, as well,” Hegeleus said. “You will maintain a level of proficiency in all skills and activities of your training. Any consistently failing to meet this minimal standard of performance as determined myself and the training Magistrate will be expelled. You will be no more than a Trembler, sent in shame from Sparta to the outer villages. No son or daughter of yours shall again be eligible for Spartan status. You will have failed not only yourself, but every member of your kin who shall ever follow you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” we said.

He held up a long, slender flute. “Each of you will go upon my order and collect reeds from the riverbank with which to prepare your bedding. You will roam no farther than

you need to hear the sound of this beckon.” He brought the flute to his lips and bleated out a sharp, shrill note. “That is your command to return to the camp. Any dawdling will be punished. On your feet, ephebes. All of you, stand up.”

We scrambled to our feet and Hegeleus nodded his chin sharply toward the trees. “Go now,” he said, and then we were off.

We hurried to the banks of the Magoula under Hegeleus’ watchful eye. I stood with the cool, swift-moving water streaming past my legs, my feet sinking into the mud and loose pebbles of the riverbed. The reeds were tall, thick-stalked and sturdy; wresting them loose of their moorings was strenuous work. We were given no tools, and ordered to use only our hands.

“Twist it,” someone said softly to me, and I looked up to find a boy standing in front of me, clasping a reed stalk between his hands. He was skinny and scrawny, with a shock of unruly dark hair whipped about his head as though he had recently stumbled through a wind storm.

I blinked at him, and he nodded his chin toward the reed I was holding. “Twist it,” he said again. “Then work the roots loose. It is easier that way.”

I tried twisting the stalk in my right hand while reaching down with my left and ripping at the tangled roots. I felt the reed yield as I wiggled it, and I stood up, yanking it out of the ground. The dark-haired boy smiled to see my success.

“Told you,” he said, hunkering over and delving with his hands into the water again.

We were not afforded much time to collect reeds before we heard the shrill, resounding call of Hegeleus’ whistle calling us back from the water. We gathered our respective piles of reeds between our arms, cradling them clumsily as we made our way back to our campsite. The dark-haired boy tromped along beside me, glancing in my direction.

“What is your name?” he asked.

I kept my eyes toward the ground and pressed my lips together, ignoring the boy.

“My name is Dieneces,” he said, neither offended nor dissuaded by my silence. “I am named for my father. I have an older brother—he is fifteen now, and named for my grandfather, Camesus. That left me to be named for my father, which is no trouble, I suppose. He does not come to my mother’s house much, so there is little confusion, and when he does come they simply call me the Younger. Better to be called Dieneces the Younger than Camesus, son of Dieneces. There would be a mouthful, do you not think?”

We returned to the campsite and set about arranging pallets for ourselves in a circle along the perimeter of the clearing. Of the eighteen other boys in our group, this boy, Dieneces chose to build his reed bedding beside me.

“You are laying them wrong,” he said. He was taking a lot of time and trouble arranging his reeds, placing some lengthwise and others at diagonals, lacing them together, while I simply lined mine in rows.

I did not stop this method and he reached out, poking me. “You are laying them wrong,” he said again. I blinked at him, and then toward Hegeleus, who was busy on the far side of the clearing, snapping at one of the other boys.

“They will rot out like that,” Dieneces said. “There is water in the stalks. You keep them close together and flat against the ground and they cannot drain. Put some at angles, like this. See? It keeps them off of the ground a bit.”

I stared at him as if he was absolutely mad.

“What is your name?” he asked again.

“Echelas,” I said, because it was obvious I was not going to rid myself of him anytime soon.

Dieneces smiled brightly and then returned to preparing his bedding. “Hullo, then, Echelas,” he said.

That night, I was exhausted from a day spent being initiated without mercy into the disciplined routine of Spartan training. After we had received our cloaks earlier in the morning, we had received the day’s food and water rations. We

had been instructed to keep them with our pallets, and had not been allowed to eat or drink without Hegeleus' express permission. Many of us went to bed hungry because older boys had decided to welcome us to our training by raiding our campsite while we were out on our day's activities, stealing our food.

I was dismayed to discover that although the thieves had missed my rations, I was no better off when the matter came to supper. The bread I had tucked beneath my mat of reeds had been spared from pilfering because it was sopping and ruined. It smeared between my fingers like barley paste, matted with dirt and pine husks. I went to bed, my stomach groaning unhappily. Some time passed; the sounds of my camp mates' breathing from neighboring pallets grew deep and loud. I felt something poke me lightly, briefly on the back and I rolled over, looking past my shoulder.

Dieneces lay behind me, curled on his side facing my spine. For once, he did not say anything. He merely cut his eyes toward Hegeleus, who was lying across from us around the circumference of the fire, his cloak drawn about him, his body still as he slept. Dieneces glanced toward one of the boys who was posted as the fire sentry, a position we each took our turn at throughout the night lest our fire dwindle. The boy was sleepy, unaccustomed to the rigorous routine Hegeleus had forced on us that day and simply stared at the fire, distracted and dazed, oblivious to us.

Dieneces reached toward me, offering me something. I frowned, reaching behind me, opening my hand. I blinked, my expression softening as he dropped a hank of bread against my palm. I looked at him, bewildered and touched. "What...what is this?" I asked.

"What else?" he said. "It is supper."

I blinked at the bread, too abashed to meet his gaze. "Thank you," I whispered.

He flapped his hand dismissively, and then tugged his cloak about him more securely as he squirmed, settling himself. "Your stomach is keeping me awake," he said, closing his eyes.

“They can probably hear it clear in Athens, the way it is yowling.”

He opened one eye and looked at me, the corner of his mouth hooking. I could not help myself, and I smiled back at him.

The moon had risen in full by the time I was roused to begin my fire watch. It was late, and my mind was befuddled with the need for sleep as I drew my cloak around myself and stumbled over to the campfire. I sat in front of the flames, blinking dazedly and yawning as the bright warmth pressed against my face. Hegeleus had assigned us each an order to follow as sentries through the night. Our responsibility while on duty was to keep the fire stoked and tended, adding wood to the blaze as needed. Animals lived in the woods around us; Hegeleus had simultaneously entertained and horrified us with stories about boys who let their campfire dwindle—boys who wound up attacked in the darkness by wolves because the flames had fallen too low to hold the predators at bay.

When my time at the watch had passed, I shuffled across the campsite toward the next boy in turn. “Pedaues,” I said, poking him with my foot. He lay beneath his cloak, the folds of wool drawn toward his head, and when I nudged him, he grumbled, shrugging his shoulder to shoo me. “Pedaues,” I said again, more loudly this time. “Pedaues, wake up. It is your turn.”

Pedaues did not open his eyes. He groaned as he tugged his cloak further across his face. I frowned. “Pedaues, get up,” I said.

His brows furrowed. “I am up,” he growled. He made no effort to move, despite this assertion.

“It is your turn,” I told him again. “You have to go sit by the fire.” I had not wanted to get up either when my turn had come around, but I had done so without complaint. I booted him in the shin, and he yelped quietly. He sat up, his brows furrowing more deeply, his mouth set in a disagreeable scowl.

“Stop it,” he said, swinging his leg at me, trying to kick me.

I stepped away from him. “You are supposed to get up and keep the fire watch,” I said. “It is your turn. Get up, or I will wake Hegeleus.”

He shoved his cloak back from his hips and rose to his feet, glowering at me. “I am up,” he said.

I turned around and walked toward my pallet. I could hear his feet shuffling in the dirt as he made his way toward the fire. I lay down on my bedding of reeds and glanced over my shoulder to make sure Pedaeus had taken up his post. He squatted next to the fire, staring at the flames, his face distant, his eyes glassy with sleep. He might have been bleary, but he was conscious and where he was supposed to be. My work was done. I lay my head down and let my eyelids flutter closed.

When Hegeleus roused the next morning, he found all twenty of his little ephebes curled up on their pallets, snoozing soundly, with none tending to the fire watch—and the campfire waned to a pile of ashes and fading coals.

“What is this?” he roared. I sat bolt upright on my bed, my eyes flown wide with startled, bewildered fright, my breath tangled in my throat.

“Who let this fire die?” Hegeleus shouted, stomping around the camp, punting boys in the backs, buttocks and bellies to wake them in full. “Get up, you little rots! All of you on your feet! I want to know who let this fire die!”

“Is it time for food?” Dieneces asked dazedly, sitting up beside me and rubbing his eyes with his hand.

“I do not think so,” I whispered. Hegeleus was furious. As one by one, we stood from our pallets, stumbling and quaking in the face of his obvious wrath, he marched in a broad circumference, stark naked, his hands folded into menacing fists, his brows drawn into a deep furrow along the bridge of his nose.

"I gave you instructions!" he bellowed. "Did you think you could ignore them? Who let this fire die? I will see each and every one of you beaten until you vomit! Who did this?" He turned, glaring at us each in turn. "Who here kept his post last night? Step forward right now if you took your turn by the fire!"

One by one, those of us who had tended the watch stepped hesitantly forward. I stood with my shoulders hunched, my eyes on my toes. "You!" I heard Hegeleus snap at a boy to my right. "Who did you rouse to follow you?"

"Him, sir," the boy said, his voice quavering and shrill. "Helemus, sir."

"Helemus!" Hegeleus yelled. "Who followed you?"

"Maron, sir," Helemus said.

"Maron, who followed you?" Hegeleus said. He knew the order he had assigned us, of course. He probably knew who had failed the watch simply by looking among those of us who had stepped forward. He wanted us to admit it; he wanted one among us to hang ourselves.

"Echelas, sir," Maron said.

I heard Hegeleus' heavy footsteps, and then his bare feet appeared in my line of sight. If I canted my chin just a bit, I could see his knees, and his fists clenched at his sides. "Echelas, who followed you?" he demanded.

"Pedaues, sir," I said to the ground.

I waited for him to move, to redirect his attention toward Pedaues. I waited and waited, letting my breath still beneath my breast. After a long moment, my eyes widened as I realized Hegeleus was not going anywhere, nor was he hollering at Pedaues next in turn.

"Who followed you, ephebe?" Hegeleus asked me again. His tone of voice had dropped. He spoke quietly to me, but there was something even more menacing in this softer, nearly gentle tone than his previous shouting, and I trembled, alarmed.

“Pedaues, sir,” I said, my voice forced from my throat in sort of a breathless, frightened rush.

“Ephebe Pedaues,” Hegeleus said. “You did not step forward. I seem to distinctly recall calling all of my fire sentries forward who served last night. Ephebe Echelas here states you followed him in turn. Yet there you remain, rooted by your pallet. Speak up, ephebe. Did you serve your fire watch last night?”

“No, sir,” I heard Pedaues say. “I was never roused for it, sir.”

My eyes flew wide, and I looked up. “What—?”

Hegeleus’ hand moved in seeming tandem with my chin, swinging back as I lifted my face from the ground. He slapped me, his open hand plowing into my cheek and sending me toppling to the dirt. I had never been struck so hard in all of my life, and I choked for breath, stunned and sprawled against the ground.

“You do not lift your eyes or open your mouth unless I tell you to, ephebe,” Hegeleus said to me.

I blinked dazedly at the ground, reeling from the blow. I could taste blood in my mouth, feel it welling in a sudden, swift stream and spilling from my nose. “Yes...yes, sir,” I whimpered.

“If you weep for it, I will only beat you harder,” he told me.

I blinked against tears in my eyes, struggling to hold them in check. “Yes, sir,” I said, struggling to keep my voice from trembling.

“Get up,” Hegeleus said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I drew my legs beneath me and staggered to my feet, standing unsteadily before my prefect.

“Did you wake ephebe Pedaues last night?” Hegeleus asked me.

I nodded, staring at my toes, watching blood from my nose spatter between my feet. “Yes, sir.”

“Ephebe Pedaeus, did he rouse you last night?” Hegeleus asked.

“No, sir,” Pedaeus replied, and I stared at the ground in helpless dismay.

“He...he is lying, sir,” I said.

Hegeleus’ hand lashed out, clamping against my chin, shoving my head backward. “I did not give you permission to speak, ephebe,” he hissed.

“But he is lying, sir,” I said. “I roused Pedaeus, sir, and he—”

Hegeleus slapped me again, knocking the wits from me. I crumpled to the ground, the left side of my face raw and stinging, my mind swimming, my vision fading. I moaned softly, gasping for breath.

“Get on your feet, Echelas,” Hegeleus said.

Please...! I wanted to beg him. I felt him seize me by the arm and jerk me to my feet.

“I said get on your feet, ephebe!” he shouted, his voice ringing in my ear. He began to march away from the campsite, dragging me in tow. I stumbled along beside him, terrified and helpless. “All of you with me!” he yelled over his shoulder. “All of you in step! Now, ephebes! Right now!”

I could hear the other boys scrambling to match Hegeleus’ furious pace. He dragged me through the trees, tromping through a clearing where another group of boys was in the midst of morning prayer rituals. He hauled me past them, and then several other camps until he reached a broad clearing among the pines, a place with three tall wooden posts erected along one side. Even with the early hour, there were young men training here, sparring with one another using staves and spears while older men dressed in the scarlet cloaks of Spartiates observed their progress. They all paused as Hegeleus marched me across the clearing.

Hegeleus shoved me headlong toward the posts. There were iron hooks embedded high along the shaft of each, and a long, thick strap of leather draped across the middle post’s

hook. I realized what it was and I stumbled, my breath fluttering.

No, I thought. No, no, please...!

“Remove your cloak, ephebe,” Hegeleus ordered.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I reached for the ties fastening the folds of my cloak at my shoulder. I fumbled with the knotted cord; my fingers were shaking. I let my cloak fall away from me, and I stood with my back to Hegeleus, naked and shivering.

“Put your hands on the post,” he said. “Both of your hands, your palms flat, your fingers splayed. Put them there.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I could feel blood dribbling down my chin from my nose, dripping against my neck, but I made no move to wipe it away. I placed my hands as Hegeleus had ordered me, and blinked at the darkened grain of the post.

“Ephebe Pedaeus, step forward,” Hegeleus commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Pedaeus said, his voice hesitant and fearful.

“Take off your cloak.”

“Yes, sir,” Pedaeus said and I heard the quiet rustle of fabric as he unfettered his cloak.

“Stand likewise against that post, ephebe,” Hegeleus snapped. “Plant your hands against it.”

“Yes, sir,” Pedaeus said.

I raised my eyes, sparing a brief, frightened glance around the clearing. I recognized one of the Spartiates standing at a distance from me. He had been watching a pair of youths practice wielding spears against one another, but had turned his attention toward Hegeleus and me. I knew his face; it was Demodocus, my mother’s friend. When he met my gaze, his expression softened with something like sympathy.

“It seems that the lessons I strove to impart yesterday remain yet misunderstood among some of you,” Hegeleus said. “And so we shall review them again, more emphatically this

time, and I trust that this will resolve any questions or uncertainties the lot of you might harbor.”

He stomped toward the middle post and jerked the leather strap down from the hook. “Since the two of you, ephebes Echelas and Pedaeus, cannot seem to agree on precisely what transpired last night, I have no choice but to punish you both for the offense.” To the rest of our camp mates, he shouted, “The failure of your fellows here might have seen you all come to harm—and I want you to learn a lesson from them. Failure is unacceptable. Disobedience to my orders is unacceptable.”

I heard him snap the lash between his hands. I flinched, gasping softly for frightened breath. “You will each receive one lash for each boy you put at risk last night,” he said. “Twenty lashes, each of you. You will count them aloud as I deliver them. If you weep or cry out—if you so much as whimper or twist your face in pain—for each offense, another five blows. You have these coming rightly due, and you will both take them like men. If not, I will beat you both lame, that you might take your place as you deserve among the Tremblers.”

I glanced over my shoulder in terror. I saw Dieneces standing nearby, visibly distraught. He stared at me, wide-eyed and stricken, his mouth agape in helpless horror.

“Ephebe Echelas, you will begin,” Hegeleus said, hefting the lash in his right fist. “Call it out now, boy.”

I blinked at the post in front of me, at my hands. I was shaking, tremors shivering through my arms clear to my shoulders and down to my feet. I could hear the frightened measure of my heart thundering in my ears.

“Ephebe Echelas, you will call it now,” Hegeleus snapped.

I closed my eyes and hung my head. I opened my mouth, but had to force air into my lungs, breath behind my voice. “One, sir,” I called.

I heard the whisper of wind as the lash swung from behind me. A searing bolt of pain lanced through my spine as

the strap of leather struck me. I sucked in a hissing breath through gritted teeth and hooked my fingers reflexively, digging my nails into the wooden post.

“Call it again,” Hegeleus said.

I exhaled slowly, my eyes closed tightly, my breath shuddering from me. I could feel the stinging, burning resonance of the blow, and I struggled to hold my voice in check. “T-two, sir,” I said, and he swung the lash again.

I called out five lashes, each one leaving my back singing with bright, fierce pain. I could scarcely breathe after the fifth; I could feel my knees wanting to fail me, my bladder wanting to loosen, and I struggled to remain upright.

“Call it, ephebe,” Hegeleus said from behind me, and it took every measure of will I could muster not to burst into tears and slump to the ground, cowering and pleading for his mercy.

“Hebon Hegeleus,” called another voice—Demodocus’. I could hear his feet whispering against the carpeting of pine needles on the ground as he approached, but did not dare open my eyes or raise my head.

“Commander Demodocus, sir,” Hegeleus said, sounding surprised and somewhat confused.

“Good morning, lad,” Demodocus said.

“Good morning to you, as well, sir,” Hegeleus said, his tone only all the more bewildered.

“Forgive my interruption, hebon,” Demodocus said. “I mean only to point out that this marks the new ephebes’ first full day in their training, does it not?”

“Yes...yes, sir,” said Hegeleus.

“I make this point, hebon, because I think perhaps you underestimate the impact yesterday’s lessons might have had upon these lads,” Demodocus said. “Perhaps five lashes apiece would suffice for any offenses, as I am certain in their unfamiliarity with routine, these ephebes meant no genuine disregard.”

Hegeleus was silent. I could hear the sound of him sputtering softly, confounded.

“They have years left to have their tutelage instilled within their hearts and minds, hebon—just as you have had,” Demodocus said, his voice quiet and pointed. “The methods and Laws of Sparta were not imparted all to you in the span of a solitary day during your training. Perhaps you should grant them the same courtesy.”

“Yes, sir,” Hegeleus said quietly.

“Give the other five lashes, and call it fair,” Demodocus said. “I think you have demonstrated more than fully to them—and their fellows—that their responsibilities are not to be undertaken lightly.”

“Yes, sir,” Hegeleus said again.

“Well enough, then,” Demodocus said. “Your mentor is Tarchon, is he not?”

“Yes, sir,” Hegeleus said.

“Your wisdom and proficiency as a prefect are apparent, hebon—and a service to Sparta. I will certainly tell him as much when next I see him.”

“I...I thank you, sir,” Hegeleus said.

Demodocus walked away. I opened my eyes as I heard him move past me. He did not pause, or turn to me, and all I saw was his red cloak fluttering behind him, his dark hair swaying against his shoulders in heavy waves.

He brushed past one of the youths he had been watching spar and clapped his hand against the young man’s shoulder. “Come along, Clesonymus,” he said.

The young man, Clesonymus spared me a glance; his heavy brows crimped over his large, dark eyes as he glowered at me. “Yes, sir,” he said.

I hung my head, bewildered but grateful for Demodocus’ intervention, and blinked against tears as I stared at my toes.

CHAPTER THREE

490 B.C.

"I do not believe any Spartan man ever forgets the first beating from his training," said the man from the cell next to mine. His voice was somewhat wistful as he spoke, as if he offered this remark with a distant, nostalgic softness in his eyes. "I remember mine, certainly. I did not make it through my first day, either."

"Why were you beaten?" I asked him. By now, I had moved to sit before my cell gate, as had the man. I could see his shadow draped against a patch of sunlight on the corridor floor.

"I do believe it was because I asked my prefect if I could relieve myself," he said. "I came from a rather prosperous kin line, and I think my prefect sought to make an example of me, if only to remind me that in the training, I could expect to be no better than any other boy. I was whipped for speaking out of turn."

He paused for a thoughtful moment. "I suppose it was a lesson that served me well, though I did not realize it at the time. Spartan training is like that, you know. It does not come upon you all at once—sometimes not until many years later do you finally comprehend what it all truly meant." He chuckled. "As for me, I never again counted myself above my fellows, no matter the status of my birth. I strove to be a man of great courage and honor, not of pretense or appearance."

His shadow moved, elongating across the floor as he leaned forward, turning his head to look toward my cell. "What of you, Echelas?" he asked. "Did you learn your lesson that morning?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I learned I could not trust Pedaeus."

503 B.C.

It was my first beating in my training, and by no means my last, although as time passed, the occasions came fewer and farther apart. This was not only the case for me, but for most of my camp mates, as well, as we became accustomed to our daily routines and responsibilities. Hegeleus would still slap you around, of course, if you faltered or failed, and he would break out the lash and parade us all down to the main clearing to bear mute witness if he felt so provoked. But for the most part, we began to demonstrate ourselves both as individuals and a group in his regard, and we in turn began to view him as a teacher and a friend, someone we admired and wished to emulate rather than feared.

Each day became a new opportunity to prove ourselves. Our daily routines soon became comfortable and anticipated, and with time, we all found our places within it. As much as I had feared my first day of training, and as horrifying as it had seemed to me, after two years spent in the company of Hegeleus and my camp mates, I could no longer really remember my life before them—much less imagine it without them. They grew to be my family, and the friends I made among them—especially Dieneces—my brothers.

One afternoon, Dieneces and I were assigned to the "prey" team during a mock hunt and we scampered together into the forests, ducking low among the thorny scrub and making our way deep into the trees.

"Why are we always the prey?" Dieneces asked. "Never once a hunter! I do not even listen to Hegeleus assign us anymore. I know my lot before he even opens his mouth. I think he does it on purpose."

"He does," I replied. "He always picks the same boys for hunters and prey. Maybe he has decided we are all well-suited."

"Well, it is not fair, that is all," Dieneces muttered. "All of us smaller boys running from the bigger ones—running

from Pedaeus. He is not a boy—he is an ox! You saw what he did to Idmon two days ago—bloodied his nose, split his lip. Pedaeus said he was squirming. Squirming, my ass. Would you squirm if Pedaeus caught hold of you by the scruff? I do not think so.”

We heard the sounds of footsteps rustling through pine needles and leaves behind us, and dove for cover beneath a tangle of underbrush. We watched a group of boys rush by about ten paces from where we crouched. We heard Pedaeus call out sharply: “You four that way, the rest of you there. If any of you finds that mouse-scat Idmon, shout out. He is mine!”

They hurried past us, their cloaks fluttering about their hips. Dieneces and I were naked; this was how “hunters” distinguished “prey” in the game. I had figured that if you paused long enough to rub dirt and mud from the river on your arms and legs, if you slapped yourself with fallen leaves or pine needles, you could create a sort of camouflage. Dieneces and I were filthy, but well disguised among the scrub, and we held our breaths, our eyes flown wide and wary as the hunters darted away, oblivious to our presence.

“Hoah, that was close,” Dieneces whispered. “Poor Idmon, in for it again. I wonder what Pedaeus will bloody up this time.”

I nudged him with my elbow as I drew my legs slowly, quietly beneath me. “Come on,” I said. If we made it back to the campsite without being caught, we were considered free and clear. We moved quickly among the trees, keeping cautious ears tuned for any sounds of movement. “If they come upon us, Echelas, do not take off on me,” Dieneces whispered. “You run too fast. I cannot keep up with you.”

“Do not worry,” I said. I paused and hooked my arm around his neck, drawing him against me. “I will stay by your side. If you are pounded, I will gladly be pounded along with you.”

We heard another noise, a peculiar rustling and the sounds of muted voices. We dropped to our knees, crouching against the ground.

"Where?" Dieneces breathed, glancing around. I nodded my chin ahead of us, and he followed my gaze. The voice came again, a low, groaning sound, too careless to be hunters, and I frowned.

"Come on," I whispered, rising again, creeping toward the noise. Dieneces caught my arm, staying me.

"Are you mad?" he hissed, wide-eyed. "Where are you going?"

"It is not Pedaeus," I said. "It sounds like someone hurt."

"It is likely Idmon, then," Dieneces said. "Or someone else Pedaeus has pounded."

"Pedaeus did not go this way," I replied, raising my brow at him. "Come on, Dieneces. Let us see."

We crept through the underbrush and trees together until we came to a small clearing in the woods. We hunkered along the perimeter of the clearing, hidden among the shadows beneath the scrub. We could see two men ahead of us, and we were still for a long moment, neither of us moving.

"What are they doing?" I whispered.

The younger of the two men rested on his hands and knees facing us. The older man, a Spartiate to judge by his beard and long hair, knelt behind him. He, too, faced us, and I drew back in startled surprise as recognition dawned on me.

"That is Demodocus," Dieneces breathed. "He is a Pitana Dymanes commander under King Cleomenes."

"I...I know who he is," I whispered back. "He...Demodocus is a friend of my mother's. He...sometimes he would come to pay her call."

The younger man looked familiar to me, too, although it took me a long moment to recognize his face—his angular features, large eyes and heavy brows—from my first day of training, when I had been whipped. He had been in the clearing with Demodocus that morning, sparring with another youth.

"That is Clesonymus," Dieneces whispered, nodding his chin toward the young man. "Demodocus is his mentor."

"His what?" I asked.

"His mentor," Dieneces said. "We will all get one when we turn thirteen. It is like a personal prefect, a hebon or Spartiate who shows you things, how to wield a sword and spear, how to behave properly at the common mess, that sort of thing."

"What is he doing to him?" I whispered. It looked like Demodocus was hurting Clesonymus, to judge by the young man's pained expression, the sounds he was uttering softly. If Demodocus was, however, I did not understand; Clesonymus made no effort to struggle against him or pull away.

"It is just something they do, mentors and their charges," Dieneces said. "My brother told me. It has always been like that."

"But I...I mean, what is he doing?" I asked, looking at Dieneces, genuinely bewildered.

He leaned toward me, cupping his hand against my cheek and whispering in my ear. As he spoke, my eyes flew wide, and I jerked back, gasping. "What...?"

"Shh...!" Dieneces hissed. "Echelas—hush! They will hear you!"

I looked back toward Demodocus and Clesonymus, horrified and curious all at once. "Why...why do they do that?"

"I do not know," Dieneces said.

"Does it hurt?"

"Hoah, sure," Dieneces said. "Camesus said it hurts right terribly. But Tibartus, his mentor seems to like it fairly well. And Camesus says he gives him treats for it. You know, wine or sweets. He told me it is just a part of things. It is supposed to happen."

We both lay quietly in the underbrush, watching the two men in the clearing with revolted fascination.

“That is not going to happen to me,” I whispered.
“Treats or no treats. There is not enough wine in the Peloponnese.”

I glanced at him and he met my gaze. We both snickered, drawing our hands toward our mouths to muffle the sound. It was too little, too late, however and we both snorted with sudden laughter. Demodocus paused, drawing still behind Clesonymus, and both of them opened their eyes, looking around in start.

“Hoah...!” I gasped as Clesonymus’ gaze seemed to meet mine across the clearing. Dieneces and I scuttled backward, kicking up leaves and brambles as we scrambled to our feet.

“You there—!” we heard Demodocus shout out, and then we took off running, charging through the woods.

“Run!” Dieneces screamed, laughing and stumbling as he struggled to match my pace. “Run! Run!”

I was laughing too, both of us staggering, nearly doubled over. When we reached the campsite, we found Hegeleus sitting cross-legged under a tree, eating his lunch. He looked up long enough to take into account our filthy states, and the fact that we were both breathless and still snorting with uncontrollable giggles and shook his head.

“Go,” he said, pointing toward the river. “By my shield, if the two of you do not stop rolling about in muck like a pair of piglets, you will not have to worry for Pedaeus pounding you. I will see to it myself.”

“Yes, sir,” Dieneces and I said, scampering away from the camp once more.

“I think Hegeleus is fond of us,” Dieneces remarked as we made our way to the banks of the Magoula.

“How can you tell?” I asked, snickering again.

“He only threatens to pound us anymore,” Dieneces said. “He never really sees it through. Have you not noticed?”

The Magoula was a wide river, but it seldom ran deep. We waded out into the shallow water. "How long do you keep a mentor?" I asked Dieneses.

"Until you are thirty," he said, slapping water against his face and rubbing fervently behind his ears. "How is it you know so little about everything?"

"How is it you know so much?" I said, my brows drawing irritably.

"I told you—my brother used to tell me."

"Well, I do not have a brother," I said, looking down at the water, feeling shamed color stoke in my cheeks. "Or...or a father, either. Nobody tells me anything...except for you."

Dieneses flicked water at me with his fingertips, sprinkling my cheek and drawing my gaze. He smiled when I glanced at him. "You do realize you are in trouble, then," he said, and I laughed.

"How will we get our mentors?" I asked.

"They are chosen from the Spartiate Assembly," he replied. "All men of Sparta over the age of eighteen. If a hebon or a Spartiate wants a certain boy for his charge, he will petition the Council of Elders to nominate him for the appointment."

"How could they want certain boys?" I asked. "They do not even know us."

Dieneses shrugged. "They see you," he said. "If you are fast, or lean...strong, tall, fair. It all depends. Usually whatever mess your mentor belongs to is the one you wind up elected to, so they tend to choose boys they think will be good members of their mess companies." He looked at me. "You know that is why Hegeleus runs us past the common messes, do you not?" he asked, and I blinked at him, puzzled. "So the men can see us, get a look at us and decide whether or not they might like to sponsor us. Even if they cannot, they can get someone younger in their mess to choose you."

"I thought...I thought they just enjoyed to cheer for us," I said, blinking stupidly.

Dieneces laughed, shaking his head. "Had I not lived with you these past two years, Echelas, sometimes I would swear you had been raised in a cave," he said.

Two weeks later, while practicing boxing, Hegeleus called me aside.

"Echelas!" he yelled. "Get on your feet and get over here!"

I lay sprawled on my back, my cheek smarting from a punch delivered by my opponent. I blinked up at the sky, my vision reeling as I struggled to reclaim my breath. "Yes...yes, sir," I wheezed.

I limped toward the prefect, looking down at the ground.

"You have a fair face, ephebe," Hegeleus told me. "You might keep it awhile if you learn to get your hands up."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I noticed you have been staying in file during our runs lately," he said. "It is not like you to mind your place in the ranks when we run. You are not even sprinting like I am accustomed to. Have you hurt yourself, Echelas?"

I could not tell him that I had been deliberately checking my pace during our daily runs because of what Dieneces had told me. Every time I thought to broaden my stride, to run as I had come to enjoy, his words would echo in my mind, as effective as a set of reins drawn taut about my neck.

You know that is why Hegeleus runs us past the common messes, do you not? So the men can see us, get a look at us and decide whether or not they might like to sponsor us.

Running past the common messes had become torment; the Spartiates always came outside to watch. I would think of Clesonymus' face, twisted with pain and I would be seized with aghast horror.

You know that is why Hegeleus runs us past the common messes, do you not? So the men can see us, get a look at us.

"Have you hurt yourself, Echelas?" Hegeleus asked again.

"No, sir," I said.

Hegeleus nodded, not the least bit convinced. I wondered if his mentor did that to him. Sometimes Hegeleus would leave us under the supervision of other prefects while he went in his mentor's company for his own training, or to visit his common mess. I looked at Hegeleus and tried to picture him on his hands and knees with his mentor grunting behind him and simply could not.

"I have a task for you, Echelas," Hegeleus said, and I blinked at him, surprised from my thoughts.

"Sir?" I said.

"One of my mentor's mess mates has told a tale his wife relayed," Hegeleus said. "About a girl your age from the Limnai Pamphyloi tribe. The women say she can outrun any other girl in her age group, and older ones besides. They have offered she can best any boy her age at a foot race, and I would like you to prove them wrong."

I blinked again. "Me, sir?"

"You are the fastest among my epebes," he said. He leaned toward me and added quietly, "You are the fastest among all of the camps. Do not let your chest puff for that, and if you ever call me on it, I will deny it and strap you one." He leaned back, regarding me. "I have spoken with the Ephebic Magistrate on the matter, and he kindly gave his permission. You will race the girl today from Amyklai to the shrine of Menelaion. You will best her at it, as well. I have no doubt of that—and none of this drawing back or shortening your stride as you have been. You make me look foolish and I will give you ten strokes with the lash."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Good," he said. "Go sit down. Keep your hands up next time."

The rest of our afternoon training was cancelled in lieu of my race. Hegeleus sent the rest of my camp on foot to Menelaion under the charge of another prefect while he delivered me to the southward road from Sparta. A wagon waited here, tended by a pair of Spartiates who would bring me to Amyklai. Hegeleus left me in their company and headed for Menelaion, “to watch me win,” he said.

I was anxious to be left alone in the company of these strangers; I had not been away from the company of my group or my prefect in two years, and I was frightened. I could not even look at them as I sat in the back of the wagon. It jostled as we rode along, and I stared at my feet, my eyes wide, my breath fluttering nervously.

The men were relatively quiet, as was customary for Spartiates. They kept glancing over their shoulders from the front bench of the wagon; I could feel their eyes dart across me, but I did not raise my head to them. I did, however, peek at the girl. I had not been near to a girl since I had left my mother’s home, and then, I had only ever known Hemitheia and Neda.

Unlike me, the girl seemed relatively at ease. She did not sit with her eyes averted; she kept her chin lifted, her gaze over the side of the wagon beyond my shoulder as the landscape rolled past us. I was oddly fascinated with her, by her unfamiliar proximity. She had enormous, round eyes, a deep shade of brown, framed by dark lashes. Her lips curved like the arms of a bow upward beneath her nose, and were rather plump, like she had been slapped or pinched to lend them fullness. She had a sharply tapered chin and her dark hair had been cropped flush at this mark. She wore it in loose curls draped about her face, tucked haphazardly behind her ears.

She was nude, like me. I had never seen a naked girl before. Her body did not look so different from my own; lean and somewhat scrawny, her ribs plainly visible, her arms and legs slender like reeds along a riverbank. She was different between her thighs, though, and I cocked my head, curious, studying her there.

She caught me looking and met my gaze, her eyes intense and piercing, her brows pinched slightly in disapproval. I hung my head, sudden color blazing in my cheeks.

"I know your father, Elara," one of the Spartiates said.

"Yes, sir," the girl, Elara said. She did not look at him; she continued glaring at me. I could feel her eyes boring into the top of my head.

"Will he be watching today?" the Spartiate asked.

"I do not know to say, sir," Elara said. "He has a wife, a lover in Limnai and a charge, all of whom seem to keep him fairly well occupied."

The Spartiate laughed at this. "And what of you, boy?" he asked me. "Will your father come to watch you race?"

"I...I do not think it likely, sir," I said, addressing my toes. "As he has been dead these four years past."

I glanced up at the girl again and found she had stopped glowering at me. She looked off over my shoulder again, her expression stoic, her posture rigid and proper. Spartan girls trained much as Spartan boys did, spending their days running and dancing, learning chorale routines and athletic games.

She turned her head and caught me staring again. Her brows crimped, and I dropped my eyes, embarrassed. "Stop looking at me, ephebe," she hissed.

"I...I am sorry," I whispered.

We arrived in Amyklai and found a large group of women waiting for us. Elara stepped down from the wagon and disappeared as they swarmed about her, chattering and laughing. I remained motionless in my seat until the two Spartiates disembarked from the wagon and called to me.

"Come on now, boy. We will take you to your mark."

I followed them to a point along the roadway where someone had drawn a line of lime against the dirt. "Do you know the way to Menelaion, boy?" one of the Spartiates asked me.

“Yes, sir,” I said without looking up from the line.

“Good, then see you get there first,” said the other. “I have a measure of wine wagered on your hide, and I will see Hegeleus mete it from there if you stumble or fall short.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Elara came and stood beside me. The others spread out around us, gathering along the sides of the road. I had no idea the entire event would be such a spectacle, or of interest to so many, and I hunched my shoulders, anxious.

“Take your marks and ready,” one of the Spartiates called out from my right. Elara squatted momentarily, flexing her knees and then she straightened, holding her arms out. I raised my eyes from my feet, looking ahead of me as I presented my hands. I glanced at her over my shoulder, but she did not spare me as much as a batting of her eyelashes. She studied the road ahead of her, her chin lifted proudly, her brows drawn slightly against the glare of the afternoon sun.

“Go!” called the Spartiate, and I sprang forward, letting my legs unfurl in a broad stride, drawing my arms back and closing my hands into loose fists as I began to run.

It was a distance between the outskirts of Amyklai and the shrine of Menelaion. The temple had been built upon a sloping mound rising beyond the village itself; to reach it, we would have to follow the road north, a parallel course along the Eurotas river, before bearing east and crossing the shallow current and racing toward the Parnon foothills. It would be no simple sprint, and endurance more than speed alone would see me there.

I had run this stretch of road countless times in the last two years; the terrain was familiar and comfortable to me. I set my pace, letting my feet fall into their accustomed rhythm against the ground. The girl was a strong, swift runner; her reputation, as Hegeleus had relayed to me, was apparently not without substantial merit. At first, she matched me stride for stride, but started to lag behind as we neared the confluence of the Eurotas and Magoula rivers. She was probably accustomed to running against those who could not meet or best her pace

and she grew tired. I was used to keeping a swifter pace, a broader stride longer. Hegeleus had told us he had won laurel wreaths not only at the Pythian Games, but even once at the Olympics, and it had become a habit to me to try and keep up with him, to match his stride as he led us.

We ran through the water, splashing in the shallows. We clambered up the slope of the river bank and I could hear her grunt softly as I pulled ahead of her, outpacing her by at least three strides. She made the mistake of trying to match me, and she ran hard to close the distance, tiring herself all the more. She was huffing heavily for breath as she drew alongside of me again.

I slowed my pace deliberately; not so much that she would notice or draw offense, but enough so that she would not exhaust herself and lag too far behind for the last stretch of our race. I knew if she did she would lose honor, and more so than any punishment or beating, she would know just as much shame as I would to lose by a wide margin. I did not know why not seeing her disgraced mattered to me, but it did. There was something in her face, a gritty sort of determination that I suddenly admired about her. I was running because Hegeleus had told me to; there was nothing more really to it than this. Elara was running because it obviously meant something to her, because she meant to prove something.

She drew ahead of me as the village of Menelaion came into view. I heard her utter a delighted little sound and the corner of her mouth flicked upward in a fleeting smile. She ran all the harder, and as the back of her head, her flapping hair came into my view, I broadened my stride again, closing this narrow margin of space between us. She might have been trying to prove something, but I was trying not to get whipped. There was only so far admiration could fare when lashings were on the line. I would give her dignity, but not the win. That was mine.

We raced side by side down the main street of Menelaion. People had gathered to watch us, and they clapped and cheered. Spartans had come from the main villages to see, and they stood shoulder to shoulder along the narrow thoroughfare. They gathered along the road leading out of

Menelaion proper and toward the shrine. Here, the ephēbe groups had gathered as well, along with Spartiates and hebontes, large groups of men flanked together and cheering us on.

I could see the temple mound ahead of us, the colonnade of the shrine. I glanced one last time at Elara; she was gasping for breath, her brows furrowed, her mouth agape. She had already tapped that hidden inner reserve, that last burst of energy while still outside of the village. I could see it in her face. She was nearly spent, but I was not—not quite yet. I let my stride lengthen, the rhythm of my feet pounding against the ground quicken. I drew ahead of her, first by no more than a half-stride, and then one in full, and then another. I ran ahead of her, running as hard and as fast as I had ever dared—more than I would have thought myself capable.

I outpaced her by three strides and then four, then five. She was behind me now, and all I could see was her shadow dropping away, withdrawing behind me. I ran up the slope of the Menelaion shrine, oblivious to the fact that hundreds of ephēbes and hebontes stood within an arm's reach of me, cheering and howling their approval. I reached the top of the slope and sprinted across the open courtyard of the shrine, racing for the temple. I leaped at the stairs, scaling them three at a stride and then ran headlong across the polished stone floor of the temple toward the altar. I plowed against it, scarcely slowing my stride, and slapped my hands against it as the corner caught me squarely in the gut, whoofing whatever remained of my breath from me.

I did not even have time to stumble backward before I felt Hegeleus hook his arms around my waist, hauling me off my feet. He cried out happily in my ear, swinging me around as the other boys from our camp fell around us, jumping and cheering. “Hoah! There is a lad!” Hegeleus cried, nearly deafening me on the right side. He set me down, letting my feet settle clumsily against the floor and then Dieneces was in front of me, his mouth spread in a delighted grin.

“Hoah! That was great, Echelas!” he cried, clapping his hand against my head and tousling my hair fondly.

“Hegeleus, congratulations,” said a voice from behind me, and I turned, shying back uncertainly to find Demodocus standing there. He looked down at me, holding my gaze as he addressed my prefect, and even though his expression was not unkind, there was a sternness in it that I understood plainly and at once.

He knows, I thought, dropping my eyes toward the floor. I felt abashed heat rise in my cheeks. *He knows it was me in the woods. He knows that I saw him.*

“You have trained him well,” Demodocus said to Hegeleus, who beamed proudly at the Spartiate’s praise.

“Thank you, sir,” he said.

“You remember my charge, Clesonymus, do you not?” Demodocus asked, and I peeked up, spying the younger man next to Demodocus. Clesonymus studied me, his lips pressed together in a thin line, and I knew that he, too, realized who I was. “And Pelorus? He is a year or two beneath you, not quite a hebon yet, but I believe you have had occasion for introduction.”

“Yes, sir,” Hegeleus said. I looked at the other young man in Demodocus’ company, the one introduced as Pelorus. I had never seen him before, but he studied me with great interest, as if examining a bug he had discovered caught on his clothing.

There was nothing gentle in his face, only a rough-hewn hardness reflected in his eyes, and I was immobilized by his scrutiny. “You ran well,” he said to me. His voice was low; his words might have been lost to me in the din around us had I not been unable to look away from him, to watch his mouth move as he spoke.

“Thank...thank you, sir,” I said, finding my voice and forcing it out of my throat.

He continued to hold my gaze, even as Dieneces clasped my hand, shaking me. “Echelas,” he said, insistently. “Echelas...!”

I blinked at Pelorus. He looked down at me, impaling me with his dark, unwavering gaze, and I trembled. "Go on," he said, nodding his chin.

I looked away, stumbling in a clumsy semi-circle toward Dieneces. Demodocus moved away from us as more Spartiates came forward to congratulate Hegeleus, and Dieneces seemed relieved. "Hoah, that was close," he breathed, leaning toward me, keeping his hand hooked against mine. "I thought we were caught for certain, the way he was staring at us!"

"Me...me too," I whispered. I glanced behind me, but Pelorus was gone, following Demodocus and Clesonymus back through the crowd. I shivered slightly, drawing close to Dieneces.

"Guess what?" he said, grinning. "Hegeleus has promised us all a treat because you won. He is going to let us each have a cup of wine with our supper! Can you believe it?"

I looked over his shoulder and saw Elara standing in the middle of the temple. Her shoulders were hunched, her hands dangling limply at her side. Her chest heaved as she gulped for air, and she stared at me, hiccupping, her brows drawn. I could not tell if she was on the verge of tears, but her disappointment was so apparent in her face that I felt shamed.

"Can you believe it, Echelas?" Dieneces asked again.

"That...that is great, Dieneces," I said quietly. He said more, but I was not listening. I watched the Spartan women from Elara's village gather, enfolding her among them, and then she disappeared from my view.

CHAPTER FOUR

490 B.C.

"Ah, wine," said the man, drawing my mind from distant memories. "As great a reward as you will find in Sparta, I suppose. What did you think of it?"

"It...it was sweet," I said. "I liked the flavor of it well enough, but it made me sleepy."

"Yes, it can have that effect," he said. "I have always been a man who appreciated his wine...perhaps a little too much for Spartan Law. The drawbacks of acquired tastes."

"Acquired tastes, sir?" I asked.

"Your prefect gave you watered wine," the man said. "Less than potent and more tender on the mind. I drink my wine neatly—a dreadful habit I picked up from the Scythians. Crass rots, the lot of them, but there you are. You get a taste on your tongue for wine served in neat fashion, and the watered vintages of the mess halls seem an insult."

I was quiet for a moment. "You...you were drunk the night they brought you here," I said at last, my voice soft.

He chuckled, unoffended. "I spend a great many nights drunk anymore, my dear lad," he said. "I might spend many more, were I not kept from it in here." He shook the gate of his cell slightly, making the iron bars rattle.

"Do they do nothing of it?" I asked. "Do they...do they say nothing?"

"Who?"

"The Spartiates, sir. The Ephors and Elders."

The man laughed heartily. "Hoah, they have spoken their minds on the matter," he said. He shook his cell gate again demonstratively. "Volumes-worth, I would say." He laughed again, and I saw his shadow move as he shook his head. "The girl you raced from Amyklai," he said. "You felt sorry for her."

It was a statement, not an inquiry, and I nodded, looking down at the ground. "Yes," I said. "She...she wanted to win very badly."

"And you did not?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Hegeleus told me not to lose," I said simply.

The man chuckled. "You would have made a fine Spartiate with that philosophy in your heart, Echelas," he said. His tone of voice was odd, and I could not tell if he offered praise or derision. "What of this man, Pelorus—who became your mentor years later? What did you think of him?"

I looked toward his shadow, elongated across the corridor floor. "I was afraid of him," I whispered.

499 B.C.

The daily routine of our training had continued for the next four years, becoming as familiar to me as the winding roads and trails outlining Sparta, along which we ran every morning and evening. We lived as outsiders from the rest of the world; the ordinary lives of others—the women and girls in Spartan villages, the Spartiate men in their common messes and barracks, the Dwellers driving loaded wagons filled with their artisan wares to the marketplace, and slaves toiling in their fields and vineyards—were observed only in fleeting passage with daybreak and dusk as we ran. With the exception of festivals, we never stepped foot in any of the village-proper of Sparta. We never visited the homes into which we had been born. From the moment we began our training, we became of one age, counted in years of service rather than years of life,

and after six years spent in the childhood phase, we were ready to transition into youth hood.

It was not something we were readily aware of. When mid-summer arrived, the festival of the Gymnopaiai began and for the first time, Hegeleus did not bring us to dance and sing among the chorale groups of younger children. We were stripped of our cloaks and delivered to the youth area on the grounds of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. We were surrounded by much older boys and I remembered being frightened of them; these tall, lean strangers who seemed caught between the frail lankiness of childhood and the muscled prowess of manhood. All of our age-group camps were brought here, and unlike the older boys, who gathered together in large arrangements, seemingly at ease in the company of so many, we huddled together like wide-eyed pups torn from their litters.

For three days, we performed before the festival crowds. We paraded with the older boys in dance routines. We sang with them, our younger, higher voices blending in pleasant harmony with their deeper baritones and basses. For the first time at any festival, we were expected to offer public demonstrations of the skills we had been honing during our training—running foot races with boys from other camps, wrestling and boxing, even squaring off for heated games of all-in. It was exhausting and intimidating, and all the while, the Spartiates watched us. I did not need Dienece to tell me what was happening; they were selecting from among us. They were choosing.

Girls had always performed as the boys at our festivals, and just as the boys were separated, children from youths, so were they. When I heard the sounds of their voices as their songs began, I raised my eyes from my toes, risking a peek, enthralled by the simple sweetness of their refrains to Artemis. I saw Elara among them, dancing nearby; a fleeting glimpse of a dark-haired girl with large eyes kicking her heels toward her rump and leaping about. It had been four years since our race, and in that time, she had lengthened and grown, as I had. I blinked at her, at the gentle curvatures that had

begun to touch her hips and waist, and at the nubs of her bosom that had slowly begun to protrude from her chest.

“You are not going to faint, are you?” Dienesces whispered, thinking the brutal afternoon sun had taken some toll on me. “Are you, Echelas? They will beat you for it—it is the Gymnopaïdai!”

“No,” I said, shaking my head slowly. I looked over my shoulder, but could not see Elara anymore. “No, I just...Elara is here.”

“Who?” he asked.

“Elara,” I said. “The girl. You remember. I raced her once, a long time ago. I just...I saw her over there dancing.”

He blinked at me as if I had been slapped witless. “We are moving—we are next,” he said, hooking his hand against the crook of my elbow and hauling me in stumbling tow as our ranks stepped forward, moving for the parade area. “Come on, Echelas. Keep in step, or you will see us all in trouble.”

At the end of the third day, the Gymnopaïdai concluded. As Hegeleus led us on foot for our campsite, my mind was filled with the comforting thought of my pallet and a sound night’s sleep. To my surprise, however, when we reached the campsite, Hegeleus ordered us to dismantle our reed pallets and toss them into the fire. I blinked at his instruction, bewildered and somewhat alarmed. He snapped at us, shouting sharply for the first time in ages, and we scurried into motion, appropriately cowed.

I looked at Dienesces as I squatted by my pallet, drawing the reeds apart. “What is happening?” I whispered.

He looked up, his eyes wide and anxious. “I do not know,” he whispered back.

“Is he angry with us?” I asked. “Did we not do well at the festival? Did we shame him?”

“I do not know,” Dienesces said again.

One by one, we brought our reeds to the center of our campsite and placed them into the fire. “Follow me,” Hegeleus barked, and he walked away from the camp, heading into the

woods. We all recognized the direction he was taking—he meant to lead us toward the main clearing, to the whipping posts and the lash.

Dieneces and I looked at one another, frightened. “What did we do?” I whimpered. “Why is he angry?”

Dieneces shook his head, his dark eyes enormous. “I do not know,” he said.

Our bewilderment only mounted when we reached the clearing. All of the boys our age had been brought here, all of the camps assembled. My camp was the Dymanes tribe from the village of Pitana, and upon our arrival, we were forced to gather with the Dymanes tribe boys from all of the other Spartan villages in one great flock—the Limnai, Kynosoura, Mesoa and Amyklai groups. As we had at the Gymnopaidei, we huddled together. I stood with my shoulder pressed against Dieneces, shied against him, wide-eyed and trembling with alarm.

The prefects ordered all of the boys about, arranging them by tribes, not by villages. Once they had us divided, they marched us through the woods again. We left the clearing, stumbling together. I walked with my hands tucked beneath the folds of my cloak, my fingers pawing anxiously, uncertainly against my belly. They were not going to beat us, that much was obvious, and while this should have brought some comfort to my mind, it did not. Nothing like this had ever happened; never before had all of the camps been brought together and reorganized by tribe. None of us understood what was happening, except that it was far from the normal routine we were accustomed to—and we were frightened.

They marched us for a long time, until well after dark, bringing us to an assemblage of buildings erected in the middle of a large, relatively flat plain of land; dozens of long, unadorned stone barracks. Tribe by tribe, the prefects delivered us to the buildings. We discovered nothing inside but a long, solitary, empty room. The prefects ordered us along the walls by camp group, snapping at us to line the room in our pallet assignment formations. Dieneces and I scurried across

the room at Hegeleus' sharp command, and stood next to one another.

When we were all in place, a peculiar silence fell upon the room. I stared down at my feet, trembling with fear. I could hear the prefects murmuring together in quiet counsel, and then the soft sounds of their footsteps as they left the building, walking outside. They took their torches with them, and darkness fell upon the chamber. They left us alone, but no one dared to utter a sound.

I heard new footsteps; someone walking alone across the threshold and toward the center of the room. I could see a circumference of golden, fluttering torchlight spreading against the floor as he approached. "I am Tages," this person said, his voice loud, deep and unfamiliar; the voice of a man, and not one of our youthful prefects. "I am your prefect now."

My breath caught in the back of my throat and I blinked at the floor. *What?* I thought, dismayed.

"You have been brought here as youths of the Dymanes," Tages said. "As such, you are in my charge."

But...but what about Hegeleus? I thought. *He is our prefect. He would not just leave us here...!*

"Lie on the floor where you are standing," Tages said to us, his voice reverberating against the tall, stark stone walls. "This will be your place now. Make your bed against the dirt and go to sleep."

"Yes, sir," we said, our voices blending together in subdued harmony. I raised my head slightly, peeking at him as he began to walk away. He was a Spartiate; his dark hair hung to below his shoulder blades, and the wool cloak he wore draped about his tall, muscular frame had been dyed red—the mark of a full Spartan.

We have been left in the charge of a Spartiate, I thought. Why? Did we do something wrong? Something to make Hegeleus angry...to make him punish us like this? What did we do?

I did as Tages had ordered; I lay on the floor, curling onto my side and drawing my arm beneath my head, cradling my cheek against my elbow. Moonlight filtered through narrow

windows near the tops of the walls, and as my eyes adjusted to the pale glow and gloom, I saw Dieneces facing me, mirroring my position, his dark eyes glistening in the dim light.

“Is...is Hegeleus coming back for us?” I whispered.

“I do not know,” Dieneces said.

“He has to come back for us,” I said, distraught, bewildered tears stinging my eyes. “Who...who is going to lead us in our morning prayers? Who is going to give us our rations, or run with us? Teach us our recitations? He...he has to come back for us.”

“I do not think so, Echelas,” Dieneces said quietly, after a long moment.

“But he...he cannot leave us here,” I whimpered. “He would not do that, would he? Why would he do that?”

Dieneces reached for me, letting his hand drape against the small margin of dirt between us. “I do not know,” he whispered.

I slipped my hand against his, curling my fingers against his palm. “He...he did not even tell us good-bye,” I said, blinking against my tears. “I am frightened, Dieneces.”

He gave my hand a soft squeeze. “I am, too,” he said.

We were roused before dawn. Tages marched down the center of the barracks, shouting out to wake us, and slapping a long, heavy strap of leather against the ground. The report of it striking, the snap of the lash, startled me awake, and I sat up, recoiling instinctively, my eyes flown wide. “All of you remove your cloaks and step outside!” Tages yelled. “I want you lined up by village! I hear as much as a whimper and every one of you will find this lash lying against your spine!”

I scampered outside, finding my place among my camp mates. Tages ordered us to run, and we did. We passed broad, open fields where the day’s physical training for older boys had already begun; we could hear their fierce, loud cries as they swung at one another with staves, or wrestled each other. I heard the ringing of iron against iron, and turned my

head, catching a glimpse of young men on a sloping hillside to my left, paired off and sparring with short swords.

They brought us to a place along the Eurotas river just north of Menelaion. Here, Tages ordered us into the water to bathe. "Rinse the stink of rot from your hides!" he shouted, cracking his whip again and sending us scurrying into the shallows.

We washed hurriedly, and then reformed our rows along the water's edge, all of us shivering. Tages led hebontes among us, inspecting us each in turn to make sure we had cleaned thoroughly. He paused before me, clasping his hand against my chin and craning my head from side to side to inspect my ears. "What is your name, ephebe?" he asked me.

"Echelas, sir," I said. "Son of Aeropus."

Tages looked me in the eye, his fingers pressing painfully against the line of my jaw. "You are the son of Sparta, ephebe," he said, leaning toward me until our noses nearly brushed. "When you are weaned from her bosom—or you have died in the effort—then you may call yourself son of a true Spartiate. Until then, you are no more than this. Do you understand me?"

I blinked at him, frightened and breathless. "Yes, sir," I said.

"What is your name?" he asked me again.

"Echelas, sir," I said. "Son of Sparta."

Tages turned loose of me, shoving me back a clumsy step. "You are the sprinter," he said. "I thought I recognized your face." He stepped past me, moving toward Dieneces. "Pretty little thing," he remarked of me to one of his hebontes, and then he was gone.

I regained my footing and my place in line and stared down at my toes, trembling in the wake of his grasp, his sharp words.

"Yes," I heard someone say, a murmur from directly in front of me. "You are a pretty little thing."

I felt fingertips hook beneath my chin, lifting my face, and I blinked in momentary confusion at the hebon who stood before me. His face was vaguely familiar and when I realized, I stiffened, my eyes widening.

Clesonymus! I thought. *It...it is Demodocus' charge, the one Dieneces and I saw in the woods...!*

"Echelas is your name, ephebe?" Clesonymus asked, keeping his fingers planted beneath my chin.

"Yes, sir," I said. He studied me, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned down as if he had tasted something bitter.

"Echelas..." he murmured, reaching up with the pad of his thumb and stroking my bottom lip lightly. It was a bizarre gesture that frightened and repulsed me, but I did not dare move. If I recoiled, I would be beaten, and I stood motionless, even as Clesonymus leaned toward me. His cheek brushed against mine and he spoke in my ear softly, his breath hot and fluttering against my skin. "Tell me, Echelas," he whispered. "Do you like to watch?"

I could not breathe. I had thought Demodocus had recognized me years ago after my foot race to Menelaion; apparently this observation had not been lost upon Clesonymus, either. He knew who I was—and bore ill will for the recognition. *He...he wants to hit me*, I thought in sudden horror, staring at the lash dangling from his hand. *He hopes I will recoil or flinch. He wants me to give him a reason to beat me.*

"Do you?" he purred. He stepped away from me, his hand slipping from my face, and I dropped my eyes to the ground. "I think I will start watching, as well, ephebe," Clesonymus said. "I think I will start watching you."

Tages herded us north again, delivering us at last to the acropolis in the heart of Sparta. A huge crowd of men had assembled along the sloping, manicured grounds—members of the Spartiate Assembly. They gathered in a broad circumference, and a group of twenty-eight, the Elders from all of the Spartan villages stood in the center of them.

Whatever was meant to happen was a spectacle of some importance, I realized. We were brought into the center

of the Assembly before the Elders and made to stand there a seeming eternity, our heads hung, our hands at our sides.

A man began to speak, his voice sharp and loud in the morning air. He called for the prefects of the Pitana Dymanes to come forward, and I saw Hegeleus step out from the rows of Assembly members, walking toward us. I nearly cried aloud in relief. Whatever madness had fallen upon us since last night, surely it was over now; surely, Dieneces was wrong, and Hegeleus had come to bring us back to the forests—to our home. We had disappointed him somehow during the Gymnopaïdai; we had shamed him in front of the other Spartiates and this had been our punishment. Worse than any beating, Hegeleus had punished us by frightening us, by making us think he had abandoned us.

He called out our names one at a time, and I watched in growing confusion as my camp mates stepped forward. He called out other names, too, unfamiliar to me, and as he did, a hebon or Spartiate from the gathering of Assembly members would step forward to meet the boy.

What is he doing? I thought, and then I felt my breath choke with the realization.

The men were our mentors. We were old enough now. *We will all get one when we turn thirteen*, Dieneces had told me years ago, on the afternoon when we had discovered Demodocus and Clesonymus in the forest. *It is like a personal prefect, a hebon or Spartiate who shows you things, how to wield a sword and spear, how to behave properly at the common mess, that sort of thing.*

“Echelas, son of Sparta, step forward!” Hegeleus called.

I did not move; I could not. I stood rooted in place, trembling with shock and fright. *I do not want this*, I thought, remembering Demodocus on his knees behind Clesonymus, the peculiar, soft sounds emanating from Clesonymus’ throat. *No, no, no, I do not want this.*

“Echelas,” Dieneces hissed from beside me, his voice shrill with alarm. “Echelas, step forward.”

No, I thought, tears filling my eyes. No, no, please, Hegeleus. Please do not do this to me.

“Echelas...!” Dieneses breathed, and he jabbed his elbow forcefully into my arm. I blinked at him, and he stared at me, nearly panicked. “They will beat you lame,” he whispered. “Go!”

I stumbled out of line and walked toward Hegeleus. I wanted to dart against him and plead with him not to send me away, not to leave me to a mentor and the barracks; to bring me back to the woods, to our camp. I stood in front of him, shivering, blinking against tears.

Hegeleus looked over his shoulder as a man approached from behind him, stepping out from the ranks of the Assembly. Hegeleus had called to him when he had summoned for me, but I had been too distraught and frightened to pay attention. I had not heard his name. “This is Pelorus the Younger, hebon of Sparta,” Hegeleus said.

I did not recall the name to hear it aloud, but when I looked up at this man, my mentor, I shrank back, my eyes widening in frightened alarm. I knew him; the hardened angles of his face, the severity of his gaze, the stern drape of his brows. I had seen him on the day of my race to Menelaion and he frightened me as much now as he had then.

“This is Echelas, ephebe and son of Sparta,” Hegeleus said. Pelorus looked down at me as if Hegeleus had just presented him with an offering of dried scat. His brows were narrowed, his thin mouth turned down in a grave line. His expression did not soften to realize my fear, or the tears in my eyes; rather, these seemed to only displease him more, and his frown deepened. There was nothing kind in his face, nothing but that rugged gravity.

“He is a good boy,” Hegeleus said quietly, and he smiled at me, a fleeting lift to the corner of his mouth.

“You are supposed to offer me a good Spartan, not a boy,” Pelorus said dryly. He turned around and walked away. “I suppose that leaves it to me to teach him the difference, prefect.”

“Hegeleus tells me you are a strong runner,” Pelorus said. It was later in the afternoon, and each of the boys in my group had been dismissed to the charge of their mentors. Pelorus had brought me to a place along the banks of the Eurotas river, south of the youth camp. He had explained to me in a brusque tone that this was our place, where I would spend much of my days from now on under his tutelage. I stood with my head hung as he paced around me in broad circles. I had never felt more alone in all of my life.

“He tells me you are a fair swimmer,” Pelorus said. “A lousy wrestler and an even worse boxer. You are scrawny for your age. You are built like a girl. It is no small wonder you have no strength to call your own.”

I stood motionless and shamed, blinking at my toes.

“I am doubling your rations to lay some flesh atop the sinew holding your bones together,” Pelorus said. “You are my charge now, and the responsibilities for your tuition and food allotments have left your mother and come upon me.” He said this as if he had just shouldered the breadth of Mount Olympus against his back. “Therefore, you represent an investment of my time, energy and profits from my lands—ancient lands my family had called its own for more than one hundred years. You reflect poorly on my investment at the moment, ephebe. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“I will not take my responsibilities to you lightly—and you will not shirk yours to me. Your success or failure reflects upon me, and I do not mean to know disgrace among my fellows. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

He paused, leaning toward my ear. I could see his hand closed in a tight, angry fist in my line of sight. “You shamed me at the acropolis today, shaking like a lamb caught in a wolf den. You are a son of Sparta. If you want to cower and snivel, tell me now, and I will haul you by the scruff to the

border of Arcadia. You can be their son, not ours, and cringe and whimper to your heart's content."

"Yes, sir."

He stood there for a long moment, letting his breath huff angrily against my ear, and then he turned and stomped toward the river. "Come with me," he said, following the line of the water. "Keep in step. You have the speed for it, I know. You have little else of merit about you save this. We might as well see it to some use."

"Yes, sir," I said, following him.

He led me up a sloping hillside to a place overlooking an expansive flood plain along the river valley. I heard unfamiliar sounds as I climbed up the hill; the muffled, resonant din of men's voices overlapping with heavy footfalls, the melodic jangling of metal against metal and haunting flute notes that floated in the air. I stood beside Pelorus and looked down at the plain, my eyes growing wide, my breath drawing still.

Here was a place most boys seldom saw. Spartiates trained here; not the clumsy efforts of children, or even the coordinated routines of the older youths. Full men of Sparta—the seasoned hoplites of her army—practiced warfare upon the plain, hundreds of them, their scarlet cloaks visible plainly, the midafternoon sun flashing in dazzling arrays off of their bronze corselets, helmets and greaves, winking against the bronze shells of their enormous shields.

They marched together in tight rows, their shields overlapping, their spears presented over their shoulders. At the piping of the flute, they would draw their cues and turn sharply, shifting direction in utter and perfect tandem, or quicken their pace, their feet falling in absolute and unwavering step together. They marched in phalanxes toward one another, their strides growing swifter at the command of the flutes as they drew nearer to an opposing formation. I watched in mute and helpless awe as two large phalanxes fell together in mock battle; their frontline shield walls crashed together with brutal

force, the resounding clatter of bronze smashing against bronze echoing across the valley, sending birds flapping away in fright from distant treetops. The Spartiates roared together as their spears shoved forward, and I could not breathe for my wonder.

“These are the Pitana Dymanes hoplites,” Pelorus told me. “Spartiates of your tribe and village, as they are mine.”

These had been the ranks my father had served in, I realized. The men below me, the Spartiates engaged in mock battle had likely known my father. Some had likely been with him in Athens during the revolt; ensconced along the Athenian acropolis with him when he had been killed.

“They are an Agiad division,” Pelorus said. “Our kings descend from the twin heirs of Heracles himself—two lines of the same royal blood. We call them the Agiad and Eurypontid houses. Each king holds command over our army, and our forces are divided among them. Your people and mine answer to his majesty, the Agiad King Cleomenes.”

“My father followed him,” I said softly, gazing down at the Spartiates and smiling wistfully, enthralled. “He died in Athens. My mother told me Cleomenes wanted to depose a wicked government there and restore another he had made friends with. He tried, but the people of Athens revolted. They drove Cleomenes and his soldiers to the acropolis, and then from the city. My father was killed. He...he died a hero, my mother said.”

I realized I had spoken freely, and out-of-turn, something likely to infuriate Pelorus, given his apparent surly mood. I blinked down at the ground, frightened and abashed.

“Would you see yourself a hero to Sparta, like your father?” Pelorus asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Would you see yourself find your place among these honorable ranks, a hoplite of Sparta?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

"Then you had best mark this, boy," he said. "It takes mettle and heart to become a warrior of Sparta—both of which you seem to be sorely lacking. It takes honor and determination, which I harbor some fleeting hope you might possess, at least in some modicum. It takes strength—of which you have none—and resilience, of which you seem to have in abundance. If you would ever see yourself here..." He pointed down toward the Spartiates. "...then you will do as I tell you, whether you wish it, will it, want it, understand it or not. You will develop that which you are lacking, and you will fortify those meager merits you already possess. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He leaned toward me, scowling. "You will begin by never, ever smiling at me again," he said. "You keep that mouth of yours closed and in line. I want 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' only out of your pipes. If I desire any more discourse than this, I will find it elsewhere—someplace with more substance and from a point of view I hold with a fair bit of regard. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Good," he said. "That is a start, at least."

"Pedaues was named Clesonymus' charge," Dieneses whispered that night. Tages had ordered us to bed and left the barrack, leaving us in darkness as we huddled against the floor. Dieneses and I lay close together, our foreheads nearly touching, our breath tickling each other's faces as we whispered back and forth.

"You remember Clesonymus," he said. "Demodocus is his mentor? We saw them in the woods together when we—"

"I remember him," I said. Clesonymus had not said a word to Dieneses along the riverbank, and I had said nothing to Dieneses of my encounter. I did not know what to think of it, and it remained one of the more disturbing highlights of a fairly unsettling day. I remembered the soft sound of Clesonymus' voice against my ear, the press of his breath against my skin.

Tell me, Echelas...do you like to watch?

"They are well-suited, it seems," Dieneses said with a frown. "Already, I have heard stories that Clesonymus set Pedaeus to a fight. He pummeled a fifteen-year-old, someone Clesonymus had a grudge against for awhile, I heard."

I think I will start watching, as well, ephebe, Clesonymus had told me. *I think I will start watching you.*

"Clesonymus is a hebon—in his twenties at least," Dieneses said. "I cannot imagine what a boy of fifteen might do to warrant a grudge from a hebon."

I can, I thought, shivering as Clesonymus' words echoed in my mind.

I think I will start watching you.

"So what of your mentor, this Dymanes hebon, Pelorus?" Dieneses asked. "What do you think of him?"

"I...I do not know to say," I said. "I do not think he likes me much." *He scares me,* I thought, but I did not admit this aloud.

"Thersites would not shut up," Dieneses said. "He talks even more than I do—if you can believe it. He went on for hours—more than I ever cared to know about anything. He told me about some sort of revolution across the sea, a place called Ionia."

"Ionia," I repeated. I had no concept of the world. That it could extend beyond the boundaries of the Eurotas valley seemed impossible to me.

Dieneses nodded. "Greeks live there," he said. "Remember when your father died? The people in Athens that Cleomenes was trying to put into power went there—to Ionia. It is part of an empire, Thersites told me. The Persian empire."

"What is Persian?"

"Barbarians," he said. "Not Greek people. Other kinds. People with dark skin who do not speak Greek, Thersites told me. When they talk, it sounds like this: 'bar-bar-bar.'"

His voice took on a shrill sort of tone as he mimicked this, and I giggled. “Why did he tell you all of this?” I asked. I was somewhat envious; Dieneces’ mentor, Thersites had not seemed to treat him poorly at all, save for yapping his ears off.

“Because Thersites said there is talk of war,” Dieneces said, his eyes wide and round. “A revolt against the Persians. The Greeks in Ionia have sent messages to Athens, asking them to help. Thersites said they might send messages to Sparta, too.”

I blinked, thinking of the soldiers I had seen that day, the Pitana Dymanes hoplites practicing their battle drills. “Will...will they go to war, Dieneces?” I whispered.

“Thersites did not know,” he said. He snickered softly. “He told me the Eurypontid king, Demaratus is a coward, a lamb who quakes to spy his own shadow in a corner. He said Demaratus would as soon sprout wings from his ass and fly as willingly agree to war. And the Agiad king, Cleomenes is too busy concerning himself with Argolis. Thersites said he would not go sniffing for a foreign war with one so close at hand.”

Dieneces raised his brow. “Pelorus told you nothing of this?”

I shook my head. “He was too busy telling me to eat more. He said I was built like a girl.”

He snickered again. “Well, he is observant, at least,” he remarked.

I poked him roughly in the shoulder. “Shut up,” I said.

He poked me back. “It does not matter anyway,” he said. “War or no war, against the Persians or whomever, it does not bother us. We will still be stuck here, no matter.”

I blinked at this in dismay. He was right; we had years left in this place. “I hate it here, Dieneces,” I whispered.

Dieneces’ face softened. He reached out and brushed the cuff of his fingers against my cheek. “I do, too,” he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

490 B.C.

"There was war, you know," the man said to me. Our shadows played long against the corridor floor now, running up along the prison wall beyond our cells as the afternoon waned. "In Ionia. Messengers did come to Sparta from Ionia begging for aid, but Sparta refused them, sent them away."

"Why?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Your friend was right. Demaratus would have no more agreed to war than he would have cut off his own member. He lacked the heart for much of anything—but most among these, for war. No, Demaratus was the sort who would have seen Sparta bend beneath the winds of Persia, if only because he believed some benefit to himself might come. He was—and remains—as much a coward as an imbecile; a traitor and a disgrace to Sparta and her Laws.

"And as for Cleomenes?" he said. "Hoah, again your lad, Dieneces spoke truly. Cleomenes would not dare make a stand allied with Athens—not when his attentions were so rightfully diverted to his own lands of the Peloponnese."

"Cleomenes wanted to make war against Argolis?" I asked.

"Of course not," he replied. "What man willingly rises to the occasion of war? None with any true mind or mettle. Cleomenes wanted to ally the Peloponnesian states. Argolis had other ambitions in mind. The Argives have never liked us—we might have presented them with the most generous of alliances, one that served their interests above any others, and

they still would have stood against it, simply because Sparta offered it. The Argives brought war upon themselves. Cleomenes merely gave them that which they so foolishly bartered."

"I remember," I said. "Pelorus went north under Cleomenes' command."

"Strengthen your home, lad, before you turn your gaze to sometime friends across any sea," the man told me pointedly. "And do not trust to Athens for any allegiance you can rely upon—she is more twisted in her means than a basket of snakes. Those are the philosophies Cleomenes followed—and he was wise for it. Athens squandered years fighting for Ionia, and in the end, it was for nothing. The revolution failed, and Athens only had new enemies to show for it—the new regime in Ionia, and the breadth of the Persian empire behind it. Cleomenes kept his eyes and his army here in the Peloponnese, and harnessed the Argives to his yoke for his efforts."

I was quiet for an uncertain moment, not wanting to offend him. "Was Cleomenes not put on trial after the Argive War, sir?" I asked finally, hesitantly. "He...I have always heard that he might have taken Argos, but he did not. The Ephors charged him with accepting bribes to spare the city. And some...some among the Assembly said he did things there...things of madness, sir."

The man laughed softly. "Your Pelorus was there, you said. Did he see such things?"

"No, sir," I said. "Not that he ever told me."

"I was there," the man said. "I never saw them, either. You would seem the victim of cruel and malicious rumor yourself, lad. I think you, more than most, should understand that what is told and what is heard at your mess halls is not always truth. I know what I saw with my own eyes in Argolis—and I know the Ephors may have tried Cleomenes, but they acquitted him of any offense. Demaratus hated Cleomenes. He refused to lead his share of the army to Argolis, and in remaining behind in Sparta, ran his tongue to discredit the better of the two crowns. A king is a powerful friend, Echelas—and an even more bitter foe."

"They are going to expel Idmon from the training," Dieneses whispered to me.

Two weeks had passed since we had been brought to the youth camp. I was slowly adjusting to my new routine. Our lives had not changed too dramatically, I was discovering, as many of our daily activities remained much as they had in the forest. We still participated in group activities, as we had in the past, only now, these activities were punctuated by hours in the morning and late afternoon spent in alone in the company of our mentors.

“What?” I asked. I lay on my side in our barrack, facing Dieneses, and blinked in surprise.

“You cannot say anything,” Dieneses whispered. “I am not supposed to know. I overheard Tages talking about it with another prefect this afternoon during wrestling.”

“Expel him?” I said. I raised my head slightly, looking over my shoulder and across the room. I could see the silhouetted outline of Idmon’s form, huddled and still. He was a small, mouse-like boy with large eyes, delicate features and a scrawny build. The regiment of torment and abuse meted out on him by Pedaeus that had initiated nearly from our first day of training had continued unabated since our youth appointments. “They...they cannot do that, can they?”

“Sure they can,” Dieneses said. “It happens all of the time here in the youth camp. It is where they weed us out.”

“He is small,” I said. “He cannot help that.”

“He is slow,” Dieneses said. “He is clumsy and weak.”

“He would not be so bad if he was not always on his own,” I said. “No one helps him out much. He is always left by himself to things. He could be alright if someone just showed him.”

“I heard Tages say the Elders had to appoint someone to his mentor on their own,” Dieneses said. “No one petitioned for him. Can you imagine that? Not even any of the members of his own father’s mess wanted him. They all know.”

I blinked at him, puzzled. “Know what?”

Dieneces looked at me solemnly. "That he will not make it."

I looked over my shoulder again toward Idmon. "What are you thinking?" Dieneces said. "Get those ideas out of your head."

"I am not thinking anything," I said, my brows drawing slightly.

"Yes, you are," Dieneces said. "I know you. You make nice with Idmon, and you are likely to find yourself on the battering end of Pedaeus' fists, too. You have enough troubles of your own without inviting that sort."

I frowned. "What troubles?"

"You have the toughest mentor in all of Sparta," Dieneces said. "Or have you forgotten?"

"Pelorus is not so tough," I said.

"Hoah, yeah," Dieneces said, laughing. "And I am the Eurypontid heir apparent."

"I have been thinking about it," I said. "I know how to make Pelorus like me better. If I do something as he likes it to be done, then he is pleased, and nearly nice about it."

"So now all you have to do is find out how Pelorus prefers everything," Dieneces said.

"Exactly," I said.

He shook his head. "You are mad," he said. "Nothing pleases that man."

I frowned at him. "I have to try," I said. "What else can I do? He is my mentor—I am fairly well stuck with him. There is no escape."

"Sure there is," Dieneces said. He raised his head, nodding his chin across the room. "If you would end up like Idmon, that is."

After Dieneces went to sleep, I stayed awake awhile, whispering my recitations to myself and working by the light of

the moon to trace and retrace my alphabet letters in the dirt floor. Pelorus was teaching me to read and write. It was a task I was proving inept at, as he repeatedly pointed out.

The next morning, however, was different. He looked over my shoulder, standing behind me as I knelt along the riverbank, carefully scratching out the vocabulary words he had assigned to me in the mud with a stick. When I was finished, I sat quietly with my head lowered as he continued studying my writing.

“Write your name,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, taking my stick in hand again and obeying him.

“Write the alphabet,” he said when I had done this. “All of the letters.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He made a soft harrumphing sound in his throat when I was finished. “What is that?” he asked, pointing to the river. I wrote in the mud: *Eurotas*.

“And that?” He pointed to the mountain peaks looming in the distance.

Taygetos, I wrote.

He harrumphed again. “Recite the opening of Terpander’s hymn to Zeus,” he said.

““Zeus, inceptor of all, of all things the commander, Zeus, I bring you this gift: the beginning of song,” I said.

“Alcaeus’ prayer for safety at sea,” Pelorus said.

““Be with me now, leaving the Isle of Pelops, mighty sons of Zeus and of Leda, now in kindness of heart appear to me, Castor and Pollux—you who wander over the wide earth, over all the sea’s domain on your flying horses, easily delivering mortal men from death and terror. Swept in far descent to the strong-built vessel’s masthead, you ride shining upon the cables, through the weariness of the dark night bringing light to the black ship.””

“What are man’s lessons, according to Alcman?” Pelorus asked.

“Experience and suffering are the mother of wisdom,” I said.

“His words of the journey?”

“Narrow is our way of life and necessity is pitiless,” I said.

Pelorus did not say anything for a long moment, and I could not help myself. I had stumped him, surprised and impressed him. The corner of my mouth fluttered upward.

He cuffed me across the back of the head. “Stop smiling,” he said dourly.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You will never take pride in performing well that which is compulsory to your training,” he said. “If I had ever thought you thoroughly incompetent or ignorant, you might be duly entitled. This not being the case, you have simply—and for once—completed what has been expected of you all along.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, blinking down at my knees. I had tried so hard to please him, and even in this, he had rebuked me. *Dieneces is right*, I thought. *There will be no satisfying him.*

There was no amount of whispering in the dark, or conscientious repetition by moonlight that would put strength in my arms or make my face less of an appealing target for swiftly delivered punches, and that afternoon during boxing practice, I hit the dirt so often, I think I had grit permanently imbedded in my scalp. To make matters worse, Pelorus went out of his way to see me paired against boys significantly larger and stronger than myself, and my graceless dives to the ground left me sprawled in their shadows.

“Come here,” Pelorus said after my final opponent of the afternoon had plowed me face-first into the dust and left me breathless, my nose bleeding.

“Yes, sir,” I said, limping to my feet. I stumbled along behind him as he led me away for private counsel. I sniffled against the blood, hunkering my shoulders and keeping my eyes on the ground, fully anticipating the berating I knew was to come.

“Here,” Pelorus said. I felt his hand cup my chin, lifting my head slightly. He pressed the corner of his cloak against my nose, and I blinked, startled. “Hold still,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, my voice pinched and stuffy.

He held his cloak against my face for a long moment, and then drew it back, canting my chin a bit to inspect my nose. “It is not broken,” he said, dabbing again, catching the last of the staving blood flow.

“No, sir,” I said.

“Hurts, though, does it not?” he asked, raising his brow.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Take a lesson from it. I have seen cornered rabbits make a better stand than you.” He let go of my chin and I hung my head again.

“Look at me,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, raising my eyes from my toes.

Pelorus curled his hands into fists and brought them toward his face, holding them closely together. “Keep your hands like this,” he said. He ducked, cutting his head toward his left shoulder and moving his hands toward his right. “You catch a punch against your hands, not your head, and you will not hit the ground so often.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Keep your hands up next time. Draw his punch against your arms and then hook around, get him in the gut.” He demonstrated, swinging his fist swiftly through the air in a sharp upper cut. “Drop your shoulder and step into your punch. Knock the wind from him. Then straighten up and step back. Come around...” He hooked his opposite fist around

and down, miming a blow to an opponent's head. "...like this. You see?"

I blinked at him, caught off guard by this proffered counsel. "Yes, sir," I said.

"Other boys may be stronger than you, but you are quicker," Pelorus told me. "Did I not tell you that you had little else of merit in your favor? Use it, Echelas. You move fast enough and step into your punches, and you can put what little weight you call your own into them."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Go to our place by the river and wash your face," he said. "It will be supertime soon."

"Yes, sir," I said.

As I walked toward the river, practicing the boxing moves Pelorus had offered, I heard someone cry out suddenly, sharply. I turned toward the sound, recognizing Idmon's voice. He screamed again, loud and filled with pain, and I frowned, running toward the sound.

Pedaeus had caught him as others from my barrack had made their ways to meet their mentors for supper. A group of nearly forty boys from the Dymanes group had gathered to watch this latest spectacle, as Pedaeus took to Idmon with his fists. As I approached the broad circumference of backs and shoulders gathered around the fight, I flushed with sudden, indignant rage. Here we all stood, laughing and clapping while Idmon had the wits battered from him, not one among us stepping forward on his behalf.

I shoved my way through the crowd of boys. I could hear the heavy sounds of Pedaeus' knuckles striking Idmon, and the birdlike, breathless sounds of his cries at each brutal impact.

"There is no place for you here among true Spartans, Idmon," Pedaeus told him. "Your mother must have spread her legs for some Messenian slave."

Everyone laughed at this, and I shouldered my way past the frontline, stumbling out into the center of a broad circle formed around Pedaeus.

“You are a Trembler in the making, nothing more, you rot,” Pedaeus laughed. “Shake for us, Trembler! Show us how it is done!”

I could see him standing with his hands closed into fists, his lips wrinkled back in his customary sneer. Idmon lay in a heap against the ground, choking for breath, his face smeared with blood. Pedaeus had hit him hard enough to make him vomit, and he lay with his cheek pressed in a puddle of thin, foamy liquid.

“Leave him alone, Pedaeus,” I said, and every single boy gathered among the trees fell silent in absolute shock. Pedaeus turned to me, his eyes flown wide, his brows lifted as though someone had just pinched him in the rump. Even Idmon, writhing in the dirt, opened his eyes and blinked at me in bewildered disbelief.

Pedaeus shook his head, uttering a snort of laughter. “Go away, Echelas,” he said. “You have had your wits scrambled from boxing. You think you are a man now.”

A ripple of quiet, nervous laughter fluttered from the boys. I held Pedaeus’ gaze and closed my hands into fists.

“Leave Idmon alone,” I said again. “He is one of us—a Pitana Dymanes, the same as you or me.”

Pedaeus laughed again. “He is nothing like me, or he would stand up to a fight,” he said.

“You only stand up to fights against those smaller than you,” I said. “You have Idmon at the disadvantage, if that is your measure of merit.”

Pedaeus smiled at me, but there was no mistaking the low, menacing note of warning in his words. “You had better run, Echelas,” he said. “That is what you are good at, and you are going to bleed otherwise.”

“I am not running from you, Pedaeus,” I said.

The malicious good cheer drained from Pedaeus' face and he stepped toward me, his brows furrowing deeply. "Fine, then," he said.

He swung at me, his broad fist pistoning around in a sharp arc aimed for my head. I drew my arms up like Pelorus had showed me, and staggered as I blocked the proffered blow. It startled Pedaeus for a fleeting moment, enough time for me to draw my fist back and ram it forward, stepping fully into my punch like Pelorus had instructed. I put my weight behind my blow and slammed my knuckles into Pedaeus' gut. He whooped for breath, his eyes flying wide, and he staggered, buckling at the waist.

I danced back a swift step and arced my other fist around and down, punching him in the cheek. He stumbled again clumsily, but caught himself with his hand against the ground before he fell. I frowned, my brows pinching furiously, and then drew my fist back, punching him in the temple. He still did not fall, and I reared my hand back, plowing my knuckles into his brow yet again.

He crumpled, his elbow folding, but did not hit the dirt. I stepped back and punted him mightily in the groin. Only then did he collapse, smacking against the ground, his breath choking from him.

There was utter and absolute silence in the forest except for his gagging. I stood over him, my fists clenched. For six years, I had lived in terror of this boy; for six years, I had scurried around like a mouse in a barn to avoid drawing his bullying attentions to myself. I looked down at him now as he sputtered for breath, and wondered what I had ever found to fear so much.

"If you ever touch Idmon again, I will beat you lame," I said to him, and I kicked him again with all of the strength I could summon in my leg. He writhed, whooping loudly, his feet kicking feebly in the dirt. "Do you hear me, Pedaeus?" I shouted. I looked around at the other boys. "Do all of you hear me? Any of you bother Idmon again, and I will knock the lot of you witless, you coward rots! One at a time, or all of you

at once! It does not matter to me! Do your worst—I am here! Let me see it!”

They blinked at me, all of them wide-eyed and stunned.

I walked over to Idmon and leaned over, offering him my hand. “Come on,” I said. “I will walk with you to the barracks.”

He stared at me, his eyes round and enormous. He was paralyzed with shock, and I flapped my hand at him. “Come on, Idmon,” I said. “Get up. It is alright.”

He hooked his hand against mine, and I helped him to his feet. I put my arm around his waist to steady him as he stumbled against me, pressing his hand against his battered stomach. Pedaeus was still lying in a crumpled heap in the dirt, moaning. He turned his head, looking at me dazedly, his face twisted with rage and pain.

“I...I will kill you...” he wheezed at me.

“You have had your wits scrambled from boxing, Pedaeus,” I told him as I helped lead Idmon away. “You think you are a man now.”

“Clesonymus tells me you beat his charge witless,” Pelorus said.

I stood before him along the riverbank, my head hung in appropriate rebuke.

“Is that true?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said quietly.

“Hoah,” Pelorus remarked. “Then you have made a liar of me. I told Clesonymus I doubted anyone could attest to his charge’s possession of wits to begin with.”

I blinked in surprise, looking up at Pelorus.

“Tuck your head down,” he told me without even a hint of a smile. “You are in trouble, Echelas. You know the rules. Ephebes do not fight.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, dropping my eyes again.

“Clesonymus is furious,” he said. “He told me he would bring the matter before the Ephebic Magistrate.”

I stared at my toes, stricken.

“I told Clesonymus that would not be necessary,” Pelorus said. “As I would see you properly punished myself.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, knowing fully well what this meant—lashes, and plenty of them.

“I do not abide by behavior out-of-turn,” he said. “A son of Sparta obeys her Laws before yielding to any pathetic instincts he calls his own.”

The Law said ephebes did not fight, and I had fought. The reasons for it, no matter how justified in my mind, did not matter to Pelorus and he would likely lay into me heartily for it. I struggled to keep my expression impassive, to not let the mounting fear I felt reflect in my face. “Yes, sir.”

“Pedaheus is a big boy,” Pelorus said. “He outweighs you by a good fifteen pounds, does he not?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Pelorus was quiet for a moment. “You used the upper cut I showed you?” he asked. “Stepped into the blow and followed with a round to the face?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You will have no supper tonight,” he told me. “That is your punishment. You will spend the time you might have supping boxing with me instead. I will demonstrate some more maneuvers for you, and you will practice until you can perform them competently. We will keep here the night through if we have to.”

There was something unfamiliar in his tone, a peculiar note I had never heard before, and I blinked up at him, hesitant and surprised. He sounded nearly proud of me.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Thank...thank you, sir.”

“Lower your eyes,” he said. “And you are welcome.”

“Where was I during all of this?” Dieneses asked for at least the thousandth time. Two days had passed since my scrap with Pedaeus, and in that time, I had achieved some status of mythological proportions among my fellows. Every boy who had ever felt threatened, intimidated and bullied by Pedaeus regaled me as some manner of hero, and while I was flattered, I suspected—to my dread—that eventually Pedaeus would get tired of my notoriety, and muster enough mettle to pummel a deserved revenge against me.

It might happen that afternoon, I realized, as we tromped through the forest during an afternoon mock-hunt—a perfect opportunity for Pedaeus to seek me out and pound the senses from me. Yet again, Dieneses and I had been assigned to the prey team, and we made our way carefully among the scraggly trees, trying to avoid the hunters long enough to reach the clearing designated as the “free” zone. Idmon was with us. It seemed I could not shake him now, as if I had sprouted him as some sort of new appendage or secondary shadow. Idmon had just finished recounting—again—the story of my fight with Pedaeus. His large eyes had been bright and filled with admiration as he spoke.

“Quite possibly the greatest moment in all of our ephebehood—with my best friend in the middle of it, no less—and I miss the whole thing,” Dieneses lamented, shaking his head.

“I think you are exaggerating,” I said. I wanted to tell him and Idmon to keep their voices down, but they were fearless now, especially Idmon. For the first time in his training, he felt safe from torment, and it was like a stone yoke had been released from about his neck.

“Hoah, no,” he said, shaking his head. “It was wonderful. I wish I could throw a punch like that. Whap! Right into his brow!” He mimed a punch through the air, smacking his fist against his palm.

“I bet they heard the echo clear in Delphi,” Dieneses said, and Idmon laughed. His confidence had improved a hundred-fold in the past two days; progress apparent in his

performances during our physical activities. Feeling secure without the threat of anyone troubling him, Idmon was beginning to come into his own during our morning and evening runs, keeping pace with the other boys instead of purposely falling behind to avoid notice. He had even fared well enough in wrestling earlier that day to merit a word or two in praise from his mentor—something that had left him nearly reeling with pleased disbelief.

“You could throw a punch, Idmon,” I told him.

“Not like that,” he said, all adulating eyes as he gazed at me.

“Sure you could,” I said. “I only learned that afternoon. Pelorus said to put all of my weight into it, to step into my punch.” I paused, seeing an opportunity present itself. “Here, try it,” I said.

Idmon stopped, blinking at me. “I...I cannot hit you,” he said.

“Sure you can,” Dieneces said as he whapped me in the arm with his fist, making me yelp. “You see, Idmon? Easy enough.”

“Step into it,” I said to Idmon. I demonstrated for him, punching Dieneces in the shoulder. He stumbled, yowling in protest. “That is all.”

“Ow,” Dieneces complained. “You did not have to punch me so hard, Heracles. I am not the Hydra!”

“Come on,” I said to Idmon, nodding at him in encouragement as he curled his fingers into an uncertain fist. He blinked at me, hesitantly. “Just aim for my shoulder and give it a swing. You can do it.”

Idmon did his best, and to his credit, he landed a fairly good punch. I made a show of staggering, clutching at my arm and letting my knees buckle beneath me. I draped myself against Dieneces, stumbling, and Idmon laughed.

“That was good,” I told him.

“Really?” he asked, beaming.

“Echelas has been knocked on his ass by some of the better in our group,” Dieneces told him. “He knows his punches.”

Idmon grinned broadly, pleased by the praise.

We were following the edge of the river, so absorbed in our conversation, we did not even notice at first that we were no longer alone. We rounded a bend, following the meandering hook of the water, and Dieneces drew to an abrupt, startled halt.

“Hoah—!” he exclaimed, his eyes flying wide.

I looked up and stumbled to a stop, surprised to find five girls standing in the shallows ahead of us. They were as startled and alarmed to see us as we were to discover them, and they scrambled for the shore, splashing clumsily, their voices raised in frightened, breathless squeals.

“Girls!” Idmon gasped, as horrified as if we had just stumbled across a nest of snakes. “Go away!” one of the girls cried. She was the first to stagger ashore from the river, and she stooped, snatching a long shaft of wood in her hand. She whirled, clutching the stave between her fists, thrusting the end toward us with fierce intent. “Get out of here!” she shouted. “You do not belong here! Go away!”

I blinked in new start, recognizing her. Her dark hair lay swept about her head in disheveled, damp waves cropped closely to her scalp. Her large, dark eyes fixed upon me, squinting beneath the leveled crimp of her brows, and her full mouth was twisted in an angry, defiant frown. “Elara...” I whispered.

“This is our place, ephebes,” Elara snapped, shaking the stick at us as her friends gathered behind her. “You do not belong here! Go away!”

“Elara,” I said again, more loudly this time, and she blinked at me, surprised to be addressed by her name. I stared at her, inexplicably weak all at once. I felt exactly as I had when Hegeleus had given me my first taste of wine years earlier—light-headed and somewhat giddy, a pleasant but

unfamiliar warmth pooling in my stomach and spreading in slow-moving, deliberate fingertips throughout my form.

"I...I just...hullo," I stammered, smiling at her goofily. My face was ablaze; I could feel heat stoking brightly in my cheeks for no apparent reason. "I...my name is Echelas. I...I do not know if you remember me...we raced...a foot race a long time ago from Amyklai, and I...I was just..."

"I know who you are," Elara snapped, shoving the stick at my belly and making me dance backward. "I remember you well, ephebe Echelas. I was beaten until I bled for losing to you at Menelaion!"

I blinked at her, startled by this revelation, confused by her rage.

"Get out of here!" she yelled. "All of you! Get out of here! This is our place!"

"Your place?" Dieneces said. He looked around, batting his eyes innocently. "I do not see your name on it."

Elara frowned. She spun the stick between her hands and used the tip to quickly jot a series of letters into the mud, cleaving thin troughs with the point. *Elara*, she wrote.

She looked up at Dieneces, her brow raised sharply in challenge, and he laughed. "That is only one spot," he said, pointing. "Barely a forearm's span, if that. And it is nothing but mud. What about here, where I am standing? Or behind me, there, with Idmon? Look, there are trees nearby, and that patch of shore right over there. Hoah, and there is a clump of grass you have not claimed—and look! Some pebbles here overturned by our feet."

Elara was not amused, and neither were her friends. She stepped forward, swinging the stick toward Dieneces, while the other four behind her crouched along the riverbank, taking large rocks from the mud and hefting them in hand.

"Hoah, now..." I said, backpedaling. I grabbed Dieneces by the arm as the girls marched purposefully towards us.

“Let us go!” Idmon hissed, alarmed, pawing insistently at my elbow.

“Hoah—!” I cried as the girls craned their arms back to hurl the rocks. Dieneces, Idmon and I all whirled about and began to run, crashing headlong through the trees.

I heard wind whistling as the girls threw their stones, sending them sailing after us. Dieneces yelped, ducking as a rock smashed into a tree trunk near his head. The girls did not follow us far from the water, but as we ran, I could still hear Elara yelling after us, her voice hoarse and outraged.

“Do not ever come back here!” she cried. “You keep away from here! Rotten ephebes—you keep away!”

CHAPTER SIX

490 B.C.

"This girl holds a special place in your memories," the man observed from his cell. "And your heart, I would be willing to wager to hear you tell of it. That is three times now you have made mention of her."

"Yes, sir," I said, smiling. "She...Elara is extraordinary." I looked through the bars of my cell toward the far wall, and the splay of his shadow against the stones. "I did not understand what beautiful was, at least not then," I said. "I had no concept of beauty. It had never been taught in my training. No one had ever showed me a flower, or a sunset or...or snow against the mountain peaks and explained to me that it was beautiful. But I...I had an appreciation for those things, nonetheless. I could still look at them and understand, even if I did not know the right words to express it."

"You thought she was beautiful," the man said, the gentle tone of his voice lending itself to a smile.

"Yes, sir," I said, lowering my head as dim heat stoked shyly in my cheeks.

497 B.C.

When I was fifteen, and two years had passed in my youth training, our mentors began to come for us at night. Up until then, there had been no sign or inclination of the bizarre

and repulsive act Dieneces and I had witnessed so many years ago between Demodocus and Clesonymus. Even Dieneces had grown convinced that such a horror would never come upon us.

“Maybe Camesus was wrong,” he had told me. “Maybe it happened to him, and he only told me it was custom to frighten me. He could be a bit of a rot if he set his mind to it, now that I recall.”

The mentors started coming, only a few of them at first, but then more and more as weeks progressed. They would enter our barracks long after Tages had ordered us to sleep, rouse their charges and lead them stumbling and in sleepy tow from the building, only to deliver them once more to their pallets hours later.

Not even a week had passed since the mentors had started this clandestine, late-night tutelage, and then Thersites came for Dieneces. I remember being startled awake by a soft rustle as he genuflected behind Dieneces. My eyes flew wide in the darkness, my breath stilled in my throat. Dieneces looked at me in the dim moonlight, his eyes enormous with sudden, stricken terror.

Dieneces...! I wanted to whimper, but when I opened my mouth, all that escaped was a soft gasp for breath.

Thersites whispered Dieneces’ name, dropping his hand against my friend’s shoulder and offering him a gentle shake. There had been nothing to prevent it. Dieneces stumbled to his feet and let his mentor lead him from the barracks. I was helpless to protect him, to keep him from it, and I stared up at him from the floor as he looked over his shoulder toward me, his face filled with tremulous fear.

When Dieneces was gone, I huddled against the ground, anticipating that at any moment, Pelorus would come for me, his voice gruff as he called me to my feet. I remembered to my shame how Dieneces and I had laughed about it as children; how when we had stumbled across Clesonymus and Demodocus in the woods, we had laughed and ran, declaring it would never happen to us. What had seemed funny and awkward and somehow unfathomable then

had all at once become a brutal, horrifying reality and I closed my eyes tightly, trying not to think of what was happening to Dieneces.

Hours passed, and Pelorus did not come. Dieneces returned at last, stumbling across the barrack threshold and toward his spot along the wall. He shuffled clumsily and I looked up at him, blinking against tears as he slowly lowered himself toward the floor beside me. His movements were slow and stiff, as if he was in pain, and I whispered his name, my voice choked with anguish.

He said nothing. He curled onto his side facing me, but closed his eyes and would not look at me. He drew his hands toward his face, pulling his cloak around him as he shivered. The trembling spread from his pate to his toes, and he shuddered against the floor, his breath fluttering from his mouth.

“Dieneces...” I whispered, my tears spilling. I reached for him, closing my fingers gently against his hand. He seized hold of me fiercely. He did not open his eyes, and he did not weep, but he scooted toward me, tucking his forehead against my hand.

“I am here,” I breathed. I moved toward him, nestling against him, holding his hand. I pressed my cheek against his forehead and let him shudder against me. “I am here,” I told him. “I...I am right here, Dieneces. I am right here.”

Pelorus came for me three nights later. Dieneces had already left with Thersites, and most of the other boys in our barrack were long-since gone in the company of their mentors when I heard Pelorus’ footsteps against the ground. I froze, listening to the whisper of his bare feet in the dirt, and my throat collapsed in a tight, constricted knot. I wanted to mewl; I wanted to weep and plead for him to go away, to leave me alone, but I could not speak. I could not move. I could not even tremble.

“Echelas,” Pelorus said, lowering himself to one knee behind me. I felt his hand brush against my shoulder. “Echelas, wake up.”

I whimpered soundlessly, drawing my hands toward my face, wanting to hide somehow.

“Echelas,” Pelorus said again. “Echelas, come with me.”

He was not going to go away. I whimpered again, finding my voice this time, a warbling, frightened sound, and I nodded. “Y-yes, sir,” I whispered.

He brought me into the forests beyond the youth camp, leading me to our place down by the Eurotas. Pelorus was not a man of tender inclinations or fond affectations, but within the past two years, I had grown to respect him immeasurably. I struggled daily to please him; although he continued to rebuke me if I failed him, I no longer dreaded our time together. I was accustomed to his gruff facade, because I had come to understand there was more beneath this grave and brusque exterior. He was wise and capable, and I benefited from his guidance. His tutelage had become important to me, and the clearing we shared along the riverbank had become a place that was comfortable and familiar. I knew it would never be the same again; I knew I would never again see it as someplace where I felt safe.

Pelorus had built a fire already, and the glow of its flames greeted us upon our arrival. He walked across the clearing and I blinked down at my feet, at my shadow pooled beneath me, fluttering against the ground. I shivered. I could not help myself; I began to shudder uncontrollably, my shoulders jerking.

“Would you like to go to the common mess with me tomorrow?” Pelorus asked. I had not expected any inquiry or words from him except directions to get down onto my hands and knees, and I glanced at him, puzzled.

“I...I have not brought you yet,” he said, his tone of voice somewhat distracted, as if he sought to make idle

conversation. “I wanted to wait, to...to make sure you would be ready for it and that I...I might feel...”

His voice faded and he sighed heavily. “You have tried very hard these past two years, and I...you have improved considerably...more than I would have thought.” He turned to look over his shoulder, and something passed across his eyes, his face as he saw my fear and confusion. He looked ashamed, and he turned from me. I dropped my gaze to the ground again. “Would you like to go to the common mess, Echelas?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Pelorus was quiet again, a silence so prolonged and pronounced that I began to feel even more uncomfortable. I trembled again, struggling to hold my hands still beneath my cloak, to resist the urge to tug and toy anxiously with the fabric.

“Recite Homer’s hymn to Pythian Apollo,” he told me.

I blinked in confusion. “Sir?”

“Homer’s hymn to Pythian Apollo,” he said again. “You know it.”

It was a statement, not an inquiry, but I was bewildered and answered anyway. “Yes, sir,” I said.

“Recite it.”

“The...the entire thing, sir?” I asked, looking up at him. The hymn to Pythian Apollo was one of the longest recitations I had been taught; a monstrosity of passage and verse that had taken me years to learn—and would likely take hours to declaim aloud.

Pelorus turned to me, his brow raised. “I do not recall asking for only part of it,” he said.

I nodded, lowering my gaze again. “Yes, sir,” I said. I took a long, uncertain breath and then began to recite. “I will remember and not forget Apollo, who shoots from afar. When he comes, a trembling seizes the gods in Zeus’ abode, and as he approaches near, they all leap up from their seats when he

stretches his brilliant bow. The only one to remain by Zeus whom thunder delights is Leto. She loosens the string, the quiver she shuts and the bow with her hands from his strong shoulders takes...”

I have no idea how long it took me to make it through the hymn. I had never been called upon to recite it in its entirety, and after awhile, I grew tired and confused, the words and phrases running together in my mind. If I faltered in my recitation, losing my place, Pelorus would prompt me with patient reminder. He paced around the fire as I spoke, his stride slow, his footsteps quiet against the ground. I was anxious at first, and his movement distracted me. I kept expecting him to draw behind me and put his hand on me, easing me to the ground. He never did. He simply walked, holding his hands beneath his cloak, his eyes upon the ground as he listened. After awhile, as I drew deeply into the hymn, I forgot my anxiety altogether, and simply struggled to keep my recitation flowing.

“Stand guard before my shrine,” I said. Enough time had passed for the fire to dwindle before me, the flames waning as the wood yielded to coal and ash. I was shivering again; not from fear this time, or any chill, but from simple exhaustion. My tongue felt leaden as I offered the final passages. “And welcome the tribes of men who gather here in search above all of my guidance...”

My voice faded, and I blinked at my toes. The next words were lost to me, and my brows narrowed as I tried to remember. “And...and welcome the tribes of men who gather here in search above all of my guidance...” I said again, stammering clumsily.

“But if there will be a rash word or deed,” Pelorus offered, walking behind me. “And outrageous conduct, which is the custom of mortal men...”

“Then others you will have as your masters,” I said. “Forever forced under their yoke. To you now all as been spoken. Keep it safe within your hearts.”

I sighed heavily. “And so farewell I bid you, son of Zeus and Leto,” I said, reaching the end of the hymn at last. “But I will call to my mind both you and another song.”

I fell silent, sighing again. I blinked dazedly at the ground, heavy-lidded and nearly groggy with fatigue.

Pelorus walked past me. “Come on,” he said. “Back to the barrack.”

I looked up at him in bewildered surprise. “What...?”

He paused, glancing back at me. “Back to the barrack,” he said, holding my gaze and offering no more than this. He turned after a moment and walked again. I fell in step behind him, leaving the warm glow of the coals behind me.

“You cannot tell anyone what happened tonight,” Pelorus said as we walked. He turned to me. “Not any of your fellows—not even Dieneses. Do you understand?”

I did not understand at all. No one talked about what happened with their mentors at night, but everyone understood nonetheless. Dieneses had never said a word to me about it; he would simply return from Thersites’ company and snuggle silently against me like a distraught child, and I would do my best to comfort him. He and Idmon had both suffered the abuse, and they had both withdrawn since it had begun, both of them becoming rather uncharacteristically silent and morose.

No one talked about what happened, but everybody knew. I knew what had happened that night with Pelorus was not what was typical, or what was supposed to have transpired between us, but I did not understand why he had done as he had—why he had spared me.

“Do you understand, Echelas?” Pelorus asked again, pausing to meet my gaze. I could tell by the look on his face that what he was asking was something very important, something he was trusting me to.

He will be in trouble if they find out, I realized. The Ephors and the Elders will punish him because it is not supposed to happen like that.

“Yes, sir,” I said quietly.

Pelorus nodded once and then turned away, leading me back to the youth camp.

Two weeks of abuse proved more than poor Idmon could bear. In that time, I had watched the confidence he had been building over the past two years wither and wane. After my fight with Pedaeus, Idmon had emerged from his shy defenses to develop into a strong, capable young ephebe. Rumor of his eminent dismissal from the training had disappeared. But in the span of two weeks, as his mentor had come for him night after night, Idmon had retreated, faltering in every aspect of his training and withdrawing into sullen, haunted isolation. We had grown nearly inseparable—me, Dieneces and Idmon—and all at once, even our company disconcerted him. I wish that I could say I was surprised when I woke one morning to find him gone, but I was not. I had seen it in his eyes; he had thought Pedaeus had put him through the worst torment he could fathom, but he had been wrong.

He ran away. He slipped out of the barracks in between Tages’ orders to sleep and his mentor’s arrival. He ducked out of the building and into the shadows and never returned.

“He is out roaming the woods somewhere,” I overheard Pedaeus saying as we gathered for our run on the morning Idmon had turned up missing. “He is out there, slithering and skulking among the foothills waiting for us. He was always that way—a coward to your face, and all mettle behind your back. He has probably laid his hands on a knife or sharpened stone, and he will creep up on us and cut our throats if we—”

Pedaeus paused, his voice faltering as he caught sight of my approach. He had never sought me out or beat me up over the matter of our fight in the woods. I did not quite understand it. I had filled out over the last years, muscles laying in lean and long on my form, but I was still nowhere near his size or girth. I had caught him by surprise that day in the

forest; I did not harbor any hopes that I might ever find him so unprepared again. He could take me if he felt like it, and he knew it—that, more than anything else troubled me. He knew he could, and yet he did not. He would watch me with a wary gaze, as one might watch a tethered dog with a reputation for snapping. For some reason, he was intimidated—if not by me, then by something someone had said to keep him from me, and I had often wondered if it had been Pelorus.

Pedaeus met my gaze and said no more about Idmon. I stared at him for a moment, long enough for the other boys to turn and notice me and remember that Idmon had been my friend. One by one, they dropped their gazes, shame-faced and shying from me. I walked past them, my brows furrowed, and took my place in line.

“He could not take it anymore, that is all,” Dieneces said quietly as we ran together, our legs moving in tandem to mark our stride. He shook his head. “Poor Idmon.”

“Where do you think he went?” I asked. Idmon could not survive long in the woods on his own. There might have been enough food and water to sustain him, but that was the least of his worries. We had heard rumors of slave disturbances in the ancient lands south of us. The slaves were always plotting some revolt or escape, to hear gossip tell of things, and the region in which the youth camp was based was patrolled every night by bands of Hunters—hebontes who stalked and killed any slaves up to no good they might encounter. The Hunters lived secret lives separate from any of the other young Spartans; they had free license to roam and kill at will, sanctioned by the Ephors themselves. Even if Idmon was able to find enough food to eat off the land, he would have no hope of avoiding the Hunters for long.

“I do not know,” Dieneces said. “Probably to a Dweller village. If not Sellasia to the north, then maybe one of the eastern ones beyond the Parnon mountains, Glympeis or Selinous. Maybe he will take a job, change his name, say he is an Argive or something.”

We ran in silence for a moment, both of us worrying for him. Finally, Dieneces glanced at me. “He told me he was

going to run away,” he said. His brows furrowed slightly, and the corner of his mouth tugged downward. “I wish I was with him, wherever he has gone.”

I blinked at him, stricken. “Dieneces...”

He pressed his lips together and I realized he was on the verge of tears. “I miss him, the rot,” he whispered. “He escaped and left us here.”

“I know,” I said softly, wishing I could reach for him, even just to touch his arm without drawing notice from a prefect. I wanted to comfort him with the only thing I could offer—the lie that I understood his pain. “I know, Dieneces.”

“Idmon ran away sometime last night,” I said to Pelorus later that morning. I followed him from the riverside, carrying a shield strapped against my back. We had just finished our daily lesson in weapon play, and I held a sheathed sparring sword in one hand and a staff in the other.

“I have heard about Idmon, yes,” Pelorus said, nodding.

He said no more than this, and did not turn around. I looked at him hesitantly, lengthening my stride to draw alongside of him. “He...someone told me he could not take it anymore.”

“The training is not meant to be easy or tolerable,” Pelorus said. “You are learning the Spartan way—developing the skills you need to survive and excel as a full Spartiate. It is meant to sift those who can achieve this from those who cannot.”

“That is not why he left,” I said.

Pelorus glanced at me, his brow raised.

“I mean, that...that is not what he could not take anymore,” I said. “His mentor, sir...coming for him at night. That is what he could not take anymore.”

Pelorus made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat. “Hoah,” he said.

I looked up at Pelorus. “Why do you not do that to me?” I asked softly.

He paused, and I stopped beside him. “Do you want me to?” he asked, holding my gaze.

I blinked in surprise. “N-no, sir,” I said, shaking my head.

Pelorus raised his brows and nodded once. “Alright, then,” he said, and he turned, walking again.

He brought me to a place along the river north of our clearing. There was a muddy beach, one of the broader stretches in the valley, and the Dymanes youths from my barrack typically practiced wrestling here. I was puzzled to find a large crowd of boys and their mentors already gathered, and I looked up at Pelorus. “Are we not going to play all-in?” I asked.

“You are wrestling today,” he said.

I adjusted the weight of the shield against my shoulders, shrugging to heft the heavy plate. “But I...we wrestled yesterday, sir,” I said.

“Then you should be well in practice,” Pelorus said.

I spied Dieneces standing among the crowd, with Thersites behind him. Dieneces met my gaze, and I raised my brows at him. *What is going on?*

He shook his head, shrugging slightly. *I do not know.*

I realized that the far side of the beach, closest to the water, was filled with girls, and I blinked in surprise. Dozens of girls our age stood facing us, accompanied by older Spartan women, and I looked at Pelorus again, confused all the more.

“There...there are girls here,” I said.

“Yes. You are going to wrestle them.”

I stumbled. “I cannot wrestle a girl,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked. “They are perfectly capable, I assure you—your less than exemplary skills at the sport not withstanding.”

“But they...” I blinked across the beach, looking at the girls in their short tunics. Like the other boys, I was growing tall and lean, muscles developing sharply, definitively along my form. By contrast, the girls were gaining curves; their waists elongating and tapering to accentuate outward swelling along their hips and bosoms. “They are different than we are.”

Pelorus shook his head. “Funny how that works,” he said. He clapped me on the shoulder. “Oil and powder up,” he said. “You will be alright, Echelas.”

They paired us off for opening rounds, and the rest of us stood about and watched the Spartan girls trounce our asses. They might have been built differently than us, but they were every bit as strong. Where the boys proved somewhat tentative at first in engaging them, the girls attacked enthusiastically. One by one, I watched my barrack mates fall, pinned beneath the girls, all of them in turn left stunned by the girls’ ferocity and strength. Even Pedaeus—usually so much in his element at the sport—seemed to be holding himself back, and when he tried to pin his opponent against the ground, he did so as if he tried to hold a bird, with clumsy care that was as close to deliberate as he could muster.

“She is not a flower—hold her down and pin her ass!” Clesonymus shouted at him, which only elicited a bewildered look from his charge.

When they called my turn, I looked at Pelorus uncertainly. He planted his hand against my shoulder and shoved me forward. “Give me your cloak,” he said.

I blinked in new surprise when they shouted out in beckon to my opponent. Elara stepped out from among the women, meeting my gaze as she approached. If I had not found her fascinating before that moment, I was struck nearly immobile by her now. She had grown all the more in the two years since I had last seen her. She was as tall as me, willowy and lean. She had lost nearly every trace of childhood and stood before me with the figure and face of a woman. A wispy

thatch of dark, curled hair had developed at the apex of her groin, as it had my own; however, I had never found mine as fascinating as I found hers at that moment.

“Stand off!” one of the prefects called to us, raising his hand to bid us ready for our match.

Elara stood with her feet apart, her knees flexed slightly as she crouched. She looked at me, and I had to mentally kick myself to wrench my eyes from her, to mirror her position.

“And begin!” the prefect called, swinging his hand toward the ground.

Elara wasted no time. She held a grudge against me from our foot race in childhood, and she apparently meant to see her honor restored on that scrap of mud. She came at me, planting her hands against my shoulders and shoving against me. Her strength caught me by surprise; there was prowess behind those slender arms and long, spindly legs, and she drove me back, making me stagger.

“Hullo,” I gasped at her, wide-eyed. She did not answer my breathless greeting. She dug her heels into the dirt and shoved against my weight, her brows furrowing over her large, dark eyes, the pretty bow of her mouth hooking into a determined little frown.

“How are you?” I asked as her hair drooped down in cropped curls from behind her ears. She wore it clipped nearly even with her chin, like she had when we were children, and it was soft and tickling against my fingers.

Elara shifted her grasp, catching me by the arm. She turned all at once, and backed against me. I had one bewildering, wondrous moment when I felt her body press against mine, my arm draped over her shoulder, caught between her hands. I felt the curve of her back tuck against my chest, the swell of her buttocks against my hips and then, just as I felt breathless and light-headed from this fleeting proximity, she folded at the waist, throwing me over her shoulder.

I hit the ground hard and lay there, momentarily befuddled, blinking up at the sky. She pounced on me like a cat, landing on my belly with her legs straddling me. It whoofed the breath from me, and I gasped. “Hoah—!”

I reached up, grabbing her by the shoulders as she leaned over to pin me. I sat up and shoved her sideways. I rolled with her, landing atop her, her legs wrapped around my hips. I did not understand why this would suddenly feel exquisite to me, but it did.

“Do you still go to the river?” I asked, leaning over her. I could feel her breath against my face, the marvelous friction as she wriggled beneath me.

The crimp between her brows deepened. “Stop talking and wrestle,” she hissed. She bucked her hips, and I fell backward, landing on my rump with my legs sprawled skyward.

Elara scrambled to her feet and backed away, waiting for me to rise. I limped to my feet and she came at me again. When I reached out with my hands to grapple her, she again caught my wrist in her hands. “Do you?” I asked. “I...I have looked for you there sometimes, but I—”

She pivoted her hips and I felt my arm crane at an unnatural, painful angle. I yelped, and then I was airborne again, sailing over her shoulder and slamming into the dirt.

Again and again, she threw me. Every time I managed to get my legs beneath me, she would charge, and over I would go. She was as strong as any man, and even though she grew tired, the lack of resilience that had cost her our foot race no longer impeded her efforts. I was exhausted before she was, and seeing dazzling little lights from barking the back of my head over and over against the ground.

She leaped astride me as I lay sprawled in the mud, recovering from the latest of her countless throws. I tried to sit up, but she clasped my wrists in her hands and forced me back to the ground. She was huffing for breath, her face beaded and glossy with sweat, her hair swept about her head in a tangled disarray. She leaned over me, sliding her hips back against mine, and at this, something within me fluttered helplessly.

“Yield,” she snapped, loosening her fingers from my right wrist so I might hold up my hand in concession.

The women would beat her again if she lost, and I did not want her to know that humiliation. She wanted to win as much today as she had when we were nine, and this time, Pelorus had offered me no imperative to win.

“I...I yield,” I said. I raised my right hand, slipping loose of her grasp. “I yield to you, Elara.”

“Yield and match,” the prefect called, and Elara scrambled off of me, dancing away as if I had bitten her. She paused long enough to glower at me. Her eyes darted toward my hips, and her brows raised, her bewilderment waning to start. She frowned again, stomping away.

I lay against the ground, struggling to find my breath and wits. Pelorus leaned over me after a moment, his brow raised. “Get up,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, drawing my legs up to sit. I thought he would scold me for yielding, and was surprised when he did not. He held my cloak out in his hand, dropping it in my lap.

“Your hoplite is on the march,” he told me, the corner of his mouth hooked in amusement.

“What?” I said, confused. I sat up and realized there was something decidedly different between my thighs. I blinked, bewildered, alarmed and embarrassed. “Hoah...!”

“Get up,” Pelorus said again, flapping his hand. He shook his head as I stumbled along behind him, back into the crowd, and then he caught me by the shoulder, steering me toward some trees. “Go and tend to yourself,” he said. “Do not be too long about it.”

“I do not know what that was, but it was weird,” I told Dieneses that night as we lay on our pallets, waiting for the inevitability of our mentors’ arrivals.

“It never happened to you before?” he asked, looking somewhat surprised.

"I...I guess," I said. "I mean, yes, but not like that. Not when I am wrestling or anything. Is something wrong with me, Dienesces?"

"I do not think so," he said. "It has happened to me, too. Sometimes for no reason. I am minding my own thoughts, and then—surprise."

"What does it mean?" I asked him.

Dienesces smirked at me and shook his head. Tonight, he was the cheeriest I had seen him in weeks, and he had stopped talking forlornly about Idmon—and about running away. If my humiliation had served any purpose, at least it had this.

"What?" I asked. He snickered, shaking his head again, and I blinked at him, wounded and embarrassed. "What?"

"Raised in a cave," he told me fondly, reaching out and rubbing his palm against my head.

"I need you to help me," I said.

He pretended to recoil. "I am not helping with that," he said. "You are on your own, Echelas."

"No," I said with a frown. "Something else. Something important."

He raised his brow. "What?"

"Your handwriting is better than mine," I said. "I need you to make something for me. A placard."

"For what?" he asked, puzzled.

"I..." I felt color stoking shyly in my cheeks, and I sighed. "I want to put it on the riverbank," I said. "For Elara. I want..." He had rolled his eyes at this, and I frowned again. "What?"

"What is it with you and this girl?" he asked.

"She hates me," I said helplessly, unhappily. "Because of that stupid foot race all of those years ago. I want her to like me...or at least stop always trying to flip me over her shoulder or poke me with a stick whenever she sees me."

“Why do you even care?” he asked.

“I do not know,” I said. “I just do. And it...the sign would please her, I think. We...we could have it be funny. Something like you would say—witty. Like ‘every blade of grass, every pebble, every leaf and grain of dirt belongs to Elara, as far as the eye can see.’”

He looked at me dubiously. “That is supposed to be witty?”

I slapped him. “No, but you can make it witty. Make her like it.”

He shook his head. “I do not know, Echelas...” he began.

“Please, Dieneces,” I whispered.

He looked at me for a long moment. “Echelas, abandon it,” he said quietly. “We are supposed to keep away from the girls. You know that. Throw it to the wind and call it gone.”

“Please, Dieneces,” I said.

He sighed heavily, shaking his head. “Fine,” he said. “I will make your stupid sign.”

I smiled. “Thank you,” I said.

“But if you get caught, it is your spine alone to get the lash,” he told me. “I know nothing of it. I have played no part.”

“Agreed,” I told him happily.

CHAPTER SEVEN

490 B.C.

“Did it work?” the man asked. “Your sign. Your effort to charm this willful lass of yours?”

“I did not think so,” I said. “I brought it to the river, but I never saw her there. I tried to forget about her.”

“An impossibility?” he asked.

I laughed. “I might have as soon forgotten my own name.”

495 B.C.

By the time I was seventeen, Pelorus had allowed me to participate in hunts with his fellows from the common mess. Twice a week, a group of twenty Dymanes mentors and their charges spread out into the woods of the Taygetos foothills with our bows in hand, quivers strapped to our backs. One afternoon, I made my way slowly along the banks of the Eurotas river, keeping my eyes trained upon the soft mud. I was searching for rabbit tracks, having discovered a fairly fresh pile of pellet-like droppings nearby. Every now and again, I could see the faint impressions left by diminutive paws, and I followed the trail, trying to be as quiet as possible. Pelorus and the others were scattered in the woods, none of them in earshot, much less sight.

“Hullo,” I heard a voice say, and my head shot up, my eyes flown wide as I danced back in start.

“Hoah—!” I yelped. I saw who had greeted me, and I stumbled again, my breath frozen beneath my ribs. “Elara...” I whispered.

She was sitting along the riverbank beneath the shadow of a tree. She rose to her feet and walked toward me. “You always remember me,” she said. “Why?”

“I...I do not know,” I said, still wide-eyed and startled.

“You are Echelas,” she said, and I nodded. She smiled and I nearly fainted. She had never smiled at me before. “Hunting?” she asked, tapping her fingertip in the air, indicating my bow.

I looked down at it as if it was something completely new and unfamiliar to me. “Uh...yes,” I said, nodding.

“I did not mean to startle you,” she said. She stopped in front of me, looking me in the eyes, paralyzing me. “I am escaping my mother under the pretenses of going to the market. They can drive you mad.”

I had not seen my mother since I had been seven years old, but I nodded as if I completely commiserated with her. “Yes, they...they...yes, they can.”

“I found your sign,” she said. When I blinked at her, bewildered, she raised her brows. “The sign you left me by the river two years ago, that place where we met when we were little.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling color stoke in my cheeks. “That. I...I hope you did not...I...I mean, I only meant for it to...”

“It was very sweet of you,” she said.

A silence fell between us, and I did not know what to say to break it. For years, I had hoped for such a chance as this, to simply talk to her in friendly fashion, but now, when presented with it, I stood there gawking and mute, like a fool. After a moment, Elara nodded her head once and turned.

"I...I should not keep you from your hunt," she said.

I forced my voice out of my throat, desperate to stay her. "I...I am having rot luck, anyway," I said, and she paused as I had hoped. "Rot luck," I said again. "No hares to be found, though I...I found some scat back there along the water's edge."

She walked back toward me.

"I...I thought one might have passed this way," I stammered. "I...there are tracks in the mud in places, and I...they led this way, and I thought..."

Elara caught my face between her hands. She pressed her mouth to mine, muffling my voice against her lips. My eyes flew wide, and I recoiled, stumbling clumsily. "What...what are you doing?" I gasped.

She stepped against me, forcing me to stagger backward in bewildered surprise and then she kissed me again without saying a word. I felt her hands move, her fingers spreading in my hair as she canted her face, lifting her chin to kiss me deeply. My heels, my back struck a tree behind me, and she pinned me there.

"What are you doing?" I asked again, trembling against her as she drew her mouth away.

"Do you want me to stop?" she whispered, and I shook my head.

"No," I said.

She giggled. "Then shut up."

She kissed me, and I felt her hand slip between my legs, reaching beneath my cloak. "Hoah—!" I gasped, jerking away from her in start, my face ablaze with embarrassment. "What are you doing?"

I knew what she was doing, of course; I did not know a boy among my barrack mates who had not long-since acquainted himself with the pleasures close at hand and readily available within his own form. How Elara knew of such things—how she knew to do this—was beyond me, however;

her touch left me mortified, alarmed and more than a little fascinated. “Do not do that,” I said.

“Why?” she asked, reaching beneath my cloak again. She closed her fingers slowly, deliberately, holding me still.

“Elara...” I whispered, breathless. “Do...do not...” She began to move her hand, and my voice dissolved as I almost swooned. I think my eyes must have rolled back into my head and any balance I called my own abandoned me, because I nearly crumpled to the ground. I leaned my head back against the tree, my knees buckling.

“Do you want me to stop?” she breathed, the rhythm of her hand quickening against me.

“No,” I gasped, shaking my head emphatically.

After a few moments of this, I felt release shudder through me, bright and exquisite and excruciating. I arched my back, uttering a hoarse, breathless cry. As her fingertips slid away from me, I reeled, my head whirling. Elara giggled and I slumped toward her, gasping for breath. She knelt with me, helping lower me to the ground beneath the tree.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I...I do not know,” I gasped. I had never felt anything so wonderful or powerful in all of my life. Nothing I had ever coaxed for myself could compare; whatever Elara had brought upon me had stripped the wits and strength from me, and I trembled like a child, panting.

“Meet me here in two days,” Elara said, and rose to her feet. “When the sun is at mid-day.”

She turned and began to walk away without another word.

I blinked after her, still light-headed and utterly confounded. “What...?” I asked.

She said nothing else, and did not turn at my voice. She tromped down to the water’s edge, the short hem of her tunic swaying in tandem with her hips. She followed the river’s course, leaving me alone, bewildered and exhausted beneath the tree.

I did not tell anyone about it, not Dieneces, and especially not Pelorus. When I rejoined the hunting group, I was still stumbling with disbelief, not understanding what had just happened, but not entirely displeased.

“What happened to you?” Pelorus asked when he caught sight of me.

I blinked at him. “Nothing...nothing, sir.”

“Your face is all flushed,” he said. “Are you sick? Did a snake bite you?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“You are walking funny—limping. You did not fall and twist your knee, did you?”

“No, sir,” I said.

He frowned. “Well, sit down anyway. Drink some water. You look like you have been plowed under.”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

I returned to the river two days later, and found her waiting for me. After that, we met as often as we could, all through the summer. Even though neither of us knew exactly what we were doing, what we lacked in familiarity, we more than offered amends for in sheer persistence and enthusiastic effort. We were clumsy, curious, overeager and insistent, pawing at one another hurriedly, desperately beneath the trees. Sometimes we did not even speak, except to exchange the mumbled “hullos” of passing acquaintances, and then we would fall together in a tangle, knocking one another with elbows or knees, stumbling over each other’s feet. She would always abandon me when we were finished. She never said good-bye. She would only tell me when to meet her again, and then leave. I would kneel in the dirt for a long time when she was gone, reclaiming my breath, my hair askew, my heart pounding out frantic rhythm beneath my chest, wondering yet again what in the world had just happened.

“Wait...” I said to her after we had been meeting for two weeks. She had just risen to leave, and when I caught her by the hand, she looked down at me. “Please,” I said. “Can you...can you not stay?”

She looked puzzled. “Why?” she asked.

“I...I just...I...” I stammered. “Can we...can we not talk awhile?”

“About what?” she asked, bewildered.

“I...I do not know,” I said, blushing brightly. “Whatever you would like. Anything you...you want, Elara. I just...I...”

She drew her hand away from mine and smiled. “You are sweet, Echelas,” she said. “Be here tomorrow.”

I loved her. I wanted to tell her, but I could not express it or explain to myself, and had no hope of sharing with her. I thought about her all of the time. I was restless and anxious when I was away from her, my heart and mind tugged toward the next time I would see her, the next time we could meet in the woods. It did not take long before others began to notice.

“What is the matter with you?” Pelorus asked one afternoon, frowning at me. I had stumbled through my morning’s recitations, absent-minded and forgetful of the passages, and now, I was moving clumsily through our spear practice.

“I...I am sorry, sir,” I said, hanging my head.

“You have been distracted of late,” he said. “Is Pedaeus bothering you?”

I shook my head. “No, sir.”

“Are you and Dieneces quarrelling?”

“No, sir,” I said.

He raised his brow. “Then what is it?” he asked. “Your mind was just midway across the Aegean Sea. It certainly was not here, focused on your spear.”

I shrugged, not raising my gaze. "I...I am sorry, Pelorus," I said quietly.

I met Elara later that day. She hid in a low-hanging tree bough like a mischievous child and pounced at me as I walked beneath her. We laughed together as I toppled backward with her atop me, her legs wrapped around my waist. She laughed as she kissed me, as she lowered her hips against mine, and smiled against my mouth as I moaned, arching my back to meet her.

"Please..." I said when she was finished. She slid her hips from me, unfurling her legs to stand, and I reached for her hand, winded and exhausted. "Please do not go."

She let me hook my fingers against hers and gave my arm a playful, gentle shake. "I have to."

I looked up at her, my eyes mournful. "Please, Elara," I said. "Just...just for awhile. Just this once." *I love you*, I wanted to say. *Please stay with me. Please, Elara. I love you.*

Her face softened. "Echelas..." she began, tugging against my grasp. "I have to go."

"No, you do not," I said.

"Yes, she does," I heard Pelorus say, and my eyes flew wide in alarm. Elara jerked away from me, scrambling backward, her voice escaping in a startled, breathless mewl.

Pelorus emerged, stepping out from the trees, striding toward us. I had never seen his face so infused with rage before, and I realized to my dismay that he had followed me. He glared at me, his brows furrowed. "Get up," he said.

I sat up, drawing my legs beneath me, frightened and ashamed. "Pelorus," I gasped. "Sir, I—!"

He closed his hand against my arm and jerked me upright. I did not even see his other hand swing around. He struck me mightily in the face, enough to leave me seeing stars, and I fell, blood spurting from my nose. I crashed against the ground, the breath and wits knocked from me, and I heard Elara cry out softly, frightened.

"Echelas...!"

She whimpered, shying back as Pelorus turned to her. “Go home,” he told her. “Go home right now, Elara, and offer your prayers to the gods that I do not see your father anytime soon to tell him of this. If I ever find you here again, I will drag you back to Limnai by the scruff. Do you understand me?”

She whimpered again, blinking between me and Pelorus. I looked up at her helplessly.

“Do you understand me, girl?” Pelorus shouted, his voice reverberating in the tree boughs. Birds scattered at his cry, doves disturbed from pine crowns fluttering away at the sound.

Elara cringed, hunching her shoulders. “Yes, sir,” she said, nodding, her eyes swimming with tears. She turned around and ran, darting through the trees.

Pelorus turned to me. “Get up,” he said.

“Yes...yes, sir,” I said, drawing my legs beneath me again. I stood and Pelorus seized me by the elbow, hurting me. He jerked me toward him and then hauled me naked and staggering through the woods.

“Spare it and spoil him,” he muttered, shaking his head, his jaw set at a menacing angle. “That is what you get. That and nothing more. Not a rot bit.”

I did not understand what he was talking about. He took me back to our clearing, and shoved me ahead of him. I stumbled, losing my balance and falling to my knees. I did not move; I blinked at the ground, frightened and humiliated.

He began to pace around the clearing, his hands folded into furious fists. “It is the Law,” he seethed. “It is the Law and it serves a purpose, whether she sees it or not. Look what happens otherwise. Give the boy nothing to do with his form, his mind when he gets old enough to be curious and brave enough to do something about it, and see what it brings. Look at what it metes out!”

When he stomped toward me, stopping in front of me, I cowered. “I am going to beat you,” he told me. He knelt, grabbing me roughly by the arm just below the socket of my shoulder. He shook me hard enough to rattle my teeth. “Do

you understand me, Echelas? I am going to lay your spine open for this!"

"I...I am sorry," I said. "Please, Pelorus, I am sorry."

Pelorus stared at me. He shoved me away and stood, stomping across the clearing. "Get up," he said. "Get up and stand against that tree. Put your hands on it. I am going to beat you."

"I am sorry," I whispered again. I stumbled to my feet, shuddering, my breath hitching with tears. I was ashamed to be so near to weeping in front of him; it would only infuriate him all the more.

"I will never trust you again, Echelas," he said. He stooped by a small bundle of supplies he kept at the campsite, and jerked a long, broad lash from the pile. "I mistook you for a man of some honor, and you have disappointed and shamed me beyond measure. If it did not mean I would have to explain myself—and you—to my fellows, I would see you never step foot in my mess again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," I said, nodding as I put my hands against the tree.

"Twenty lashes," Pelorus said, striding toward me with the strap. "You will call them. Every last one of them—you will call them out loudly and you will take them."

"Yes, sir," I said as I hung my head in disgrace. I hooked my fingertips against the trunk, bracing myself for the first blow.

"Call it, Echelas," Pelorus said, and I heard the lash hiss in the air as he gave it a whirl.

I kept my eyes closed, my fingers clawed into the bark. "One, sir," I said loudly, tucking my chin toward my chest. I held my breath, waiting for him to hit me, struggling to stand my ground and take it with some semblance of mettle.

The blow never came. I let my breath out slowly when my lungs began to ache with strain, but I did not relax. I stood poised against the tree trunk, helplessly anticipating his strike. I heard Pelorus sigh heavily, and then he threw the lash down

with a snort of disgust. He stomped away from me. "Put your hands down," he growled.

"Yes, sir," I said, letting my hands fall to my sides.

Pelorus muttered under his breath. "Damn you, Demodocus," it sounded like he said, but I could not be sure. "Get away from that tree," he snapped more loudly.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He paced around the clearing; I could hear his swift, heavy footsteps but did not dare lift my eyes. He stopped in front of me. I could see his feet, his hands held in tight fists at his sides. "Look at me," he said, and I did, raising my gaze hesitantly. His brows were drawn, and he frowned. "Echelas, what you were doing is...it is how the gods give us children," he said.

I stared at him, stricken and confused. *What...?* I thought.

"You did not know," he said. He was angry with me, but there was something else in the stern set of his mouth; something pained and remorseful. "And I should have told you. I...you are at an age now when it...you are curious, and I have never..." His voice faded and he lowered his gaze. "Of course, you would be curious," he muttered, the furrow between his brows deepening. "You cannot help it. I...I have never given you any other choice."

He looked up at me. "You cannot do that," he said. "And you will never do it again—not until you are thirty, Echelas. Not until you are a Spartiate and wed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"You do not want to know the shame that will come upon you—and any child you might give Elara—if she bears you one while you are not yet a Spartiate. It is a terrible disgrace, and the child would know no place in Sparta. It...the Elders would cast it into the Apothetae chasm to die because it was not born to a full man of Sparta. Do you understand?"

I blinked at him in horror. "Yes, sir," I said.

He glowered at me. "You will never see her again," he said. "Never, Echelas. If I find out that you have, I will beat you lame. Do you understand me?"

He could have whipped me one hundred times, each blow delivered with the full strength of his broad arm, and it would not have broken me as much. "Yes, sir," I whimpered.

"You will say nothing of this," Pelorus said. "Not to anyone. Dieneces does not know, does he?"

I shook my head. "No, sir."

"You will never tell," he said. He looked at me gravely. "Never, Echelas. You will forget about her. If you...if you get confused, or you...you feel the need for her, you...you go into the trees. You go by yourself, take yourself in hand and tend to it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I whispered.

He looked at the blood smeared on my cheek and chin from my nose. He frowned again and turned away from me. "I am sorry I hit you," he said, his voice clipped and terse. "I lost my temper. I lost my wits." He walked across the clearing and I stared after him, confused. He had never apologized for raising his hand to me before, not in all of the years I had known him. "Go clean your face off," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"How is he?" I heard someone say, a low voice rousing my mind from sleep.

Pelorus had not brought me to the mess for supper that night, or returned me to the barrack. He had built a fire and we had taken supper together by the blaze, just like when I had been younger. He had said nothing to me during the entire meal, and I had suffered in silence, cowed beneath the heavy, imposing weight of his disapproving gaze. He had given me some wine, and it had helped to quiet my despondent mind. The events of the day had left me exhausted and dazed with bewildered shock, and I had curled onto my side by the fire and fallen asleep.

“How do you think he is?” Pelorus replied, his voice sharp and angry. “He is confused and upset. He does not understand.”

As my mind stirred from sleeping to awake, I kept my eyes closed. The voice speaking with Pelorus was dimly familiar to me, but I was still groggy and recognition was not immediate. I heard the soft rustle of fabric as someone genuflected in front of me. The glow of the fire, bright and golden through my eyelids faded to shadow as the man’s body blocked the light of the flames. “I am sorry,” he said, quietly, his voice tinged with sorrow.

“Yes, well, you should be, Demodocus,” Pelorus said. “This is all on your account. Yours and Hemithea’s.”

I did not move or open my eyes, although my mind was now wide awake and sharply alert. Demodocus. I had seen him nearly every night; he was a member of Pelorus’ common mess, and a table mate. He seldom said much, but I would glance up from my barley bread, black broth or wine and find him sitting at the far end of the table, his gaze settled on me as if it was something comfortable and customary for him. He never looked at me unkindly, but his attention always unnerved me nonetheless.

“Hemithea has the mind of a mule caught in that head of hers,” Demodocus said. “There is no reasoning with her when she fixes on a philosophy.”

I remembered that Demodocus had been a friend to my mother in some way when I was a child, but I did not understand why they would mention her now.

“She is no more to blame than you,” Pelorus snapped. “It is the Law, Demodocus. It keeps us from this—from this precise moment.”

“I know that, Pelorus,” Demodocus said.

“It gives boys of his age a safe means to explore,” Pelorus continued, as if he had not heard Demodocus. “It is important to their training—it keeps them focused. It keeps them from these distractions, these women.”

“I know, Pelorus.”

"You know—and yet you agreed to it, Demodocus," Pelorus said angrily.

"I will take care of everything," Demodocus said.

"The girl..." Pelorus began.

"I said I will take care of it," Demodocus said, his voice sharp, silencing Pelorus. "You just...you tend to the boy. I am trusting you to that."

Demodocus' shadow moved, the warmth of the fire pressing against my face again as he stood. "If you trust me to it, call off your charge," Pelorus said.

"What?" Demodocus said.

"Clesonymus," Pelorus said. "Call him off. You have been very clever about it, but I am not an idiot, Demodocus. I hear him at night with that untethered bull he tends to, rustling in the leaves. I see them stealing about in the daytime. If you trust me, you should not need to see me supervised."

"What are you talking about?" Demodocus said. "I have not seen Clesonymus in more than passing, except for the mess. He has his own charge to oversee, and I have my duties. He is nearly thirty—our time has passed."

I heard Pelorus' footsteps as he walked toward Demodocus. "You...you have not sent him, then?"

"Of course not. My trust in you has never faltered, Pelorus."

They were both quiet. "How long?" Demodocus asked finally.

"Years now," Pelorus said. "Nearly from the first. I thought you had dispatched him. I never made mention because I assumed..." His voice faded and they were quiet again. "He could make trouble for us," Pelorus said at length, his voice low and grim.

"He will not," Demodocus said, but he sounded uncertain.

“Years now, Demodocus,” Pelorus said. “He has spied on us at night. He will know.” He walked again, pacing briskly about the fire. “He might be spying on us now.”

“He is not,” Demodocus said. “I left him at the mess. I would have heard him follow me.”

“He is fixed on you,” Pelorus said. “You know that. His affections for you have always been somewhat mad. He might—”

“I will take care of him, too,” Demodocus said. Pelorus drew in breath to speak, and Demodocus interrupted. “He will listen to me. Yes, he is fixed on me, but he is not mad for it. I will talk to him and he will listen. Besides, he will soon be too busy to make any trouble. It is time for him to marry—as it is for you.”

Marriage? I thought, startled. It had not occurred to me until that moment that Pelorus was on the threshold between his training and his status as a full Spartiate. He did not speak of such things with me, and seldom broached them at the common mess. His private life, his duties to his own training remained very much a mystery to me. I did not even know his mentor’s name; surely the man belonged to the mess Pelorus attended—because Pelorus did not have membership status on his own, as he was not a Spartiate.

I had never heard Pelorus mention his family before, much less his parents or any prospects for marriage. He was Pelorus the Younger, which meant he was named for his father, but beyond this, I knew nothing of him.

“And you know about Argolis,” Demodocus said. “Cleomenes would see us march before the month’s end.”

“I know,” Pelorus said. “I have received word. It does not matter. If Clesonymus—”

“Clesonymus will be marching with the tribe against the Argives,” Demodocus said. “He will be too far away—and too busy making war with the rest of us—to bother anymore.”

My breath drew still again. I had heard murmurs of war against Argolis at the common mess. *Pelorus is leaving?* I

thought, dismayed. *He is going to war? He...he did not tell me that. He never said a word of it. Why would he not tell me?*

“Do not worry,” Demodocus said to Pelorus.

“That is easy enough for you to say,” Pelorus muttered. “Clesonymus could make trouble. You have put us all in a bad place, Demodocus.”

“I will take care of it,” Demodocus said. I heard him clap his hand against Pelorus’ shoulder. “Thank you, Pelorus. For everything you have done.”

“Yes, well, Echelas is a good enough boy,” Pelorus replied in a surly, begrudging tone. “And I...I have grown somewhat accustomed to him. I do not want to see anything come upon him.”

My eyes nearly flew wide in surprise; those were the closest to fond words I had ever heard Pelorus offer in my regard. I heard them clasp forearms, a customary greeting among men, and then the rustle of their cloaks as they embraced briefly, clapping each other on the shoulders.

“I know, Pelorus,” Demodocus said.

Shortly after that, Pelorus disappeared. I was bewildered and somewhat alarmed. I worried that despite his kind words, he had been angry enough to abandon me. He had been furious and frustrated with me over what had happened with Elara. All that I had done in the past to disappoint, aggravate or anger Pelorus had paled to his rage when he had found me in the woods. He had not beaten me for it, but he had been furious nonetheless. I feared it had been the last straw atop too many failures on my part, and Pelorus had thrown up his hands and left me.

These fears seemed unfounded, however, once I paused long enough to think rationally about it. Many others had seemingly abandoned their charges along with him, including Clesonymus. Tages kept us all under his tight rein in the meantime, and while the others went in the company of their mentors each day, he kept us at the youth camp, forcing us to practice marching drills and weapon play against one

another. No one offered any explanations as to our mentors' whereabouts, and we were not allowed to ask. They simply did not come.

When I finally saw Pelorus, nearly two weeks had passed in full. I was returning to the barrack after our morning run, letting the long muscles in my legs relax after such fierce exertion. I saw him walking toward me and I stumbled, drawing still. He wore the uniform of a Spartiate hoplite. The sun was behind me, and its new glow gleamed against his magnificent bronze corselet and helmet. His dun-colored cloak was gone, and a flowing cape of scarlet draped about his tall form, fluttering in the breeze against his hips, falling toward his knees. He had already begun to grow the beard of a man; his chin and cheeks were covered with a dusting of dark, coarse hair.

"Pelorus...!" I whispered, my eyes flying wide. I could not run to him; I could not cry out his name happily. I could display no emotion, and so I simply stood there, blinking at him as if Apollo himself walked toward me, bathed in the glorious fire of the dawn.

Pelorus stopped before me. The horse-hair crest of his magnificent helm rose in a broad arc above his head, spilling down in a long, blanchéd tail toward the middle of his back. He wore the sword of a Spartiate hoplite fettered at his hip; his calves were encased in gilded greaves of polished bronze. I could not help myself and grinned at him, my mouth unfurling broadly, my heart shuddering with fierce pride.

"Stop smiling at me," he said. His tone was brusque, but I did not miss the momentary fondness softening his face, tugging the corner of his own mouth upward in a fleeting, crooked smile.

"Yes, sir," I said, breathless with awe.

"You have been minding Tages?" he asked. "Keeping from mischief?"

"Yes, sir," I said. I wanted to ask him where he had been; why he had left me alone for so long. I had been frightened for him all the while, and now, with his

reappearance in such splendid regalia, my confusion only intensified. My bright expression softened, and I blinked at him, wounded and bewildered.

“Come on,” he said. “Let us walk awhile.”

“I thought...I thought you were angry with me,” I said as we walked toward the river, and our clearing along the shore. He looked at me, curious, and I averted my eyes. “You have been gone for so long.”

“I have finished my training,” he told me. “There are rituals and ceremonies, pomp and circumstance. I had to keep away. I am married now, as well—a nice lass named Iaera—and was elected to the common mess. I have left Iaera instructions to insure my contributions will be made in timely fashion on your behalf, and I expect you to sup there at least once a week while I am gone.”

“Gone?” I said softly.

He nodded. “I will not be able to see you for a time,” he said. “In the next weeks, I will be with my phalanx training in earnest, and then we are marching for Argolis with Cleomenes.”

“Oh,” I said quietly.

“You will keep with Tages for your training in my absence, as you have been these past weeks,” he said. “You will also visit your mother once a week.”

“My mother...?” I said, blinking, caught completely off-guard.

“I expect you to practice your recitations for her audience,” he said. “I have discussed the matter at some length with her, and she has agreed to assume responsibility for you until I return from the north. If you need anything, you will send Hemithea word and she will tend to it.”

I had not seen Hemithea since I was seven. Her face was a vague and hazy memory to me. I doubted I could pick her from among a crowd. I remembered the strange and

somewhat ominous conversation I had overheard between Demodocus and Pelorus

Hemithea has the mind of a mule caught in that head of hers. There is no reasoning with her when she fixes on a philosophy.

and wondered if it had anything to do with these sudden and unexpected arrangements of Pelorus'. I wondered if it was some sort of punishment for what had happened with Elara—or some insurance on Pelorus' part that it would not happen again while he was gone to Argolis.

What is going on? I thought. Why are you doing this, Pelorus?

After Pelorus brought me back to the barrack, I overheard Pedaeus speaking to a group of his friends, his voice loud and booming with pride.

"Clesonymus is a Spartiate in full, and on the march for war in Argolis!" he declared. "He has more land holdings in the ancient region than any other man in Mesoa—he inherited seven plots, and his wife Elara brought four more with her hand! Eleven plots...!"

He rambled on, but I did not hear him. I had frozen in midstep, paralyzed and stricken by the words "and his wife Elara." I turned and walked toward Pedaeus, wide-eyed. "What did you say?" I asked.

There were at least five young men between me and Pedaeus, and at first, none of them paid me any mind, too enthralled with Pedaeus' yammering. I frowned, shoving aside the boy nearest to me and as he yelped in surprise, Pedaeus fell silent, blinking at me.

"What did you say?" I asked him. "Clesonymus married?"

Pedaeus was fully unaccustomed to me offering him any sort of conversation—casual or otherwise—and he looked around uncertainly, as if expecting a trick. "Of course he married," he said. "He is a Spartiate now. What did you think?"

He would keep a bachelor to his shame, and let the women mock him at the Karneia?"

I stared at him in stricken disbelief. "You said her name," I said. "What was her name?"

"Elara," he replied, baffled.

"You...you are lying," I whispered, my brows furrowing. I knew what had happened. I knew it in my gut. Demodocus had said he would "take care" of Elara—and Clesonymus as well. *Is this how? I wanted to scream. He would need them both to keep them away from me? Why? Why would Demodocus do this? What does he want from me?*

Pedaeus raised his brow, insulted. "You had better hold your tongue, Echelas," he said. "I have kept my peace with you these years."

"Why?" I asked him, closing my hands into fists. "Because Demodocus told you to? Threatened you if you did not?"

He blinked at me, taking a step back in surprise. I had not known with certainty as I had said this last; his reaction was all of the reply I needed. I had long suspected something other than simple courtesy or kindness had kept Pedaeus from making trouble with me, and now I knew for sure. It had been Demodocus—just like everything else suddenly seemed to hinge upon that man, this, too was his doing.

"You are lying!" I snapped, and I planted my hands against Pedaeus' shoulders, shoving him mightily. He floundered back, nearly losing his footing. "Clesonymus did not marry her! You are lying, you rot!"

I turned and stormed toward the barrack, my face flushed with rage. The other boys shied from my path, wide-eyed and dumbstruck.

"What is the matter with you?" Dieneces asked when he found me lying on the floor in the barrack. "Come on, get up. Tages is calling us to the practice field for marching drills."

“Leave me alone,” I said, despondent, tucking my forehead against my hands, hiding from him.

“Everyone is saying you have gone mad,” Dieneces whispered, kneeling behind me. I felt him touch my shoulder gently. “I know you are upset that Pelorus is going to Argolis, but to pick a fight with Pedaeus? I am going to miss Thersites, too—and worry for him besides—but you do not see me attempting my own life in my grief.”

“It is not that,” I whispered.

Dieneces lay down behind me, spooning against my back. “I heard about Clesonymus and Elara,” he said softly. I lowered my hands in surprise, glancing back at him. He lifted his head and smiled as he propped himself up on his elbow. “You could not miss Pedaeus’ ramblings if you were standing in Messenia.”

He was trying to coax a smile from me, but I had none to offer. “It...it is proper that she married him,” I said, and turned away from him again, blinking at the far wall of the barrack. “It is the Law.”

“That does not make it fair,” Dieneces murmured. His brows lifted in gentle sympathy. “Or your pain any less.”

“No,” I whispered, closing my eyes again. “No, it does not.”

His hand found mine, and he hooked his fingers against my palm. “I am sorry, Echelas,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

490 B.C.

"There are so many things I do not understand," I said. "Demodocus arranged for Clesonymus to marry Elara—I know he did. He must have to keep them away from me, but I do not understand why. I...I have never understood why Pelorus called for him to meet that night in the woods. I have never understood Demodocus' presence in my life at all, or what he wanted from me."

"Perhaps he wanted you," the man said. "He could not take you for his charge, but saw his means to you through Pelorus."

"I...I do not know," I said. "He never tried to approach me, like that or any other way. He was friends with Hemithea, but he did not know me. He and Pelorus were members of the same common mess, but I...I seldom saw them speak there, or..."

"Maybe that was Demodocus' original intention," the man interjected quietly. "Something he and Pelorus had agreed to, but then Pelorus changed his mind and would not see through."

I blinked at the floor. "Pelorus would not have done that," I whispered. "He was a man of honor, if nothing else. That was most important to him, no matter what he did—honor. He would not have done that to me. I know he would not. I...Pelorus was like my father. The only father I ever knew."

"And perhaps you were like a son," the man said. "Whatever deal he might have bartered with Demodocus in the beginning, perhaps he broke it because he loved you."

494 B.C.

Pelorus was gone for four months in Argolis. Autumn yielded to winter, and the year yielded to the next. While Sparta waged war to the north—and Athens likewise waged war against the Persians across the Aegean in Ionia—my life continued in its relatively sheltered procession. The Eurypontid King Demaratus had not traveled on the Argolis campaign, and enough Spartiates remained in the Eurotas valley under his command to make it possible to believe there was nothing out of the ordinary underway at all. Every morning and evening, I ran as I always had; the hours in between were a daily montage of battle training, physical activities or visits with Hemithea.

I went to the common mess once a week, as Pelorus had instructed. I tried to go on the same day as I went to Hemithea in Pitana, if only to have a viable excuse to leave her. Every visit with my mother was like that with an aloof stranger.

She would lead me to the courtyard of her home and make me stand for hours, offering recitations at her cue. Although she always listened attentively to me, her dark eyes fixed upon me, I never saw a hint of anything other than this in her face. Her expression never softened; the measure of her mouth never lifted in a smile. She watched me as if she expected something of me, although what, I had no idea, and felt obligingly helpless to offer her.

When Pelorus returned, it was as a hero; the campaign he had participated in against Argolis had been successful—or at least, so it had seemed from the first. Within weeks of the return of Cleomenes' forces from the north, controversy and rumor swarmed throughout Sparta. The Ephors leveled charges against Cleomenes that only brought to the forefront of conversations in the common messes those rumors about his sanity—or lack of it—ordinarily kept to quiet murmurs.

Cleomenes' hoplites had defeated the Argives at a place called Sepeia. It was a forested area outside of the

region's main city, Argos; lands and groves considered sacred to the Argives. The soldiers of Argolis had fled here after their defeat against the Spartiates had seemed eminent. They did not find the sanctuary they sought in Sepeia, and fell to Cleomenes and his troops. A victory seeming worthy of celebration, but during suppers at the mess hall, I listened with fascination and horror as Spartiates offered varying accounts of events.

"He bartered a seven-day armistice with them," one of the Spartiates named Smicrus said. "The Argives were holed up tight among the trees, shivering and gathering their wits about them. Six thousand of them at least. Three days into the peace, Cleomenes sends Dweller heralds to the woods. He tells them 'here are the names of men we have secured ransoms for—we will give you safe passage back to Argos.' He has them thinking all this while, he has been bartering with their kin, and out they come, one hundred men or so from the trees. Cleomenes gives the word and our archers draw upon them. You could not hear a sound save the snapping of bowstrings, the hissing of fletchings in the wind and those stupid Argives shrieking as they were hit."

Smicrus met my wide-eyed gaze, pleased that his story was enthralling me so. "I tell you, little ephebe, it is a woeful chorus—one hundred men screaming like that. It echoes off the mountains to the south and then the winds from the gulf blow it back upon you in the night, like the cries of shades."

I blinked at him, breathless.

"And then the next morning, Cleomenes sends heralds again with the same promises of safe passage—only this time, the Argives have none of it," Smicrus said. "They keep to the trees, and so Cleomenes says fine. They will not stand to the fight; the fight shall move to them. And he orders the Dwellers forward to line the tree bases with twigs, leaves and pine needles—anything they can find for kindling. He orders the Dwellers to take torches to the trees, and alight they go. It has been a dry summer atop an unkind spring, and those spindly trees went up as though they had been soaked in neat wine. You should have heard the shrieks, little ephebe—a gruesome harmony with their feet to mark their tempo. The men ran about all afire, screaming and thrashing. I have never seen—or

heard—the likes. And the stink of it...!” He shook his head. “Like a sow split down the center and seared on a spit. It gets into your nose and lingers there—sweet and sooty and scorched. Six thousand men among those trees, and not a one of them made it forth alive.”

“The cloud of smoke blocked the sun,” said another, a Spartiate named Deliades. “It rose so high and broad, they could see it from Argos. When Cleomenes sent word to them to fall into the alliance, they cowed like mutts with a strap taken to their haunches.”

“But he did not take the city,” Smicrus remarked, taking a drink from his wine. He looked at me and dropped a wink. “There are some who are saying he was too cowardly to try, after what happened in Athens when your father was killed all those years ago. He took them at their word for proffered loyalty and withdrew.”

“Hoah, and there are some who are saying the Argos women begged a deal of him—with silver to line his purse,” said Deliades. “There is what the Ephors have called him on. They say he was bribed to spare the city.”

“And there are some who even say the Argos women drove us off, lining their walls and firing at us with arrows.” Smicrus snorted and shook his head. “I was there, little ephebe—you may mark me at this. No woman outside of a Spartan woman shall ever turn back or rebuke a Spartan man. We stayed long enough at that city to pay a call to their shrine and see them mindful of their manners and then we came home again. Not an arrow fired—and surely from no Argive woman.”

“Hoah, and their shrine is another matter altogether,” said another Spartiate, Solon. “We have all heard stories of Cleomenes’ madness, and I tell you, I saw it firsthand.”

“He has been mad from his youth,” Deliades said with a frown. “Those who will not speak it aloud still think it in their hearts—he was born mad, I say.”

“I was there in the front ranks when we drew near Argos and came upon their sanctuary to Hera,” Solon said. “I

saw Cleomenes mount the temple steps. I heard him call out to the priest, ordering him to let us make offerings to the goddess. When the priest told him no, I saw the look that came upon Cleomenes' face—a flush as deep as the scarlet of his cloak. He bore his teeth and wrinkled his lips back like a fox caught in a corner. I have never seen the likes of such a rage—his own commanders drew back from him.”

“He screamed for someone to bring him a lash,” Smicrus said, drawing my gaze. “I saw him seize that priest by the crook of his arm as you would a naughty ephebe, and then throw him down the steps, sending him sprawling and face-first into the dirt. Over and over, he screams for the lash, and when someone steps forward, Cleomenes snatches it in hand and swings it again and again.”

“He was a madman,” Solon said, and I blinked at him, horrified. “He beat that priest until he was dead; his liver and lights, the meat of his brains smeared against the ground. He beat him until the strap of the lash sliced his own palm open from the force of his blows, and all the while, he screamed and cursed.”

“And then when the poor rot was dead, Cleomenes tosses aside the lash and wipes his hand against his skirt,” Smicrus said. “Without another word, he enters the temple. His priest and seer trail behind him, and they keep inside for a time before they emerge. Cleomenes calls to us—‘I have seen fire blaze from Hera’s heart. The gods have spoken, then, and here is all we were meant to claim.’”

He raised his brow at me. “And with that, little ephebe, we were for home. I do not know for cowardice, bribes or women warriors of Argos. What I saw was that dead priest—and the omens from Hera.”

I turned to Pelorus, fascinated by the stories; eager and curious for his account of things. He met my gaze patiently, evenly. He had not spoken at all about his experiences in Argolis, even though I had asked him. Whatever he had seen there; whatever toll the battle had taken upon him remained his own, secreted and unspoken. The code of the common

mess was that the words spoken within remained within, but be that as it may, Pelorus said nothing.

“What will the Ephors do to Cleomenes if they find him guilty of accepting bribes?” I asked Pelorus later that night, when he had retrieved me from the barrack and brought me to the riverside. It was cold, and my breath hung in the open air before my face in a dim, frosted haze. I stood near the fire with my cloak drawn snugly about me.

“They will depose him,” Pelorus said. “Recite Tyrtaeus’ opening of courage.”

“Here is courage, mankind’s finest possession,” I said. “Here is the noblest prize that a young man can endeavor to win, and it is a good thing his city and all the people share with him. When a man plants his feet and stands in the foremost spears relentlessly, all thoughts of foul flight—”

“Thought,” Pelorus said, interrupting me. “‘All thought of foul flight,’ Echelas, not ‘thoughts.’”

“Yes, sir,” I said. He was deliberately avoiding the topic of Cleomenes, but I was feeling curious and persistent. “‘All thought of foul flight completely forgotten, and has well trained his heart to be steadfast and to endure, and with words—”

Pelorus held up his hand to silence me, turning his head as if a faint sound attracted his attention. I closed my mouth and followed his gaze, hearing nothing but the crackling of dried wood from our fire. “What is it?” I whispered.

Pelorus glanced at me. “Nothing,” he said.

“Will the Ephors find Cleomenes guilty, Pelorus?” I asked.

“Not if they have wits in their skulls,” he replied. I looked at him expectantly, and he sighed. “Cleomenes followed a good course in keeping to the Peloponnese—the only course he could. We have had three opportunities for war these past years—opportunities Cleomenes alone has had to weigh and ponder. Demaratus does not bargain for war; he

avoids it like the stink of rot. Cleomenes knew we could join Athens in aiding the Ionians against Persia and stretch our resources thin for war overseas; he knew we could turn our attentions to Aegina and force them in line, punish them for offering allegiance to Persia, or we could strengthen our own boundaries here within the Peloponnese, holding it to Sparta's ways. Demaratus refused to support an assault against Aegina and Cleomenes could not barter their cooperation standing alone before them. He could not force them with only half an army—not with Aegina resting in the palm of the Persians, and so he opted for this last—for unifying the Peloponnese. It was one measure his forces alone could tend to, with or without Demaratus' approval, and it will benefit Sparta in the end."

I blinked at him, impressed by his familiarity with politics. "How do you know so much of things?" I asked him softly.

The corner of his mouth hooked slightly. "Because I listen to facts, Echelas, not torrid gossip proffered at the common mess," he said. "I weigh what seems logical and gather that this is truth."

"Hoah," I said quietly.

He tapped his fingertip in the air, walking toward me. "I believe you were at 'and has well trained his heart to be steadfast and to endure.'"

I sighed, hunching my shoulders as he walked behind me. "And has well trained his heart to be steadfast and endure, and with words encourages the man who is..."

Pelorus drew to a halt behind me, and although I could not see him, I knew something was wrong; his breath had drawn sharply still. My voice faded and I fell silent. We stood there for a long moment, and I glanced over my shoulder. "Pelorus...?" I whispered.

I hear him at night with that untethered bull he tends to, rustling in the leaves, I remembered him telling Demodocus, speaking of Clesonymus. He has spied on us at night. He will know. He could make trouble for us.

I glanced toward my left, but could see nothing. I could hear nothing except for the snapping of our fire. I had never been aware of anyone following us—even though years ago, Clesonymus had threatened me with exactly that.

I think I will begin by watching you.

Pelorus had obviously realized it, however—for years now, he had told Demodocus. It had never worried him because for whatever reason, he had thought Demodocus was responsible, but now that Demodocus had told him he was not, Pelorus was alarmed.

You cannot tell anyone what happened tonight, Pelorus had told me on the first night he had taken me, and I had realized he would be punished for not abusing me; for breaking Spartan Law. Not any of your fellows—not even Dieneces. Do you understand?

“Continue your recitation,” Pelorus said quietly, walking away from me. He went to the corner of our clearing where he kept our supplies bundled, and I blinked as he hefted his sword in hand.

“Pelorus...?” I said again, uncertainly.

“Continue, Echelas,” he said without turning around or pausing in his stride. He walked toward the edge of the fire’s glow, approaching the trees. I heard the hiss of metal against leather as he drew the short, double-edged blade from its scabbard, and then he stepped into the shadows and disappeared.

He was gone for a long while. I stood anxiously by the fire, trying to peer into the darkness beyond the perimeter of its warm glow. I began to recite again, my voice quiet and tremulous.

“And...and with words encourages the man who is stationed beside him,” I said. ““Here is a man who proves himself to be valiant in war. With a sudden rush, he turns to flight the rugged battalions of the enemy, and sustains the beating waves of assault.””

All at once, the sounds of the forest I had never really paid much mind to seemed strange and sinister, and I whirled,

wide-eyed and breathless at an unfamiliar rustling. “And he...he who so falls among the champions and loses his sweet life,” I said, struggling to find my voice. “So blessing with honor his city, his father and all his people, with wounds in his chest, where the spear that he was facing has transfixed that massive guard of his shield, and gone through his breastplate as well, why...why, such a man is lamented alike by the—”

Pelorus’ sudden footsteps in the pine needles startled me, and I turned, yelping softly as he stepped back into the circumference of firelight. The flames winked off of his blade as he sheathed it once more.

“Who...who was it?” I whispered.

“I do not know,” he replied grimly. “I did not see anyone.” He looked around, his brows narrowed. “There have been slave disturbances again,” he said. “The Ephebic Magistrate and the Ephors have appointed more Hunters, hebontes sent into the wilds to keep the slaves under control. They patrol these woods sometimes.”

He did not believe for a moment it was Hunters who had crept upon us in the darkness, watching us from the shadows. I could see it in his eyes. “Come on,” he said. “Back to the barrack.”

I blinked at him in surprise. “But it...it is early yet,” I said.

“Yes, well, I have a busy day planned for you tomorrow,” he said, walking past me. “And I would see you well-rested for it. Come on.”

“A busy day?” I asked.

“Yes,” Pelorus said. “I have spoken with the Elders on the matter, and as of tomorrow, you are in training.”

“Training?” I said, bewildered, following him away from the camp. I could not help but notice he did not return his sword to his bundled supplies. He carried it in hand, as if keeping it near and at the ready.

“Yes, Echelas, training,” Pelorus said. “You have always been fleet-footed, and come this spring, I am going to

put it to some use. You are going to represent Sparta in the foot races of the Pythian Games.”

I trained until the spring, running until heretofore undiscovered muscles in my body remained perpetually aching and strained in protest. It was my eighteenth year, and as a Spartan ephebe in good standing, I was allowed to participate in the Spartan Assembly. This was not as prestigious an occasion for me as it seemed to be for Dienece. He delighted in the meeting, deriving some sort of breathless, awestruck thrill at the simple act of being included. He was delighted to finally be more than a passive observer of political policy and practice in Sparta; you would think he had been named the Agiad heir, as excited as he was about our first Assembly.

Two weeks later, as we rode by wagon along the northern highway from Sparta toward the isthmus of Corinth and the Greek mainland, heading for the Pythian Games, he was still chattering about it.

“Latychidas says that Demaratus has no rightful claim to the Eurypontid throne,” he said. “I have heard he is bending the ears of the Ephors. He wants them to depose Demaratus straight away. Hoah, to have that brought before the Assembly, instead! Can you imagine if the Elders call us on it?”

“They will not,” I said. “That is a rumor, Dienece. Gossip to distract you from the rot flavor as you swallow your black broth. Everyone said they would depose Cleomenes, too, for bribery in Argolis, and they acquitted him with just cause.”

“I have always figured there must be a certain truth behind even the wildest stories, else how would they come about in conversation?” Dienece said.

“Easy,” I told him, smiling. “Eager little mouths like yours pass them about, making them wilder with each retelling.”

Dienece laughed. “Can I help it if I have blessed as an orator?” he asked. “I think not. You cannot question the divine will of the gods. And thus, here I find myself, in a wagon on my way to Delphi to represent my Sparta in the oral recitation

contest of the Pythian Games.” He smiled broadly. “Hoah, that laurel is as good as mine. You just wait.”

“Pelorus says a wise man can listen to gossip as well as any other,” I said. “But he can take what seems logical from all of the nonsense and decide on the truth for himself from it.”

Pedaeus snorted at this. He was sitting across from us, chosen to participate in the wrestling contests at Delphi, and had been listening to our conversation, his expression surly. “Something to share, Pedaeus?” Dieneces asked him sweetly.

Pedaeus ignored him, meeting my gaze. “Pelorus says this,’ and ‘Pelorus says that,’” he said, snorting again. “If Pelorus is so wise, Echelas, why is he no more than a Spartiate? Why is he not a commander to the kings with all of this wisdom he spouts so freely?”

I raised my brow to the challenge. “Because Pelorus is pleased to serve Sparta, as is his duty by Law,” I said. “If he was appointed to lead, then he would do so with equal pleasure. Lyncurgus told us Spartan men should know no ambition but to serve Sparta first and foremost in their hearts.”

“It is easy enough for you, is it not?” Pedaeus asked me. “To extol the virtues of a simple Spartiate while milking the benefits of favor from another of higher status.”

“Hoah, now,” Dieneces said. “Those were a lot of big words you threw out just now, Pedaeus. Settle yourself, or you will exhaust before we even get to Delphi!”

“What are you talking about?” I asked Pedaeus.

He raised his brow. “You know what I am talking about, Echelas,” he said. “There is not a man on this wagon who does not know—and who has not from the first.”

I blinked, bewildered, and looked among the others in the wagon. There were twenty of us crowded in the back, and they all looked at me, then toward Pedaeus as if they knew exactly what he meant.

“Forget it, Echelas,” Dieneces said quietly, hooking his hand against my arm to draw my gaze.

“Do you know what he is talking about?” I asked.

“Is he talking or squirting wind from his ass?”

Dieneces replied. “I can seldom tell the difference.” He spared Pedaeus a scowling glance. “Do not pay him any mind. He is trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Echelas should know about stoking a rise,” Pedaeus said with a smirk, and the boys on either side of him snickered.

“What does that mean?” I said, leaning forward, my brows drawn.

“You are the one with the sage for a mentor,” Pedaeus said. “Figure it out.”

A loud, sharp report against the side of the wagon startled us, and I jerked, my eyes wide with surprise. Clesonymus had reined his horse alongside of the wagon and had smacked his fist against the sideboard. He frowned at us, his gaze sweeping the cart.

“If you have enough energy to seek trouble, ephebe, I can find it for you,” he said, glaring directly at me. “You can walk the route to Delphi with your hands strapped to my saddle.”

I lowered my gaze, rebuked. “Yes, sir,” I said quietly.

“It is a long road to Delphi,” Clesonymus said. “I suggest the lot of you mind your manners, or you will find it an even longer one home.”

My anger and bewilderment dissolved upon our arrival in Delphi. Thousands of Greeks from all of the city-states gathered in these highlands and sun-draped slopes for the Pythian Games—more people in one place than I had ever witnessed in all of my days.

As we approached the sanctuary of the ancient oracle of Apollo, Dieneces and I drew onto our knees, looking over the side of the wagon, any maturity in our years slapped from us by simple, childlike wonder and astonishment. We marveled over the towering colonnades, statuaries and manicured walkways of the shrine and memorials. Accustomed to the

simple drab cloaks of the Spartiate ephebes and hebontes, or the scarlet of Spartiates, I felt dizzy looking at the men from Athens, Corinth, Thebes and Eretria—every corner of established Greece, draped and donned in surely every hue and fabric the gods had ever set upon the earth.

We came to the stadium, a broad and expansive arena where the games would be held. Here, the voices of the crowd blended together in a thunderous din, and you could scarcely stumble a halting step forward without bumping shoulders with at least a dozen other people. I shied next to Dieneces as we hopped from the wagon; I pressed myself against him, wide-eyed and anxious by the crowd. I felt his fingers fumble against mine, and I held his hand. When Pelorus reached out and clapped me on the shoulder from behind, I whirled, yelping in fright, smacking into men shoving past us.

“I have to find the registers and see that you are listed,” Pelorus said, having to shout to be heard as he leaned toward me. “You go with Thersites and Dieneces to the stadium. Wait for me there—I will find you.”

“Yes, sir!” I yelled back.

Thersites was not the least bit intimidated by the crowd. He guided me and Dieneces through the throng, keeping one hand planted firmly against each of our scruffs, lest he lose track of us. He and Dieneces chattered together the whole way. I tried to listen to their conversation, but it was hard; not even their loud, eager voices carried well over the resounding noise. I was also distracted, my eyes darting this way and that as I marveled at the people, colors, voices, smells and sounds.

The stadium benches were already crowded to nearly overflowing capacity by the time we found a small section in which the other representatives from Sparta had settled. I sat on the edge of one of the narrow stone risers and caught sight of a nearby group of young Greek men. I gazed at them for a long time, enthralled. I had never before seen young men of such splendid and well-tended appearances. Spartan youths their age were generally disheveled looking, through no fault of our own. We exercised all day; our cloaks were usually rather

careworn and hastily arranged; our bodies dusted with sweat and grime. Their bodies were lean, their skin pristine and glossy. They had handsome faces with etched, haughty features, and when they noticed my attention, they poked one another with their elbows and nodded toward me.

“Look, lads—a little Spartan,” I heard one of them say.

“A Spartan or a slave, to judge by that threadbare cloak,” remarked another.

“I can count his ribs from here,” said a third.

“Spartans are too stupid to realize they are hungry, unless another points it out to them,” said a fourth, smirking.

Their mockery shamed me and I lowered my gaze, feeling abashed color stoke in my face.

I heard a sharp bark of loud laughter from my right and turned. I saw an old man easing his way through the crowd, searching for a seat. Spectators glanced at the old man, snickering and pointing as he leaned heavily on a wooden staff and hobbled along. The younger Greek men I had only just studied were now nodding their chins toward him and guffawing.

“There are no seats here, old father,” I heard one of them call out, his voice mockingly pleasant. His fellows snorted laughter at this, elbowing one another as they drew their hands to their mouths and laughed.

“Try the stables,” suggested another, lifting his chin and voice, trying to attract the old man’s attention. “Pile the dung high enough and you might plant your ass atop the heap.”

I was startled and confused by their behavior. The man was their elder, but they spoke to him with no respect at all; they belittled him, and though he struggled not to show that he paid them any mind, I could see as his mouth twitched downward that the old man could hear them. He could hear as the other Greeks along the tiered seats called out in similar insult, and he tried not to let his humiliation show.

I rose from my seat, tucking my hands beneath my cloak. I stood in the aisle as the old man approached, and I lowered my head politely to him. "Here is a seat for you, sir," I said.

Dieneces and Thersites had taken notice of the man when I stood, and they both rose as well. "Sir, here is another, if it should please you," Dieneces said, turning his eyes towards his toes in deference.

"And another, sir, should you prefer," Thersites said, drawing his hands beneath his red cloak as if he was an ephebe before his mentor.

One by one, all of the Spartans stood, noticing the old man. They each stepped graciously aside to offer the man their places along the benches. The other Greeks could not help but take notice as more than two hundred Spartans rose to their feet, bowing their heads before the old man. A profound and somewhat awkward silence settled on our section of the stadium, as conversations faded and attentions turned towards us. From somewhere along one of the rows, I heard the clapping of hands. The sound was picked up and fluttered among the section as the other Greeks applauded our courtesy.

The old man looked around at us. He blinked at me, as I was nearest to him, and I realized there were tears in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again, as if words escaped him, and I stepped forward, holding out my hand to steady his gait.

"Please, sir," I said, helping him toward my bench.

"You are from Sparta," he said, as he sat down slowly against the stone. I genuflected with him, keeping my hand pressed against his back.

"Yes, sir," I said, keeping my eyes on my toes.

"Is it not something, lad," he remarked, brushing the cuff of his fingers against my cheek to draw my gaze. "That all of the Greeks should know what is proper enough to applaud it, but among them, only the Spartans see it through?"

I competed in three foot races that day, and beat my competitors by more than five strides in each, earning laurel wreaths for Sparta. True to his word, Dieneces won the laurel for his recitation, a compelling and poignant rendition of Homer's hymn to the Pythian Apollo. He delivered the ode in a magnificent manner, his chin hoisted proudly, his voice booming across the stadium tiers. There was not a word he missed, or a phrase he stumbled through; it did not seem as though he even paused for the benefit of a full breath. Despite the grueling length of the poem, he held the crowd positively motionless and silent throughout his entire delivery. They rose to their feet in approval when he completed the recitation, and the roar of their applause resounded off of the surrounding mountainsides.

To his credit, Pedaeus won a laurel for wrestling. He broke the fingers of several young opponents, cracked some ribs and meted out other forms of physical punishment for which he seemed aptly suited. All total, the representing athletes of Sparta brought home more laurel wreaths than any other Greek state in the competitions.

"The Athenians mocked me," I said to Pelorus. The games were over, and we were preparing to leave. Dieneces had seemingly disappeared, and I followed along behind Pelorus like a shadow as he packed up his horse.

"How do you know they were Athenians?" he asked.

"Because I raced against them," I said. "I heard them called to the track."

"And you bested them there," he told me pointedly. "So it seems their mockery was rather moot."

I looked down at my feet. "They said I was either a Spartan or a slave," I said. "On account of my cloak. It...it is rather worn, I guess. It is not fancy, like theirs."

Pelorus turned to me. "A cloak covers a man, Echelas," he said. "It does not make him. There is no fabric in the world that can disguise poor character."

“They called us stupid,” I said, glancing up at him. “They said Spartans were too stupid to realize they were hungry unless someone else told them so.”

Pelorus folded his arms across his chest and raised his brow. “Do you know when you are hungry?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Then I should think you are not nearly as stupid as the Athenians say.”

I said nothing, and Pelorus walked toward me. “Let the others mock,” he said. “They will never know the courage it takes to do what is honorable and right, even when others laugh or call you stupid for your efforts.”

I realized that he was perfectly aware of what had happened with the old man in the stadium earlier; Thersites or one of the other Spartiates must have told him. I looked down at the ground, studying my toes.

Pelorus hooked his hand briefly but fondly against the back of my neck. “You stood for Sparta today,” he told me. “You obeyed her Laws, and represented her with honor. You could have placed last on the field, tripping and stumbling over the line, and I would still be proud, Echelas.”

“I have to talk to you,” Dieneces hissed as we waited to load the wagon. He caught me by the arm, closing his fingers firmly against my elbow as he drew me aside.

“Where have you been?” I asked, trying vainly to flap my arm and dislodge his grasp. “Let go. What are you doing?”

“I have to talk to you, Echelas,” he said again, and there was none of his characteristic humor in his face. He looked serious and somewhat frightened, I blinked at him, alarmed. “You are in trouble.”

“What?” I said. “Why? I...I have not...”

“Echelas,” he said, meeting my gaze. “Listen to me. You are in trouble. I have been talking to Pedaeus...pretending to make nice with him, and I have found out what he meant on

the wagon on the way here—and why Clesonymus hates you so much.”

I blinked as if he had slapped me. “Clesonymus hates me?”

Dieneces nodded solemnly. “Clesonymus has taken it into his head all of these years that his mentor, Demodocus has some sort of favor for you. I do not think it bears mentioning that whatever is in Clesonymus’ head is fairly well in Pedaeus’, too.”

“But I...” I said softly, stricken. “I do not even know Demodocus. Not really. I...I just...why would they think such a thing?”

Dieneces leaned even closer, lifting his chin to speak softly against my ear. “Pedaeus told me when Clesonymus became eligible to join the common messes, Demodocus told him he had to apply to his father’s.”

Most charges were elected to the mess of their mentors, as these were the ones the young prospects spent the most time visiting. Usually, because of grouping arrangements in training, the mess of a Spartan’s mentor was the same as that of his father, but not always. Because there were three tribes, but five villages comprising Sparta proper, it was possible for a young man to have a mentor of the same tribe as his father, but from a different village. This made him eligible for election to either common mess. Despite the fact the youths would have grown most familiar with the mess of their mentors, custom dictated it was more appropriate for them to seek membership in that of their fathers.

“That is the way of things,” I whispered to Dieneces. “That is not me, or Demodocus! It is what is proper!”

“Yes, well,” Dieneces said. “Clesonymus is convinced that Demodocus did it on purpose to insure you would know a place among the Pitana Dymanes mess. He thought Clesonymus might vote to keep you from it if he was a proper member.”

“Why would Clesonymus have voted against me?” I asked, wounded. I had never done anything to Clesonymus. I

had always known that there was no love lost toward me on his account, but to think that he might hate me left me dumbfounded.

“Because Clesonymus thinks Demodocus is...fond of you,” Dieneces said. “If you know what I mean.”

I knew indeed, and my eyes flew wide. “What?”

“Pedaheus told me Demodocus is always looking out for you, keeping you from trouble,” Dieneces said. “He said Demodocus was too old to be your mentor—and he already had Clesonymus as a charge. He made Pelorus petition for you, and then once he was appointed, Demodocus cut his ties to Clesonymus in full. Clesonymus assumes this is because he found a new distraction—someone younger and a bit more fresh. You, Echelas.”

“That...” I sputtered, incredulous. “That is ridiculous, Dieneces. Demodocus has not touched me. He...he scarcely speaks to me at the mess! He left Clesonymus because Clesonymus was too old—and had his own charge. These things fade when the charges gets older—you told me Thersites seldom bothers you anymore.”

“Pedaheus said Clesonymus has been aware of Demodocus’ attentions toward you since we were boys,” Dieneces said. “Demodocus has apparently spoken of you frequently—and fondly—all of this time, even before you started visiting the mess.”

“How can he speak of me at all?” I asked, shocked. “He...by my breath, Dieneces, that man does not know me.”

Dieneces pressed his fingertips against my lips, quieting me. “You do not need to explain to me,” he whispered. “I know this, Echelas. I know you. I am telling you what Pedaheus said.” He looked at me gravely. “You have made a bad enemy for yourself.”

“But I...” I whimpered. “I have done nothing to Clesonymus! Nothing to make him think that, or...or to hate me so...!”

“It is not what you have done,” Dieneces whispered. “It is what Demodocus did. Think of how you feel for Pelorus,

and then see it grow a hundredfold. Set it too close to a bed of coals so that it sort of warps from the heat and twists in on itself. That is how Clesonymus feels for Demodocus—and why he hates you. He thinks you have come between them.”

I blinked at Dieneces, aghast. “But I have done nothing,” I whispered helplessly.

“Listen to me,” Dieneces said, touching my arm. “It was not so bad before. Clesonymus was only a hebon—a glorified epebe, really, no different in status than you or me. He is a Spartiate now, Echelas—a citizen in full standing. He can make very serious trouble for you.”

“Like what?” I whispered, frightened.

Dieneces shook his head. “I do not know. Pedaeus would not tell me.” He looked at me, his eyes round with worry. “I think Clesonymus is dangerous, Echelas. You have to tell Pelorus.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I remembered the conversation between Pelorus and Demodocus in the woods. Demodocus had said he would take care of things; to hear Dieneces tell of it, Demodocus held more influence than anyone over Clesonymus. He had already tried to make Clesonymus keep his distance—and it had not worked. I thought of the rustling in the woods Pelorus had overheard, the sounds he had told me he thought were Hunters—something I knew he did not believe for one moment.

He could make trouble for us, Pelorus had told Demodocus.

“What do you mean, no?” Dieneces asked, his eyes widening. “Echelas, he is your mentor. He is a Spartiate—and Demodocus’ mess mate. He can talk to Demodocus, and Demodocus can talk to Clesonymus. Demodocus is his mentor—he is one of the Dymanes hoplite commanders. Clesonymus will listen to him.”

“I cannot tell,” I whispered to Dieneces. He looked at me as if I had been struck daft, and I lied. I could not tell him the truth, because I knew it could see Pelorus in trouble. I had

promised him I would never tell—not even Dieneces—about our time together in the woods, and I was bound by my word. “I cannot go to Pelorus with this because Pedaeus said it all. You know Pedaeus’ poor reputation during our training. Pelorus would not believe me on Pedaeus’ word alone.”

“Then what will you do?” Dieneces asked. “Bide your time and wait for Clesonymus to do something Pelorus might weigh with more consideration? He is a Spartiate—he can ruin you, Echelas. Do you not understand? He...he can make it so you do not pass your training. He can see you expelled—a Trembler.”

“I understand, Dieneces,” I said. “But I cannot tell Pelorus. He would not believe me. I know he would not.”

“Pedaeus is getting bolder because Clesonymus is getting bolder,” Dieneces whispered. “Pedaeus told me years ago, after you trounced him in the woods, Demodocus made Clesonymus draw him in line—made him promise to leave you alone. Clesonymus is furious with Demodocus now after the incident with his mess appointment—”

“What about Elara?” I asked, and he blinked at me, startled. “What about Elara?” I asked again. “Did Demodocus arrange for his marriage to Elara, too?”

“What does that have to do with anything? I do not know,” Dieneces said. He frowned at me. “I am telling you that you are in trouble, Echelas, and you are worrying about that girl? What is the matter with you? Clesonymus is angry with Demodocus—and you—and he is eager for revenge. He cannot take it out on Demodocus—but he surely can on you.”

I stared at him, stricken.

“And given that Pedaeus has just won a laurel for snapping a lad’s finger nearly in half, I can say in all honesty, Echelas, that I am feeling some anxiety on your behalf.”

“I...I can handle Pedaeus,” I said without the least bit of confidence in my voice.

“Hoah, really?” Dieneces asked, arching his brow.

“I have just won three laurels for outpacing all of the other Greek runners,” I said. “I think I can run fast enough to get away from him.”

I had been hoping for at least a smirk, if not an outright laugh, but Dieneces offered neither. He looked at me, concerned.

“I will think of something,” I said. “Do not worry for it. Let me...let me just think about it.”

CHAPTER NINE

490 B.C.

"I know Clesonymus," the man said, and I blinked in surprise. "A young man whose ambitions sometimes cross the line of what is appropriate by Spartan Law. He was a Hippeis, one of Cleomenes' royal guards in his early years as a hebon. He must have been assigned to your lad, Pedaeus following his tenure."

Of all those who passed from the youth phase of their training into the young adult, or hebon phase, the three hundred chosen by the Ephors and the Ephobic Magistrate to have excelled the most were appointed to the service of the Spartan kings. These three hundred—the Hippeis—served five-year terms, positions that molded and shaped them to become commanding officers of the hebon forces—and the hoplite army when they became Spartiates.

It was an extraordinary honor to be chosen as a Hippeis—and a terrible risk. For every young man selected, there were at least one hundred behind him to vie for his position. If a Hippeis could be discredited or dishonored while in service to the kings, he would lose his appointment, and his post would be tendered to the next young hebon most qualified to serve. As a result, to be a Hippeis meant to always be on your guard, and your best behavior. I knew this from personal experience—like Clesonymus, I, too, had been chosen as a Hippeis.

492-491 B.C.

In my twentieth year, I left my childhood behind me, and the comforts I had come to know at the youth camp, as well. When spring came, the young men of my age entered the final phase of our Spartan training—the hebon years.

My rite of passage was a brutal, vicious, bloody affair; something that on any other occasion would have offended Artemis upon the sacred grounds of her sanctuary. Priests stacked offerings of cheese atop the altar of Artemis; it was our task to claim every one. This not would prove easy, by any means.

Hundreds of prospective hebontes from every tribe and village designation braved the challenge that day, running through a gauntlet of older hebontes bearing whips to reach the altar. We could not stop running until every cheese was gone—or every boy had fallen. To do this was the greatest disgrace an ephebe could know, eradicating in one misstep, one fumbling moment of imbalance or suffering all of our years of training. These poor young men were eliminated from the ceremony—and excluded from the ranks of Spartiate.

We charged the altar in groups, divided for the first time since childhood into individual village denominations among our tribe. I faced this last transition in my training as I had the very first—with the Dymanes boys from Pitana. One by one, our names were shouted out, and we were forced to race for the altar to grab heavy wheels of cheese. Behind us, the crescent tiers of the stadium were crowded with spectators; their cries and shouts filled the air, making it tremble as they roared. We ran with our heads ducked towards our chests as the lashes whistled and hissed in the air, striking us.

The initiation took more than three hours to finish, and in that time, I ran the gauntlet more than thirty times. The pain was indescribable; I staggered at the end, parched and panting for breath, slick with sweat and soaked with blood. My last run was clumsy and stumbling, but I did not fall. When the last of the once-heaping mound of cheeses was gone from the altar, the crowd rose to its feet, cheering us, the newly initiated hebontes of Sparta.

I stood facing the approval of the stadium, my body ragged and torn, my face sliced open from the lashes. Dienesces came to me; I felt him grasp my hand, and I turned to him, reeling with exhaustion and pain. He was battered and bleeding; neither of us could scarcely muster the strength to stand, but we managed somehow as the crowds cheered for us. Dienesces looked at me, and found it within himself to grin. "Nothing...nothing to it," he said, his voice hoarse.

"Easy enough," I whispered, and then we fell together, weeping and laughing at the same time.

I do not know how I came to be at my mother's house, but I remember stirring from unconsciousness, waking to find myself on her bed. I remember the fragrance of her bedding, something delicate and pleasant, as if Hemithea slept with dried flowers and herbs tucked among the reeds and grasses of her mattress. I was lying on my stomach, and I remember she sang to me; no discernable words, only a sweet, soft melody that roused my mind gently.

The pain from my wounds was excruciating; a terrible, all-encompassing, searing agony that left me stricken and immobilized. I opened my eyes and blinked dazedly at my mother, who knelt beside me on the floor. I watched, bleary and groggy, as she dipped a folded wad of linen into a shallow bowl and then leaned over me, unaware of my rousing. She touched my back with the damp cloth, singing softly to me as she bathed my wounds. As she dabbed the linen against me, for a moment, the pain in these places waned, and I closed my eyes again, my mind fading into darkness, comforted by her voice, her touch.

I remained in Hemithea's care for at least a week following my rite of passage, although I cannot be certain of the exact time; I spent most in that semi-lucid haze. It would prove to be all of the rest I was allowed; on the day I left Hemithea's house, Pelorus brought me back to the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia for another ceremony—this one of a different vein than the brutal gauntlet of whips.

Here, amidst a gathering of all of the newly indoctrinated hebontes of my age class, I stood before the summoned Spartan Assembly. We stood upon the grounds we had only just recently stained with our blood and faced our elders and peers lining the stone benches of the stadium tiers. In the time that I had been recuperating in Pitana, Pelorus and the other mentors had come together in heated and lengthy council with the Ephebic Magistrate, the Ephors and the Council of Elders. They had brought us before the Assembly to present their selections of Hippeis, the finest three hundred of us all.

My name was called, and I was summoned forward. They offered no explanations for their choices—although I am certain among them in private, our respective merits must have been hotly debated—and I wondered if they had made a mistake. I did not feel so extraordinary or deserving, and as I joined the ranks of the other young Hippeis, I blinked down at my toes, puzzled and uncertain. I could feel the collective weight of the other boys' stares, those whose names had not been called—and would not be called that day. Each and all of them had given no more or less in their efforts than I had these past years, and yet there I stood, named before every man of Sparta as better than any of them.

Pedaeus told me Demodocus is always looking out for you, Dieneces had told me years earlier at the Pythian Games, and I wondered as I stood before the other hebontes if Demodocus had not played some part in this new-found appointment, this honor of mine.

Dieneces was chosen, as well. When all of the Hippeis were named, more boys were called, although they remained motionless among the hebon ranks. These were the young men who had missed their place among the Hippeis by narrow margins; hebontes who had been nominated, and sometimes fervently argued in favor of, but in the end had been voted against. These were the ones the three hundred of us chosen would have to be the most wary of; those who would take our place if we failed in our duties as Hippeis. They were, in essence, our friends no longer, even if we had known them

well and fondly since childhood. They were the first true enemies we had ever known.

When the announcements were over, so were any ties we might have had to our former barrack mates. We were delivered to the youth camp long enough to collect those meager possessions we called our own. As Dieneces and I were leaving, the other hebontes were returning. I could not look at them. I felt no pride in my appointment; rather, I felt some bewildering degree of shame. When one of them walked deliberately close to me, jostling me roughly and purposefully with his shoulder, I almost did not look up, thinking whoever it may be was entitled to their anger and jealousy; I was someplace I did not belong. I almost did not look up, but then I heard Pedaeus hiss at me, his voice soft and filled with menace.

“Grow eyes in the base of your skull, Echelas.”

I blinked at him, drawing to a halt. Dieneces paused, curious by my hesitation, and I felt him touch my arm, his fingers hooking against my elbow. “Come on, Echelas,” he said quietly, glowering at Pedaeus.

In the two years since the Pythian Games, Pedaeus had barely spoken ten words to me. I had begun to think whatever ill will had festered had surely faded, but I could see in his eyes that it had not. He hated me; it was twisted in his face like knots in well-worn and faded cord. Pedaeus hated me.

“Why?” I asked him, meaning: *Why do you hate me so much?* He did not understand; he thought I offered answer to his threat and he leaned toward me, his thick brows furrowed.

“Because I will break you,” he seethed. “Your appointment is an insult to the rest of us who have put forth genuine effort and known honest accomplishment. You think you have brought something good upon yourself with this? You have only made it easier—sanctioned even—to break you.”

“Echelas,” Dieneces said, drawing me forcibly in tow. “Come on. They are waiting for us.”

“Yes, go, Hippeis Echelas,” Pedaeus told me, offering a malicious smile. “I will be seeing you again, I assure you.”

We were brought to a new barrack far from the youth camp—a place south of the sanctuary of Artemis and yet within the Spartan basin of the Eurotas and Magoula rivers. While not in a Spartan village, we were no longer outsiders, excluded from Sparta's boundaries. Unlike the other hebontes, we were assigned under the direct command of the Spartan kings, and we enjoyed privileges to accompany these posts. We were welcomed into Sparta because of them.

"Pedaeus is jealous, that is all," Dieneces told me as we lay facing each other, tucked beneath our cloaks in this new home.

"Maybe it is not all," I said quietly, and Dieneces raised his brow, curious. "What if he is right?" I whispered. "What if...what if Demodocus is responsible my appointment?"

"Your merits brought you here—not anything Demodocus said or did, but you," Dieneces said. "You deserve this, Echelas. When did you start being so harsh to yourself?"

I closed my eyes, unconvinced, and did not answer.

The next night at the common mess, the mood was celebratory, as Spartan men I had never met before even in casual acquaintance came to our table to clap me affably on the shoulder and offer congratulations to me. I tried my best to endure the attention graciously and with appropriate humility, but I found myself stealing glances toward Demodocus. He sat in his customary place near the end of my table, watching me with silent scrutiny that left me flustered and blinking down at my black broth.

Did you do this? I thought. Is this because of you? Do I deserve this appointment or did it come only by your word, Demodocus?

A heavy hand fell against my shoulder, startling me. At this touch, Pelorus' tablemates all smiled broadly and rose to their feet, offering loud, enthusiastic greetings.

“Look who has graced us!” exclaimed Smicrus, standing and reaching across the table. I felt the hand draw away from my shoulder to accept the proffered clasp.

“Where have you been?” said Deliades, laughing with good cheer. “The lion’s son has come out of his corner and wandered to our end of the mess! What are you, lost?”

“I have been in disguise,” said the man behind me. “Keeping to myself to let the lot of you find trouble as you would.”

The men at my table laughed. Pelorus touched my arm to draw my gaze, and smiled at me. “Rise, Echelas,” he said with a nod. “Here is someone I would like you to meet.”

I did not recognize the man behind me. He was a Spartiate; tall, broad-shouldered and long-legged. He had a strong jaw line and a thin mouth that lifted from an imposing line into a gentle smile as his gaze met mine. His brows draped down over wide-set, piercing eyes to leave a stern crease indelibly etched along the bridge of his nose. There was something so commanding about his presence that I immediately dropped my eyes toward my feet, cowed by the simple gravity of his stare.

“Pelorus’ pup was named to the Hippeis,” Smicrus said cheerfully.

“Our boy Echelas shall soon be blossoming into the sweet flower of manhood,” said another tablemate, and they all laughed together fondly, proudly.

“Yes, I know,” said the man in front of me. “I nominated him for the post.”

I blinked in surprise, and Pelorus touched my arm again. “Lift your eyes, Echelas,” he told me. “This is my mentor, Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas. He has waited a long time to meet you.”

I felt my breath choke beneath my breast, and I could not raise my eyes. *Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas*. I did not know much of politics, but I would have been an idiot not to recognize the name. Leonidas was half-brother to the Agiad King Cleomenes—and heir to the Agiad throne of Sparta. *This*

is Pelorus' mentor? I thought, stunned. This is who nominated me for the Hippeis? Not Demodocus at all, but Leonidas—the future king?

When I did not look up, the other Spartan men chuckled. “Lift your head, little one,” Smicrus said. “You will not break him to look upon him.”

I looked up hesitantly, blinking at Leonidas. He smiled at me as Pelorus lowered his head in deference to his mentor, offering proper introduction. “Sir, if I may, here is Echelas, son of Sparta.”

“Echelas,” Leonidas said, offering his hand to me. “It is a pleasure, lad. I have watched you from a distance these past years.”

“I...I am honored for it, sir,” I said, accepting his hand clasp. There was magnificent strength in his fingers; I could feel it as his hand closed against my wrist. It was gentle, but imposing, like Leonidas’ face. It was the grasp and power of a man who had earned his place among his fellows.

“Congratulations on your appointment,” Leonidas said.

“I hope...I hope that I might prove worthy of it, sir,” I said.

Leonidas glanced at Pelorus and his smile only widened. “I have no doubt of that, Echelas,” he said.

My life changed dramatically as a Hippeis. Gone was the comfortable routine of training I had grown accustomed to; there were no more games of all-in, mock-hunts or sparring. Any semblance of such recreation vanished completely, and my days became filled solely with battle; drill after countless drill of marching routines, combined with phalanx charges against older squadrons of hebontes and battle exercises with spears and short swords. For the first time in my days, I gained a true appreciation for what a full Spartiate hoplite endured; my uniform transitioned from nudity or a simple cloak to heavy iron replicas of a Spartiate’s bronze armor. We fought in full infantry regalia—breastplates and greaves, crested helms and leather skirts. The marching drills in

phalanx formation that had seemed relatively unchallenging after years of practice among the youths presented all new and heretofore unimagined challenges with the imposing weight. Our endurance was taxed to new measures as we marched beneath the full heat of the sun in our gear; day in and day out, we spent most of our time on the training fields encumbered by the armor, stumbling and sweat-soaked by sundown.

Every day, we charged opposing phalanxes, our shields overlapping, our tipless spear shafts hoisted before us. Every day, we crashed headlong into one another; plowing into a fully armored mass of hebontes and their broad, heavy shields was like slamming into a mountainside. Even when I did not stand on the frontline, I could feel the reverberating shudder of the brutal, massive impact through my shield arm and shoulder, trembling clear to my toes. My arm ached so badly, my shoulder so strained from the burden of bearing my shield and bracing against that terrible force that I would whisper at night for Dieneces simply to cut the rotted limb from me, to spare me from further abuse. Over time, as weeks progressed, that miserable ache spread from my shoulder all of the way to my buttocks and knees, anyplace my body tensed itself to repel the opposing brunt of the shield wall. I taxed portions of my form, muscles I had never even been aware of before—and I suffered for it.

The kings would come and watch our daily struggles. At first, the presence of Cleomenes and Demaratus left me unnerved and diligent, but after several weeks of this rigorous, relentless torment, I was too exhausted to even notice them, much less care.

We would also see the kings at every sunrise. The Hippeis were roused from our barrack before the sun was even tempted to challenge the dark of night. We would don our armor and cloaks and march in full formation to the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, where we would line the grounds, positioning ourselves to face the stadium as Cleomenes and Demaratus led the priests of Sparta in rituals and sacrifices to the gods. Every morning, the people of Sparta would gather in the stadium to observe these rituals. Before the ceremonies, choruses of young girls would prance out onto the grounds

and offer hymns and dance routines in honor of Artemis, Apollo and the twins, Castor and Pollux.

One morning, I saw Elara. It was my twenty-first year, and I had not seen her since the day in the woods when I had been eighteen, and Pelorus had sent her running from me. Her gaze seemed to find me among the ranks of Hippeis; at first, I thought it was my imagination, that I only dreamed her eyes met mine, but then her mouthful unfurled slightly, lifting in a delicate and beautiful smile. I stared at her, the world fading to silence around me, my breath drawing still. She did not turn away from me throughout the entire ritual.

She came to me during that all-too brief interim at the end of the ceremony, as the citizens of Sparta left the sanctuary, and the Hippeis remained poised upon the grounds to keep them from approaching the kings. Instead of moving to her left, following her row mates and filing from the stadium, Elara stepped toward me, her expression hesitant but hopeful.

“Hullo, Echelas,” she said.

“Elara,” I whispered. I would be in trouble if I was caught speaking to her, but I could not stay my voice; I might have as soon trapped the wind between my hands. I blinked at her, as fascinated and enthralled as the day we had first met. “Hullo,” I said. “How...how are you?”

“I am well,” she told me, smiling, a hint of blush gracing her cheeks.

“What...what are you doing here?” I asked.

She blushed all the more. “We come sometimes for the morning rituals, when we are able,” she told me. “And we like to watch my youngest sister, Creusa. She is among the dancers in the beginning. I seldom get to see her otherwise.”

“We...?” I said, as a woman stepped behind her, too close not to be of acquaintance. She was a Dweller, dressed in a simple tunic, holding a young boy, no more than a toddler in her arms. I looked at Elara, puzzled, and her smile widened. “This is Paria, my nurse,” she said softly. “And Iacchus, my son.”

“Son...” I whispered breathlessly, blinking at the child. Something within me twisted sharply, agonizing. I had known Elara would lay with Clesonymus; of course she would, as she was his wife, but to see this boy—evidence of their coupling—left me stricken and anguished.

The little boy tucked his face sleepily against his nurse’s shoulder. Elara smiled at me, her hand fluttering out to momentarily brush against my arm. “I have seen you here before,” she said. “But I...I did not know if I should speak to you. I...I was not sure you would remember me.”

“How could I forget you?” I whispered. Embarrassed from the moment the words were loose, I lowered my head, my cheeks blazing.

She smiled again. “You are a Hippeis,” she said. “I...I saw your rite of passage, and I was so pleased for you, and...and worried. I had wanted to visit you at your mother’s afterwards, but I...” Her voice faded, and she laughed softly. “You were hurt, bleeding, but you...you stood so proudly before the stadium, and I was so proud for you. I have wanted to tell you for so long now how proud I was—how proud I am. You...you have brought such honor to Sparta...three laurels from the Pythian Games and now this—you are a Hippeis, and I...”

I stared at her, surprised. She spoke as if she had paid attention to my life since we had parted ways, as if she had been watching me from afar with fond attention.

“I bring Iacchus with me every morning to the grounds below,” she said. “To see your placard from Delphi, your name inscribed for your wins at the races.”

“Why?” I whispered, and she looked up at me, her eyes filled with sudden, poignant sorrow, even as she smiled.

“I touch your name carved into the stone and I...I think of that sweet boy I knew from the forests,” she said softly. “It always makes me smile.”

I looked at her, mute and touched. She glanced at me, and it pained me to see her eyes swimming with tears. “I...we should go,” she murmured. “We will see you in trouble.”

“Elara...” I breathed, and I touched her arm. She looked up at me and smiled.

“I...I wish I had stayed,” she whispered. “Even once, just to talk. I...with all of my heart, Echelas, I wish for that.”

She drew away from me, and hurried off, her nurse trailing behind her, trundling Clesonymus’ son in her arms.

Weeks passed, and then rumors began to spread in the common mess that Demaratus was about to lose his throne. The heir to the Eurypontid crown, Latychidas, had been causing somewhat of a stir, calling into question Demaratus’ patrilineal heritage—and his right to the throne. Latychidas had apparently brought his misgivings before the Ephors and demanded a resolution on the matter. The Ephors in turn had sent their Pythian delegates to Delphi to seek the oracle’s decision on the question of Demaratus’ legitimacy.

“What do you think the oracle will tell them?” I asked Pelorus as we walked together from the mess toward Sparta. My time training in the afternoons with Pelorus had ended with my appointment to the Hippeis; the only time I had to spend with him in the last year had been supper, and our walks from the mess to my barrack. Even though I had grown accustomed to this routine, I still missed Pelorus terribly, and kept as near to him as a shadow whenever we were together. I walked beside him now, his equal in height, and nearly so in build, still feeling the adulation of a child toward him, despite this.

“I do not know,” Pelorus said. “If I did, I would be an oracle myself.”

“Do you think Demaratus is illegitimate?” I asked.

“What I think does not matter,” he replied.

“It matters to me,” I said, drawing his gaze. He smiled at me, shaking his head.

“No,” he said. “I think Demaratus is legitimate in his reign.”

"Then why would the Ephors consider that he was not?" I asked, puzzled. "Why would Latychidas keep saying it is so?"

Pelorus raised his brow thoughtfully. "I think it is because someone has put it in Latychidas' head," he said. "Someone best served by having Demaratus out of office."

I was quiet for a moment, pondering. "Cleomenes and Demaratus do not like one another very well," I said.

"No, they do not," he agreed.

I looked at him. "You told me once Demaratus is not fond of war, but that Cleomenes is. They have disagreed on the matter in the past—at Argolis and again at Aegina."

Pelorus raised his brows, impressed. "You have been paying attention."

"Gleaning truth for myself from among bits of gossip," I told him, and he smiled appreciatively.

"Good lad," he said, clapping his hand against my shoulder.

"Cleomenes would be well served without Demaratus around," I observed. "If Latychidas has different views on war, it would suit Cleomenes well to serve with him as Eurypontid king instead. Am I right?"

"I do not speak ill against my king," he said. "But in my opinion? Yes, Echelas."

"Cleomenes set Latychidas to petitioning the Ephors?" I asked, and then I looked down at the ground, answering myself. "Of course he would have. There is enough rivalry established between him and Demaratus that it would only look petty if he raised the matter himself."

"You have become a sage of late," Pelorus told me. "Very astute indeed."

"Smicrus said the Pythian delegates returned this evening from Delphi," I said.

"I heard, yes," Pelorus said.

"What do you think will come of it?" I asked.

He met my gaze. "I do not know to say," he said. "But I imagine we will learn tomorrow morning."

Demaratus was deposed. Within hours of the Ephors' decision, based upon the divine judgment of the Pythian oracle, Demaratus had abandoned Sparta, leaving for the north in the dead of the night. Several months after he had fled, rumors began to circulate as to what had become of him. Men at the common mess frowned and whispered together that he had traveled across the Aegean Sea to reach the shores of Ionia, where he had pledged his loyalty to Darius, the king of Persia.

"Rot traitor," one of the men at my table muttered, turning his head to spit against the floor. "Did Cleomenes not say he would see us all whores to the Persians? Not only would Demaratus have kept us from war with them—he would have seen Sparta to her knees."

As usual, Pelorus kept his opinions on the matter to himself, sharing them with me only as we walked together along the northward highway from Amyklai to Sparta. "Do not be so easily swayed, Echelas," he told me. "Not that I have any fondness lost for Demaratus, but I cannot believe he would have ever let Sparta fall to Persia. No matter what his circumstances now may suggest, I cannot believe that."

"Why did he go to Persia, then?" I asked.

"He is a man accustomed to power," Pelorus said. "Where else might he find such as he has enjoyed here in Sparta? Not in Athens, or in any other Greek state—not as he would in Persia. Darius is fixed upon Greece—you can mark me at that, lad. Athens may have been the ones to cross them in the Ionian revolt, but the Persians made an enemy out of us all for Athens' offense, and we will all either answer for it or fall. Demaratus knows this—he knows Darius is mustering his forces to attack. It is an inevitability, and as such, he can barter for power in exchange for his counsel. Who better to help plan a war against Greece than a Greek?"

“We will go to war against Persia?” I asked, quietly, stricken.

Pelorus raised his brow. “War is always a possibility,” he said. “The foes seldom remain the same, but the threat is never far from us. As for Persia?” He shook his head. “I do not know. There are enough troubles here to keep us occupied.”

“Troubles?” I said.

“Slaves in the south lands,” Pelorus said. “There have been disturbances lately. They know the transition that has taken place in the Eurypontid throne. They understand that things are new yet and changing here. They would take advantage of what they misperceive as a weakness among us. Cleomenes has appointed three hundred additional Hunters to try and stifle the unrest before it grows any further. Your fellow Pedaeus was among them. Have you not heard?”

“No, sir,” I said, struggling to find something toward to say. “I suppose a Hunter is an appointment Pedaeus would be suited for.”

“Hunters have Ephoric sanction to kill,” Pelorus told me. His tone of voice had grown odd, nearly somber, and I glanced toward him. “And Pedaeus is a hebon next in line to see your Hippeis status besides.”

“He will not try anything against me,” I said, though I did not share in my heart the conviction I summoned into my voice. “He has bothered me for years, flapping his mouth, and nothing has ever come of it.”

“Even so, I would see you have a care,” Pelorus said. He drew to a halt, and I paused, looking at him. “You will take supper in Sparta from now on,” he said, and I blinked, startled. “No more visits to the mess, not for awhile, as long as Pedaeus is out on the roam after nightfall. This route we follow is long, and could be unsafe.”

“What?” I asked. “Pelorus, that...please...please do not. He will not do anything to me.”

"I know he will not," Pelorus replied. "He cannot enter Spartan limits, and you will promise me that you will not leave them."

"Please," I whispered, stricken. Already, I spent so little time with him; already, I was lonely enough without his company. What Pelorus was asking would strip from me those few precious hours I had left. "Pelorus, please do not ask that of me."

Pelorus looked at me gravely. "Promise me, Echelas," he said. "I would ask your word of you like a man, instead of ordering you to it like a child."

I did as I was told. "I promise, Pelorus," I said quietly, unhappily.

"That is hardly fair," Dieneses remarked that night as we lay facing one another.

"I know," I said.

"I mean, why did Thersites not make me offer such a promise?" Dieneses complained. "Hoah, I walk the Amyklai highway every night, too. And Pedaeus hates me practically as much as you, if only by our association."

I glowered at him. "Thank you for that."

Dieneses smiled. "I will talk to Thersites," he said. "He will think it is a fine idea, and he will let me keep here to sup with you. We can make our own common mess right here on the floor of the barrack together. Maybe we could even find some slaves to bring up from the fields; get them drunk, make them dance for us."

I could not help myself but to laugh. I reached out and hooked his hand, squeezing fondly. "Sometimes I am very grateful for you, Dieneses," I told him.

"As well you should be," he replied, closing his eyes to sleep.

Thus, Dieneces and I took supper together in our vacant barrack every night. Pelorus and Thersites were excused from their common messes once a week to join us, and I was grateful for even this brief measure of time spent with my mentor. As summer waned toward fall, however, Pelorus would miss his visits, sometimes weeks in a row. When he would come, he seemed distracted and troubled, although he never shared with me what might be bothering him, or what circumstances had kept him away. He feigned smiles and light conversation for my benefit, but I knew him too well. I could tell something was wrong.

I asked Dieneces if he could whittle some news from Thersites, but the only thing Dieneces was able to discover was that some weeks earlier, Cleomenes had promoted Clesonymus to a Hunter prefect, a Spartiate officer in charge of the Hunter hebontes. While it was unusual for a Spartan king to personally see to such appointments, Cleomenes had long focused his attentions on keeping Sparta strong and the Peloponnese unified. The slave disturbances in the ancient lands had not been dispelled readily, and Cleomenes' interest and concern in this could be perceived as justified, his direct intervention understandable.

"If we were eighteen again, I might be more bothered by it," Dieneces told me. "But now? Clesonymus cannot still be angry about his common mess appointment—that was three years ago, and he has done nothing for it! He cannot still think you and Demodocus are having some sort of affair—you are way too old now for anyone to fancy! Why would anything that happens to Clesonymus trouble Pelorus so? "

"I...I do not know," I said quietly. Something had happened to disconcert Pelorus; that was for certain. He knew I was not leaving Sparta for the mess anymore, and so like Dieneces, I could not understand why he might worry that Clesonymus' appointment might affect me somehow. If Clesonymus was appointed over the Hunters, he would be working outside of Sparta proper—away from me. *Why would it trouble you, then?* I thought.

Early in the autumn, the kings summoned all of the Hippeis together after morning sacrifices to announce their appointments for the Seclusion. The Seclusion was a rite of sorts generally reserved for senior-most Hippeis. It was a year-long sabbatical during which ten Hippeis the kings personally selected would leave Sparta for the wilds beyond the Magoula river and into the Taygetos foothills. These Hippeis would spend a year isolated not only from each other and their fellow Hippeis, but from everyone else—including their mentors. They were to live off of the land, bringing with them no weapons or supplies. They foraged and hunted for their own food and survived by primitive means. It was meant as a period of intense personal dedication and development, a means by which those Hippeis the kings had decided were best suited for high-officer ranking would hone their characters and focus, finding the strength of heart and mind they had already proven in form upon the practice fields.

We were all taken somewhat by surprise by their decision to make new Seclusion appointments for that year. News of slave disturbances had only grown in the last months, with reports of wayward bands of slaves attacking and robbing Dweller settlements. The slaves' efforts seemed to make them braver with every success, and drew them all the more near to Sparta's villages.

In the face of such grim news, it seemed bewildering that the kings would decide to send some of their finest young officer candidates unarmed and vulnerable out into the heart of it. Their list of appointments was even more confounding—because mine was among the names that Cleomenes called.

I stood beside Dieneces, blinking in stupefied surprise, thinking surely I had misheard. When Cleomenes called for me again, lifting his chin and searching expectantly for me, I glanced at Dieneces in disbelief. *How could I be chosen?* I thought. *I am only in my first year as a Hippeis.*

Dieneces looked me in equal confusion, and then I stepped forward, walking toward the front of our formation and the kings.

“These are trying times for Sparta,” Cleomenes said, as I took my place among the other chosen Hippeis. “I know I need not mince words among you—you have each been selected to be here because your elders hold confidence that the strength of Sparta’s future rests upon your capable shoulders. While we customarily appoint those young men among you furthest along in your Hippeis tenures to the Seclusion, I know I can trust to you all to understand in full when I tell you that in the weeks and months to come, you will never be more equal in merit than you are at this moment. Your years of service will not bear as much measure as your caliber of character, and you may be called upon beyond any course of ordinary duty to defend Sparta. For some of you, that call has come today, and you will answer her, as is your duty by Law.”

CHAPTER TEN

490 B.C.

"I cannot sleep, rot your eyes," Dieneces said, stepping out of the darkness and into the circumference of my firelight. He met my gaze and raised his brow. "Do you always greet your guests so warmly?"

"It depends on the guest," I replied, lowering my spear, my shoulders relaxing.

"You look terrible," he told me.

"Yes, well, I cannot sleep, either," I said. "There is no one to tend the fire watch but me, and it is the heart of winter. I will freeze without it. Rather inconvenient."

He laughed. "That is nice," he remarked, nodding toward the spear. "You made it yourself?" I nodded and he looked around my small campsite, taking stock of my bow and a bundle of arrows near my rush pallet. "A bow, too. You have been busy."

He walked across the camp and knelt, examining the bow. "Where did you find the string?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at me.

"I find boar carcasses down by the river's edge every now and then," I said. "The wolves about pick them clean to the bone, but I can usually work some sinew from them."

He stood, hefting the bow in hand. He extended his bow arm, pinching the string lightly between his fingertips. He canted his wrist, angling the bow slightly as if he aimed an invisible arrow off of the cleft between his knuckles. He drew the string back somewhat, admiring the pull. "Very nice," he said, lowering the bow and looking at me.

It had been more than five months since I had been brought into the foothills to begin my Seclusion. I was surprised it had taken Dieneces so long to find me and visit; I told him so, and he laughed.

"It took me awhile to convince Thersites that I should sup at the mess again," Dieneces said. "I told him I was in no danger from Pedaeus, that I had only remained at the barrack to keep you company. Protect you and all."

He came to me, and we embraced. I tucked my chin against his shoulder and closed my eyes as he clapped his hand against my back.

"I miss you," he whispered. "I cannot sleep by myself in that barrack. Halmus snores something awful. I never noticed it before."

"Mine drowned him out," I said, as we stepped apart.

He laughed. "That must have been it."

He reached beneath his cloak and pulled out a small, linen-wrapped bundle. "I brought you some bread and cheese," he said. "You do not know the torment I have suffered to imagine you out here on your own, having to fend for yourself to find food." He glanced toward my fire, at the skinned rabbit that roasted on a spit above the flames, and then raised an appreciative brow at me. "Looks like I need not have."

We supped together, sharing the rations he had smuggled and roasted meat. When he produced a small skin of wine from beneath his cloak, I laughed aloud, delighted. "Anything else under there?" I asked, tugging at his cloak.

We each took long drinks from the wine. Dieneces rested against his hip, leaning his shoulder against mine. "Are you not worried the flames will draw Hunters?" he asked.

I shook my head. "They have been too busy of late to bother with me," I replied.

"Yes, I have heard," Dieneces said. "Two nights ago, slaves attacked a little Dweller settlement again—this one west of here, just outside of Kalamai. Killed them all—eleven people, I think—set some fires, stole their stores. Thersites told me they were looking for weapons. The Hunters caught about a dozen of them later on, the stolen weapons on them, the food. They killed them."

"It was not slaves who attacked the Dwellers," I said, and Dieneces raised his head, looking curiously at me. "It was the Hunters. I saw them."

"What?" Dieneces said.

"I could hear screaming in the distance and smelled the smoke from the fire," I said. "I followed and saw them. They were dressed up like slaves, in rough skins and fur caps, but they were Hunters."

"How can you be sure?" he asked.

"I saw Pedaeus among them," I said. "I heard his voice. There is no mistaking him."

"What did you do?" Dieneces whispered.

"I kept among the trees, watching them," I said. "There was nothing I could do. There were probably twenty of them—armed."

"I do not understand," Dieneces said, frowning. "Why would the Hunters attack a Dweller settlement? Why would they dress up like slaves?"

I raised my brow and met his gaze, grimly. "Maybe they want the Dwellers to think the slaves attacked them," I said.

Dieneces looked toward the fire. "Hoah," he said softly.

"I have been thinking about it ever since," I said. "I wonder if all of these slave uprisings we have heard so much about these past months, the disturbances, the Dweller village attacks...what if they have been the Hunters all along?"

Dieneces frowned. "The problems were not so bad until Pedaeus was appointed," he remarked quietly. "And Clesonymus is his prefect commander. They were both mad about the Hippeis appointments. Thersites told me Clesonymus argued long and hard to see Pedaeus named. He was furious when Pedaeus was denied." He glanced at me. "Pedaeus did it to himself, Thersites said. His reputation as a troublemaker kept him from being a Hippeis. But it reflects poorly on Clesonymus as his mentor. I imagine he would want to do whatever he could to improve his own standing—and Pedaeus'."

"And what better means?" I asked. "If they make their own trouble and blame it on the slaves, who is to say otherwise? They have sanction to kill the slaves—if they kill the ones they say cause trouble among the Dwellers, there is no proof that they are wrong, the slaves unfairly blamed."

"They justify their existence," Dieneces said.

"And make themselves look very good in the process," I added.

"Hoah," Dieneces said, raising his brows.

"Exactly," I replied.

"We have to tell," Dieneces said. "Thersites or Pelorus. I could go tonight and—"

"Dieneces, it would be my word against Pedaeus'," I said. "And I doubt he would admit to killing those Dwellers—or any others besides. Not to mention you would see no end of trouble if you told Thersites or Pelorus—you are not supposed to be here for me to have told you, remember? I am on Seclusion."

He frowned. "Who cares for that? I have to tell. The Hunters could come for you. They know you are out here. Clesonymus and Pedaeus could—"

"They have no reason to so far," I said. "They did not see me two nights ago."

"That does not matter," Dieneces said. "You know how they feel about you. Maybe they have done nothing in the past, but they have never had a better opportunity than this—you alone out here and on your own."

"I do not think Cleomenes would put me out here—any of us—if he thought we might be in danger," I said. "He ordered Clesonymus to leave those of us on Seclusion alone."

Dieneces raised his brow. "If they will say slaves killed Dwellers, what is to keep them from saying they killed you?"

"They do not want that sort of attention," I said. "If a Spartan hebon turns up missing or dead from his Seclusion, more than Hunters will roam the area—Cleomenes and Latychidas will dispatch Spartiates to control the slaves. Clesonymus is in charge of the Hunters. He will want everything to keep within his power—so that he can reap all the glory. Like you told me before I left—it has been three years since Delphi, and Clesonymus' common mess appointment. He has likely forgotten about me by now—or at least enough that he would not bother with me here, if it meant no benefit to him. And you know Pedaeus—he does not harbor a thought in his skull that Clesonymus has not put there. If Clesonymus tells him to leave me be, he will."

It sounded good, and I hoped it would convince Dieneces. The truth was, I was not so certain that Pedaeus and his Hunters would not come for me. Pelorus had been anxious in the weeks prior to my appointment to the Seclusion, and I had begun to wonder if he had known about it somehow, or at least suspected it. If he had, it had made him nervous—and that led me to believe he probably had good reason. More so than hunting or fishing, that was why one of the first things I had done when I had been brought into the wilds was to put together weapons for myself, and why I always kept my fire tended and strong all night long. If trouble came while I was here, I meant to greet it with a sharpened point of stone and in the full light of a roaring blaze.

"I hope you are right, Echelas," Dieneces said.

Hoah, I do, too, I thought.

"You should know," Dieneces said, glancing at me, his expression troubled. "Things have gotten strange since you left."

"Strange?" I asked.

He nodded. "Cleomenes has been acting odd," he said softly. "That is why I hope you are right, and he would not put you out here where you might be in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"You know he has always been a drunk," he said. I did not know this firsthand, but Pelorus had told me in his typical, noncommittal, do-not-speak-ill-against-his-king fashion. *He is fond of his wine*, he had said.

"He is groggy some mornings, have you ever noticed? Bleary-eyed and grouchy, like he is on the mend from a night with too much wine," Dieneces said. "I have smelled it on his breath even with the dawn sometimes. He has been taking to it heavily of late, more so than usual. Yesterday, he came to join the front line and fell over."

My eyes widened, and Dieneces nodded. "He just wobbled there, blinking at nothing in particular, and then keeled over. Latychidas told us he was unwell, some sort of blight had come upon him, but I am not ignorant. I have seen the slave dances at the mess—enough to know drunk when presented with it plainly."

He met my gaze. "And he dismissed Demodocus from his commission," he said.

"What?" I asked, startled.

Dieneces nodded. "Right after you were brought here," he said. "It was very odd, and no one has said much about it, not even Thersites. Cleomenes did not demote him to a simple line officer or anything. He demoted him to hoplite—an infantryman."

"Why?" I whispered. "What did Demodocus do?"

“No one knows,” Dieneces said. “And that is what is so peculiar. It makes no sense. I overheard Demodocus the night before I heard the news of his demotion, as I followed the Amyklai highway from the mess. He was behind me a ways, but the wind was fair, and I could hear him if I held my breath. He was talking to Leonidas.”

“Leonidas...” I said.

“The Agiad heir, Cleomenes’ half-brother—good enough company to keep, if Leonidas had the throne,” Dieneces said. “But poor if you are trying to keep in Cleomenes’ good graces. I have heard if there is one person Cleomenes dislikes in Sparta more than Demaratus, it is Leonidas.”

I blinked at the fire, stricken. “Why?”

“You know, that whole matter of Cleomenes’ inheriting the throne,” Dieneces said. “He and Leonidas shared the same father, but different mothers. Cleomenes’ mother was thought barren until he came along. Anaxandridas had taken another wife in the while, and she had a son, too, right after Cleomenes was born. His name was Darieus. He was Leonidas’ older brother. There were plenty among the Assembly who thought Darieus deserved the throne when Anaxandridas passed. When Cleomenes was named king, Darieus left Sparta. He died in Italy somewhere, I think. Anyway, it leaves Leonidas next in line for the throne—and no fond regards lost between him and Cleomenes, if you know what I mean.”

“What were Leonidas and Demodocus talking about?” I whispered.

Dieneces looked perplexed. “Delphi,” he said. “Demodocus said the oracle only offered predictions on the seventh of the month, and if he left within the week, he could arrive in time.”

I looked at him, bewildered. “Why would Demodocus go to Delphi?” I asked. “And why would that make Cleomenes punish him?”

"I do not know," Dieneses said. "It may have nothing to do with anything. It was just odd, that is all. Like I said, it makes no sense."

We were both quiet for a long moment, gazing at the fire. "I feel as though I am caught in the middle of something," I whispered to Dieneses. "Something big, but I...I do not know what, or why I have been made a part of it."

He glanced at me. "Leonidas is Pelorus' mentor," I said without looking at him. "Leonidas is the one who nominated me for the Hippeis. I had thought it was Demodocus, but..."

Dieneses made a thoughtful, troubled sound in his throat.

"I have always felt like trouble has come upon me because of Demodocus," I said. "Clesonymus hating me...Pedaeus, too, all of these years because of Demodocus." I turned to Dieneses. "He has never touched me," I said. "He has never done anything to me. Clesonymus was always wrong about that...angry at me without cause. Demodocus and Pelorus know one another from the common mess, and Leonidas is Pelorus' mentor..."

"And now Leonidas and Demodocus are keeping company together," Dieneses said quietly.

"And something was bothering Pelorus—troubling him deeply—before I was sent here," I said. "You know that—you saw him—but he would not say anything of it."

"Do you think he knew?" Dieneses asked. "He...he knew about something Leonidas and Demodocus might have been up to together? Hoah, Echelas, maybe they are plotting something against Cleomenes to see Leonidas claim the throne."

"Pelorus would not be a part of that," I said. "He will not even say an ill word against Cleomenes. He would never take part in any plot against his king."

"Yes, but what if Demodocus would?" Dieneses whispered. He leaned toward me. "Cleomenes appointed Clesonymus to hunter prefect. They must be on some sort of

amicable terms. You said yourself maybe Clesonymus is trying to make himself look good—what if it is because he knew Cleomenes would demote Demodocus? His position as Dymanes commander has not been filled. Clesonymus would slobber at the chance to see himself appointed.”

He rose to his feet and began to pace, his eyes wide. “What if Clesonymus is sending his Hunters out to fake slave attacks? The more attacks, the more slaves his Hunters can kill—and the better a job Clesonymus appears to be doing in the regard of the Ephors. Cleomenes could nominate him for Dymanes commander, and the Ephors would agree to it—why would they not? Look at all the seeming good he has done to keep the slaves repressed.”

He turned to me. “What if he told Cleomenes about his suspicions—about you and Demodocus? True or not, Echelas, Clesonymus believes it, and he has always hated you for it. Suppose Cleomenes has known for some time about whatever Leonidas and Demodocus are up to? He could appoint you to this—to the Seclusion—to keep you vulnerable. If Leonidas nominated you for the Hippeis, you must mean something to him, if only as Pelorus’ charge. And you have obviously always meant something to Demodocus, for whatever reason. Maybe Cleomenes thinks if you are in danger here alone in the wilds, with his Hunters on the loose, that he can use that as leverage against Demodocus and Leonidas. Maybe he tried to use you and failed—and that is why he demoted Demodocus.”

His eyes widened all the more. “Hoah, you might be in the midst of something indeed, Echelas,” he gasped. “Something enormous—some sort of plot against Cleomenes!”

“But why?” I asked. I shook my head. “That makes no sense, Dieneces. Cleomenes might be a drunk, but that is no cause for the Ephors to depose him. There is nothing Leonidas could say or do—with Demodocus’ help or without it—that would weigh enough against Cleomenes to see him lose his throne. Pelorus told me he has his flaws, the same as any other, but he is a good king. Why would they conspire against him?”

Dieneces frowned. "I do not know," he said softly. He looked at me, his eyes dancing with firelight as the corner of his mouth hooked wryly. "But I mean to find out."

I blinked at him. "What?" I stood, walking toward him, alarmed. "No, Dieneces, do not do anything."

"I am not," he said. "No more than I usually do, anyway—eavesdrop and ask questions. Listen to gossip, play innocent and ignorant."

"No," I said. "Dieneces, let it go. Whatever is going on is dangerous, and you do not need to be a part of it."

"You are a part of it," he told me. "That makes me a part of it, too. Do not worry for me, Echelas—worry for yourself. You are the one stuck out here in the woods alone with Hunters on the loose. No matter what you say, have a care. They are up to something, and you are involved somehow, whether you mean to be or not. They could come after you."

"They...they will not," I said, lacking any conviction in my voice.

"Yes, well, we will know for certain shortly," Dieneces said, still smiling wryly as he dropped me a wink. "You will keep here, at this camp?"

I looked around. "Where else am I going to go?" I asked. If Dieneces was right—and if the suspicions I had been harboring on my own were correct—there was no place for me to turn or hide where I might hope to be any more safe. If Clesonymus and Pedaeus meant to find me and kill me, they would.

"Good," Dieneces said. "I will come back, then, whether I learn anything or not."

"Dieneces..." I began in protest. He stepped against me, hugging me fiercely, and my voice faded. I drew my arms about him and pressed my cheek against his. "Be careful," I whispered.

"And you," he said.

When Dieneces left, I curled onto my pallet beneath the eaves of pine boughs I had arranged for a lean-to. I faced the fire, lonely now that Dieneces was gone, and worried for whatever trouble I was certain he was going to find in his absence. It was a cool night, and the fire was well-stoked and warm; I was confused and anxious, and rested with my hand curled loosely around the shaft of my spear. I did not mean to fall asleep, but sleep had been something I had enjoyed precious little of lately, and sometimes it crept up on me, as it did now. My eyelids drooped closed, and my mind faded. I did not even notice that as my fingers relaxed, they slipped away from the spear.

A scream ripped through the night—loud and shrill with fright, and I jerked, gasping for startled breath, my eyes flying wide. I sat up as another cry echoed among the cragged foothills of the mountains, coming from somewhere distant; at least a couple of miles. I scrambled to my feet, snatching my spear in hand.

I had heard the same screams two nights earlier, when Pedaeus had led his Hunters against the Dweller village, and I knew they were on the prowl again. I had torn my cloak in half to fashion a quiver of sorts for myself; I grabbed it from beside my lean-to and slung it over my shoulder. I hefted the bow I had made and shouldered it as well. When a third shriek rang out from the darkness, I lifted my chin and followed the sound, trying to determine the direction of its origin.

I had told Dieneces that we could not tell anyone about Pedaeus and the Hunters; that it would be my word against theirs. What I had not told him was that I fully meant to tell—when I had more proof than just my own testimony. If I could catch the Hunters in the act of assaulting Dwellers—if I could stop them and drive them away before they could kill everyone in the village—then I could have more witnesses to tell the Ephors what had happened. I could wound one of the Hunters and catch him; it would not be too difficult in the dark to shoot one with an arrow and leave him injured enough to prevent him from fleeing. Dressed in the garb of a slave, with Dwellers surviving to identify him from among their attackers,

his guilt would be assured—and with him, all of the Hunters in his group.

I ran toward the screams, my bare feet moving swiftly, nearly soundlessly against the ground. I could cover the distance in relatively short measure by sprinting; even so, to judge by the anguished sounds of the voices I had heard, I hoped I was not too late.

I smelled the smoke first, and then caught sight of a fire's glow in the darkness ahead of me—a large blaze, big enough to be a house or barn set alight. As I drew closer, I could hear the Hunters shouting out to one another, and other voices besides—frightened cries from the Dwellers who had called this place their home.

I approached the fire, and saw the looming silhouettes of at least four houses burning. I slowed my stride as I spied other silhouettes darting about in front of the bright orange glow—men running back and forth. I crouched, letting my knees fold beneath me, and I crept cautiously forward, keeping my ears trained on the voices fluttering and yelling around me, taking a mental account of who was whom, and where everyone seemed to be in the darkness.

I heard the resounding clatter of metal against metal from my left, and I turned, frowning. One of the Dwellers had apparently decided to fight back; I could see his shadowed form dancing around in the haze of smoke, swinging an axe. I watched another figure grapple with him—a Hunter—and the Dweller staggered, the ax falling as the Hunter ran him through with his short sword. As the Dweller collapsed, I heard a woman shriek in agonized protest, and then I saw her running toward me, racing away from the fire. Three smaller shadows loped along behind her—small children. They were all screaming and wailing, and I heard Pedaeus roar out clearly, sharply above their panicked, terrified peals. “Stop them! Get them! Bash their skulls open!”

I set my spear aside and shrugged my bow from my shoulder. I had used enough fabric from my cloak to suspend my quiver against my hip, and I reached for an arrow, slipping the fletchings between my fingertips.

One of the children stumbled, pitching face-first to the ground. The woman stopped, whirling around and running back, her arms outstretched. She scooped the child up, staggering beneath this new weight as she tried to reach the trees. The Hunters were right behind her; she would never make it.

I set the arrow, letting the sharpened stone tip jut slightly past my knuckles. I pinched the ferrule and drew the string back, raising my bow arm in the same motion. I felt the edge of feathers tickle against the angle of my jaw as I canted my bow arm, leveling my sights. I opened my fingers, releasing the arrow, and heard the sharp, sudden hiss of wind.

I could not see the arrow find its mark, but I heard the Hunter yelp and saw him flounder abruptly, falling sideways and crashing to the ground, his arms and legs flailing skyward. I drew another arrow and set it against the string, raising my hips as I genuflected in the witchgrass. I pivoted, drawing my bow up. Again, I fired, and again, another Hunter went tumbling.

The others slowed now in confusion and alarm; one of their fellows falling might have been dismissed as clumsiness, but two hitting the dirt was something far more. In their panic, the Dweller woman and her children did not realize what had happened, and they plowed into the woods to my right. I heard them crying, the crash of underbrush as they rushed headlong through the scrub, and then they were gone. I do not think they ever even knew I was there.

The Hunters were another matter entirely. It took them all of the measure of a full breath to realize the two who had fallen had not done so willingly, and they were at once aware of my presence somewhere close at hand. Pedaeus shouted at them to spread out, to go into the trees in a broad circumference and find me. I turned, grabbed my spear and ran.

I needed to lure them deep into the woods and then lose them. I needed to do this and somehow make my way back to the burning houses at the same time, so that I could grab one of the injured Hunters before his friends came back

for him. I had enough cloak left to rip into straps, to bind one of them hand and foot, to gag him and keep him quiet. I had to do this—and then I had to find the Dweller woman again because I needed her to convince the Ephors that I was not alone in witnessing what had just happened.

As I ran, I tossed my spear into the underbrush, caught a low-hanging branch in my hands, and swung my legs up. I kicked the open air as I gritted my teeth and hauled myself into the tree. I fell still, crouched on the branch, draped among the heavy camouflage of pine needles, hoping that the taxed wood would not yield beneath my weight.

I watched, motionless and silent as five Hunters, all dressed in the guises of slaves, ran beneath me. I listened to the commotion as they headed further into the forest and then swung myself down from the branch. My feet dropped to the ground, and I crept quietly to retrieve my spear. As I stooped, my hand outstretched, I heard a loud, startling rustle from behind me, and I whirled, taking the shaft of the spear between my hands. I reacted out of instinct, pistoning the right end of the stave around in a sharp, defensive arc. The Hunter who had charged me had not anticipated my attack and had no time to counter. The end of the spear slammed into his left temple, and he staggered, blood spewing from his nose.

I pivoted and swung my left arm around, sending the other end of the spear smashing into the right side of his skull. He grunted sharply and then crumpled, the wits battered from him. He fell to the ground, moaning and squirming feebly.

I heard a crash from behind me as another Hunter plowed out of the trees. I whirled in surprise, dancing backward and sent the right end of my spear whipping around to greet him. The shaft of wood caught him beneath the chin; he gagged as the breath was abruptly snapped from him, and then he toppled, knocked off his feet.

“You rotted—!” I heard someone shout from my right, and I turned loose of the spear with my left hand, letting it fly in my right in a broad arc. The shaft slammed into the charging Hunter’s face, cutting off his cry and sending him crashing to the ground.

I was in trouble, and I knew it. I had been foolish to think all of the Hunters had run hard enough and fast enough to make it beyond my position, as had the five I had watched from the tree. I had to get out of there; if they caught me, they would kill me.

I turned to bolt and came face-to-face with Pedaeus and another Hunter as they rushed out of the trees. We all had one fleeting moment to blink at one another in stunned surprise. Pedaeus staggered, his eyes flying wide, his mouth dropping agape in startled recognition.

“Echelas—!” he gasped, and then I planted the end of my spear against the ground and used it as a fulcrum, pistoning my legs up and out. I rammed my heels into their chins, knocking them back; I dropped to the ground and jerked my spear from the dirt. I slammed the right end of the shaft squarely into Pedaeus’ nose, shattering it with a spray of blood and a sickening, moist crunch. As he screeched, stumbling, his arms pinwheeling for futile balance, I sent the left end of the spear hooking around, striking the other Hunter in the head. The impact proved one too many, and my spear shaft splintered into pieces. I threw what remained aside and ran.

I did not give them time enough to follow; I took off like a rabbit fleeing hounds, racing into the forest. I ducked and darted among the trees, my heart pounding in alarm, my feet so quick and frantic in their stride, I could barely feel the thud of the earth beneath my soles. I could hear Pedaeus bellowing from somewhere behind me, growing more distant with every stride.

“That was Echelas—that was a Hippeis!” he screamed, his voice decidedly nasal around his newly broken nose. “Get him! Kill him! He has seen us—hunt him down!”

I spent the rest of the night in a tree. I did not dare return to my campsite; if Pedaeus and the Hunters had not known already where it was, the glow of my fire would lead them unerringly to it. There was precious little cover around me, and few if any trees with height or crown to offer me shelter in the daylight, but in the darkness, I found one that

sufficed. I shimmied as high into its branches as I dared, and then remained crouched near the trunk, my legs folded beneath me, my eyes trained on the ground. I kept an arrow nocked against my bowstring, with the bow poised and at the ready by my hip.

It felt like ages before my heart slowed to any semblance of normal pace. I listened to it racing in my ears, my breath fluttering frantically, and my eyes darted about anxiously. Pedaeus had recognized me. He had looked right at me and called me by name. I cursed myself, ruing my stupid decision to try and catch them at their trouble. I had only found more trouble for myself—the worst I could have stumbled across. *Idiot*, I thought, shaking my head. *What were you thinking? If Clesonymus and Pedaeus were content to leave you alone before now, they will not from this moment on. They have been clever enough to fool the Dwellers—and everyone in Sparta—into thinking slaves are attacking. Dieneces was right—they will hunt me down and kill me, and make it all look like part of this slave revolt they have been orchestrating.*

“Stupid,” I whispered, shaking my head. “Stupid, stupid rot.”

By the time dawn began to creep through the trees, my legs were screaming with pain from having been folded for so long, bearing my weight as I balanced precariously in my perch. I was shivering with chill and exhaustion. The Hunters would be gone; it had been a seeming eternity since I had heard any hint of their voices or movements from the woods, and they were expected back at their respective barracks with the morning’s first light. They would be gone, but my rot luck was far from waned. With daylight came Pedaeus’ opportunity to report back to Clesonymus, and I knew as soon as Clesonymus learned that I had witnessed their assault, he would order me dead.

I climbed down from the tree and limped back to my camp. My fire had died with no one to keep it tended through the night, but apparently, the site had remained undiscovered or disturbed by the Hunters. I paused, standing beside my lean-to and surveying the camp carefully for any signs of unwelcome company. There was nothing; no more than my

foot prints and Dieneces' in the dirt around my fire bed, and I could not help myself. I laughed, a warbling, weary, shaken sound. "Apparently they are more stupid than I am," I remarked.

I tossed aside my bow and quiver and staggered for my pallet. I crumpled, landing on my belly and letting my eyes fall closed. I knew I should leave; I should spend my morning breaking down my campsite and finding another, and then setting my snare lines as was my daily habit to catch some semblance of supper for myself. I knew I should, but I did not. I had told Dieneces I would be here, and if the Hunters had not discovered my site, I could not convince myself to abandon it just yet. *I will not build fires anymore at night*, I thought, as I began to doze. *I...I will keep here until Dieneces returns...he told me he would and he...he can get help to me somehow...Pelorus or Thersites...*

I might have thought further on the matter. Sleep swooped upon me, sudden and urgent, and beyond this, I do not recall.

I heard the soft rustle of footsteps in pine needles and my eyes flew wide. I had no idea what time of day it was; the sun was bright through the trees and I suspected it was at least midday. The footsteps were distant, but approaching—and more than one set—and I sat up, my mind snapping from grogginess to alert in a single breath. My spear was gone, broken in the night, but I still had my arrows. I reached behind me, hooking the strap of my makeshift quiver against my fingers and drawing it toward me.

I could hear faint voices now, murmured conversation. I slipped an arrow from the quiver and snapped it quietly between my hands, keeping the tipped end as some semblance of a weapon. I stood and crept beyond my lean-to, stealing into the trees beyond my camp. My feet whispered against the ground as I moved toward the voices, the careless sounds of footsteps. I had participated in enough mock-hunts in my life; moving quietly to circumvent potential enemies had

become instinctive to me, and I circled around in the woods until I came behind whoever approached my camp.

I could see them; two figures walking abreast of one another, both wrapped in the dun-colored cloaks of ephebes. One of them carried a spear, but the other appeared unarmed. I moved forward, the arrow half poised in my hand. I crept within a few brief strides of the pair, and then I sprang at the unarmed man. I hooked my arm around his throat, catching him beneath the chin; he uttered a startled, strangled cry as I jerked him against me, hauling him backward. His friend whirled, catching the spear between his hands and shoving the iron tip toward me. I drew the arrow toward his friend's face, wedging the point against the nook of his jaw, the soft meat of his neck.

"Drop it," I hissed, and then I realized who was in front of me. "Dieneces?" I said, lowering the arrow tip, my arm loosening against my captive's throat. The man shrugged away from me; I let him go and when he turned, wide-eyed and breathless with alarm, I saw it was not a man at all. I blinked, bewildered. "Elara...!"

"What were you thinking?" Dieneces demanded. We had returned to my camp and stood around the ash remnants of my fire. He stared at me as you might a person who had gone stark raving mad. "'Do not do anything,' you tell me. 'It is too dangerous,' you tell me. And then, hoah! Not even a day in full and the barrack is abuzz with stories of you going feral in the wilds, attacking Pedaeus and his Hunters!"

"They were raiding another Dweller settlement," I said. "I could hear the Dwellers screaming from here. I thought if I could catch one of the Hunters at it...if I could keep one of the Dwellers from being killed, we might be able to prove—"

"'We?' What is this 'we?'" Dieneces cried. "I was going to go about matters in a perfectly safe manner—beyond Clesonymus' interest or attention! You are the one who plowed headlong into the fray!"

I looked at Elara and found her regarding me, her dark eyes filled with frightened worry. “Clesonymus has told the Ephors you attacked the Dwellers,” she whispered. “He told them when his Hunters tried to stop you, you turned on them.”

“A woman survived,” I told them. “One of the Dweller women escaped into the woods with three children. I saw them. We could find them, and she could tell the Ephors a single man did not attack. There were at least twenty Hunters there—she could tell them.”

Elara and Dieneces glanced at one another. “Echelas, no one survived,” Dieneces said.

“Yes—a woman did, and three children. I am telling you,” I said. “They ran right past me in the dark. They fled into the trees.”

“A woman and three children were found by the banks of the Magoula this morning,” Elara said softly. “Their throats had been cut.”

I blinked, stricken and startled. “What...?”

“Echelas, you are in trouble,” Dieneces said. “Clesonymus and Pedaeus are saying you did all of this.”

“But I did not,” I said.

“It does not matter,” Dieneces said. “Clesonymus is a Hunter prefect—the Ephors believe his account of things. They have ordered you hunted down and brought to Sparta—they have ordered you arrested.”

I stared at him, aghast.

“Clesonymus came to the house this morning,” Elara said. “I heard him in the courtyard speaking with Pedaeus. They are coming tonight—all of the Hunters will be looking for you.”

“She heard them and then she came to me,” Dieneces said. “She figured I would know where to find you, Seclusion or not. Imagine that.” The momentary humor in his voice faded and his face twisted with anguish. “They...they will kill you, Echelas. Do you understand? Even if the Hunters do not

kill you, the Ephors are going to order you executed.” He reached for me, clasping my hand. “You have to leave.”

“What?” I whispered.

“You have to leave,” he said again. “You have to go today—right now, Echelas. You have to flee. Follow the river north and get out of Laconia—there is no place here that will be safe for you.”

“Leave?” I said, stunned. “But, Dieneces, I...I cannot...”

“You have to,” Dieneces said. “Are you not listening? This is no whipping offense, Echelas. They are not going to take away your rations for a day or two—they are going to kill you! You cannot remain here!”

“If you leave now, you can reach Pellana by nightfall,” Elara said. “It is a Dweller village north of Sparta, along the Magoula river. My nurse, Paria has a brother there, Palici. Ask for him; go to his home. I will have supplies for you; clothing, blankets, food and water, a pair of horses—one you can keep, the other you can barter for silver outside of Sparta.”

“You...you cannot do that,” I said. “Why would you do that? If Clesonymus finds out—”

“They are stores from my lands,” Elara said, her brows pinching. “They are my horses. I may do as I please with them. Let him try to call me on it.”

“But you...you are Clesonymus’ wife,” I said. “You are the mother of his son—his heir. You cannot get involved in this. He would—”

“Iacchus is my son,” Elara said softly. “He is not Clesonymus’.”

I looked at Elara and realized. All at once, I understood why she had seemed to be keeping track of my accomplishments these past years; why she would have told me she visited my placard at the sanctuary of Artemis each morning to remember me by. I remembered what Pelorus had told me on the day he had caught us together in the forest

It is how the gods give us children.

and my breath drew to a shocked, tangled halt.

Elara lowered her eyes. "Clesonymus knows," she said quietly. "He has always known."

"Go to Pellana, Echelas," Dieneces said to me. "If you leave now, you will yet have enough daylight to make it. Come dusk, these woods will be crawling with Hunters."

"Take the horses and supplies and go to Achaia, to the coastal village of Patras," Elara said. "Paria's nephew, Dolon lives there, an apprentice to a blacksmith. You will be safe with him in Patras until Dieneces and I can get word to you."

"Word...?" I said.

"I am going to Thersites and Pelorus," Dieneces said. "I will take this to Demodocus, Leonidas, whoever—I will stand in front of Latychidas if I must and scream it. I will tell them what has happened, and that you are innocent. I will find a way to convince them—and the Ephors—and set things right."

I looked between them, stunned and trembling. "But I..."

"Do not argue with us," Dieneces said, pressing the shaft of his spear against my hand. "Take this with you—you might need it. I hear you broke yours upside of Pedaeus' head."

I stared at him, my mind reeling. I was in shock.

"You have to go, Echelas," he said. "You have to go now. It is not safe for you."

I nodded mutely. I looked at Elara, Pelorus' words echoing in my mind.

It is how the gods give us children.

"Elara..." I said softly.

"Go," she whispered. She leaned toward me, pressing her lips against my cheek. "We will send you word in Padras."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

490 B.C.

"The boy, Iacchus," the man said quietly. "He is your son."

I nodded. "Yes," I whispered.

"And Elara kept it hidden," the man said. "She told you Clesonymus knew, but no one else must have."

"I would have been expelled from the training if it had been discovered," I said.

"And the Elders would have ordered the child killed if they had known."

I nodded. "If they found had out I was the father—not a full Spartiate—they would have cast him into the Apothetae chasm."

"And left him to die," the man murmured. "An illegitimate son is one unnaturally created, an offense against Sparta and the gods—of no use or worth to either."

"I do not understand why Clesonymus would have ever agreed to it," I whispered. "He has wanted to ruin me—there was his chance. I would have been disgraced if the Elders learned about Iacchus."

"Perhaps Clesonymus realized an opportunity when presented with it," the man said, and I looked toward the corridor beyond my cell, curious. Afternoon had waned, and evening was upon us. I could no longer discern our shadows against the floor or wall; the entire hallway was draped in gloom.

"You have proven an exemplary son of Sparta," the man observed. "You are humble about it, lad, but your accomplishments speak volumes. You were chosen a Hippeis. You earned three laurels in the Pythian Games. Any child of yours would surely know the same honor—more so, it seems than any Clesonymus has achieved. Maybe this occurred to him—maybe Clesonymus realized that any accomplishments of the child would be a merit to his own standing if people believe the child is rightly his own."

"Maybe that is why I thought he had forgotten about me for so long," I said. "He had Elara. He...he had our son. He must have been laughing at me all the while, knowing I had no idea about Iacchus...knowing that it would hurt me to know Elara was his wife."

"What happened after that?" he asked. "Obviously you never made it as far north as Padras. Did you reach Pellana?"

"I did, yes," I replied. "But I...I did not remain."

"Why not?" he asked.

I looked down at the ground. "I...I spent most of that day in a state of shock, I guess. I felt...I had not had much sleep, and I was frightened, confused. I felt like I was in a daze, almost as though I was dreaming. I kept thinking at any moment I would wake up, and I would be back in my barrack and everything would have just been a bad dream."

I lifted my gaze, blinking against the sting of sudden tears. "Hoah, I did not realize my nightmare had only just begun."

490 B.C.

I arrived in Pellana at dusk and found Palici's house, the home of the brother to Elara's nurse. When I rapped against his door, Palici answered. He looked at me from beneath thick, pinched brows, eyeballing the spear in my hand, my disheveled appearance and tattered cloak with undisguised suspicion. When I tried to explain to him who I was, and why I paid call, his wariness did not fade in the slightest.

"I am expecting no one," Palici told me, his mouth pulled down in a frown. "My sister has sent no word to me. No one has delivered any sundries or horses today."

I blinked at him, confused, and then he slammed the door in my face. I remained at his threshold for a long, uncertain moment, and then risked knocking again. He did not answer this time, but shouted through the wood. "Go away, you rot worthless slave!"

"Please, sir," I said. "I am not a slave. I swear it to you. I was sent here by your sister's employer, a Spartan woman named Elara. She told me to come here."

The door opened a slim margin, and Palici glowered out at me. This time, I could see he brandished a small ax in his hand. "My sister's mistress is a good woman who would not stoop to help the vagabond-slave likes of you."

"I am not a slave, sir," I said. He tried to close the door again, swinging it swiftly, and I reached out, planting my palm against the wood. His eyes widened somewhat, and then his brows crimped again as he shoved against the door. I do not know what the old man did for his life's work, but it was something that left the strength of someone half his years in his arm. I struggled to keep the door from slamming on me again. "Please, I...I am a son of Sparta, and she sent me here—Elara told me to come because I am in trouble—"

"You are no son of Sparta," he snapped, his face twisting with disdain. "No Spartan son would turn to women and Dwellers if he was in trouble. He would face his burdens with honor—not bother old men with them in the night like a cowering child."

He put his full weight against the door, and I danced back as it slammed shut between us. "You ought to be ashamed, disparaging such a decent name as my sister's mistress!" he shouted. "Now get out of here!"

I stumbled back from his stoop, my eyes wide with confusion. *Something is wrong*, I thought, a semblance of reason whispering through the shocked, disbelieving haze that had shrouded my mind most of the day. *Something has happened. Elara told me she had sent word—these things would be waiting for me here, and she would not have lied. If that word never came; if the supplies did not make it to Pellana, that means something has happened to prevent them.*

It was as though the old man slamming the door on my face had battered one open within my mind. For the first time since stumbling back to my campsite that morning, my rationale restored, and I blinked at this Dweller man's small, weather-worn home in realization. *Something has happened and Dienesces and Elara will be made to answer for it*, I thought. *They tried to help me and they will be punished for it.*

I turned around and began to walk away. The Dweller man's words rang within my head, over and over, a remonstrative mantra that made me hang my head, my shoulders hunching with shame.

No Spartan son would turn to women and Dwellers if he was in trouble. He would face his burdens with honor—not bother old men with them in the night like a cowering child.

Dienesces and Elara had come to me, and their revelations had shocked the wits from me. As my senses restored somewhat, as I thought of the old man's words, I knew he was right. *They took a great risk to help me*, I thought. *I cannot run away while they are punished for it. I cannot.*

I left Pellana behind me, following the woods along the southern highway leading back toward Sparta.

No Spartan son would turn to women and Dwellers if he was in trouble. He would face his burdens with honor—not bother old men with them in the night like a cowering child.

I was in trouble; Clesonymus and Pedaeus would ruin me if they could, but fleeing from Sparta would solve nothing. Dienesces had sworn to me he would set matters right if he could, but it was not his responsibility.

It is mine, I thought.

I walked for a long time through the darkened forests. It would take me several hours to reach Sparta again; it might have been faster to keep to the road, but I did not dare. If Hunters or Spartiates were out looking for me, they might very well kill me on sight. I wanted my chance to stand before the Ephors and give my account of what had happened, of what Pedaeus and his Hunters had done. I wanted them to hear the truth from my own mouth and then judge me as they would.

I will face you with honor, Pedaeus, I thought, frowning. And you, as well, Clesonymus—all of your lies. My friends will not answer for me. I will answer for myself—and so will you.

I was distracted by my own resolved thoughts, and the sounds of footsteps creeping from behind against the carpeting of pine needles were so soft, I did not hear them. I caught a blur of movement out of the corner of my eye, and then a strong arm clamped about my neck, throttling me, jerking me backward.

I reacted reflexively, dropping my spear and grabbing my assailant's forearm. I planted my feet and doubled over, throwing the man over my shoulder. He slammed against the ground, whooping breathlessly at the impact, but recovered with astonishing speed. I had a half-breath to realize he was carrying a spear, and then his arm swung out in a broad arc. The shaft of the spear slammed into my calves, plowing my feet out from beneath me. I fell back, hitting the ground hard.

I pistoned my right foot out and felt my heel smash into the man's cheek. He grunted and closed his hand about my ankle before I could pull my foot back. He started to twist my leg; I could feel the tendons in my knee and ankle strain as he craned my leg at an abrupt, unnatural angle, and then I smashed my left foot into his face. His hand loosened enough for me to jerk loose of his grasp. I scuttled backward in the dried leaves and pine needles, pedaling with my feet, my eyes flown wide.

It was dark outside; a waning crescent moon offered precious little illumination through the tree crowns, and all I could see of the man was a silhouette. If he was Hunter, so far he seemed alone, although I jerked my head, my eyes darting about wildly, scanning for any of his fellows. I found my spear, my hands fumbling against the shaft, and I closed my fingers around it as I scrambled to my feet.

I shoved the iron tip of the spear toward him; moonlight winked faintly, briefly off the sharpened edge. He was kneeling, clambering to his feet, and raised his head. I could not see his face, but I saw the moon's glow flash as he swung his own spear again, taking me by surprise in his attack.

His spear smashed into mine, sending me dancing clumsily sideways, and then he was on his feet, coming at me.

I staggered back, trying to put distance between us to no avail. He was tall, swift and strong. He swung the right end of his spear around in a sharp arc toward my head; I jerked the left end of my spear up, feeling the thrumming impact through my entire arm as the two shafts smashed together. He swung his left end around, and I skittered backward, nearly tripping over my own feet as I drew the right end of mine around to counter his blow again. He moved so fast that in the dark, I could not see well enough keep up with him; as soon as I parried his proffered blow, his spear swung, whipping in a downward hook, clipping me in the right heel. I fell, my foot slapped out from under me, and I sprawled in the dirt, gasping sharply as the back of my head smacked the ground.

I had no chance to recover my wind—or wits—before I saw another fleeting wink of pale light against a spear tip. The man towered over me, a looming silhouette, and his spear point caught me beneath the chin, pressing firmly against the shelf of my jaw. I fell still, my eyes wide, my breath fluttering softly.

“Echelas?” the man said, sounding bewildered, and then the spear point slipped away from my flesh. I blinked up at the man, startled anew.

“Pelorus?” I whispered.

Pelorus tossed his spear aside and reached for me, closing his hand about my wrist and helping me stumble to my feet. “Hoah, Echelas...” he said, drawing me against him. He held me fiercely, clapping his hand against the back of my head. “You are supposed to be in Pellana,” he gasped against my ear. “What are you doing here? These woods are filled with Hunters. There are Spartiates patrolling all along this highway.” He stepped back from me, cradling my face between his hands. “Are you alright?” he whispered, and I nodded. “You are not hurt?”

“No, sir, I am fine,” I said. I stared at him, stricken. “Pelorus, I did not kill those people,” I said. “I am not mad. I did not kill them.”

He laughed softly and hugged me again, his arms tight against my shoulders. "I know you did not, Echelas," he whispered.

"The Hunters killed them," I said. "It has been them all the while. I saw them. I saw them murder the Dwellers."

He drew away and took my arm, leading me in tow. "Come on," he said. "We have to get out of here. It is not safe."

"I had to leave Pellana," I said. "Elara was supposed to leave supplies for me there, but they—"

"She got word to me," he said. "Her nurse came and waited at the common mess until I left. She told me Hunters have been posted outside of Elara's home all afternoon. She could not leave or send word out to Pellana."

I blinked at him. "She came to me today," I said. "Elara and Dieneces. Clesonymus must have known. He...he must have had Elara followed. They would have heard everything. They...they would have..."

"It does not matter," Pelorus said, shaking his head to still my voice. "All that matters is that you are safe, Echelas—and I mean to keep you that way. Come on."

"Where...where are we going?" I asked, as he tried to pull against me again.

"We are going to cut through the Taygetos passes," he replied grimly. "It is a difficult trek, but we can make it. We will go through the mountains into Messenia, and then we will turn north, into Elis."

I drew to a halt. "I cannot, Pelorus," I whispered.

His brows lifted. "What do you mean, you cannot?" he asked.

"I have to go back to Sparta," I said. "I have to stand before the Ephors. If I run away, they will only believe Clesonymus and Pedaeus all the more. I cannot—"

"You will have no chance to stand before the Ephors," he told me, his voice sharp, startling me. "Do you

not understand? Elara sent her nurse to find me because she heard Clesonymus order you dead, Echelas. He knows you saw the Hunters attack the Dwellers. He knows you will tell the Ephors—and he means for you to never have that chance. You will not be arrested, no matter what the Ephors have decreed. If the Hunters find you, they will kill you.”

I blinked at him, frightened, and he took me by the arm. “I am bringing you to Olympia,” he said. “Leonidas and Demodocus will send word to me when it is safe to return. They will take care of things, Echelas. We have to go.”

“It...it is not theirs to see to,” I said, shrugging my shoulder to dislodge Pelorus’ hand. “It is mine, Pelorus.”

“It is not yours, Echelas,” Pelorus replied, his brows pinched. “You do not understand that, I know, but none of this has come because of you.”

“Then why?” I cried, and as he reached for me, I stumbled away from him. I closed my hands into fists. “Why, Pelorus? Clesonymus hates me—he has always hated me and I have never understood why. I have done nothing to him, and yet he is fixed on ruining me! He wants me to run away—the better to make me look guilty in front of the Ephors, the Assembly—all of Sparta! I did not do this, and I am not afraid of him. If this is not happening because of me—if I cannot even stand before Sparta and answer in my own defense, then tell me why!”

He looked at me silently, his expression pained.

“Tell me why,” I pleaded. “Why is this happening to me?”

Pelorus stepped toward me. When I shied away, he paused, his brows lifting in sorrow. “Cleomenes bribed the oracle of Delphi,” he told me softly. “That is why this is happening, Echelas.”

I blinked at him, startled and bewildered. Of all of the answers I might have anticipated, this was not among them.

“Cleomenes gave silver to the Pythian priests so that they would say Demaratus was illegitimate to the Eurypontid throne,” Pelorus said. “He had been inciting Latychidas to

challenge Demaratus, and when the Ephors decreed that Delphi would decide the matter, Cleomenes knew this was the only way to ensure Demaratus was deposed.”

He stepped toward me again, and this time, I did not move. “Latychidas has grown suspicious,” he said. “The more he considered matters, the more convenient it all seemed to him, and so he shared his suspicions with Leonidas, my mentor—and Cleomenes’ due successor. Leonidas in turn sought Demodocus’ counsel on the matter, and they decided that Demodocus should go to Delphi to try and learn the truth.”

He reached for me, touching my face. “That is why Cleomenes sent you into the wilds,” he whispered. “I could not keep you from it; there was nothing I could do. Cleomenes found out. He knew by threatening you, he could keep Leonidas and Demodocus in hand, prevent them from traveling to Delphi. If they can prove his bribery, they can see him dethroned. But they cannot prove it without the word of the priests.”

I blinked at him, confused. “What does that have to do with me?” I whispered. “Why would my being on Seclusion keep Leonidas and Demodocus in Sparta?”

“Because Cleomenes knows Clesonymus hates you, Echelas,” Pelorus said. “He appointed him to Hunter prefect deliberately to put you in harm’s way. Demodocus realized this—Cleomenes told him as much—and he never left for Delphi. He did it to keep you safe.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why does he care? I...I do not even know him, and he keeps coming into my life. Why would he care if I am safe or not?”

Pelorus pressed his hand against my cheek. His eyes were filled with pain and sorrow. “Echelas...” he said softly.

I ducked my head, pulling away from him. “Why?” I cried. “Tell me why he—”

I heard a sharp snap of sudden wind. Pelorus heard it, too, because he started to turn his head, his eyes widening. He gasped suddenly, stumbling forward. His knees buckled and as

he staggered, I saw the end of an arrow protruding from his back.

“Pelorus—!” I cried, horrified.

There was another hiss of wind, and I felt the slapping breeze from feather fletchings as an arrow sliced through the air near my cheek. Pelorus looked up at me, his eyes round with alarm, and then he shoved his hand against me, pushing me.

“Hunters!” he cried, staggering, trying to get me to run. Blood peppered from his mouth; the arrow head had punched through his ribs and speared his lung. “Go—go!”

I whirled around, meaning to sprint, and then eleven Hunters darted out from the trees in a wide circumference in front of me. I stumbled back, my eyes flown wide, my shoulders smacking against Pelorus’ chest. “Pelorus—!” I gasped.

“This way,” he said, grabbing my elbow and spinning me about. We both froze in our tracks as more Hunters emerged, a full pack of twenty surrounding us. Their slave disguises were gone; they were draped in shadows and the dun-colored cloaks of Spartan ephebes. They were armed with bows, spears and short swords, and as Pelorus and I turned in a stumbling circle, we saw they left us no margin of escape among the trees.

“Take them,” one of the Hunters said, and I turned, recognizing Pedaeus’ voice. In the dark, it was difficult to appreciate the full damage I had meted out on his nose, but I could hear it in the pinched, snuffling sound of his voice. “Kill them both.”

Pelorus hooked his toes beneath the shaft of his fallen spear. He kicked it up into the air and caught it in hand. “Echelas,” he said, pivoting and tossing the spear to me. I caught it and held it between my fists, presenting the tip toward the Hunters.

“You have no honor, Pedaeus,” Pelorus said. He turned his face and spat out a mouthful of blood. He punted my spear from the ground and into the air; he closed his fist

about the shaft and spun it around, shoving the point toward Pedaeus' gut. "And no courage, either, that twenty of you would stand against two."

"You are the one without honor, Dieneces," Pedaeus snapped, mistaking Pelorus in the dark. "And just as mad as this feral dog that you would try to help him escape from us." He nodded his chin toward his fellows. "I said take them!" he shouted. "Kill them both!"

The Hunters charged us, their feet shuddering against the ground, moonlight flickering wildly off of spear points and brandished swords. I danced back as five of them converged on me at once; I swung the left end of my spear around, battering aside the proffered thrust of one spear. I pistoned the right end around and slammed the spear shaft into the Hunter's head. I had no time to recover; I pivoted my hips as another Hunter rushed at me. I felt the breeze from his body against mine as I barely skittered out of his path. I whirled, following him, and smashed my spear shaft into the back of his head, sending him sprawling facedown into the dirt. Two more were behind me; I planted the end of my spear in the ground and leaped, swinging my legs around and punting them both in the chins. Their heads snapped back on their necks and they tumbled, their spears falling from their hands.

One of them grabbed me from behind, seizing me around the waist in a crushing embrace, hoisting me off my feet, forcing me to drop my spear. I kicked, driving my heels into his knees, and he cried out, stumbling. My feet hit the ground, and I buckled, ramming my elbows back into his gut. He staggered away from me, and I caught my spear shaft beneath my toes. I kicked it, and it flew toward my hand; as another Hunter charged me, I swung the left end around, knocking aside his thrust. I countered by hooking the right tip behind his heel, knocking him off balance and sending him toppling.

I felt the ground tremble as another rushed at me from behind. I danced to my right, sucking in a sharp, hissing breath through my teeth as I felt his sword blade slice through my side, nicking beneath my ribs. I rammed my elbow backward, smashing into his nose. He screeched, floundering

away from me, and I whirled around, letting my spear sail in a wicked arc against the side of his head.

I turned again as another Hunter ran toward me, his sword reared back to strike. As the blade whipped downward, I drew my spear up between my hands, blocking the blade as it swung toward my face. I kicked my foot up, planting my sole against the Hunter's gut, and then I punted mightily, shoving him away from me.

They were everywhere, and I could not fend them all off for long. A well-placed swing with a spear slapped mine from my hands, and I was left to grapple with them, fighting with my fists. As a Hunter came at me with his sword, I rushed him headlong, grasping his sword hand. I twisted, spinning about, throwing him over my shoulder, sending him flying into two of his fellows as they came at me from behind. Another Hunter grabbed me roughly by the midriff, and I stomped my heel with all of my might against the top of his foot. He screamed in my ear, and his arms loosened about my waist. I drove my elbow into his sternum, battering the breath from him, and then I whirled, slamming my fist into his temple, sending his wits to follow his wind.

Another Hunter hooked his arm around my throat, strangling me, and I swung myself forward, letting my knees fold beneath me. He flew ass over elbows over my head, smashing against the ground. I did not see the next one coming; he darted forward, a silhouette among shadows, and when his fists careened around and plowed into my cheek, I staggered, gasping against the sudden taste of blood in my mouth, blinking against pinpoints of light dancing before my eyes.

Someone kicked me in the stomach as I floundered, losing my balance, and I whoofed loudly, crumpling to my knees. More fists pounded into my face, and they were upon me, all of them beating me, driving their knuckles into my head, their feet into my gut and groin. They caught me beneath the arms and hauled me to my feet, pummeling me. I heard Pelorus scream my name, and then the fists fell away as he rushed to my aid. He plowed into the Hunters, his spear still in

hand, swinging madly, and as they turned loose of me, I collapsed, breathless and dazed to the ground.

“Get away from him!” Pelorus roared, smashing his spear shaft into skulls as he drove it again and again in broad arcs. “Coward rots! You disgraces to Sparta! You are less than Tremblers—the lot of you!”

I heard his voice cut off abruptly in a startled gasp and I looked up, my head spinning, my vision bleary. I saw Pelorus standing over me and I was dazed, puzzled at first, because it looked like he was embracing one of the Hunters. They stood so close together—nearly belly to belly—that their silhouettes blended together into one misshapen form in the darkness. Pelorus’ hand opened slowly, and he shuddered, dropping his spear.

“Pelorus...?” I whispered.

The Hunter staggered back from Pelorus and I saw something protruding from Pelorus’ chest—a sword hilt. Pelorus’ knees buckled; he stumbled and collapsed, and I realized.

“No—!” I whimpered, scrambling toward him, dizzy and bleeding. “No, no, Pelorus, no!”

“Pelorus?” I heard one of the Hunters gasp.

Pelorus had fallen to his knees, and hunched over the ground, supporting himself with one hand, clutching at his chest with the other. I could hear his laborious, wheezing effort for breath. I reached for him, my hands fluttering against his shoulders, and he fell forward, crumpling into the dirt.

“No!” I screamed, struggling to turn him over. “No! Pelorus! No! No!”

“Pelorus...” another Hunter hissed, his voice sharp with alarm. “Artemis above, it...it is Pelorus...!”

“A Spartiate...!” whimpered another, skittering back in panic. “Hoah, we...it is Pelorus—a Spartiate...!”

I rolled Pelorus over, cradling his head against my lap. I could see the sword now; it had punched through his chest, stabbing him in the heart. His cloak was soaked in blood.

“No...” I whimpered, pawing at Pelorus, shuddering over him. “No...no, please...Pelorus...!”

He was already dead. His eyes were half-opened, his mouth agape, blood smeared on his face and in his beard. I began to weep, hoarse, agonized sounds escaping my mouth as I clutched at him, rocking him back and forth.

“Stay with me,” I gasped. “No...please...please stay...please...!”

I reached for the sword hilt, curling my hand around it. I jerked against the blade, feeling it grind against his sternum. I screamed hoarsely in despair and wrenched the sword loose from his breast. Blood splattered as the blade flew free; it splashed against my face, and I screamed again in futile protest.

“No!” I wailed. I crumpled over him, still clinging to the sword. “No! Pelorus! Pelorus!” I looked up at the Hunters, and they all stared back at me, ashen with horror. They had not realized they attacked a Spartiate—that they had just murdered a full Spartan citizen. They had thought he was Dieneces, a hebon no different than they were, and they blinked at me, stricken and terrified.

“Bastards!” I screamed at them. “You...you murdering bastards!”

I leaned over Pelorus again, letting the sword tumble from my fingers as I pressed my forehead against his and wept. “Please,” I begged him. “Please...do not go...do not...”

“Take him,” I heard someone say. I looked up, and saw Clesonymus walking out of the trees, moonlight gleaming against the bronze of his Spartiate armor. He stopped in front of me and I stared up at him, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Why...?” I whimpered at him. He said nothing, and merely stared at me. “Why?” I screamed at him. “Why? Demodocus never touched me! You stupid rot! He has never been anything to me!”

“Take him,” Clesonymus said again, his face set impassively. “Arrest him. He has murdered a Spartiate. He must answer to Sparta for it.”

I blinked at him, breathless and stunned. “You bastard,” I whispered, closing my hands into fists.

“He has murdered a Spartiate,” Clesonymus said. “Bind his hands and bring him to Sparta.”

“You bastard!” I screamed, leaping to my feet. I lunged at Clesonymus, plowing into him and knocking him off of his feet. We hit the ground together in a tangle of sprawled and thrashing limbs, and I began to hit him, swinging my fists again and again, driving my knuckles into his face. “You lying, murdering bastard!” I shrieked.

The Hunters grabbed me, hauling me off of their prefect. I struggled wildly between them, screaming in rage and grief, my voice a strangled, anguished garble of sounds. “You bastard—!” I screamed at Clesonymus, and then a Hunter stepped in front of me, his fist hooking around sharply. He struck me in the face, his knuckles plowing into my temple. I saw a momentary dazzle of starlight, and then I crumpled, my mind swallowed by shadows.

“When I...when I came to, I was here,” I whispered to the man in the other cell. I lowered my head, drawing my hand to my face as my voice dissolved in tears. “I...I did not even get to tell Pelorus good-bye...”

“Sometimes I think there is no more to life than that,” the man said quietly. “Moments of pain, punctuated by missed opportunities.”

I shuddered, weeping against my palm. I gasped softly for breath, unable to speak.

“I am sorry, Echelas,” the man told me. “You...hoah, lad, you should not be here. You are not supposed to have come to this.”

I shook my head. “Maybe...maybe it is just,” I said, hoarsely. “I...it was my cries that drew the Hunters to us...I...I know it. It is my fault Pelorus is dead, and maybe...maybe I deserve whatever happens to me. I did not wield the sword, but I...I killed him just the same.”

“No, lad,” the man said. “You did not.”

He said nothing for a long time, letting me weep. Evening had yielded to night, and our prison was darkened. There was no moon to seep through our windows, and even in his silence, I found comfort in the man’s presence. I leaned my head and shoulder against the wall of my cell and pressed my lips together, struggling to stave my tears.

“You should not be here, Echelas,” he said again after a long moment. His voice was gentle, like a proffered caress, and I closed my eyes. “You should have been in Apothetae all of this while. None of this should have ever come to pass.”

I opened my eyes, startled. “What...?” I whispered.

“The chasm of Apothetae,” the man said. “You should have been cast there upon your birth. You should have known only that brief moment of frightened suffering instead of this.”

I sat up, my breath fluttering in my throat. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you not know?” the man asked gently. “Even now, Echelas, do you not realize?”

“Realize what?” I whispered, feeling my gut twist suddenly, anxiously. I curled my hands around the bars of my cell and leaned forward, staring into the darkness. “Who are you?”

“Do you not understand why this has happened?” the man asked me. “You are close to the mark, lad. It is Demodocus’ fault. This is upon him—and Leonidas.”

I stared into the shadows, stricken, and the man chuckled softly, without any humor.

“Demodocus is your father, Echelas,” he said, and I recoiled, my eyes flown wide. “He has indeed looked out for you all of these years—but not for the reasons you suspected, or Clesonymus, either. He loved you—not as something he coveted, but as his son.”

“No,” I whispered, trembling. “No, that...that is untrue.”

"It is true, lad," he said. "You were conceived before Demodocus was a Spartiate in full. Your mother was wed to another, and as with your Elara, it made for convenient excuse. The fig never falls too far from the branch that bore it, I suppose. Your mother, Hemithea has always been a woman set in her own philosophies—Demodocus was right about that. She found our practices among Spartan men offensive. She saw the effects it had upon her own husband, Aeropus. It is my understanding that Aeropus never cared for the company of his wife, much less understood it. He preferred that which he had grown accustomed to—men. It is a inconvenience I have observed myself on occasion—and one that afflicts Clesonymus, as well, hence his willingness to accept your son as his own. Less worries for him in the end."

"Who are you?" I asked. "How...how do you know these things?"

"Hemithea made Demodocus promise to see you spared from that," he said. "She made him see that you received a mentor who would not abuse you in such fashion—a man Demodocus could depend upon to keep to his word, to avoid the temptations of your fair youth, no matter what. And he did, Echelas, in his brother. His youngest brother, Pelorus."

I could not breathe. My throat had collapsed, constricting my breath, and I gasped for air. I shied back from the threshold of my cell, my eyes enormous and stinging with new tears. "What...?"

"You said Pelorus was named for his father. That should tell you he had an older brother to bear his grandfather's name, as is customary. It never occurred to you, did it?" He said this last tenderly, as if pitying me. "I am sorry, Echelas. You should have been killed at birth. The old Dweller man in Pellana was right. You are no son of Sparta. You never have been. You have never had the right to the accomplishments you have known, the privileges and honors you have received. You are a bastard, an offense against the gods and Sparta, lad. You should not be among us."

Tears spilled down my cheeks and I gasped softly, shuddering.

"I know the truth of your circumstances," the man said quietly. "I knew before you told me. Your friend Dieneces is a very astute young man. He had no proof, but he yet held your answers."

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"A shame it has all been for nothing," the man said. "It might have worked out so nicely otherwise. But as I said, Hemithea is a woman fixed upon her own philosophies. Had she remained in Sparta, it might have all been different. But she rode to Delphi. She returned—despite my best efforts to the contrary, she found her way home again. And now here we are, lad, the both of us—you and me."

"Who are you?" I shouted, lunging at my cell gate. I closed my hands against the bars and shook mightily. "Tell me who you are!"

"I am the reason you are here, Echelas," he said. "And I am the reason you will die. My name is Cleomenes, son of Anaxandridas. It is a pleasure to make your proper acquaintance."

I fell back from the gate, sitting hard against the floor. "Cleomenes...?" I gasped, stricken.

"Had I known you would always speak so kindly of me, Echelas, and with such loyalty in your heart, I might have reconsidered this for you," he remarked. "I am sorry. It has all proven for nothing, but I had to try. All that I have given to Sparta, and she would betray me like this."

He laughed softly. "I did bribe the Pythian priests. Who does not? Those priests have stockpiled more silver and gold for proffered prophecy than most conquering kings. This righteous indignation of Latychidas and Leonidas is pathetic. They have both reaped the benefits of my bribes. They both fall upon their knees to praise the gods for my alleged treachery. Demaratus was a soft and stagnant fool who would have seen Sparta bend to Persia. He would have seen the Peloponnese a quarrelling, squabbling mass of disenfranchised regions, none yielding to the other. He was a liability to Sparta, and to a unified Peloponnese, and his absence is a blessing we

will enjoy for generations to come. And they would call this an offense. They would see me punished for it.”

I said nothing. I sat in the darkness, shuddering, struggling for breath.

“I ordered your mother murdered,” he said. “What choice did they leave me but this? She rode to Delphi—the same silver that coaxed my reply from the priests would have as easily brought her the truth. But I was betrayed in my efforts—my own bitch daughter, Gorgo turned on me like a cub that snaps at its mother’s teats. I would see her a Queen—I gave her hand in marriage to Leonidas, and Gorgo repays me with this. She tells Leonidas, who in turn tells Demodocus.

“He loves your mother. He might have married her, would she have had him—and had your illegitimate birth not seen her womb stilled. A man has no need for a second wife if she is barren. But he loves her yet, and rode to save her. I learned of her survival and fled. I had no choice. I could stand before the Ephors and justify myself until I was hoarse from the effort, and they would still see me killed. I am mad, you know—those vicious rumors have plagued me all my days, no matter my achievements, no matter what I have brought to Sparta. I am a drunk; I am mad; I was a curse upon my parents and undeserving of my throne. They have waited for this opportunity—to depose me with seeming cause.

“I fled to Sellasia and then to Arcadia.” Cleomenes laughed softly, ruefully. “But Leonidas is clever—far more clever than I would have considered. He lured me back with false oaths from the Ephors—promises that my throne was safely mine, and that I was welcomed among my people. I returned to open arms from them all; a magnificent feast in my honor. They got me drunk and turned against me—feral, slaving dogs, the lot of them. They brought me here, and I imagine they will kill me. They will bide their time. They will make me wait for it, but they will come. Just as they will come for you, Echelas.”

I pressed myself against the wall of my cell and huddled there, shivering.

“Moments of pain and missed opportunities, lad,” Cleomenes said. “That is all that life is in the end. It is rather courteous of them to allow us this time to recount ours to one another, do you not think?”

When I said nothing, I heard him chuckle quietly.

“I am sorry, Echelas,” he said. “You seem a good lad, with a heart that would make most any rightful son of Sparta proud. More than anything, that is what I believe Clesonymus and Pedaeus envied about you. Your mettle, lad. It is something no tenure of training, no measure of beatings, no length of running can instill. A man is either born with it, or he is not.”

He snickered again. “It is a shame I never shared with them the truth of your birthright,” he remarked. “It would have incensed them all the more to know you had no right to the heart you call yours.”

I heard a scraping sound of metal against metal from somewhere down the corridor, and I looked up, startled. It sounded as if the outer gate of the prison had just opened, and all at once, I heard heavy footsteps falling along the corridor.

“Hoah, they are coming,” Cleomenes said. “That is timely fashion, would you not say?”

“Coming?” I whispered.

“To kill me, lad,” Cleomenes said. “Or you. Or us both. I would wager on the former, and neither of the latter. Particularly since I could see you spared.”

I blinked, confused.

“Do you want my help, Echelas?” he asked. “I could see you freed from here, if you do. They are coming, lad—I can see their light against the wall now. Tell me if you want my help, lest your wounded pride sees you run too short of time.”

I scrambled to my feet and stumbled in the dark toward my cell gate. I could see the glow of firelight against the wall now, and the sound of footsteps grew louder as they approached. “You...you will help me?” I said, grabbing the

bars of my gate and pressing my face through the narrow space between them.

"I know the truth, lad," he said. "I know you are innocent."

"They think you are mad," I said. "They will never believe you."

"Yes, they think I am mad," he agreed. "Mad, drunk, illegitimate...hoah, just as you are by rumor. But we both have also made great achievements for Sparta, Echelas—precious scraps of honor that have kept us alive so far, and tendered enough guilt into the hearts of our fellows that they have given such lengthy consideration to our fates."

I saw his hand extend out from beyond his cell gate into the corridor, reaching for me. "They will believe me if I tell them you are here by my deceit. I have brought this upon you, lad, and I could take it from you. I could see you freed by my word alone, Echelas."

I shoved my hand between my cell bars, craning my shoulder, straining for his hand. My fingers fumbled against his, and he clutched at me. "You would do that?" I whispered. "You would tell them?"

He caught my hand, his fingers crushing mine. "I said I could do that," he said. "I never said that I would."

I blinked in stunned, anguished realization. "No..." I whispered, struggling to wrench my hand loose from him. "No, you...you bastard..."

"The fox has many tricks, lad," Cleomenes told me, laughing. "The hedgehog has only one. And mine, my dear boy, has always served me well."

"No...!" I gasped, and then he turned me loose as a large group of men rushed past my cell. I recoiled from the gate, staring at them in horror. There were seven in all, dressed in rough fabrics and skins to lend them the guise of slaves, but I knew they were no slaves. They were Spartiates, each and all armed with short swords and I heard the scraping of metal as they unlocked Cleomenes' cell.

“No!” I cried helplessly as their footsteps pounded heavily against the floor and they crossed into his chamber. I grabbed the bars of my cell again, and shook the gate desperately. “No, no, you rotted bastard, tell them!” I cried. “Tell them the truth! Tell them!”

I listened as they murdered him. He did not cry out, not even once as their swords punched into the soft meat of his belly, wrenching loose his liver and lights. I could hear the wet, spattering sounds of his blood and entrails falling to the floor; I heard the Spartiates grunting with the force of their blows.

“No...” I whispered, as I heard Cleomenes’ body fall with a heavy thud against the ground. I sank to my knees, shuddering, the strength in my legs abandoning me. “You...you bastard...”

The Spartiates left his cell. They did not even pause to look at me as they disappeared down the corridor once more, bringing their torch with them, leaving me alone in the darkness with a dead king.

I shook uncontrollably, gasping for breath. I hung my head as dismayed tears spilled down my cheeks. “Bastard,” I whispered, but there was no one left to hear me. “You bastard.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

They came for me the next morning. I was not surprised by the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor beyond my cell, or when five Spartiates in full armor came to the threshold beyond my gate. I had spent the night resigning myself to this inevitability. Cleomenes and I had apparently been no more than pieces left over in a puzzle that had been completed to the Ephors' satisfaction; wayward cogs that remained after some intricate mechanism had been assembled. Nothing remained but the disposal of these unnecessary pieces, whose continued existence only raised more questions than offered answers. Cleomenes had been taken care of and now it was my turn.

I did not cower or flinch as the Spartiates unlocked my cell. I stood quietly in the center of the small chamber with my eyes toward the ground. I watched the soft glow of the new morning sun pool around my feet, and understood that this would be my last measure of it. I did not resist them as they caught me by the arms. I did not fight or stumble as they led me in tow from the cell. I breathed the cool morning air deeply, drawing the crisp fragrance of pine forests and mountain foothills into my lungs as they escorted me from the prison. I found some comfort in these last moments of quiet breath; there was precious other enjoyment I would ever know again.

They brought me before the Ephors. These five men were strangers to me; I had been gone from Sparta during the Assembly's annual election, and their faces and names were

anonymous and unknown to me. They sat in a small chamber in a semi-circle, facing me. I was somewhat surprised to find the thirty members of the Council of Elders assembled along a crescent of tiered seats behind me.

The room was very quiet, and no man among them offered a murmured word or hushed sound as I was brought in the middle of them. I kept my gaze upon my feet, feeling the weight of the Ephors' gazes before me, and that of the Elders' from behind.

I listened in mute witness as Clesonymus was summoned to offer testimony. I did not raise my eyes from my toes as he spoke. He offered lies to them. I had expected no less of him, and watched the sunlight drape against the floor, seeping among the colonnades and crawling slowly toward my feet. I listened to him describe in elaborate and invented detail the stories of my assault against his Hunters, his fabricated observations from the night Pelorus was murdered.

"I have seen boars and weasels cornered by the hounds of a hunt," Clesonymus said. "I have seen them infected with the desperation of survival, and I have seen them fend off with fang and claw even the largest pack we could gather. I have witnessed these things—these gruesome and bloody demonstrations of the simple, maddening capacities of nature—and I stand before you, sirs, and tell you plainly that none compared to this youth in the wilds."

I looked the part of some maddened, wild fiend in my tattered cloak, with my askew hair, blood-stained form and grizzled beard. I did not look any manner of Spartan hebon, worthy of merit or the benefit of doubt. I looked like a man who had lost his mind, and who had murdered people coldly, ruthlessly, and I knew it.

"A dog must be run through with arrows if it should turn feral upon its master," Clesonymus said. "For there is no hope to be found that it might return to its previous complacency and composure. I find no such hope here, either, sirs. There is no place among us for this boy anymore. The sight of his master, his mentor—my friend, Pelorus the Younger—as he lay dying upon the ground will haunt me the

measure of my days. I would weep now simply to speak of it, to recite his name with only fond recall in my heart.”

When Clesonymus’ testimony concluded, I stood alone before the Ephors. Here was my chance to speak in my own defense, to offer my account of events, but I remained silent, my gaze upon the ground. His words might have been lies, but Clesonymus was right. There was no place for me among Spartans anymore.

You are no son of Sparta, Cleomenes had told me. *You never have been. You are a bastard, an offense against the gods and Sparta, lad. You should not be among us.*

No matter Clesonymus’ lies, the truth remained plain. Pelorus was dead because of me. I had not brandished the blade that had pierced his heart, but he had known the truth about me. He had known I was Demodocus’ son—a bastard of Sparta—and he had died trying to protect me as much from this as from Clesonymus’ Hunters.

“Hebon, will you offer no words on your own behalf?” one of the Ephors said to me.

I kept my eyes upon the ground, my body motionless, my hands pressed against the flat of my stomach beneath my cloak. “No, sir,” I said.

A soft murmur fluttered through the chamber at this, as the Ephors blinked at one another, caught off guard, and the Elders whispered in sudden, startled disconcertion.

“Hebon, if you offer no defense to persuade us otherwise, we will have no recourse but to pronounce your sentence,” the Ephor said to me.

“Yes, sir,” I said. They had already pronounced sentence; they had decreed as much when Cleomenes had been killed. They meant to put me to death, and I deserved it.

You are no son of Sparta, Cleomenes had told me. *You never have been.*

“I will offer words on his behalf,” said a woman’s voice from behind me, and the murmurings stirred again, louder and startled anew. I had closed my eyes, my breath

stilled as I had waited for the Ephors' judgment of me, but I opened them now, blinking in surprise at my toes. "If none of you possess the mettle or conscience to speak in this boy's defense, let me show you how it is done," the woman declared, and I heard her soft, swift footsteps and a rustling of fabric as the draping hem of her long tunic flapped. She marched past me to stand before the Ephors.

"And shame upon you all that you might call yourselves men of Sparta in the same measure of breath as you would condemn this noble young hebon to his death," she said.

"Queen Gorgo..." one of the Ephors sputtered.

"My Queen, these proceedings are closed to our women," said another, and I heard the low, creaking groan of his chair as he rose to his feet.

"By my father's inheritance, and that of my mother, I own forty-seven plots of ancient land," said Gorgo—Cleomenes' daughter and Leonidas' wife. I watched her feet move as she stepped in a slow circle, leveling her gaze at each Ephor and Elder in turn. I could see her hands now, clenched in tight, angry fists. "Who among you can claim as much?"

An awkward silence greeted this challenge, and Gorgo snorted quietly. She turned back to the panel of Ephors. "I will speak where and as I damn well please, Ephor Chaeron."

"Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas, King of the Agiad House," said another Ephor, his voice decidedly uncomfortable. "Perhaps you might offer a measure of counsel to your wife, sir, that we might—"

"I would as soon prevent the sunrise with my bare hands as keep my Queen from her peace when her mind is fixed upon a task," I heard Leonidas answer from behind me. "I would hope that we might all be humbled by her fire, and honored—as ever—for the benefit of her gracious wisdom."

"This son of Sparta is innocent," Gorgo said. "His only crime is that he has been helpless to prevent these circumstances as they have come to pass. You have all lost the

benefit of your wits that you would call him before you—you are the ones stripped mad and senseless, not this boy.”

“He will offer us no testimony to the contrary, my Queen,” said an Ephor. “What would you have of us? He—”

“He has spent a week in my father’s company, locked and trapped beneath Menelaion,” Gorgo snapped, interrupting him sharply. “The gods alone know what that cruel and manipulative man has put into his mind to convince him this is a deserved fate, and one he is duly entitled to. Cleomenes swayed the Pythian oracle itself to twist fate to his own designs. His conscience would not keep him from so wickedly influencing this young man. This hebon stands before you with all that he has left to call his own—his honor. He holds his tongue because it would be disgraceful to wag it in any measure against his fellows, his king—or Sparta. You should drop your gazes to stand before a man of such dignity—for it is a measure you lack in abundance, sirs, the lot of you.”

“My Queen,” said an Ephor, his tone taxed with forced patience. “We have listened to first-account testimony from our Hunter Prefect, who witnessed—”

“Who witnessed shadows dancing in the darkness,” Gorgo said. “Does logic not occur to you? If slave revolts prompted the introduction of so many new Hunters to our lands, does it not seem reasonable that the responsibility for those Dweller deaths, and the murder of our Spartiate, Pelorus the Younger lies there? A hebon alone in the forests for his Seclusion, upon hearing screams and sounds of struggle would go to investigate. This surely accounts for his presence at each of these incidents, as described by Clesonymus’ Hunters, and by the Prefect himself. Mistaken identities in the dark led to frightened attacks on both sides. This hebon stands before you as much a victim as Pelorus—sanctioned by my father as punishment to my husband, because Cleomenes knew this youth held special merit in Leonidas’ heart. He bore helpless witness to his mentor’s murder, and we have robbed him of the right to grieve for his loss. We have all conspired to see him a victim—and it is a victimization we continue cruelly with the perpetration of these unfounded hearings.”

She walked toward me. I watched her stand before me, the hem of her tunic draped against the floor, her small toes framed in the slender straps of her sandals. I felt her fingertips settle beneath my chin, coaxing my face up. I blinked at her, breathless. She was beautiful; a young woman no older than me, with exquisite features and dark, glossy hair drawn back in a bundle from her face. She looked at me, and her expression softened, filling with such tender sympathy that I was shamed. I lowered my eyes, unable to hold her gaze.

“His heart is broken,” she said softly. “Left alone with none to comfort him but the monster who sired me, it is no wonder he has convinced himself that he is to blame, no matter the circumstances.”

She turned back toward the Ephors. “Use your reason, sirs,” she said. “I implore you. Has my father’s treachery not caused enough pain in Sparta? He is gone from us now—too much the coward to face us all with any honor, he has killed himself. Let his wicked deceit die with him. Confusion in the night and bitter, unfortunate circumstances have found us here—the only madness was that of Cleomenes.”

She lowered herself to her knees, prostrating herself before the Ephors. “And if my father’s death does not serve as retribution enough for his crimes that you would seek to punish another, then I beg you to punish me instead. I am blood kin to Cleomenes—there is more culpability than this young hebon will ever know. Do not make him answer for my father’s offenses.”

I blinked at her, stunned. Apparently, I was not alone in my shock; the entire chamber stood absolutely silent.

“I beg you with earnest humility to see this noble son of Sparta spared,” Gorgo said. “His honor restored, his rightful place among us returned. I beg you.”

I was found innocent.

I had been so prepared to accept the Ephors’ command of my execution that their judgment left me reeling. I dropped to my knees in the very place I stood, my eyes flown

wide, my breath abandoning me. They declared me innocent of all offenses, and restored me in full to my status as a hebon and a Hippeis, assigned to the services of King Leonidas.

I listened in stunned, tremulous disbelief as the Ephors called Clesonymus again before them. “Our noble Prefect,” one of them said to him. “Our Queen has spoken wisely and well. It seems to reason that those slaves who have caused such disturbances for you and your Hunters have only brought these most latest incidents to pass. With Persia advancing upon the mainland and their delegates having already paid Sparta call, war now seems eminent. You and the Hunters would be best served with swift answer to our slave problems, as Sparta would be best served to have such dissention well in hand should war come upon us.”

“Yes, sir,” Clesonymus said, as breathless with shock as I felt. I glanced up at him and found him blinking at his toes, his balance wavering, as if he felt light-headed or ill.

“Therefore, we will see you and those Hunters under your command dispatched immediately,” the Ephor told him. “You will disperse yourselves well beyond the boundaries of Sparta and into Laconia, and here you will remain until these disturbances plague us no more—and for no less of a timeframe as necessary to insure they do not rekindle once suppressed. I should think at least one year should serve as an initial measure...?”

He looked among the other Ephors, who nodded and murmured in concurrence.

Clesonymus looked at me out of the corner of his eye. This was the Ephors’ means of punishing him, and we both realized it. They could not accuse him outrightly of conspiring with Cleomenes. They could not prove that one of his Hunters had known fully well that Pelorus was not a revolting slave or some other perceived enemy of Sparta when he was killed—or that one among them had even wielded the sword. They could not prove it, but they knew—and Clesonymus and I understood this at nearly the same moment.

He looked at me and I met his fleeting gaze. His eyes pierced me like a blade; there was such searing, undisguised hatred that I lowered my face again, abashed.

"You will leave at once, Prefect," the Ephor told him. "This very afternoon. You will send weekly reports from the field for our consideration."

"Yes, sir," Clesonymus said.

When the hearing was adjourned, I remained upon my knees, even as the Ephors and Elders rose from their seats to take their leave. Gorgo genuflected in front of me, tucking her fingertips beneath the shelf of my chin to again draw my gaze. "Rise, good son of Sparta," she told me softly, her voice as gentle and kind as her touch.

I looked at her, confused by her intervention, still reeling from the Ephors' decision. She was smiling at me, her lovely mouth unfurled, and I could not breathe for her proximity. "Your...your father did not kill himself," I whispered to her.

The corners of her mouth lifted a bit more. "I know," she murmured, and I blinked at her, realizing. *She...she had him killed. It was not by the Ephors' orders that Cleomenes was murdered. It was by hers...!*

"Your mother taught me to dance when I was a girl," Gorgo said, slipping her hands against mine. "I have known her well and fondly ever since. She has been told to keep to her bed, to rest until she recovers from her assault, but I know she would enjoy so dearly to see you."

"I...I will visit her, my Queen," I said, letting her draw me to my feet. I stared down at the ground as she left me, slipping past me like a hint of breeze.

Demodocus approached as Gorgo left me. He was neither an Ephor, nor an Elder, and I realized he must have been waiting outside of the forum, keeping anxiously nearby as he waited for their judgment. He had come to me as best he was able, and as he drew near, I kept my eyes on my toes, my

heart seized with sudden, frantic uncertainty, Cleomenes' words reverberating in my mind.

He has indeed looked out for you all of these years—but not for the reasons you suspected, or Clesonymus, either. He loved you—not as something he coveted, but as his son.

My father, I thought in a mixture of dismay and wonder. *Demodocus is my father.*

He said nothing at first, standing before me as uncertain, anxious and at a loss for words as I felt. After a long moment, he cleared his throat, an awkward sound meant to draw my gaze. I blinked up at him, disconcerted.

"If it...if it would please you, Echelas," he said softly. "I could tend to that instruction that...that Pelorus would have seen to in your training."

He was asking to be my mentor. He met my gaze, and his eyes were filled with tremendous sorrow and remorse. He looked at me as if he wanted with some desperate longing to comfort me, embrace me, but did not move. "I know that I...I can never hope to hold Pelorus' stead in your regard, but I...by my breath and all that is mine, lad, I...I would do right by you," he told me.

He loved you—not as something he coveted, but as his son.

I did not know what to say to him. I did not understand how to feel. I was caught between joy and dismay; poised between fury at him for all that had happened, shame at my anger and all the while, filled with love for him. He had loved me, yet had lied to me. He loved me still; I could see it in his eyes, and I knew he would still allow the lie to persist. He would let the Ephors, the Elders, the whole of Sparta believe I was Aeropus' son, no more than a stranger to him—a rightful son of Sparta. "I...I would be honored for your guidance, sir," I said, lowering my gaze to the ground.

"I am sorry for your pain," Demodocus whispered, his voice choked as if he hovered on the verge of tears. I blinked against my own, staring at my toes. I felt his fingertips brush against my cheek, a fleeting and uncertain gesture. "I am so very sorry, Echelas," he breathed.

“As I...I am for yours, sir,” I said softly, and I looked up at him, my eyes flooded, my throat constricted. “For the loss of your brother.”

He blinked at me and said nothing for a long moment. He understood that I knew; I could see it in his anguished expression. He knew that nothing was secret from me now; that I had learned the truth.

“I am sorry,” he whispered at length. He said no more than this; he admitted nothing to me aloud, though his stricken expression as he turned away said more than any words. “Forgive me. I am sorry.”

I was brought to the Hippeis barrack. The others had already left to tend to their morning training activities, but somehow, Dieneces was there, waiting for me. The Spartiates who escorted me said nothing about his presence, and I knew that Demodocus must have surely arranged for it.

“Hoah...!” Dieneces gasped, embracing me fiercely. I did not want him to turn loose of me; I wanted to keep by him for the rest of my life, huddled against the shelter of his tall form.

He walked with me to the riverbank, and stood with me in the shallows as I bathed for the first time in weeks. I watched Pelorus’ blood at last rinse away from my skin, and as I looked at my hands, clean now, even in the creases and along my cuticles, I blinked against tears. Dieneces stood beside me with his hand against the small of my back, as if he feared I would stumble, my knees failing me. He tried his best to make idle conversation, forcing a bright tone into his voice that did not quite reflect in his eyes.

“There is talk of war,” he said as I washed my face. I glanced at him. I do not know why this surprised me; I would have thought nothing further that day could come to pass that might infiltrate my tired, confused mind. He nodded. “Darius of Persia is at last advancing against the mainland. After all of these years, it is upon us.”

“When?” I asked.

"I do not know," he said. "Delegates from Persia arrived a few weeks ago. Latychidas and Leonidas rode to meet them in person at Sellasia."

I remembered now; something mentioned at my hearing, offered by one of the Ephors to Clesonymus. It had made no sense to me at the time of its utterance; I had been stupefied with shock, and the words had scarcely registered.

With Persia advancing upon the mainland and their delegates having already paid Sparta call, war now seems eminent.

"What did they want?"

"Surrender tokens," Dieneces told me. "Earth and water. Others have already yielded, they told us. Athens is one of few states to refuse them."

"What did the kings do?"

"Leonidas ordered the delegates tossed into a well, or so I have heard," Dieneces said. "Latychidas leaned over the side and called to them to draw their earth and water from there." He managed a wry, fleeting smile and a snort of laughter. "That is fairly good, I think. And can you believe Sparta might make a stand allied with Athens? Olympus would crack to the foundation for that, I say." He blinked at me, his smile faltering. "Anyway, it...it is only gossip. I know...I know you do not care for idle rumor."

"I have found I do not mind it so badly," I remarked, splashing my face again. I glanced at him and smiled. "When it is not at my expense."

Dieneces blinked at me, and then laughed. "No one has told us more than this, except to prepare," he said. "They are marching us night and day on the practice fields to ready us. The Hippeis have all been fitted for bronze armor. We are expected to march with Leonidas when the time comes." He looked down at the water, seeming disconcerted. "You...someone will bring you to the market, to a smith to see you sized, I am sure."

This would have been a mentor's responsibility. "Demodocus will bring me," I said. "He has offered to be my mentor now."

I must have said this with a peculiar tone I had not intended, something aloof and somewhat cold brought about by my ongoing state of shock. I glanced at Dieneces and he met my gaze, studying me. "It is alright," I said. "I...he spoke to me of it, and I...I told him I would be honored for his tutelage."

"Leonidas has reinstated him," Dieneces said. "All of his honors and commissions, the Dymanes division commander again."

"Hoah," I said quietly. "Then I suppose I am all the more honored."

"They will still let you march with us," Dieneces said. "They...they may move you to the rear formation, as you have been...gone awhile, but you...they will still let you stand with us for Sparta, Echelas, should it come to war."

"I...I do not think I should stand for her, no matter the occasion," I whispered. "I am not a son of Sparta."

"Do not say that, Echelas," Dieneces said softly, laying his hand against my arm. "Yes, you are."

"Demodocus is my father," I said, and he blinked at me, startled. "I was born while he was a hebon. I should have been cast into Apothetae, but Hemithea lied to the Elders. She and Demodocus lied. I am not a son of Sparta."

Dieneces stared at me. "Do not say that," he whispered again.

"It is true, Dieneces," I said. "Cleomenes told me."

His brows pinched slightly. "He lied," he said. "He was a mad, cruel, deceitful man who only—"

"He had no reason to lie," I whispered, drawing him to silence. "He found far more pleasure in hurting me with the truth."

Dieneces blinked at me, visibly stricken.

"I am a bastard son," I said. "An offense against the gods and Sparta, Dieneces. They...the Ephors should have

executed me. The Elders should have killed me from the first. I...I am not supposed to be here.”

He caught my face between his hands. “Do not say that,” he said, his voice hushed but sharp. He gave my head a shake, as if scolding a pup. “Do you hear me, Echelas? Do not ever say that again. You are my friend—my best friend—and I could not love you any more if we were kin. I do not care what Cleomenes told you. I do not care if Zeus himself came down from Olympus with lightning shooting from his ass and told it to you plainly—I am telling you that you are a Spartan son. Whatever the matter of your birth, here is your place. You have more right to it by honor alone than Clesonymus or Pedaeus or any of those rot damn Hunters by ten generations of ancestral due.”

I blinked at him, startled by his fervency. “I would have run myself through,” he told me, his eyes filled with desperate implore. “Do you not understand that? If the Ephors had ordered you killed, I would have had no reason—no desire—to keep in this world without you. I would have run myself through if only to be with you in Hades.”

Tears spilled down his cheeks, and he pressed his forehead against mine. He closed his eyes and trembled against me. “Dieneces...” I breathed, pressing my hand against his face.

He turned his cheek against my palm. “I...I could not live without you,” he whispered. “Promise you will not say that. Not ever again. Promise me, Echelas.”

I hugged him, drawing him fiercely against me, clutching at him. “I promise, Dieneces,” I said. “I promise.”

Despite my promise, I spent that day feeling like a stranger, even among surroundings and people that should have brought familiar comfort to me. I was excused from my training; the prefects had mercy on me, given I was fairly well shocked and stumbling, and when Dieneces had to leave me for the practice fields—albeit begrudgingly—I was allowed to visit the Spartan village of Pitana and see my mother.

Hemithea lay in bed, her head and shoulders propped upon folded blankets to support her. I had been told the knife wound she had sustained had been minor, that she was recovering from her injury, but it was the first time Hemithea had ever seemed frail to me, delicate and vulnerable, and I blinked at her, startled.

Her eyes were closed when I entered, but when I leaned over, draping my hand against her shoulder, her eyelids fluttered opened and she blinked dazedly at me. The corner of her mouth, usually set so austere, lifted in a fragile, tender smile. "Echelas," she murmured.

I genuflected at her bedside. She lifted her hand, brushing the cuff of her fingers lightly against my cheek. "How are you, Mother?" I asked.

"I am well now," she told me, her fingertips trailing through my hair.

"I heard what happened—your attack," I said. "Are you hurting? Are you in pain?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Would it please you if I recited for you?" I asked her softly, lowering my eyes. I could not look at her; to meet her gaze for too long left me disconcerted. *Is it true?* I wanted to ask her. *Is Demodocus my father? Am I really an illegitimate son—my entire life a lie?*

"It pleases me just to look at you," she said. "I had feared I might never again."

She slipped her hand against mine, her fingers soft and warm. "Why did you go to Delphi?" I whispered.

"Because you are mine," she answered. "You are my son, my blessing from Artemis."

"You went to find out if Cleomenes had bribed the Pythian priests," I said.

"Yes," Hemithea said. "I did."

"You went because of me," I said. "Cleomenes sent me into the wilds...named me to the Seclusion because he...he

hoped to use me to prevent Leonidas from learning the truth about Delphi, and Demaratus' deposing."

"Yes," Hemithea said.

"He hoped to keep Leonidas from it," I whispered. "And...and Demodocus, too."

"Yes, he did," Hemithea said.

I looked at her, feeling tears sting my eyes. "Is Demodocus my father?" I whispered.

She did not react at all, not so much as a startled batting of her eyes. "Does it matter?" she asked.

I blinked at her in bewildered surprise. "Yes," I said, nodding. "Yes, it...of course it matters. If he is my father, then I...nothing I have is rightly mine. Nothing I have done is due to me, and I...I am not a son of Sparta."

She looked at me for a long moment, her expression soft but impassive. "You are a son of Sparta, Echelas," she said. "By birth and by right."

"You lied to the Elders," I said. "You...you lied, Mother. You told them I was Aeropus' son. Demodocus was only a hebon. I...I would have been taken away, left to die at Apothetae, a disgrace."

I drew my hand away from her. "I cannot stay here," I whispered. "I...I do not belong here. I never have. You lied to them. The Elders should have killed me then—the Ephors should have killed me today. Pelorus died because of me. He—"

Hemithea's hand shot out, her fingers claspng me by the chin with surprising force. She lifted her shoulders from the bed and leaned toward me, her brows crimping. "All of those weeks you spent imprisoned, do you think I kept here to my house, ashamed to walk the streets?" she asked. "When I passed through the market, do you think I hunched my shoulders and kept my gaze upon my toes in disgrace as the other Spartan women whispered and pointed? Do you think my cheeks blazed with shame at their words—'there is his mother, this feral youth, this wild dog in his Seclusion?'"

She shoved me away from her. "I held my chin up proudly, my gaze even with those who would mutter," she snapped. "I would have seen you executed for crimes you did not commit, your reputation sullied, my family ruined—I would have stood through it all with my shoulders back and my eyes unashamed. You have never brought disgrace to me, Echelas—never in your days until this moment."

She spat against the floor. "Your father was a man of honor and reason," she said. "A man who loved you, and whose honor you should mark rather than slander. Your eyes fill with tears, your voice trembles with weakness—have shame that you would doubt yourself and your father's honor so callously. You have been marked by the gods for greatness—today should be proof in your regard, but I have known it all the while. From the moment of your birth, I knew it well, and shame upon you, Echelas, son of Aeropus that you would know such simpering uncertainty!"

I stared at her, stricken and abashed by her rage.

"If you would flee—if you would abandon Sparta, then you are less than no son of Sparta—you are no son of mine," Hemithea told me. "If you would tuck your tail and flee this valley, then I have scarcely weaned a pup from my bosom, much less a man! Go, then! Be gone! Run away, Echelas! You might not have killed Pelorus, but you have killed me today. Your words have pierced my heart deeper than any blade."

I did not know where to go, or who to turn to when I left Hemithea's home. I was distraught and despondent, and without meaning to, I followed the streets of Pitana until I found myself upon Elara's threshold. Dieneces had told me in prison that Clesonymus had stationed Hunters outside of the house, but I saw no sign of any sentries when I arrived. Clesonymus had been sent into the wilds by the Ephors, and true to their decree, all of the Hunter hebontes under his charge had been dispatched with him.

Elara's nurse answered the door. She held Iacchus in her arms, balancing the squirming toddler against her hip. Seeing him left me all the more stricken, and my shaken

expression troubled the nurse. She canted her body in the doorway, as if shielding Iacchus from me as I stammered out some semblance of polite request to pay Elara call.

“She is in the courtyard, sir,” the nurse told me. “I would be glad to announce you. If you would wait here, please...?”

I realized I could hear muted voices from somewhere beyond the threshold; young girls singing hymns. I blinked at the nurse and nodded, shying back from the doorway. “Yes, ma’am,” I said, lowering my gaze to the ground. “I...I would be very grateful, ma’am.”

The nurse closed the door on me, and I stood there for a long, uncertain moment. I could still hear the children singing; now their voices were punctuated by soft thumping sounds as they danced in Elara’s courtyard. She was instructing the village girls in the choreography of festival dancing, as was proper for married women of Sparta. The sounds never waned, and I began to worry that I had alarmed the nurse, that she would not summon Elara and had simply left me to stand there in the hopes I would eventually give up and go away.

I raised my hand, meaning to knock again, and jumped in surprise as the door opened. Elara was there. She looked at me, and her eyes widened. “Echelas...” she whispered.

She stepped against me, embracing me. I could smell the sweet, delicate fragrance of her hair and skin, and I closed my eyes, slipping my arms about her waist.

“I could not send word to Pellana,” she gasped against my ear. She drew away from me, reaching up and letting her palms brush fleetingly against my cheeks. She blinked at me, pained. “Clesonymus had me followed that day in the woods. His Hunters heard every word—they knew our every plan, and he trapped me here, kept me like a prisoner...”

“It is alright,” I said softly to her.

She blinked against tears and lowered her gaze, her fingertips dabbing at her eyes. “Please,” she said, standing aside and opening the door in full to let me pass. “Please, Echelas, come inside.”

I followed as she led me along the broad foyer of her home. Through the doorway to the courtyard, I could see a group of seven girls hopping in synchronized step to the clapping instruction of another Spartan wife. Elara noticed my attention and smiled somewhat shyly. "The Hyacinthia festival begins next week," she said. "We...we are teaching them the routines. It will be their first performance in public."

She brought me into her small bedchamber off the left of the foyer. "I hope you do not mind," she said, keeping a courteous distance as she turned to face me. "I would invite you to the courtyard, but it...it is occupied at the moment."

She walked over to the patio door and closed it, muffling the sounds of the girls' singing. "Would you like some wine, Echelas?" she asked.

"No," I said. "No, thank you."

She looked at me for a long moment, her brows lifted in gentle sympathy. She was so beautiful to me, I drew comfort by simply looking at her. "I would have been there today if I had been able," she said at length in a quiet voice.

"Clesonymus...he...he has left for the ancient lands south of Sparta. The Ephors sent him and his Hunters, but he...he kept a pair outside of my door until today. I...I could not..."

"Dieneces told me," I said. "It is alright. I understand."

Silence settled between us and I lowered my eyes to the ground. "I...I am sorry," I whispered. "I did not know where else to go."

Elara came to me. She meant to hold me again, but I caught her face between my hands. I kissed her deeply, feeling her startled intake of breath. She stiffened against me for a surprised moment, her hands planted against my shoulders as if she meant to shove me away. She relaxed however, and stepped against me, lifting her chin to press her mouth against mine all the more. She uttered a delicate, fluttering sound in her throat as she tangled her fingers in my hair.

I eased her backward until her knees met the edge of her bed and she settled against it. I leaned over her, feeling her

legs part to enfold me, the folds of her tunic falling aside as I lowered my hips against hers. I made love to her, kissing her as I delved into her deepest, warmest recesses. Anyone could have come upon us; any of the children might have opened the courtyard door and discovered us together, but I did not care. I loved Elara as much in that moment as I had from the first, and I knew by the way she drew me eagerly, deeply into her; the way she matched the powerful, fervent rhythm of my hips with her own; the way she clutched at my shoulders and gasped my name softly, breathlessly as I drove her to pleasure that she felt the same love for me.

“Come away with me,” I whispered when we were finished, my lips brushing hers as I spoke.

“What?” she asked. “Echelas, what...what do you mean?”

“I mean come with me,” I said. “North to Achaia, or across the isthmus to the mainland. Wherever you want...whatever you would like. You and me, Elara, and Iacchus—the three of us. Let us leave this place—let us leave Sparta. Please.”

“Echelas...” she breathed, stroking her hand against my face. “Echelas, I cannot.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “Please, Elara. I love you.”

She smiled at me softly, blinking against her own tears again. “I love you, too, Echelas,” she whispered. I stared at her in helpless confusion, and her smile widened. “I told you that I wished I had stayed to talk,” she said. “Just once, even that. Would you...would you stay with me awhile now, Echelas? Would you talk with me?”

“Yes,” I whispered, nodding. “Of course.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I did not leave Sparta. In the end, it was not Dieneces' pleas or Hemitheia's rage that stayed me. It was Elara's quietly proffered logic.

"Where would we go?" she had asked, lying beside me in her bed, her hand draped against my heart. "We are of Sparta—our wealth is here, only in Spartan lands. We do not have silver; we do not use gold. The iron spits we barter with at the market are worthless beyond Laconia. We have no skill except those that have been instilled in us to benefit Sparta. There is nothing for us outside of Sparta, Echelas."

By midsummer, Persian attacks against Greece had begun. They struck the island of Euboea east of the mainland along the Aegean Sea first, sacking the city of Eretria. From here, Persian forces moved by land and sea to the south. Their invasion of the mainland would commence at Marathon, a city northeast of Athens.

When Athens marched to engage the Persians here, they sent a frantic plea for help to Sparta, delivered by an Athenian courier who, according to rumor, raced the massive breadth between Marathon and the Peloponnese in a solitary day.

"Good thing you did not face him at Pythia," Dieneces told me with a solemn wink as he recounted rumors from his common mess. Demodocus shared Pelorus' aloof contempt for gossip, and because he was a senior commanding officer, men at our mess table would sometimes guard their

tongues and commentary in his presence. In lieu of this, Dienes had taken it upon himself to make sure I missed out on none of the better rumors circulating.

He told me what he knew of events at Marathon, and even recited the plea from Athens: *Men of Sparta, the Athenians ask you to help them, and not to stand by while the most ancient city of Greece is crushed and subdued by a foreign invader. Even now, Eretria has been enslaved, and Greece is the weaker by the loss of one noble city.*

I asked Demodocus about it. If it bothered him that I was listening to mess hall gossip, it did not reflect in his face. He had raised his brows thoughtfully. "Leonidas spent the better part of this past week arguing with the Ephors," he told me. "He would have seen us on the march for Marathon already, if he had his way."

"The Ephors will not let him?" I asked, puzzled.

"The Ephors say that our slave disturbances continue to threaten Laconia's stability," Demodocus said. "It is a valid point. We cannot well dispatch all of our Spartiates eastward and leave Sparta vulnerable. The slaves would seize upon it."

"They could send some troops, if not all of them," I said.

"You would think that, yes," Demodocus agreed, the corner of his mouth lifting wryly. Pelorus' death was still new and unfamiliar to my heart, and Demodocus had come to remind me so poignantly and often in both mannerism and appearance of his brother, that sometimes it was uncanny. This was one such incident; he looked and sounded so much like Pelorus that I lost my breath.

"I think that is Leonidas' point," Demodocus said. "But the Ephors have challenged him, calling on Spartan Law. The Karneia festival begins in one week and will last nine days. By Law, we cannot wage war during the Karneia. If Leonidas cannot convince the Ephors to send even a modest number of Spartiates to Marathon soon, he will have to wait until the Karneia passes."

He looked at me. "What is it?" he asked.

"I...it is nothing," I said quietly, lowering my eyes to the ground. "You...you remind me of him sometimes, that is all. Pelorus, I mean."

He smiled at me gently. "That is funny," he remarked. "I was just thinking the same of you."

I looked up at him. We had never discussed Demodocus being my father. After Hemithea's outrage, it was something I was afraid to broach, and because it was something that Demodocus and I both understood as truth, we simply avoided the topic.

"Were you and Pelorus close?" I asked.

"More so than most Spartan brothers get to be, I suppose," he said. "We were not strangers to one another, if that is what you mean. We did not always see eye to eye on things, and I..." He smiled again, somewhat sorrowfully this time. "I do not suppose Pelorus always liked me very well. He thought a man should have no ambitions of his own outside of serving Sparta. I happen to be of the philosophy that if a man's ambitions serve himself as well as Sparta, there is no harm in them."

"Was he jealous of you?" I asked. "That you were an officer?"

Demodocus laughed. "Pelorus? No, lad. Envy was not something he practiced. I think he was more disappointed that I was an officer than anything else. He thought I should have been content—as he was—to be only a Spartiate."

He glanced at me. "He found benefit in my position, though he would have been loathe to admit it. That is how you remind me of him. He asked a lot of questions. His mind was always so curious. He wanted no more part in things except to simply understand how they worked. The mechanisms of politics and life fascinated him."

I blinked, surprised. Had I lived to be one hundred, I would never have considered Pelorus curious, or one to ask a lot of questions. Everything I had ever observed of Pelorus seemed to contradict this; he had always seemed satisfied to be a quiet bystander in mess conversations, listening and seldom

adding his own thoughts or comments. That something might have fascinated Pelorus took me completely off guard. Nothing had ever seemed to surprise Pelorus, much less fascinate him. His regard of the world had seemed functional and logical. He lent little credence to myth or gossip, satisfying himself with his own determination of fact and truth. I mentioned this to Demodocus and he chuckled again.

“Oh, that was his philosophy,” he told me. “He listened very carefully and formulated questions in his mind. He found no purpose in addressing these questions to his mess fellows, however. He considered their answers no better than any he could devise on his own. If he had a question, he asked it of me or Leonidas. He figured our positions gave us greater insight than anyone else he knew.”

The Karneia festival came, and Sparta sent no troops to Marathon. I learned that the dissention between Leonidas and the Ephors on the matter had come to a sort of mutually begrudging compromise—one proffered by Latychidas. Latychidas had appeased the Ephors by offering to keep his share of the Spartiate army in Sparta to tend to any slave disturbances. He also bartered to keep Leonidas’ forces in Sparta until after the Karneia festival’s conclusion, just to insure that the slave uprisings were firmly in hand before departing for the mainland. Neither Leonidas nor the Ephors were particularly enthused about the arrangements, but they both agreed to them nonetheless.

“Leonidas is a bit of a hot-head,” Dieneses told me one night. “You would think it would be Latychidas, would you not? He is so much younger than Leonidas. Who would have thought youth would be the voice of reason and common sense in this circumstance?”

It might have surprised Dieneses, but not me. The more I came to know of Leonidas, the more I saw traits of Cleomenes within him. Leonidas might have vilified his half-brother’s campaigns and ambitions, but as the Agiad King, Leonidas more shared that refuted them. He was prideful, willful and eager to assert Sparta’s military superiority. Leonidas was not a bad man, but sometimes—despite my

personal experience with Cleomenes—I did not necessarily believe that Cleomenes had been, either.

He is mortal and flawed for it, the same as any other, Pelorus had told me of Cleomenes. His flaws must have been traits he had gleaned from his father, because Leonidas, also kin to Anaxandridas, seemed to share them in abundance.

In August, when the Karneia concluded, my contingent of Hippeis marched under Leonidas' command for the Greek mainland. Leonidas was frustrated by the delay in our departure, even though he had agreed to it, and we marked a brisk pace as we traveled. Unfortunately for us, and for Leonidas' already bruised and anxious ego, we arrived too late for the fray.

Demodocus had explained to me that Athens had a formidable fleet and just as Sparta remained virtually unchallenged in land wars, Athens knew no rivals on the open water. Part of the reason Latychidas had been able to coax a concession from Leonidas on the matter of departure was the philosophy that Athens would have to engage the Persian army on land, not the sea. Athens would be trounced—and rightly served by it—by the Persian ground troops until Sparta arrived to save their hides.

"That, more than anything else was the appeal for Leonidas," Demodocus had told me. "There is not much else that would please a Spartan king more than to see Athens get their rightful due, to have them plowed back into place."

I cannot imagine Leonidas' surprise or dismay when we arrived at Marathon to find the battle long-since over. Thousands of Persian infantrymen lay dead upon the battlefield; bodies sprawled and heaped from one edge of the horizon to the other. The stench of death was stifling, sickening and sweet, and the buzzing of flies drawn to new decay thrummed in the air.

The Athenian troops had abandoned Marathon, returning to Athens to fortify their city and thoroughly repel the Persian fleet's planned sea assault. Some had returned; when we came upon Marathon, they were already in the process of digging massive pits in which to dump the Persian

dead. They had left them out in the sweltering sun only long enough for us to arrive and see them—a veritable slap in the face from Athens to Leonidas and Sparta.

“I will be damned,” Dieneces remarked, as we stood together looking at the slain Persians. He glanced at me, his brow raised. “They did right well for themselves, did they not?”

We returned to Sparta. Not much was ever said about the debacle at Marathon, but it left an indelible mark in our politics. Leonidas had been sore with the Ephors prior to leaving; upon his humiliating arrival in Marathon, he was disgruntled and irritated all the more.

The following year, Athens invited Sparta to engage Aegina with them, retaliation for Aegina’s support of the Persians. Even though Aegina had once been a rival Cleomenes had sought to subdue, Leonidas thoroughly rejected the proposal. Athens was feeling cocky, Dieneces told me, having paid careful heed to rumors swarming at his mess. The invitation had been more mocking than sincere, and Leonidas had fairly well told the Athenians to cram it up their asses.

In 486, Darius, the King of Persia died. While this should have brought a collective sigh of relief to Greece, it did not. Demodocus told me in guarded tones, and with a grave expression that Darius’ son Xerxes would prove a greater thorn in the Greek paw than any efforts his father had made. Darius had not sat idly in defeat after Marathon; he had been patiently strengthening his forces and planning a meticulous second attempt against Greece. His efforts did not fade with his passing; Xerxes seized upon them and began in earnest to plot his own invasion.

“We have received secret messages from Demaratus,” Demodocus told me quietly, grimly. “Our one-time Eurypontid king served as counsel to Darius—and now to Xerxes, his son, but it seems Demaratus’ loyalty might yet lie with Sparta.”

“What sort of messages?”

“Hidden beneath layers of wax, transcribed to wooden tablets,” he told me. “He has warned us that Xerxes will come for Greece. His preparations have only just begun. There will be trouble for it. Mark me at that, Echelas. We will see the likes of which none of us have ever known before.”

For years after Marathon, my life revolved around war. My days were consumed with mock battles engaged on the practice fields as our young and fledgling phalanxes were slowly but thoroughly honed into powerful, brutal, unified forces. Battle became instinctive to me. The measure of my footsteps to the cadence of drill flutes; the heft of my shield against my shoulder; the massive recoil of impact against an opposing shield wall; the shaft of my spear clasped against my palm all became components of my very nature. The weight of my armor comforted me, so customary as to make me feel cold and exposed without its burden against my chest and legs. Every year that passed drew me from the shelter of my hebon youth and closer to the hoplite status of manhood, and I earned every measure as the days progressed; I paid for each with exhausted sweat, furious battle cries and drawn blood.

Every morning, I saw Elara at the dawn sacrifices. She would come and stand along the lowest tier of seating and hold my gaze. I seldom saw her otherwise; after his year in the wilds, Clesonymus had returned. I did not want to make trouble for Elara and Iacchus, and thus kept away. It pained and pleased me to see her every morning. There was a poignant mixture of sorrow and joy in her eyes when she would look at me, and my heart would long for her. She brought our son with her, and I watched him grow from this helpless distance. When Iacchus no longer came to the sanctuary grounds with Elara, I needed no explanation; his training had begun.

I continued to visit Hemithea once a week during these years. Whatever distance between us might have closed in the tender and fleeting moments between my rite of passage and my hearing before the Ephors had opened wide once more. We never again spoke of my leaving—or of Demodocus. My interactions were limited to droning recitations for her approval. I did not understand my mother at all, and had come

to realize with something akin to sorrow that I likely never would.

I had asked Demodocus about her once, my voice hesitant. He had been quiet for a long and thoughtful moment before venturing a reply. “Your mother is an extraordinary woman,” he had told me. “And she loves you very much, Echelas. It is difficult for her to express sometimes, as it is for any Spartan mother. She would not see you swayed by any tender doting from her. She would not see you weakened for it. Your accomplishments as a warrior are her reward, kinder to her heart than any sweet words or fond embraces.”

He had dropped me a wink. “The Greeks fear Sparta’s army, but it is our women they should fear more than our phalanxes,” he had said. “Our women are our sharpest spear points, our most impenetrable of shield walls. We are only formidable because our women instill it within us. Never forget that, Echelas—and never doubt Hemithea’s love for you. She nearly died on the road from Delphi to prove it.”

In 482, I reached my thirtieth year. I became a Spartiate in full, as did Dieneces. There was no trial to establish hebony from hoplite; no gauntlet of whips to mark us from youths to men. There was simply a modest election at the common messes to allow our permanent entry, and a quiet afternoon at Hemithea’s courtyard in which I was introduced to the woman she had chosen to be my wife.

Demodocus accompanied me, which marked the first time I had seen him and Hemithea share a measure of space together since I had been a child. Demodocus and I were escorted out onto the courtyard, where Hemithea sat waiting for us. She was not alone.

An older Spartiate stood near her, a man I recognized dimly, but whose name escaped me. Elara stood beside him, and I blinked at her for a long, bewildered moment. Another young woman sat before them. The girl was no more than eighteen; she might have passed for Elara’s twin from that age.

I stared at the girl as my mother offered introductions. The Spartiate man was Agathyrnus; the moment I heard his name, I recognized him as Elara’s father. Even then, it took me

a long, startled, confused moment to realize what was happening. The girl was Creusa, Elara's youngest sister. My breath drew still, and even though my face remained stoically set, I felt my body stiffen with stricken, stunned shock. Hemithea introduced Creusa as my bride. She had arranged for me to marry Elara's sister.

I did not listen as Hemithea explained for my benefit the details of my marriage. She told me of the lands I would inherit as of that moment; lands that had been set aside for me upon my father's death. She explained how many plots were mine by right, and how many Creusa brought with her in dowry from her father's familial plots.

She said all of this, and I did not hear a word of it. I stared at Elara, aghast and heartbroken, unable to comprehend how this had come to pass. They might as well have cleaved my heart from my breast and presented it to me.

Your sister? I wanted to scream at her, even though I knew it had not been Elara's idea. I blinked at Hemithea, and as she droned on, she met my gaze coolly, aloofly, and I understood. Hemithea knew my love for Elara, and about our son. She knew, and this was her method of trying to set things right; this cruel and heartless arrangement.

Look what I have done for you, her gaze seemed to say to me. *I cannot give you Elara, but I will give you this—as close as kin allows. Her sister.*

When we were finished in the courtyard, I was brought to the house in Pitana that would be more Creusa's home than ever mine. I was left alone in the bedchamber to watch the sun wane in a dusky backdrop of shadows and colors through the patio doorway. Creusa had been dressed in a long, draping tunic that afternoon at Hemithea's, with her dark hair bundled against the nape of her neck. When she was delivered to our home, our marriage bed, she had changed—her hair shorn off to the scalp, as was proper Spartan fashion. Her tunic was gone, replaced with the dun-colored cloak of a Spartan ephebe. This was expected; Spartan men were not supposed to be accustomed to the forms of women.

They were supposed to be used to men, and this guise was meant to make our brides more appealing physically to us.

I studied her as she stood upon the threshold of the chamber, trembling like a reed caught in a huff of breeze. She looked as stricken as I felt, her dark eyes enormous and swallowing the delicate measure of her face. She was frightened of me; terrified of what was meant to happen in the confines of that room, and I felt my heart ache for her.

I walked toward her, and she blinked down at the floor, her bottom lip quivering. She looked so much like Elara, especially in the shadow-draped gloom of evening that I nearly lost my breath. I reached out and touched her, brushing the cuff of my fingers against her cheek. She flinched, uttering a fluttering, frightened breath.

"It is alright," I told her softly, drawing her hesitant gaze.

We were expected to lay together. As husband and wife, we were not expected to love one another; we were only meant to make sons and daughters of Sparta together. Creusa and I both knew this; the mechanisms had been explained to us, and I could see that it alarmed and disconcerted her.

She looked so much like Elara, I could pretend. I could touch her and picture her sister. It was cruelty atop whatever other indignities this poor lamb of a girl had been forced to endure that day, but I could not help it. It had been years since I had touched Elara, made love to her; it was a longing that had haunted me, pulled at me in all of the years since.

I can pretend, I thought, cradling Creusa's face between my hands. It can be Elara in my mind. That is what Hemithea meant for me. That is what Elara meant.

I made love to her; not like the Spartans made love—from behind—but face to face and belly to belly, the way Elara had taught me, the way I had always enjoyed with her. To my shame, I imagined Creusa was Elara the entire time. On their wedding nights, other Spartan men approached their brides as they might something completely foreign and

unknown to them. Most had never been with a woman before and did not understand their smaller, curved forms, or the places along them that brought a woman pleasure. I only knew because Elara had taught me; the irony that I now employed these techniques once practiced with her upon her sister was bitter, and not lost upon me. I remembered the things that had pleased her, because it had mattered to me; I loved her and had wanted to please her. I had committed them to memory and used them with Creusa.

She relaxed against my touch when she realized I would not hurt her. In the end, her frightened breaths waned to soft gasps of pleasure. She pressed her thighs against my hips and arched her back against me, her release drawing my own in a sudden, powerful moment that left me shuddering atop her.

I was not allowed by Law to stay with her; when we were finished, I was expected to leave the house and return to my barrack. She watched me rise from our bed and draw my cloak across my shoulder. I did not look at her; I could not look at her. I was ashamed of myself, heartbroken and dismayed.

“Do you love her?” Creusa whispered.

It was night in full now, and there was precious little light whatsoever in the room. I looked down at the floor, pretending to be occupied with my cloak. “Who?” I asked.

“Elara,” she said, and I paused, my breath drawing still. “You...you called me by her name. Over and over, you whispered that to me. You called me Elara.”

“I...” I said, forcing my hands to move again. “I am sorry. Forgive me.”

I walked toward the door, my cheeks blazing with abashed color. I could not breathe; suddenly the air in the room seemed stagnant and hot, choked with the odor from our lovemaking, and it made me dizzy.

“Do you love her?” Creusa asked again.

I paused in the doorway, but did not turn. I said nothing.

"It is alright," Creusa said to me. "She told me."

I glanced at her over my shoulder. A sliver of moonlight had spilled against the bed and I saw her smile, so much like Elara that I felt the strength waver in my knees.

"She loves you, Echelas," Creusa told me. "She told me that, too."

Ten months later, Creusa gave birth to our son, Aeropus. I derived a moment of great pleasure as Hemithea had cradled the swaddled newborn in her arms, her face set with uncharacteristic joy. I had told her coldly, "There is my quotient for Sparta." It was the only time in my entire life that I caught Hemithea by surprise, this moment of my vengeance for the cruel farce of the marriage she had bartered for me. She had blinked at me, the smile fading abruptly from her face, and for that one sweet moment, she looked hurt, stung to the core by my words. I had turned around and left her, the need for further discourse gone.

Dieneces' son was born to his wife, Iphinoe less than a month later.

"There is a bother," he told me on the night of the birth. We lay facing one another in the barrack, and his face was set in a troubled frown. "Now they will expect me to try again sooner or later."

He had enjoyed Iphinoe's pregnancy, because it had absolved him of the obligation to lay with her. His only sexual experiences in life prior to his marriage had been at the hands and hips of Thersites, and while he would concede that laying with his wife was not entirely unpleasant, it remained a clumsy and disconcerting act for him. I had tried in the past to offer some gentle suggestions to him for means to make the matter more enjoyable for both him and Iphinoe, but my attempts left Dieneces blinking at me as if I had been struck daft.

"I am not putting my mouth there," he had hissed at me after one such conversation. His eyes had been enormous with repulsed shock. "Are you mad?"

After assuming his father's throne, the Persian King Xerxes had wasted no time in beginning his preparations to assault Greece. He made no great attempt to hide his efforts, either. Over the years, he slowly moved into Thrace, a region north of Greece and east of Macedon. He took his time, building bridges to advance his army, letting his fleet gather and grow in the northernmost reaches of the Aegean Sea. Athens dispatched spies to Thrace regularly to monitor his progress, and as the years passed, the tidings from the north grew all the more grim. Rumors of the size of his forces filtered across the isthmus and into Laconia; numbers that seemed too astronomical to be believed.

"An army of millions," Dieneces told me during an afternoon mock drill. I had blinked at him, my eyes flying wide and he had nodded grimly, sunlight flashing against his bronze helmet.

"There are not that many people in all of the world," I said, breathless with shock.

"Apparently there are," Dieneces said. "And they all live in Persia."

I asked Demodocus about this that night at the common mess, and he shook his head, chuckling. "Greeks cannot count, Echelas," he told me, clapping me on the shoulder. There was something in his eyes as he spoke, a graveness that did not quite match the wit in his words, and I knew he, too, was worried by the rumors.

In the spring of the year 480, Xerxes and this massive army of Persians he commanded began to move. Word whipped through the Greek states like wildfire in dried witchgrass; the entire mainland and Peloponnese seized with sudden, bright panic. Millions of men—more than all of the armies of the Greek states combined—were on the march, advancing south through Macedon, encroaching upon the northern borders of Thessaly.

Sparta and several other principle Greek states sent envoys north toward Macedon to seek audience with Xerxes,

trying to barter some sort of diplomatic truce with the Persians. They were either killed—their lack of return being sufficient reply—or sent back to their native lands with the grim tidings: Xerxes would not be dissuaded. He meant to see Greece fall.

The oracle of Delphi was bombarded by frightened delegates from throughout Greece upon this news. When Sparta's Pythian representatives returned from seeking the oracle's counsel, their disturbing tidings filled the common messes, and there was talk of little else.

"What does it mean?" I asked Demodocus as we walked to my barrack from the mess that night. The prophecy of the oracle had been recounted over and over again as we supped, and I had nearly committed it to memory: *For you, inhabitants of wide-wayed Sparta—either your great and glorious city must be wasted by Persian men, or if not that, then the bound of Laconia must mourn a dead king from Heracles' line. The might of bulls or lions will not restrain him with opposing strength, for he has the might of Zeus. I declare that he will not be restrained until he utterly tears apart one of these.*

"I think it means the Pythian priests would yield yet again to a fat enough purse," Demodocus replied. "If what the spies from the north have told us is true, I do not doubt that Xerxes has enough power and wealth to sway Delphi. She is telling us what Xerxes wants us to hear. He wants us to lose hope—who better to instill a sense of futility among us all than our most ancient and trusted oracle? She has delivered similar promises to all of the states; even Athens is fearful now with her warnings in mind."

"The oracle said we would either fall to Persia, or mourn a king," I said. "Do you...do you think it means Leonidas?"

"I think exactly what I said, Echelas," he said, his voice sharp and irritable—with circumstances, not with me. "I think Delphi has already fallen to Persia. The oracle wags her tongue, but it is Xerxes' words she utters now, his prophecies, not Apollo's."

Athens sent word to Sparta by courier—a message calling for alliance among the Greek states against Xerxes. This time, Leonidas did not scoff at their offer, and offered no scathing reply. He sent delegates, summoning Demodocus and his other tribal commanders and traveling with them north to Corinth. Demodocus had little time to explain the purpose before he had to leave, but he told me representatives and leaders from throughout civilized Greece had been called to assembly, an unprecedented, collaborative effort to unite their land and naval forces and plan their courses of action against Xerxes.

“It will never work,” Dieneses told me when I relayed this information to him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the fundamental philosophy of the whole of Greece is that there is no whole of Greece. There never has been, never shall be. The Greek states do not get along, and that is precisely how we like it. It has always been that way.”

Dieneses was right. Demodocus, Leonidas and the other commanders came home from Corinth within a matter of weeks, the lot of them surly and scowling from the experience. Demodocus would not talk to me about the meeting, but Dieneses kept his ear to the rattle and hum of mess hall rumor, and was able to glean a bit among the chatter.

“Told you,” he said. “Athens wants to make a stand.” He shook his head and snorted. “Give them one land victory in Marathon and they think they can tackle the trials of Heracles. They want to unify all of our fleets under theirs, all of our armies, too. They want to see us greet Xerxes headlong by land and sea and all at once. It worked for them at Marathon. They seem to think this proves a rule.”

“What did Leonidas say?” I asked.

“He said what all of the other Peloponnese delegates said—that we should withdraw into the Peloponnese; all of the Greek allies should gather their armies here. If we fortify the isthmus of Corinth by land and position this mighty fleet of

Athens' all about by sea, we can stave them off forever, if need be."

I was quiet for a moment, my mind stirring with troubled thoughts.

"They are to meet again next month," Dieneses told me. "I suppose they will keep meeting until they either agree to something, kill each other or Xerxes pays call, whichever comes first."

"Are you frightened, Dieneses?" I whispered.

"Of war?" he asked. "I do not know."

"There are millions of them," I said in a hush.

"Greeks cannot count," Dieneses said. "Everyone knows that, Echelas. Put more than twenty pebbles in a pile in front of any of us, and we will tell you 'hoah, there is a hundred surely enough.' There are not millions of people in the world, just as you said."

When I offered no reply, letting a troubled silence settle between us, he sighed. "Echelas," he said. "Think about it. All of the Greek states cannot agree upon anything, even in our own defense. What makes you think any number of men that size could possibly get along well enough to follow the word of one man? That is all Xerxes is, Echelas. A man. No one man can lead so many. It is not possible."

"Thermopylae," Demodocus told me. It was now the height of summer, and the last meeting in Corinth had concluded days earlier. He had only just returned, and told me that at long last, some semblance of agreement among the Greek states had been reached.

"Thermopylae," I repeated.

He nodded. "To the north, on the shores of the Malian Gulf," he said. "A narrow pass flanked by mountains and the sea. It will be Xerxes' only way from Thessaly into Greece proper, and it is slim enough that the bulk of his forces cannot pass all at once."

This, then, would be the fulcrum of the Greeks' defense. A similar mountain pass had already been explored a month earlier, when the Greek council meeting in Corinth had dispatched ten thousand hoplites from its combined states to northern Thessaly. Here, they had hoped to barricade the Pass of Tempe, separating Thessaly from Macedonia. The idea had been abandoned almost as soon as the troops had arrived; the hoplites had been led by Latychidas' Limnai commander, and he had taken one look at Tempe, declared it unsuitable—as well as undefendable—and ordered his troops about and back again. This had led to further arguments in Corinth; an entire month's worth of planning wasted, and another ahead of them spent bickering and debating.

That is, until Demodocus had broached the option of Thermopylae with Leonidas and the council.

"A modest contingent can make a stand at Thermopylae and fend the Persians off while the fleet strikes to the east, off Cape Artemisium in Euboea," he told me.

"A modest contingent?" I asked. Ten thousand hoplites had marched for Tempe. That sounded far from modest in my estimation.

Demodocus scowled. "Damned Ephors," he muttered, canting his face to spit against the ground. "If not for them, we might yet wage a war someday. The campaign is set for August. They are protesting by Spartan Law—the Karneia festival. They will not yield. The Law says we cannot make war during the lunar festival, and they will see us bound to it."

"But you said a modest contingent," I said. "They are letting some go."

"Yes, Leonidas convinced the Ephors to allow him to leave, to bring a contingent of three hundred Spartiates with him on the condition that Latychidas will lead the rest once the Karneia has concluded."

I blinked as if Demodocus had just slapped me. "Three hundred Spartiates?" I said. "That...that is all? How many among the other states?"

Demodocus met my gaze and smiled without any hint of mirth. "As many as we can collect along the way," he said. "Their eagerness for battle seems to have subsided with the abandoning of Tempe, and they are pleading previous engagements—the Olympic Games. Do not look so stricken. Leonidas has called upon the Dwellers to supplement our forces. Couriers have been dispatched throughout Laconia with the word. As many as will volunteer will be accepted to our ranks."

"Dwellers," I said, incredulous. "Leonidas would see us fight alongside Dwellers?"

"Shall I pinch you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, please," I replied, and he laughed.

"Three hundred Spartiates, and of those, only ones with sons," Dieneces said that night at the barrack, his gaze distant and distracted. After a moment, he blinked and looked at me. "I am going to volunteer."

"What?" I asked.

"They will need line officers—especially with Dwellers filling the ranks," he said. "The more wits the better in that misbegotten circumstance, I say."

"Dieneces, you cannot do that," I said, my eyes widening with alarm. "They are saying it is suicide—that Leonidas has called for men with sons because he wants no Spartan bloodline to die out. Let us wait here—we can march with Latychidas after the Karneia, and we can yet fight. Better odds among better ranks."

"I am not afraid to die, Echelas," he told me.

"I am not, either," I said. "But there is no honor when a good man dies without cause."

Cleomenes had told me that ten years earlier in prison. I would not have anticipated that the man's words would ever become some measure of wisdom to me, and yet, time and again, they proved aptly so.

“There is cause,” Dieneces said. “You do not see that?” He raised his brow. “Echelas, why do you suppose Leonidas would march without the other Greeks behind him to Thermopylae? It is no different than the Pythian Games when we were children. Remember the old man in the stadium? The whole of Greece knows what is right enough to applaud it, but only Sparta will see it through. Whoever goes to Thermopylae may be marching headlong to his death, as you said, but it is not heedless, Echelas. It is with honor. You know Tyrtaeus’ ode to courage: ‘For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can endure to face the blood and slaughter, to close against the enemy and fight with his hands.’”

I blinked at him, stricken, and he took my hand. “I am going to Thermopylae,” he told me.

I held his gaze. “Then I am going with you,” I whispered.

Dieneces smiled. “Splendid,” he said. “You pack the cheese. I will see to the wine.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I would like to speak with you, please," I said to Hemithea. I stood at the threshold of her courtyard, where she sat in her customary seat, sipping from a glass of wine. She raised her brows at me as she lowered her cup, cradling it between her palms. This was as much invitation as I would get from her, and so, thus proffered, I stepped out onto the patio.

I was en route for the Spartan Assembly meeting. The gathering had been called to summon volunteers from among the Spartiates to accompany Leonidas to Thermopylae. I did not have much time to linger or mince words with Hemithea.

"I am going to volunteer for Thermopylae," I told her.

Not much I had said or done in thirty-two years had moved or affected Hemithea in any seeming fashion, and this statement was no different than most others in the past. She looked at me, her expression impassive, and took a drink of her wine.

"Does Demodocus know?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

She nodded, one of her brows raised slightly.

"Should he know?" I asked. "Has he that right, Mother?"

She looked at me for a long moment, her dark eyes piercing. "He will try to dissuade you," she said.

“Why?” I said, meeting her gaze evenly. She would never admit that he was my father. I could be standing before her disemboweled and dying, my liver and lights dripping against her patio cobbles and she would yet keep her misbegotten little secret.

“I am going,” I said. “I thought you should know. Hear the truth from my own mouth, rather than by rumor or muttered gossip.”

I said this deliberately as yet another jab, and it was not lost upon her. She looked at me, her eyes hardened and cool as she sipped her wine again.

“Should you go?” she asked me. “Ten years ago, you came to me with tears in your eyes, whimpering that there was no place for you in Sparta. Thermopylae will be a place for Spartan sons, men with the mettle her Laws have instilled in their hearts. Would you find a place among them, Echelas?”

“I think so, yes,” I replied.

“Still you are not certain,” she said. “If you lack the conviction to see it through, Echelas, you should remain behind.”

“So that you can mock me again?” I said. “Call me a Trembler?”

“Do not go on my account,” she snapped, her brows crimping. “Do not dare stand there and say you will go only to please me.”

“Then do not dare sit there and try to convince me not to go, Mother,” I snapped back, and at my sharp tone, Hemithea’s eyes flew wide, sunlight flashing across them hotly. “All of my life, you have tried to manipulate matters to your misconceived notion of my benefit. Do you really think I am so stupid?”

“If I ever considered you stupid, I would have killed you myself,” Hemithea said, frowning. “I would not have waited for the Elders at your birth, or the Ephors when you stood accused of killing Pelorus. I would have clamped my hands against your throat and throttled the hopeless, witless

breath from your lungs. You are blessed, Echelas, marked for greatness by—”

“Do not!” I shouted, cowing her momentarily in start. I turned away from her, forking my fingers through my hair. “Stop saying that! All of my life, you have told me that—and precious little else, Hemithea!”

I whirled to her. “I am not Heracles! I am not Achilles—I am no more and no less than any other man! Why can that not be enough for you? Why must everything in my days be some measure of greatness? Can I not simply aspire to this, Mother—to be a Spartiate like Pelorus?”

She rose to her feet and I held her gaze. “I am going to Thermopylae because that is my place, not because I long for some greatness of the gods,” I said. “I am a Spartiate. By Law, I will fight shield to shield with my fellows and stand my ground—give my life, if that is what comes. I cannot ask more of myself than this—and I can expect no less, either.”

“Why?” Hemithea asked, and I blinked at her, startled from the reverie of my ranting. She looked at me, her brow smooth again, the corner of her mouth lifted slightly. “Why, Echelas?”

“Because I am a Spartiate,” I said.

“A son of Sparta,” Hemithea told me, still smiling. She came to me and touched my face, pressing her palm against my cheek. “I have never wanted or expected you to be Heracles or Achilles. I have only wanted you to find your own measure of greatness, Echelas.”

She gazed upon me with something in her face I had only ever seen once, when she had tended to me after my rite of passage. She looked at me with love, and I lost my breath.

“Go to Thermopylae if your heart leads you there,” she said. “For that is your place among us, Echelas. That is your measure of greatness.”

“Mother...” I whispered.

She embraced me, drawing her arms about my neck and holding me gently, briefly. I felt her hair brush against my

face as she turned her cheek, speaking softly against my ear. "Come back to me," she said. "With your shield or upon it."

Every Spartiate at the Assembly volunteered for Thermopylae. I thought Leonidas would weep as he stood before us at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, and every man came forward to offer his service. Even those among the Assembly who had no sons and were not qualified to volunteer stepped forward, and as the five Ephors who had denied us all the honor of marching with our king in full watched, we could see their faces blaze with abashed rebuke.

Whatever shame touched their hearts did not sway their decision, however, and they retreated in the company of the kings to decide from among us those three hundred to go. It took them two hours to return to the grounds of the sanctuary and call us out by name. Dieneses was chosen, as was I. Demodocus was named a commanding officer, while Pedaeus was appointed to the phalanx ranks. Clesonymus had stepped forward to volunteer; the first occasion I had seen him in nearly five years, and when his name was not called for the three hundred, I watched him shrink like a blossom abandoned by the sun, his shoulders hunching, his eyes upon the ground.

We were to leave with the dawn. It would leave precious little time for farewells, and as the Assembly disbanded, Dieneses and I stood together, uncertain and immobile.

"I...I suppose I should find my wife," Dieneses remarked quietly, glancing at me.

"Yes," I said, nodding, blinking at my toes. The realization of what we had just committed ourselves to was at last dawning upon us in full, and neither of us knew what to think or feel. "I...me, too."

"I will probably have to lay with her one last time," he said with a weary sigh. "Just in case I have one son left in me."

I laughed, hooking my arm around his neck and drawing him against me. He hugged me. "I will see you at the

barrack,” I whispered in his ear, and he nodded wordlessly, clapping his hand against my shoulder.

I found Creusa sitting outside in the courtyard of our home, holding Aeropus in her lap and singing to him. He was two now, and rather squirmy, and he wriggled in her arms as she tried to distract him with playful bouncing. She looked up when I stepped onto the patio, and her expression grew quizzical with surprise, her mouth fluttering into a smile. I did not customarily pay call in the daytime.

“Echelas...” she said, rising to her feet, grunting softly as she shifted Aeropus’ wiggling weight in her arms.

“I have been chosen for Thermopylae,” I told her.

She blinked at me, too young yet for the characteristic stoicism of Spartan women to be instilled in her fully. She was caught off guard only for a moment, and then lowered her eyes, staring at the ground. “Oh,” she said, loosening her embrace on our son. She stooped somewhat and let him slide from her arms to stand of his own wobbly, uncertain accord. “What...what an honor.”

She straightened, but did not look at me. Aeropus did, his dark eyes round with wonder, as he was unaccustomed to my presence. He was ordinarily asleep for the night when I came to Creusa, and fascinated, he toddled toward me, his little mouth agape, his hands outstretched. It was my cloak that astounded him more so than me; he latched onto the scarlet folds, hooking his small fingers in the fabric.

“Aeropus...” Creusa said, walking toward him.
“Aeropus, do not...”

“It is alright,” I said, drawing her to a halt. I genuflected before the boy, and now my beard fascinated him. He pawed at it with fingertips dampened by slobber, as he had only moments earlier drawn them from his mouth.

“Hullo, little one,” I said softly. I stroked my hand against his hair, and he ducked shyly away from me. He turned and scurried back to Creusa, hiding behind her legs and tucking his face against the long train of her tunic.

"I am bringing Abas with me," I said to Creusa as I stood. "His portion of the rent allotments will be missing from this next cycle."

"Alright," she said softly, nodding once.

"My lots will be Aeropus' when he is due," I said. "The Ephors told us that no arrangements needed to be made. There should be no difference in the tending, and you can keep issuing my contributions to the mess in his name. He should have no trouble being elected when the time comes."

Creusa nodded again, looking down at Aeropus, draping her hand against the cap of his head.

"I will be leaving with the dawn," I said. "I...I cannot think of any matters that need tending that you do not already see to well or fully, but if you should think of any...this afternoon, I could..."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "No, I...I can think of none."

"If you need anything," I said, drawing her gaze. "If you ever want for anything, you can turn to my mother."

"Alright," Creusa said.

We looked at one another. If there had ever been anything to say between us, it had already been uttered, the breath to issue it waned. She lowered her gaze again, and I nodded, turning to leave.

"Thank you, Creusa," I said softly, pausing on the threshold. I heard her breath flutter softly with tears.

"You...you are welcome, Echelas," she said.

I went to Elara's house. Clesonymus answered the door. The two of us stood face to face, holding each other's gaze. The humiliation of being declined for the Thermopylae campaign still shrouded him like a heavy cowl. We said nothing, merely staring at one another, and then his brows pinched slightly after a moment. "What do you want?" he asked.

“To see Elara,” I replied. He did not intimidate me anymore. The hatred that had once seemed so terrifying to me now only seemed pathetic. I did not wait for his permission or invitation; I shoved him aside with my shoulder, entering his home.

“Will you greet Thermopylae with courage, Echelas?” he called after me as I walked across the foyer. His voice was sharp and mocking as he summoned the last, fervent measures of his disdain. It was like tipless arrows slapping against me; the buzzing of flies in my ears. “Will you die with honor in that last good fight?”

I turned to him, and at my hardened gaze, he shied back a step. “With more honor than you will ever know,” I told him.

Elara already knew. I am sure Clesonymus had derived great pleasure in telling her of my appointment. I found her alone in her bedchamber facing her courtyard door. She turned when I entered, and I saw she was weeping.

She did not say anything at first. She uttered a soft, anguished sob and then rushed across the room to me. I caught her in my arms, holding her against me. I closed my eyes and lowered my face toward her shoulder, feeling her hair brush lightly against my cheek, drawing the sweet fragrance of her against my nose.

“Do not go,” she whispered. She drew away, looking up at me, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Do...do not go, Echelas, do not...please do not go.”

“Elara,” I said softly, pressing my palm against her cheek. She turned her face toward my hand, closing her eyes as she whimpered against sobs.

“You once asked me to come away with you,” she said. “To...to leave Sparta...to bring Iacchus and all of us leave.” She looked at me, her eyes filled with despair and implore. “Let us go now,” she begged. “Please, Echelas, let...let us leave now, right this moment. Wherever you want to go...we can...we can go there...we...”

"I cannot," I told her, anguished.

"Yes, you can," she pleaded, clutching at my cloak. "I have horses—swift horses. We can go into the forests, to...to Iacchus' camp and we can take him. We can leave for the north...someplace where it...where it is safe for us, and we..."

"Elara," I said, reaching for her. "I cannot."

"Yes, you can!" she cried, ducking away from my hand and staggering backward. She began to sob again, her shoulders shuddering. "Yes, you can, Echelas! I...I was wrong! I was wrong—do not make me answer for it! Not like this! There is something for us outside of Sparta, and we...we can find it together! There must be, Echelas—I was wrong. Please...please do not make me answer for it like this!"

"Elara," I whispered, stepping toward her. I cradled her face between my hands. She shook her head, trying to pull away from me, and I leaned toward her, kissing her. "Listen to me. Please listen to me."

She blinked at me, whimpering and trembling, and I kissed her again. "Once I would have given everything that I had—or would ever have—to hear you say that," I whispered.

"I...I am saying it now," she said. "It is not too late. Do not say it is too late. Please...!"

"It is too late," I told her, and she shook her head again. "Elara, it is different now. I am different now, and I...I must do this. It has been asked of me, and I cannot refuse."

"You will die!" she cried, wrenching herself away from me. She stumbled back, weeping. "You will die!" she cried again. "You...you will die for Sparta!"

"Yes," I told her, and she stared at me, stricken. "I am a Spartiate, Elara. I will die for Sparta."

She blinked at me, gasping softly, her hands fluttering helplessly in front of her face. She ran toward me, and I held her again, lifting her from her feet and clutching her to my heart.

We made love, both of us realizing fully that it would be our last moment—our final chance. She drew me to her bed,

her hands pushing the folds of my cloak away from me. She wept as I lowered myself against her; as she drew her thighs against my hips and let me fill her slowly, sweetly, her tears spilled anew.

“I love you,” I told her; over and over, I whispered this to her, stroking her face. “Do not cry, Elara. Please do not.”

She lifted her head toward mine, taking my face between her hands, kissing me. She found the rhythm of my hips and matched it with her own, drawing me more deeply, urgently. We moved together with a desperate longing; a passion tempered by mutual heartache. When I drove her to climax; when her thighs pressed against me and her fingers hooked into the muscles of my back, she cried out my name. Her voice was hoarse with anguish, loud and standing in bold challenge to Clesonymus’ presence somewhere beyond the chamber threshold. I found my own release as her body tightened against me, inside and out, and I closed my eyes, my voice abandoning me.

“I love you, Echelas,” Elara whispered, as I pressed my forehead against hers and we trembled together, flushed and gasping to reclaim our breaths. “My heart will never change and I will never forget. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I told her, kissing her throat, her hair. “I will always love you, Elara.”

My last visit that afternoon was to the banks along the Magoula river, near the Spartan youth camp. Here, the adolescent ephebes had gathered for boxing matches. They looked at me as I walked among them, their eyes widening with wonder, their whispered voices blending together in marveling harmony as they recognized my red cloak, my status as a Spartiate.

I found Iacchus faring as poorly as I ever had at his age against his boxing opponent. He was fourteen now, and small, just as I had been. I watched him weather blow after blow from the larger boy he faced, and at last, when he hit the

ground, he huddled there, gasping for breath, his mouth bleeding.

As his opponent left the boxing field, I walked toward Iacchus. He moved slowly, drawing his legs beneath him, wincing as he tried to reclaim his breath. I stood over him, and he blinked up at me. His eyes widened at the sight of my red cloak. He did not recognize my face; he had not seen me in seven years.

“Iacchus?” I asked him.

He nodded his head, his eyes round and uncertain. “Yes, sir,” he said.

I flapped my hand at him. “Come here a moment.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, clambering to his feet. He followed me hesitantly, his eyes upon the ground.

I drew him to the side of the boxing area, beneath a stand of pine trees. “Look up at me,” I said.

“Yes, sir,” Iacchus said, raising his eyes from his toes.

I took the corner of my cloak, pressing it gingerly against his lip. He sucked in a soft breath, his brows lifting. “Hurts, does it not?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, nodding.

“Good,” I told him, and he blinked at me in surprise. “Take a lesson from it. I have seen cornered rabbits make a better stand than you. Who is your mentor?”

“Lycas, sir,” he said.

I knew Lycas; he was a young hebon from my village, a good lad. “Do you listen to him when he offers instruction, Iacchus?”

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“Learn to listen better, then,” I told him. He hung his head, abashed. “No one told you to lower your eyes, ephebe.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, raising his gaze.

I closed my hands into fists and brought them toward my face. “Keep your hands like this,” I told him. I ducked my

head toward my shoulder, moving my hands to block an imaginary blow. "Catch the punch against your hands, not your head. It works much better that way."

He blinked at me, surprised by my instruction. "Yes...yes, sir," he said.

"Keep your hands up next time. Draw his punch against your arms and then hook around, get him in the belly." I swung my fist around in an upper cut. "Drop your shoulder and step into your punch. Knock the breath from him. Then straighten up and come around..." I swung my other fist about. "...like this to send his wits behind his wind. Do you see?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

I looked down at him for a long moment. "Just because a boy is stronger than you does not mean he is quicker. Remember that, lad."

"I will, sir," Iacchus said, as wide-eyed with wonder as if Apollo himself were before him.

I blinked against the sting of unbidden tears. "You...you will be alright, Iacchus," I whispered.

He smiled at me. "Thank you, sir."

That night, Dieneces and I lay facing one another on the floor of our barrack, both of us too anxious and frightened to sleep, and neither willing to admit it. We tried to pass the time with idle conversation—fond and familiar habit to us.

"What did Demodocus say tonight at the mess?" Dieneces whispered.

"Nothing," I said. "He was not there. Last minute planning sessions with Leonidas, I think. He would not have, anyway. To say something against me going would be fairly well admitting he was my father."

"Why does he not just say it?" Dieneces said. "They cannot take away your Spartiatehood now, can they? After so many years?"

"I do not know," I admitted. "You saw how everyone stepped forward today to volunteer, and still the Ephors would not relent. They are bound by the Law."

"Gagged, whipped, trussed and throttled by it..."
Dieneces muttered.

"They will stand by the Law, is my point," I said.
"They would probably cast me out if they learned about Demodocus. Spartiate status or not, they would strip me to a Trembler. Or worse."

"Five grown men and not a brain among them,"
Dieneces said, frowning.

"Elara wept," I said softly. "She...she begged me to run away with her. I wanted to so badly."

"I know," he said.

"Refusing her...telling her no...by my breath,
Dieneces, it was the hardest thing I have ever had to do."

"But you did it," he said.

I nodded. "I broke her heart," I whispered.

"She has broken your heart all of these years."

"No, she has not," I said, glancing at him. "She...she has always made me happy."

"And sad," he said. "I have seen you sad over her. I have never understood it..." He poked me in the shoulder to make me smile. "But it has happened. All of our lives practically, you have been daft over that woman."

"It is not daftness—it is love," I said, and he shook his head, smirking. "What? Have you not ever felt love, Dieneces?"

"I do not know," he said. "What does it feel like?"

I shrugged my shoulder. "It is nice," I said. "It...it is when you...you would give up everything for someone, I think. Everything you called your own if only to keep them safe, see them happy. Even...even when it hurt you...when it cost you dearly, you would see it through for them. Only for them."

Dieneces was quiet for a moment. "And you feel this for Elara?" he asked at length.

"Yes," I said, smiling and feeling sorrowful at the admission all at the same time. "Yes, I do."

He smirked and shook his head. "You are mad," he said.

"A mad man and your friend," I agreed, nodding.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It took eleven days to travel north to the Kallidromos mountain range and reach the pass of Thermopylae. Three hundred Spartiates marched under Leonidas' command, supplemented by one thousand Dweller men who had volunteered from throughout the breadth of Laconia. The fact that so many Dwellers had come forward to battle on Sparta's behalf—more than three to one over the number of trained Spartiates dispatched—served as a further slap in the face to the Ephors, but they remained unmoved in their decision to restrict the mobilization of more Spartiate troops until after the Karneia.

Outside of Laconia, Leonidas found little support where he might have hoped for it the most—from the other regions of the Peloponnese. With the exception of the Arcadians, the others stubbornly clung to the notion that the isthmus of Corinth should be fortified; their armies ensconced in their homelands to repel any Persian invasion.

We found the mettle lacking in the Peloponnese in unexpected places upon the Greek mainland. Thespieae, Phocis and Malis all rallied to Leonidas' cause, as did the Locrians of Opus and the hoplites of Thebes. Though none of them had more than a few hundred men to offer, the fact that they came forward willingly served as marks of honor in their favor. Leonidas was able to coax them convincingly with promises that Latychidas—and the bulk of the Spartiate army—would follow close behind us. All that would be asked of those at

Thermopylae, he declared, would be to stand fast and hold the pass until these reinforcements arrived.

We had nearly seven thousand Greek men from all walks of life and semblances of service among us when we at last arrived at Thermopylae. This seemed a suitable number in my opinion. I had seen the fallen Persians left behind in the wake of the Battle of Marathon ten years earlier; no matter the rumors to Persian numbers, surely an army no greater than this awaited us at Thermopylae.

Some of the Phocians awaited us at Thermopylae, and as we set up our respective encampments, framed by the Malian Gulf to our right, and the sheer, towering cliffs of Kallidromos to our left, they passed grim rumors among us.

“More than fifty regions and thirty commanders among their troops, they are saying,” a Spartiate named Ceto said as we trundled our weapons and armor from horseback and mule toward the center of our campsite. “Five million men advance under the Persian banners, the Phocians are saying. They have seen them firsthand.”

“One side of the horizon to the next, the earth is blackened by their numbers,” whispered another, named Rhesus. “No scrap of earth is left untrampled by their feet. Like locusts, stripping trees bare, fields to the dirt.”

“Five million men,” said another, a man I had known from boyhood named Maron. He shook his head and spat against the ground. “Five million men,” he muttered again in dismay.

“I have heard when their archery brigades fire, the arrows block out the sun itself,” Maron’s brother Alphaeus said.

“Hoah, there is good news,” Dieneces said, grinning. “We shall have our fight in the shade, then.”

We were at a place along the pass the Phocians called the Middle Gate. Leonidas had chosen this point as our most viable position because reports in Corinth had described a defensive wall bridging the narrow margin of space between cliff sides and sea. Phocians had built it generations earlier to

stave off invasions. However, we had discovered the wall in a ruinous state, more rubble than mortar, and we had all watched Leonidas throw his hands to the gods and utter a disgusted little shout. He had stomped about for the better part of the hour, his head tucked near Demodocus' and several of his other commanders, and then they had ordered us to rebuild the wall.

"Shore it up now!" the commanders shouted out, tromping through our camps. "However you can, whatever you can find! Fortify that wall!"

And thus, we spent the first day at Thermopylae in the wretched summer sun, trundling stones or loads of sand from the gulfshore to the wall, grunting and stumbling as we tried to rectify decades of abandon and neglect. For most of the day, the weather was hot but favorable; the sky flawless and pristine overhead. By late afternoon, however, the wind had picked up, growing swift and whipping inland from the sea. A line of clouds grew along the horizon, encroaching toward the land. During a break from our labors, Dieneces and I stood with the foaming surf slapping against our feet, our heels sunk into the damp sand, watching the clouds grow thick and dark as they approached.

"That does not bode well," Dieneces remarked as we heard a low grumble of distant thunder.

The storm reached us by nightfall, the likes of which I had never witnessed in all of my days. The wind had reached a violent, buffeting crescendo; the black underlay of clouds danced with splayed streaks of lightning. The gulf had been stoked into a furious frenzy and waves crashed into the beach, spewing water as far ashore as our campsites, spraying the mountain faces. The air shuddered with thunder; it rolled in a seemingly endless tirade. When the swollen skies finally opened, they sent a stinging downpour of icy rain pelting upon us, and we huddled along the cliffs of Kallidromos, our cloaks wrapped about us, our shields over our heads in vain efforts to keep dry.

"Bad omens," Maron muttered. We crouched with our shields overlapping, our shoulders aching from the burden of

bearing them at unfamiliar angles above our heads. We were all sopping and shivering, flinching with every booming thunderclap, our eyes flying wide with each searing, hissing bolt of lightning.

“Bad weather,” Dieneces told him, his teeth chattering. “That is all. A little misfortune.”

“It is a hellespont,” said another Spartiate, Pylonor. “Notus, god of the south winds and Poseidon of the sea come together and grapple. Storms blow southward from the Thracian Sea this time of the year.”

“What about the fleet?” Maron asked, wide-eyed. “Our ships are stationed east across the gulf at Artemisium.”

Pylonor met his gaze. “Pray for them,” he said solemnly, rain spattering from his lips. “Pray they withdrew south of the Euboean peninsula to wait it out.”

None of us found much sleep that night. The storm raged nearly until the dawn. When morning broke, the last of the clouds waned to allow new sunlight to find us. We stood along the beach and watched in dismay as the tide slowly withdrew, leaving behind littered scraps of wood, broken timbers from shattered boat hulls.

“May the gods have mercy,” Demodocus murmured, coming to stand beside me. We walked together slowly along the shore, staring at the debris. He raised the blade of his hand to his brow and scanned the horizon, squinting against the glare of the sunrise.

“Are they ours?” I asked, coming upon a large piece from a broken keel. It had been buried in the sand, protruding outward like an accusing finger.

“I do not know,” he replied. “Themosticles has a good head for the sea. He likely saw the storm coming. He might have had time to draw the fleet far enough south in the gulf.”

Themosticles was one of Athens’ leaders, the man whose foresight had seen the city dedicate massive resources in the past years to building and amassing a large fleet of triremes to counter the Persian navy.

"If...if these are not Athens' ships, then whose?" I asked.

Demodocus raised his brow. "Any sailor worth his measure from the mainland would know this is the season for hellesponts," he said. "But I would wager the Persians would not. They were sailing southward from the Thracian Sea. Maybe they got caught."

He scanned the horizon again, and puzzled, I followed his gaze. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"This is not the last storm that will strike," Demodocus said. "Megistias told us waves of water and thunder will find us again, and then a great flood of men will come."

Megistias was a seer from Arcania traveling with us, an elderly man who had proffered his counsel to Leonidas. Every morning since he had joined us, he made sacrifices to the gods, and that dawn, his offerings had yielded grave tidings.

A great flood of men. It did not take much to know this meant the Persians.

"The storm has damaged the wall," Demodocus said, turning away from the water and walking toward the cliffs. "Enough gawking, Echelas. There is work to be done—enough to last the day through."

I looked down at the broken keel lodged in the sand and surf at my feet. *A great flood of men will come.* I shivered and turned around, following Demodocus back toward our encampment.

Our work on the wall was hampered by the departure of the Phocians.

"Leonidas sent them into the mountains," Dieneces told me, his brows furrowed, his teeth gritted as he tucked his shoulder against a crumbling mound of dirt and stone. He tried to keep it from tumbling as I added heavy stones to stabilize it.

"The mountains?" I asked.

He nodded. "There is a channel through the peaks," he said. "The Anopaea path—it circumvents Thermopylae." He glanced up at me, wincing as a smattering of grit rained down on his head. "The Phocians built a rot damn wall to stop enemies who would only traipse around them to attack. There is the same logic they used to engineer this crumbling heap."

"The Persians will use it," I said, pausing in my work long enough to blink at him, aghast.

"If they find it, likely so," Dieneses agreed. "But they have not found it yet. That is obvious. They are plowing headlong for Thermopylae."

"What will the Phocians do up there?" I asked, looking toward the cliffs.

"Fend them off, one would think, if they happen to come around," Dieneses replied. "Or at least come running back down quickly enough to give us warning. Are you going to place that rock, or balance it against your arms all morning long?"

Despite Megistias' warnings, another storm did not come upon us that night. This granted us no reprieve or the luxury of sleep, however. At dusk, Leonidas called us all together, and dispatched word among his unit officers that we had work yet to be done.

Beyond the northern edge of the mountain range lay agricultural plains. The Persian army would cross through these lands to reach Thermopylae. Along their way through Macedon and Thessaly, they had been laying claim to rural farm villages en route; villages that surrendered to Xerxes, tendering food and supplies to the army. Leonidas meant to keep them from finding such benefit from the lands north of Thermopylae, and he ordered all of us to spread out and travel north, setting fire to everything we could find. We burned laden fields ready for autumn harvest; we set fire to orchards, rendering trees into cinders. We demolished villages and raided farms, seizing their food stores and throwing the carcasses of slaughtered animals into their wells to pollute them. We

traveled the night through on this violent, destructive mission so that those villages we displaced could not accurately gauge our numbers, and in turn, share this information with the Persians as they passed through the region.

As a line officer in the phalanxes under Leonidas, my primary responsibility was to trail behind the hoplites assigned to me and make certain they left nothing untouched or spared. We came upon a small house late in the night's endeavors. While some of my men smashed down spindly corral fences to herd livestock toward our camp, others stormed the house and storage barns in search of supplies. I listened to the sounds of furniture smashing, overturning within the house, and a woman screaming at the hoplites, cursing them. I heard small, warbling voices—children crying—and I walked toward the house. I ducked my head to keep my helmet crest from smacking the door frame as I stepped inside.

"Bastards!" the woman shrieked as I entered. She was standing in a corner with her husband, an older man with a bushy, unkempt beard. A pair of young children cowered behind her, wailing like abandoned kittens. The woman balanced a large basket of figs against her hip, and snatched the fruits one at a time to hurl at us. Her brows were furrowed, her lips drawn back from her teeth like a dog snarling, and when she sent a fig flying with alarming accuracy toward my head, I jerked sideways, stumbling to avoid being struck.

"You are bastards!" she screamed, throwing another fig. "Bastard sons, all of you! You deserve to rot beneath Persian heels that you would ruin us so! Bastards!"

A fig whistled in the air and I ducked my head toward my right shoulder as it flew past my ear. "Hoah—!" I yelped.

Two of the hoplites charged the woman, and her words dissolved into furious screeches as they overpowered her, wrestling the fig basket from her grasp and dragging her out of the house. Another pair of soldiers took the children, hoisting them like feed sacks against their hips and carrying them toward the threshold. The children wept and screamed in panicked, shrill voices, slapping at the soldiers' arms and kicking their feet.

“Do not hurt them,” the older man said, rising to his feet. He had been sitting on a small stool, observing a remarkable calm that stood in stark and bewildering contrast to the histrionics of his wife and children. When hoplites approached to take him from the house, he turned his head back and forth, his eyes wide, his hands outstretched and groping at the air. “They do not understand. They mean no harm. Do not hurt them.”

He did not resist the soldiers who caught him by the elbows and led him toward the door. “Take what you need,” he said, still canting his head back and forth. “I know what you are doing, and why. Do what you must, only do not hurt my family.”

There was something about his voice that struck me as peculiar. “Wait,” I said to the soldiers, holding up my hand to stay them. The hoplites paused, and the old man blinked at me, his expression puzzled. I stepped closer to him, studying his face. If I might have found anything familiar in his features, it was lost beneath the cover of his beard and mustache, his overgrown nest of eyebrows. His eyes were clouded over with a dim, milky film and I blinked, drawing back in surprise.

“What happened to your eyes?” I asked.

“An infection took my sight, sir,” he replied, tilting his face toward the sound of my voice. “Some eight years ago, I think. Another found my leg, and left me crippled on my right. If it were not for the woman you took just now caring for me, I might have surely died.”

His voice was low and gravelly, edged with a rough-hewn hoarseness that again stirred that disquiet within me; a disconcerting notion that I had heard it before.

“What is your name, sir?” I asked him.

He lowered his head toward the ground in respectful deference. “They call me Ilus the Younger, sir, those that would speak of me with any acquaintance.”

I glanced between the hoplites. They were the only two remaining in the house; the others had stepped outside to tend to the woman and children, or the food stores in the

barns. "Go," I said quietly, nodding my head toward the door. "Leave us a moment. I will see to this man."

"Yes, sir," the hoplites said.

I waited a few breaths once they had taken their leave, and then I cocked my head, studying the old man. "Look up at me, sir," I said. He raised his eyes, but again, I could not place him. It was his voice more so than anything that gnawed at me. "Have we met before?" I asked softly. "Do you know me, sir?"

"Not your face, as much as your voice, lad," he said, and I drew back, my breath caught in my throat, my eyes flying wide in realization. "It has been some ten years past, but yes, I know your voice."

"Cleomenes—!" I gasped, staggering backward, jerking my sword from my sheath. I shoved it between us, leveling the blade at him.

Cleomenes lifted his hands, presenting his palms and turning his face toward me. "You made it to Spartiatehood, then, Echelas, son of Aeropus," he said. "And now you would make your stand at Thermopylae, and die like a proper son of Sparta."

"I...I am a son of Sparta," I said, the sword shaking in my hand. I was absolutely breathless with shock; that my knees did not abandon me was nothing less than astonishing.

Cleomenes is dead! my mind screamed. I...I heard them kill him! I heard the sounds of their sword strikes...I heard him hit the ground!

Cleomenes smiled. "Here is irony I might not have expected had I lived to be one hundred," he said.

"You...you are dead," I whispered, leveling my sword at his throat. "I...I saw you...the...the Spartiates came at Menelaion, and I...I heard them..."

"You heard plenty, yes," Cleomenes said with a nod. "You saw nothing, though, Echelas, if you duly recall. You saw only men dressed in the guises of slaves storm past your cell and back once more. No more than this."

I blinked at him, stricken.

“Who is to say one among those men who entered my cell stepped forth again in the end?” he asked. “One might have traded his clothing with me. One might have stomped his feet against the ground, while others clattered and banged their steel about to mimic the sounds of gruesome murder.”

“What...?” I whispered.

He approached me, but paused as I let the edge of my blade press against the side of his throat. “Keep away from me,” I hissed.

“I mean no harm to you, lad,” Cleomenes said. “I might have once, but those days are behind me now, and I have more than made amends by you.”

“Amends?” I said. “You left me to die at the Ephors’ command, you bastard! You knew the truth—you knew my innocence—and you said nothing! You might have tricked your own way from prison, but you left me behind!”

“You are not dead, Echelas,” Cleomenes told me pointedly. “Obviously, I did not leave you to die.”

When I blinked at him, stunned, reeling and confounded, he chuckled softly. “Come now, lad,” he said. “Who do you think inspired my daughter to rail against the Ephors on your behalf?”

“Wh...what...?” I whispered.

“There was no other way,” Cleomenes told me. “And I had no other choice. The Ephors had to believe I was dead—just as they had to be convinced indisputably of your innocence. I sent word to my daughter—messages through Spartiates yet loyal to me, with her replies delivered with the bread rations they gave us. Gorgo may hate me, but she has wits in her skull. She knew Sparta would be better served by my survival—just as she would by yours.” He smiled. “And so we both yet draw breath, lad. There are my amends. I saved you, just as I told you I could.”

“And now you would betray us,” I snapped. “Why are you here? Waiting for Xerxes to come so that you can offer him counsel?”

His brows pinched and he scowled. "Years of my life waned to see Sparta stand against Persia—do you truly think I would let a little matter like my execution sway me to Xerxes' breast?" He brought his hand toward my sword, trying to bat it away from him. "Lower your blade."

"No," I said.

"Put your sword down, Echelas," he said, sounding irritable. "I am old, blind, half-lame and unarmed. Hardly a worthwhile opponent."

I lowered my sword slowly.

"You are here because of me. Athens has her spies, and Sparta has me—Ilus the Younger, her humble servant. For years now, I have sent word to Gorgo—tidings she has kindly passed along anonymously to Leonidas, and counsel she has offered to Latychidas. Neither of them are the wiser, and yet they both benefit from it."

"You...?" I said. I frowned at him, raising the sword again. "You are lying. Demaratus has sent us word from the north of the Persians—messages hidden in wax tablets. He is the Kings' secret counsel—not you."

Cleomenes snorted. "Do not insult me," he snapped. "You have wits within you, Echelas—you tell me truly. Between me and Demaratus, who would risk themselves to see Sparta know glory? Demaratus—who shirked such opportunity when presented freely with it upon the throne, or me—who spent more than thirty years of my life on the throne strengthening our state, preparing her for this very moment?"

I blinked at him, my blade faltering in my hands again, dropping toward the floor.

"Who, indeed, Echelas," Cleomenes said, smiling at me. "When I learned the Pass of Tempe had been abandoned, there seemed little other point of defense save this—Thermopylae. And yet, in a timeframe bound by the speed of Xerxes' forces, and the rotted waxing progress of our temperamental moon, I knew that the Ephors would never consent to dispatch our forces en masse. Not during the Karneia. But if three hundred could be sent—with Dwellers to

strengthen their numbers—then there might be hope, a chance to hold the pass until the Spartiates are free to wage war.”

He smiled crookedly. “Leonidas may curse my name, but my father’s blood yet courses within his veins, too. We are more of the same mind than he gives due credit. I knew my plan would appeal to him—and that Gorgo would see enough benefit to kindly pass it along in my stead.”

“What do you want?” I whispered.

“What I have always wanted, Echelas,” he replied. “That desire has never faded, and I would yet see it through. I want Sparta to know glory, and victory besides.”

“Who is this?” Dieneces asked with a wary frown when I returned to the camp. I led Cleomenes, and he shuffled along beside me, his head lowered, his hand coiled against mine as we crossed the rocky, unfamiliar terrain.

“His name is Ilus,” I said. “Ilus, sir, this is Dieneces. He...he is my friend, sir. My best friend.”

“Yes, sir,” Cleomenes said, turning his face toward Dieneces, his eyes wide and unfixed. “I remember you made such mention.”

Dieneces looked at me, his brow raised. “Made such mention?” he said. “You know this man, Echelas?”

“He...he is a farmer who wants to stand with us,” I said. “I agreed to let him help Abas attend to my supplies.”

“Him?” Dieneces exclaimed, blinking in surprise. He looked at me as if I had gone mad. He hooked me by the arm and drew me away from Cleomenes, leading me a few steps beyond earshot. “He is an old man, Echelas,” he whispered, frowning at me. “Limping along, and what? Is he blind, too?”

“If it makes him feel helpful, who am I to refuse?” I said, frowning. “I am showing him some deference, Dieneces—the least I can do given I just torched his home.”

"If Demodocus or one of the other officers learns of this, they will send him away," Dieneses said. "We are not meant to be tending blind, crippled Thessalians. We—"

"Then let us make sure they do not learn of it," I said, leaning toward him. "Where is the harm, Dieneses, if he keeps with my supplies? My horse? Abas will look after him, and he...he took such pride in offering his service. Please, Dieneses. Say nothing. No harm will come of it."

Dieneses shook his head and sighed, glancing toward Cleomenes. "Fine, then," he said. "I will say nothing. You are mad, though, you realize."

I looked over my shoulder to where Cleomenes stood, patiently awaiting my return. His expression was impassive, and his ear was not turned toward us, but I knew he had heard every word Dieneses and I had just exchanged.

"Yes, I must be," I muttered, and the corner of Cleomenes' mouth lifted wryly.

"The Persians can circumvent us by the path of Anopaea," Cleomenes said to me. I had done my best to see him situated and comfortable, encamped with my slave Abas—far away from any Spartiates who might recognize him. He drew his cloak snugly about his shoulders and looked up, following the sounds as I stood to return to my own campsite. It was nearly dawn, and though I entertained no real hope for sleep, I meant to try anyway.

"They can use it to come at us from behind, along the east gate of the pass," he said. "They can box us in here."

"Leonidas knows," I said. "He sent the Phocians to stand sentry."

Cleomenes snorted. "Get him to send Spartiates."

"He cannot afford to lose any of us from the shield wall."

Cleomenes looked at me grimly. "There will be no need for a shield wall, Echelas, if the Persians come at you

from both sides. Convince him to dispatch Spartiates, even if only enough to oversee the Phocians.”

“The Phocians are familiar with the terrain,” I said. “They know the pass. They know this area well—their ancestors built the defensive wall.”

“Hoah, there should be comfort to your mind, given its stability,” Cleomenes said. “The Phocians will fail you. They are quick to summon mettle and slow to see it through. They sound like good allies in the telling—until the fight is upon you. They are not up there keeping watch—they are sleeping, lad, every last one of them. You can mark me at it. Remember your first fire watch as an ephebe? The Phocians are no better than Spartan boys with no prefect to terrorize them into obedience. Leave them up there with no Spartiate to oversee them, and the Persians will march right past them in the dark.”

“The Persians do not know about the path,” I said, frowning.

Cleomenes smiled without any humor. “Xerxes has spent years planning this invasion, Echelas,” he said. “Do you truly believe something like that might escape his notice? If it has thus far, it will not for much longer. You just disgruntled a large number of people quite familiar with that path tonight—Greek farmers who might decide to let Xerxes know of its existence.”

I glanced toward the looming shadow of the cliff sides, suddenly unnerved.

“Who else has Leonidas gathered among us?” Cleomenes asked.

“Hoplites from Arcadia,” I said, and he nodded, making a pleased, rumbling sound in his throat. “That is all from the Peloponnese, sir.”

“Bastards,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Let me guess: they would keep behind and fortify the isthmus of Corinth against invasion—and likely it was Argolis that put this thought in their minds. Hoah, if they ever learn the breadth of the world extends beyond our fair peninsula, the lot of them would drop dead where they stood.”

"Thespieae has joined us, sir," I said. "And Thebes, Malis and the Locrians besides."

Cleomenes frowned thoughtfully. "The Malians could be trouble," he murmured. "The Thebans, too."

"They came willingly, sir," I said.

He raised his face in my direction and smirked. "Willing, my dear lad, is only an outwardly proffered appearance," he said. "Malis sits north of here, in the region you burned and raided tonight. Did they willingly cut down their own orchards and torch their own fields? And Thebes..." He turned his head and spat. "Take a Theban and toss him mightily. You cannot trust one for even that measure of space. Leonidas will have to keep a careful accounting of them, the Malians and Thebans alike. I would not doubt either or both to use this opportunity to find some means of barter with the Persians."

"They...they would betray us?" I asked, genuflecting before him.

"I do not know for that," Cleomenes said. "But the temptation will be there—as it will be among all of us, Echelas. Keep your eyes open and your ears keen. The closer the battle comes, the more frightened these men will be." He flapped his hand, indicating our vicinity. "And none but the three hundred—not even our good Dwellers—have the benefit of Spartan Law in their hearts to resist their fear."

He grunted softly as he lay down, curling onto his side and snuggling beneath his cloak. He reached for me, patting his hand against his knee. "Convince Leonidas to send Spartiates to the Anopaea path," he said. "The Phocians will fail you even if the Thebans and Malians prove true. I have waged war for more years than you have drawn breath, lad. I know what I am talking about."

"Maybe we should send some Spartiates up into the mountains to keep with the Phocians, sir," I said to Demodocus. Like me, he had apparently abandoned the idea of finding rest, and I found him sitting in murmured

conversation with Demophilus, one of the Thespian commanders.

Demodocus looked at me for a moment, caught off guard by my suggestion. "There are one thousand Phocians along the path," he said. "Plenty enough to stand guard and hold their ground. We need all of the Spartiates here in the pass."

"But do...do you not think it might be wise?" I asked, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "Even a handful, just to see that they keep to their posts? There are none among us as disciplined, sir, as the Spartans. We are more accustomed to—

"Echelas, the Phocians will not fail us," Demodocus said. "They came willingly, and offered of their own accord to take the watch over Anopaea."

Willing, my dear lad, is only an outwardly proffered appearance, Cleomenes had told me, but I pressed my lips together and did not share this insight with my father.

"And we have no reason to believe Xerxes even knows about Anopaea," Demophilus added.

"Sir, if I...if I may," I said, looking down at my toes. "We have made enemies tonight among the Thessalians. We burned their homes, seized their crops. They all know about the pass, and Leonidas...he suspects they will tell Xerxes of our position. That is why he ordered us to move in the dark, so they could not estimate our numbers. If they could report our numbers, could they not tell Xerxes about the path?"

"It would not matter if they did," Demodocus said. "It would take them days to circumvent the mountains and reach the east gate. We are two days into the Karneia, and only seven more remain before Latychidas marches behind us. We have seven thousand men here—and more besides, if we arm the slaves. We can hold the pass from both ends until he arrives, if it should come to that."

I said nothing. I stared at the ground, nodding. "Yes, sir," I said quietly. "It...it was only a thought, sir."

The Persian cavalry had begun to set up encampments just past the western gate of Thermopylae by the next morning. They sent riders along the pass, following the undulating edge of the sea toward us. Our sentries intercepted them ahead of our defensive wall, along a section of the pass known as the hot gates. Here, a series of hot springs flowed from the mountains, and here, our guards blocked a party of twelve men on horseback. The Persians offered no resistance or attack. They wanted to speak with our leaders. They had tidings from Xerxes to share.

“Echelas, Dieneces—you are both with me,” Demodocus said, marching swiftly past us in full armor. Dieneces and I were strapping our helmets on, and blinked at one another in surprise. “Mount up,” Demodocus called without slowing his pace or turning to look at us.

More than forty Greek officers rode with us to greet Xerxes’ delegates. I stared in wonder at the Persians as we reined our horses to halts before them. They did not seem the least bit intimidated by our numbers, and turned their heads slowly, taking us into account. They sat with remarkable poise upon their saddles, these soldiers from across the sea. They studied us as if we interested them more so than bothered them, as if they were as curious about us as we were of them.

They were magnificent; tall and lean, their long legs draped comfortably against their horses’ flanks, their shoulders back, their chins lifted proudly. Their features were elegant; their complexions dark. They had enormous, striking eyes accentuated with meticulously applied cosmetics. They wore long, colorful skirts that fell about their ankles; they wore metal-plated leather breastplates comprised of overlapping horizontal straps. They bore laden quivers at their waists, and swords upon their hips. They had bronze helmets that rose above their pates in intricately adorned domes, with drapes of bronze-plated leather falling from the back of the helms towards their shoulders.

Their horses were as resplendent as their riders, all with matching coats of mottled white and silver, with pale, braided manes and long, plaited tails. The horses snuffed at us, their large, velveteen noses lifting against the restraints of their

bits as they drew our unfamiliar scents from the air, and we stared at one another, Greeks and Persians, amidst a heavy silence.

“I am Demodocus, son of Pelorus,” Demodocus called out at length. He pressed his thighs against his horse’s shoulders and it marched forward, lifting its heavy hooves and prancing in the sand. “Commander of the Dymanes division, the contingency of Sparta. I speak and listen on behalf of his majesty, Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas and Agiad King of our good state.”

One of the young Persian officers reined his stallion forward. He lowered his head in a courteous nod at Demodocus and then lifted his chin, scanning among us as he called out in a loud, clear voice. “My most honorable liege—our great king of the Medes and Persians who sits upon the thrones of Babylon, Sumer and Akkad; our mighty son who has conquered and claimed every measure of earth for which a man might walk, or his eyes might travel; he whom the sun god Ahuramazda has blessed, sent and sanctioned; this magnificent ruler whose grasp spans the four rims of the world—almighty Xerxes sends his tidings to you!”

He spoke fluent Greek, a common dialect that rolled with uncommon beauty from his tongue. His voice, his words were like music, and I felt nearly mesmerized as he spoke.

“It is not my Xerxes’ wish to see such noble sons know so fell an end as awaits you,” he called. “He would see you know life yet, and honor besides, and reward for the surrendering of arms to his name.”

The Persian man looked at Demodocus. “Lay down your arms and declare this pass for my liege’s to claim,” he said. “Xerxes will see you spared for your actions—but more than this, he will call you his friends, allies of Persia and as such, dear to his heart. Your lives will yet be yours, and great Xerxes will see that each man among you knows more to his claim than he now calls his own. Greater lands and wealth will be tendered to you all—those among you with noble and purposeful status will know a thousandfold such standing in the empire of Xerxes. Our great king is magnanimous,

generous in his offerings and earnest at his proffered word. Lay down your weapons and surrender your position that you might know the glory of serving him.”

A long moment of silence greeted this. At length, Demodocus said, “I will consult my own great King,” he said. “We will have your answer at midday.”

The Persian lowered his head again politely. “We know no hurry, sir,” he said.

We could hear Leonidas and the Greek leaders arguing from our campsite. Other Spartiates had gathered around to listen as Dieneces relayed his account of the meeting with the Persians. A general disconcertion and bewilderment had settled upon us all, and the Spartiates muttered among one another.

“What sort of surrender is this?” Maron asked, blinking at his brother, Alphaeus. “One where they would reward, not imprison us? We would be made great men and not slaves?”

“A pox on Persian promises,” Alphaeus said, spitting against the ground. “That is what I say. Ask the Greeks of Ionia of Persian rewards, Maron, if your heart is tempted.”

“I am not tempted,” Maron replied with a frown. “I am intrigued. Why would they make such an offer?”

“Because we amuse them,” I said quietly. I had not said anything as Dieneces had talked, and as they had spoken among one another following his recount. My friends all turned to me now in surprise, and I looked at them gravely. “Why do you think we have known such luxury in setting up the wall, burning down the farmlands?” I asked. “We have been here three days, and the Persian cavalry has only now set up their camps near the west gate. Xerxes has given us this time because his army is still gathering. That is how huge they are. It has taken three days so far for all of them to arrive.”

The Spartans stared at me. This had occurred to many among them as well, I am sure, but for those to whom it had not, it was a startling and horrifying realization.

“And Xerxes will keep letting us wait until his forces are amassed in full to charge us,” I said. “Four days or four hundred—he is not afraid of us. He is not going to bypass us. He is going to plow us through—he will plow us under.”

I glanced at Dieneces and lowered my head. “They are laughing at us as we speak,” I said quietly. “We amuse them, nothing more. They do not understand why we would make such a futile stand.”

Leonidas issued his reply through Demodocus to the Persian demands, and again, Dieneces and I accompanied him to the hot gates. The Persian cavalrymen were waiting for us, and they did not so much as bat an eyelash in surprise when Demodocus called out to them.

“My own great liege, Leonidas, son of Anaxandridas and Agiad King of Sparta has heard your request for the surrender of arms, and has tendered his answer,” Demodocus shouted. “He says come and take them!”

With this, he jerked against his reins and turned his horse. We left the Persians as we had found them, and raced our steeds proudly back to our camp.

Leonidas had offered a bold answer to Xerxes, but it was not one that was apparently shared among the other Greeks. That night, as dusk approached, our encampment stirred with restless anxiety and dissention.

“Now we will see where the mettle lies,” Cleomenes murmured, nodding his head. I had brought him supper, some bread and wine, and knelt before him. He reached for me, touching my face, pressing his palm against my cheek. “The others wanted to surrender.”

“Not all of them,” I said. “Demophilus of Thespieae stands behind Leonidas.”

“But he is fairly well alone, is he not?” Cleomenes asked, blinking past my shoulder. My silence spoke volumes to him and he nodded, smiling slightly. “Watch the Thebans

now,” he whispered. “And the Malians. If they were not tempted before, they will be. They know what rewards betrayal might bring and their reason and resolve might abandon them in the face of such promise. That is what Xerxes wants more than anything. To discourage us, divide us—see us bicker among each other. He knows the Greek tendencies well. He has studied us many long years, setting them to mind.”

He stroked his thumb against my mouth and cheek. There was something tender, nearly fatherly in the gesture and he smiled at me. “Your heart was not tempted, though,” he said.

“No, sir,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I...I do not know,” I said. “What I call my own is plenty for me. I...I would as soon keep it and be free as have more, but be bound to Xerxes. Our Laws suit me fine. I...I want no other...no more than this.”

His smile widened and he nodded. “What a fine young man you have proven to be, Echelas, son of Aeropus,” he said, and when I smiled, he could feel it with his fingertips.

“Are...are you warm enough, sir?” I asked. “I could find another cloak for you.”

He shook his head. “No, this will do. And thank you kindly for the supper.”

“The wine is not neat...” I began, and he laughed.

“No matter,” he said. “It was a nasty habit. Damn the Scythians for seeing me so fond of it.”

“I...I should get back now,” I said, drawing my legs beneath me to stand.

“You have been very kind to me, Echelas,” he said, catching my hand, staying me. He turned his face toward mine. “Why?”

I blinked at him, caught off-guard. “I...I do not know. You were not so unkind to me once, at least for a time. And you were company to me, and some comfort besides in

Menelaion. In the years since, I...your words have come to me a lot. There was a wisdom in them. There still is."

Cleomenes smiled. "You have your own wisdom in you, Echelas," he said. "You have never needed mine—or anyone else's."

He patted my hand and turned his face toward the ground. "I was cruel to you there," he said softly. "And I was wrong—blind even then, though my eyes had not yet failed me."

"You made amends by me, sir," I said. "And I am grateful for that."

He drew his hand back, reaching down for his bread, his fingertips fumbling. I pressed it against his palm, and he smiled. "Thank you, lad," he murmured. "Go now. The others will wonder."

"Yes, sir," I said, rising to my feet.

"Echelas," he said, drawing my gaze.

"Yes, sir?"

"I was mistaken in Menelaion," he told me, looking up. "I was wrong, and I...more than anything else...any other failing in my life, that has haunted me."

"Sir?" I asked, puzzled.

"You are a son of Sparta," he said. "You always have been. I am ashamed to have made you believe otherwise." He smiled, turning his sightless gaze back toward his bread. "I wish that I had half the measure of your heart—or that you had half the measure of my birth. What a glorious king we might have made either way."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

If anyone had noticed my absence from the camp, it was not mentioned to me upon my return—except by Dieneces, that is.

“Where have you been?” he asked, stomping to meet me as I approached our ring of pallets. He took me by the arm, his expression caught between worried and exasperated. “This is not the evening to go wandering off on your own, Echelas. Demodocus has ordered us all to keep close quarters—every man accounted for—and the Spartiates to take turns at sentry past the wall.”

So Demodocus suspects as Cleomenes does, I thought, looking about, but not seeing my father anywhere close at hand. Xerxes has tempted us with promises of reward...and with their cavalry base so close at hand, he is afraid someone might try to turn sides.

“I was not off on my own,” I said. “I was checking on Abas, and bringing some supper to Ilus.”

Dieneces raised his brow. “What is it with you and this old man?” he asked.

I shrugged loose of his grasp and started to brush past him. “I do not know what you mean,” I said. “I am only—”

“You know exactly what I mean,” Dieneces said, grabbing my arm again. I turned and met his gaze. “Echelas, what is going on?” he asked, his brows lifting in implore. “Will you not tell me? Do you not trust me to it?”

I sighed. "That is not fair, Dieneces. You know I trust you."

"Then tell me what is going on with that man," Dieneces said. He leaned toward me, whispering. "Do you know him or something? A Dweller you recognize from Sparta? What?"

"I know him, yes," I whispered. I met his gaze and felt shamed color rise in my cheeks. "I met him ten years ago, at the prison in Menelaion."

Dieneces blinked at me, only momentarily puzzled before shocked realization occurred to him. He recoiled, his eyes flying wide. "Are you mad?" he exclaimed.

My eyes darted about anxiously. "Hush, Dieneces," I hissed.

"You are mad," he said, shaking his head. "You...Echelas, you have lost your mind. You think that man..." He shoved his forefinger toward the slave encampments. "...is Cleomenes?"

"I do not think it," I said, stepping toward him, speaking in a hush. "I know it, Dieneces. It is him."

"He is dead," Dieneces whispered. "He...Cleomenes is dead. You told me yourself you heard him murdered in his cell!"

"He is not dead," I said, laying my hand on his shoulder. "He told me it was a devising—Gorgo did it so that he could escape without pursuit."

Dieneces started to pull away from me, his eyes still wide with disbelief, and I drew him toward me, close enough to feel his breath against my face. "Listen to me," I whispered. "He saved my life. He is the only reason I still draw breath. He convinced Gorgo to stand for me at my trial. He knew his words would not sway the Ephors—that nothing else would but the Queen. He saved my life, Dieneces."

"Yes, and now he will tender it to the Persians," Dieneces said. His brows furrowed and he wrenched himself away from me, staggering backward. "Are you crazy bringing

him here? The gods above only know what he has told the Persians—what he means to tell! He is probably sending secret word to them of our numbers, even as we speak! He—”

“He would not do that,” I said.

“What?” he exclaimed. “There is no one in this world with more cause to hate Sparta—or Leonidas—than Cleomenes! If that is him, then he is conspiring against us! That is all he knows—have you so soon forgotten what he did to you? What his deceit nearly brought to you, Echelas?”

“He made amends for it,” I said. “He is sorry for his past, and he has—”

“Hoah, that is gracious of him,” Dieneces snorted.

I touched his shoulder again. “Dieneces, he has been working to help Sparta, not hurt us all of these years. He has been in Thessaly to monitor the Persians’ progress. He has been sending word back to Gorgo—secret word, Dieneces, so that she can persuade Leonidas and Latychidas.”

“Persuade them to do what?” Dieneces said.

“Make the right stand against Xerxes—and know greatness for it,” I said. “That is what he wants—do not roll your eyes at me, Dieneces—by my breath, that is all he wants. He wants Sparta to know glory. He worked his life through that we might.”

“You...” Dieneces sputtered, shaking his head again. “You cannot believe that, Echelas. Tell me you are not that big a fool.” He started to walk past me. “I am going to Demodocus—and Leonidas. You will see us all betrayed and killed, Echelas. I cannot believe you brought him here.”

“You cannot do that—!” I gasped, seizing him by the arm. He jerked himself loose, closing his hands into fists. In all of our years, he had never bared his fists at me, and I blinked at him, startled and wounded. “They will kill him if you tell,” I whispered.

“He is a traitor—he should be killed!” he snapped. “What is wrong with you, Echelas?”

"I believe him, Dieneces," I said. "Please, he will not betray us. I know he will not. He...he is my friend."

"No, I am your friend," he told me, frowning. "Cleomenes is the man who tried to ruin you and then see you dead. Whatever amends he might have said he offered should not take that from your heart. He is lying to you."

"I believe him," I said again.

"Then you are a fool, Echelas," Dieneces told me. He turned to leave again, and I caught him by the shoulder.

"Please," I said. "You asked me if I trusted you—do you not trust me? I am giving you my word, Dieneces. By my breath, my blade—my honor, Dieneces—Cleomenes is with us, not against us."

He stared at me for a long moment, his fists still poised.

"Please," I begged him. "Dieneces, please do not tell."

He shook his head and lowered his eyes. "I will not," he whispered. He glanced up at me, still frowning. "But only by your word, Echelas. I do not believe him—not for one moment. And if he tries anything—if I even suspect he is up to his old treacheries—I will run him through myself. No legends this time—his guts hit the dirt."

"Alright," I whispered. I had never seen Dieneces so angry with me before—in fact, I had never seen him angry with me at all. He was furious now, and disappointed in me, and I blinked down at the ground, shamed by his rage.

I heard the soft scuffle of approaching footsteps and raised my gaze, startled. Dieneces turned in equal surprise, and then we both drew back wary steps, reaching for our swords.

"Pedaeus...?" I gasped.

"What do you want?" Dieneces asked sharply, striding forward to stand in Pedaeus' path. He glared at Pedaeus, meeting the other man's gaze, his hand not loosening from his pommel.

"I need to talk to you both," Pedaeus said, cutting his eyes from Dienece to me.

Dienece snorted. "Is that not something?" he remarked, and he glanced at me over his shoulder. "They are coming out like mice in a forgotten bag of barley."

"Please," Pedaeus said, and at this quiet plea, the uncharacteristically anxious note in his voice, the ire faded from Dienece's face. Pedaeus looked between us again. "It is important."

"I saw Clesonymus among us," Pedaeus said.

Dienece and I both blinked in mutual surprise. "What?" Dienece said.

"Clesonymus is in Sparta," I said. "He was not chosen to come."

Pedaeus raised his brow. "I know that," he said. "I know where he is supposed to be, and I am telling you, he is not in Sparta. He is here at Thermopylae. I saw him earlier this afternoon."

"And you are only just now making mention?" Dienece said.

Pedaeus frowned at him. "I was not certain until just now," he said. "I saw him in passing, among a crowd."

"He was your mentor," I said. "How could you not know him from the first?"

"Because he was disguised," Pedaeus said. "He was not among the Spartiates, or dressed like us. He was among the Malians, at their camp. I was not sure."

"The Malians?" Dienece asked. He looked at me, bewildered. "Why would he be there?"

"Why would he be here at all?" I asked.

"I do not know," Pedaeus said. "But I suspect trouble for it."

We looked at him, startled again.

"I have been asking after him among the Malians, describing his appearance," Pedaeus said. "Nobody claimed to know him but a few; men who said he sounded from the telling like a farmer named Ephialtes who marched among them. They did not know him past this; none had ever seen him before. They said he joined them on their way southward, that he told them his lands lie between Locris and Malis."

"So maybe that is who he is," Dieneces said. "Plenty of farmers joined the hoplites."

"None of the Malians had ever met him before," Pedaeus said. He looked at me. "It is a small scrap of land between Locris and Malis. Not too many farms, or farmers unfamiliar with each other. Do you not find that odd?"

"What I find odd is that you would come to us with this, Pedaeus," Dieneces said, frowning. "Since when would you confide in me or Echelas? If memory does not fail, ten years ago you were running amok killing Dwellers and blaming it on Echelas—all under Clesonymus' orders."

"I am confiding in you because you are my line officers," Pedaeus said, frowning to match Dieneces'. "Ten years have passed, yes, Dieneces, and I am a different man than I was in my youth." He met my gaze. "I am a different man," he said again.

I looked evenly at Pedaeus. "Why would Clesonymus be here? Is he that eager to fight? Why would he not wait and march under Latychidas? There is no recognition for him if he fights here in disguise—no benefit to him."

"No," Pedaeus said. "Not if he fights among the Greeks."

I blinked at him in realization. "Did...did he say anything to you of this?" I whispered.

Pedaeus shook his head. "I have not spoken with him more than passing in ten years," he said. "Not since your trial, Echelas, when we were sent to the wilds. He ranted and raved there—for weeks, I listened to him cursing you, and all I could think about was you in the woods on the night Pelorus was killed." His brows lifted in sorrow. "You screamed at him that

Demodocus had never touched you, and I...I began to doubt him. I began to wonder if all of the things Clesonymus had told me for so long...if any of it was true.

"I saw him for the first time, with plain eyes and my own judgment that night," he said. "And I called him on it when you were exonerated, and we were sent into the wilds. I told him it was our due, and he beat me for it. He clubbed me with his spear, knocked my teeth loose from my skull."

He hooked his fingertips in his mouth, drawing his lip back to reveal a line of missing teeth, at least four of them from the right side of his jaw. I stared at him, stricken. "Pedaeus..." I whispered.

"Hoah, bawl me the river Styx," Dieneces said. "Do you expect us to believe you let anyone pound you witless, Pedaeus?" He glanced at me. "He is lying. He is up to something."

"I am not lying," Pedaeus said. "And yes, I let Clesonymus hit me. He was my mentor—and a Spartiate, while I was still only a hebon. I may not have your good sense, Dieneces, but I had enough at least not to raise my hand against a Spartiate."

He turned to me, his brows lifting in implore. "I would not have let them kill you," he said. "I would have gone to the Ephors myself—I was there at the acropolis the day you were judged, and I would have stood before them had the Queen not come forward."

"Pig scat, Pedaeus," Dieneces snapped. "What a sweet and charming little tale—a load of scat! It sounds so sincere in the telling, with no one to prove you true or false!"

"I am not lying," Pedaeus insisted. "Echelas, please—whatever reason Clesonymus is here cannot be good. I think he has been looking for his chance—and the Persians' offer this morning will be what he needs to take it."

"Chance for what?" Dieneces said.

I met Pedaeus' gaze. "To betray us to the Persians," I said. "He has been waiting for his chance to turn against us."

"He will tell them about the Anopaea path," Pedaeus said. "And our numbers."

"And what will be in it for you when he does, Pedaeus?" Dieneces asked. "What part in this scheme do you play? Hoah, I know—we all go looking for Clesonymus to stop him, and Echelas is struck by a wayward arrow or spear. Maybe Persians attack in the darkness, or better than this—maybe you mistake him in the night for a Mede, and run him through. You seem to make those sorts of mistakes with fair regularity."

"It is not a trick," Pedaeus said, growing angry now. He stepped toward Dieneces, balling his hands into fists. "I am telling you, I am sorry for what happened in my past, and it is behind me. I cannot take it back, but I can offer amends as I am able. That is what I am trying to do."

I looked at Pedaeus for a long moment. "Did you kill Pelorus?" I asked quietly.

"No," he said. "By my shield, Echelas, it was not me."

"Who was it?" I asked. "Which one among you held the sword?"

"I do not know," he replied. "It was dark. We were panicked and he was a Spartiate. No one ever admitted it."

I looked down at the ground. Dieneces touched my shoulder, glaring at Pedaeus. "You have hurt him enough in this lifetime," he whispered. "Get out of here, Pedaeus. Take your lies, your pathetic, proffered amends and go away. Whatever you are up to, go and tell Clesonymus you failed."

"No," I said, looking up. Dieneces blinked at me in surprise. "Let us go and see, Dieneces. If Clesonymus is here, he...he is fairly well kept here. Demodocus has sentries posted all along the defensive wall and the rear perimeter. Clesonymus cannot leave, and if he is here, whatever he has planned can be stopped."

"So you trust Pedaeus now, too?" he asked. "I am beginning to draw insult, Echelas, given the company you call 'friends.'"

“He is not my friend and I do not trust him,” I said. I turned to Pedaeus, my brows narrowing. “I do not trust him and I do not fear him, either—or Clesonymus. I stopped being frightened of you both a long time ago. If you are part of this, Pedaeus—whatever Clesonymus might be playing at—you will answer for it with him. I will see to that.”

“I am not lying,” Pedaeus said. “And I am not a part of it, Echelas.”

I glanced at Dieneces. “Then let us see.”

We did not have to look far. We had just crossed the camp area, reaching the Malians when sharp cries from the beach attracted our attention. We followed the sounds, and discovered a large group of men standing in the surf along the water’s edge. They had waded out to their knees and shouted out in alarmed voices, cupping their hands around their mouths.

“Ephialtes! Ephialtes, hoah! Call out to us! Can you hear?”

“What is going on?” I asked, sloshing out into the gulf, grabbing one of the Malian soldiers by the arm. They were crying out for Ephialtes—the name Pedaeus had told us Clesonymus was using.

“He was swept under!” the man cried at me, wide-eyed and frantic. “He...he waded out into the surf—he said he saw something there—and he was swept under by the tow!”

The Malians held torches; their fellows had lined the beach in droves behind us, all of them holding torches aloft as they strained to see out across the dark expanse of water. I scanned along the glittering reflection of firelight against the undulating sea, but saw no one.

“How long ago?” I asked.

“Only a few moments,” the Malian replied. “He thought he saw something, he said. A small boat, or a piece of wreckage.”

I saw nothing—no wreckage, boat or man bobbing in the water. “Did you see it, too?”

“No, sir, none of us did, but he...he was gone so fast, running out into the water,” the Malian said. “He ran out and then dove under. We heard him yell, and then we lost sight of him.”

I looked over my shoulder toward Dieneces and Pedaeus.

“He is a strong swimmer,” Pedaeus said, his expression grim.

“Go get Demodocus,” I told Dieneces. “Go now—get him now!”

The fox has many tricks. The hedgehog has only one.

Cleomenes had told me that in the Menelaion prison. He had told me that his had always served him well, and it seemed Clesonymus’ had, as well. In our past, he had seized upon opportunities to endear himself to those in positions of power; he had done so for his own personal gain, as he had now. Xerxes had promised reward for our surrender; it did not take much imagination to realize he would offer similar compensation for a man who turned sides in his favor.

“Send word to the wall,” Demodocus said, pacing along the beach, frowning. “If they see him in the water, draw their bows on him. Shoot him dead.”

He wore a stern expression as he delivered this order, but I could see that it pained him. No matter his transgressions, Clesonymus had been Demodocus’ charge, and Demodocus had loved him for it.

“He is dead,” said the Malian commander, a man named Agagenor. “Surely he has drowned or been swept out to sea.”

“He is a strong man and a good swimmer,” Demodocus said quietly, his brows furrowed. He turned to walk away. “I will notify Leonidas. I want every man in your

contingent accounted for, Agagenor. Anyone else approaches the water, and I want them shot.”

“Yes, sir,” Agagenor said.

The next morning, as the sun rose, Dieneces left for his assigned sentry post at the defensive wall. As they had all along, the Persians made no effort to repel or prevent our scouting expeditions, and reports from beyond the western gate were grim. Xerxes’ army was fully ensconced—a mass of men stretching from one edge of the horizon to the next; a veritable sea of soldiers. They could attack us at any time—and at their leisure—and our guard posts stood heavily fortified in anxious anticipation. When Dieneces had gone, I caught sight of Demodocus standing by himself along the edge of the gulf. I knew he was hurting; I could see it plainly in his hunched and drawn posture, and I went to him.

“They found a cloak washed ashore,” I said as I approached him. He glanced over his shoulder toward me, his expression troubled. “Just before dawn, along the beach past the wall.”

“He did not drown,” he said. “He took his cloak off to make us think that. He swam up the shoreline and reached the cavalry camp. He is probably keeping counsel with Xerxes as we speak.”

There was a hard edge to his voice, a sharpness I was unaccustomed to, and my footsteps faltered. I paused uncertainly as he looked away from me, returning his gaze toward the water.

“I...I am sorry, sir,” I said quietly. “I will leave you alone...”

“No,” he said, and he turned to me, his stern expression softening. “No, Echelas. I...I did not mean to snap at you. Please do not go.”

He looked toward the gulf again and I walked hesitantly to stand beside him. “It is my fault this has happened,” he said softly.

"No, it is not," I said.

He glanced at me. "Yes, it is," he said, sighing. "Clesonymus would never have learned about ambition if I had not taught it to him. I almost wish that he was dead. I...I am standing here, begging Poseidon to have claimed him, and I...it is my fault."

"Please do not say that," I whispered, and he looked at me.

"Pelorus was right," he said. "A man should have no ambition outside of what benefits Sparta. If you yield even once to that which serves you, it...that desire lingers within you. You always want more. Clesonymus saw me pursue my own ambitions, and he...he learned to want for himself by me. I taught him to believe what he called his own was not enough—not when more could be found, aspired to, claimed."

He smiled, brushing the cuff of his fingers against my cheek. "But you do not know of such things, do you, Echelas?" he murmured. "Pelorus taught you well, and you...hoah, lad, you have taken his lessons so dearly to heart, I...sometimes, I cannot breathe for how much you remind me of him." He lowered his gaze to the ground. "I admired him so," he whispered. "You asked me once if he was envious of me. Do you remember?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I was the one who was envious between us," he said. "He was a better father to you than I ever could have been. He...he loved you so much, and you loved him, and I...I was so envious of that."

I blinked at him, wordlessly. I did not know what to say. In the ten years I had really been able to know him, this was the only moment in which Demodocus had outrightly admitted he was my father. Instead of moving me, it left me sorrowful for him in his anguish, and sorrowful for myself that I could offer nothing to comfort him.

"I wish I might have been that for you," he whispered. "More than what I have now, there is my heart's true ambition. I wanted so badly to hold my brother's stead in your regard,

and I...I knew I could not. Not because of the Law, but because I...I could never take his place. I could never hope to be even one measure of the man Pelorus was."

He drew away from me and walked along the beach, turning his back toward me. "And now, I...at last, I am truly answering for it. I thought when Pelorus died...when you...you were imprisoned, the gods were punishing me for my ambition, my greed. That was only the beginning. My penance is here...this is my restitution. Clesonymus learned the lessons I taught him well, and now..." He hung his head, shamed. "Now we will all answer for it."

He left me alone and I did not follow. What could I tell him? What words could I hope to offer that might lessen the burden he had placed on his heart? I knew there was nothing; I was helpless to assuage his pain. When Pelorus had died, I might have been told ten thousand times it was not my fault, but I had believed this nonetheless. Even now, so many years later, a part of me was haunted with the thought of my culpability. It was inescapable to me; there would be no convincing my heart otherwise.

I watched my father walk away with my breath caught in my throat, my feet poised to move, to go to him, but unable to do so.

A Persian scout rode toward the defensive wall that morning. Dieneses told me about it; the forty Spartiates posted as guards had been manning their positions, while perhaps another fifty practiced among them, sparring together in full armor, wrestling in the nude, preparing for battle. They had all paused at the sounds of approaching hoof beats, and turned their gazes along the path toward the west gate.

"He did not draw too near, but I could see him," Dieneses said. "A Persian soldier on a large white horse, like the ones we saw yesterday. He reined to a halt along the beach and stood there for awhile."

"Doing what?" I asked.

“Watching us,” he said. “Watching us watch him. We all just stood there for the longest time staring at one another. He must have grown bored—or seen what he needed to—because after a time, he turned his horse around and galloped off again.”

“Why would he come like that?”

“Checking the wall progress, maybe,” Dieneces mused. “Or trying to gauge our numbers. Maybe Cleonymus reported how few of us there are and they were trying to decide if he was telling the truth.”

I went to Cleomenes that evening to bring him supper. I told him about Cleonymus and the Persian scout. I also told him about a meeting Leonidas had called late in the afternoon, a gathering of all of his commanders and officers.

“We are moving into position at the hot gates beyond the defensive wall before dawn,” I said. “He anticipates they will come at us with the morning.”

“Of course they will,” Cleomenes said. “His army is in place, and he has sent out his surrender demands. He has been a cat playing with a cornered mouse all of this while. That he left you alone today is astonishing.”

Cleonymus’ betrayal caught him no more off guard than my tidings of impending battle. “If he had not tried something like this, I might have been surprised,” he remarked, shaking his head. “He has always had more ambition than sense—a useful enough flaw when I employed it, but one that will see him dead. He will not find the reward he is seeking from Xerxes. He will tell them of the Anopaea path. He may well lead them along it himself—I imagine his arrogance would see him extend such an offer. He will betray his own people and then Xerxes will order him killed. Cleonymus lacks the wits to see such logic. He is nothing among his people, or he would have achieved higher status. Xerxes will smell this about him like a fox smells a rabbit clutch hidden in the scrub. He did not amass such an empire for himself by maintaining allies who are weak and incapable.”

He took a bite of bread and chewed thoughtfully. "Moving ahead of the wall is wise on Leonidas' part," he said. "The pass is most narrow there along the hot gates. The phalanxes can stand the strongest, and the shield wall can pose most formidably in such tight confines. I would have chosen such a position. Damn near admirable of him."

"Do we have any hope?" I asked softly, and he turned to me, blinking past my shoulder.

"There is always hope, Echelas," he said. "I have always found it to be a matter of personal choice rather than outside influence. If you are asking me if we stand a chance holding this pass against the Persians, then I must answer frankly, lad, and tell you no. We will not go easily, or readily, and perhaps not all at once. But we will go down. Any man who stands his ground here plants his feet where he will be buried."

I said nothing, shaken and disturbed by his words. It was one matter to declare yourself willing and ready to die; it was another altogether to find yourself only the breadth of a night away from it.

He reached out and found my cheek, patting it with his palm. "I would tell you that you could run, but it would waste my breath," he said. "You know the Law. I do not need to recite it for you."

"I...I should get back now," I said, drawing my feet beneath me to stand. "I have sentry duty."

"Remember, Echelas, the difference between a wise man and a fool is that a fool marches heedlessly to his own death, proclaiming himself unafraid," Cleomenes told me without looking up. "A wise man faces his death without complaint or comment, with fear in his heart that he chooses not to heed. No man with any wits in his skull does not fear his own mortality. There is no law that can strip that from our natures, and that is where courage is truly marked. It is not Spartan Law to hold no fear of death. It is the Law that you stand and face it anyway."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I did not sleep at all that night. I know of no man among us who did. The sun was not even a glowing hint against the horizon when we prepared ourselves, dressing in our armor and hefting our shields against our arms. As we gathered beyond the defensive wall, in the narrow channel of the hot gates where the cliffs of Kallidromos pressed eastward toward the sea, the only sounds among us were the clattering of our armor plates as we moved, the thudding rhythm of our footfalls against the ground and the rush of water drawing against the beach.

The phalanxes formed, men flanking one another in tight files, the broad circumferences of their shields overlapping before them. We stood facing north, with the fluttering illumination of torches caught in the breeze draping across our ranks, glittering against polished bronze and sharpened spear points. There was no sound but the sea; the wind rustling our cloaks and the measure of our own breaths to break the heavy weight of silence.

We heard the Persians before we even saw them. The thrumming of their feet came to us faintly at first, like distant drums. It grew louder, reverberating off of the sheer cliff faces to our left, until we could feel it in the ground. The earth beneath us trembled and when the sun began to rise, we could see them. The dawn's first glow struck against their armor, their weapons. They came upon us, filling the narrow channel of the pass, and their footfalls became like thunder.

"Gods above," Dieneces whispered from my left. We stood five rows back from the front line of the shield wall, each of us calling orders to divisions within the phalanx.

"Call the march," one of the senior officers behind us shouted out, his voice carrying like a bell toll on the morning air. Other seniors picked up the call, barking out the command, and the flutists trilled out sharp, sudden notes.

"Present your shields!" I shouted. From my left, Dieneces voice overlapped with mine as we relayed orders to our troops. The men of the phalanxes moved in tandem, shifting the weights of their shields against their arms and

presenting the bronze plates in full to the north. The flutes trilled again, and more orders were called. We began to advance, marching in perfect unison toward the narrow pass.

The thunder of our footsteps could not drown out that of my heart. I could not breathe; my throat had collapsed in on itself, and I do not know how I forced my voice out to call my commands. “Present your pikes!” I shouted, and the first three rows of advancing hoplites shifted again, lowering their spears, presenting them toward the advancing Persians.

I was shaking; I could feel fright and adrenaline surging through me, seizing my limbs, collapsing around my heart. The earth shuddered beneath me, as much from the measured rhythm of the phalanx as the Persians. They were upon us now, near enough for me to see these were not the same soldiers—beautiful and elegant—who had come to us demanding surrender. These men wore similar armor and helmets, but their shields were small, fashioned of woven wood. The front line brandished spears, but they were short; I could see ranks of archers behind these.

The flute called out, and our pace doubled for the charge. The Persians matched our strides, a low, resonant battle cry stirring from deep within their ranks as they advanced. The cries were picked up and began to grow, and when they quickened their pace and plowed toward us, they roared together—a din so loud, it drowned out the sounds of the ocean.

We fell together and suddenly this sea of men, this seemingly impenetrable wave of Persians broke before us, smashed by the bronze shield wall. From the sounds of it, the world itself split open along an unexpected seam; the ground beneath me shuddered with the brutal impact, and I felt the resounding thrum ripple back through the phalanx ranks, through my shield and into my shoulder as I closed in upon the hoplite in front of me.

The Persians’ wicker shields crumpled at the sheer force, and as the front row pikes punched into their ranks, their battle cries wrenched upward in shrill, agonized octaves.

“Forward on!” screamed the officers behind me, and I lifted my chin, shrieking over the din.

“Forward on!” I yelled. “Move forward! Second battalion—present pikes!”

The last two rows of hoplites in my columns thrust their spears forward, shrugging their shoulders and presenting steel. We surged forward, digging in our heels as we shoved together against the Persians; a massive battering ram of polished bronze. The Persians shrieked; I could see them falling in droves, stumbling and collapsing, forced aside and to the ground as our phalanx advanced. They were trampled underfoot, thrashing and flailing; the ground beneath our feet became soaked with blood, slippery and sodden. The stink of it, bitter and metallic filled the air along with their screams, strangled and choking as our heels stomped against them, as their own fellows crushed them in their recoil.

The Persians’ short spears could not level accurately enough to penetrate the overlapping basins of our shields. Their pike staffs shattered against the formidable barrier, spraying the air with splintered wood. If they managed to punch around the circumferences of bronze, they battered against our breastplates or grazed against our arms.

Their archers scrambled for position as their front lines were forced back. They launched arrows at us; for every volley, I screamed out loudly, and the hoplites ducked their heads behind the shelter of their shields, using the bronze to protect their faces while arrows skittered and careened wildly off their helmets.

The Persian infantrymen were well accustomed to hand-to-hand combat—and armed for it with swords and knives—but we were trained to fight headlong and shield-first; their blades were of no benefit or defense. They could not strike past the overlapping plates, and when they tried, scrambling for footing to draw their swords around, they were crushed in our path, plowed from their feet and trampled under our heels.

Their advantage was the sheer number of these soldiers—Xerxes’ personal fodder shoved forward to greet us,

tire us, wear us down. Leonidas had anticipated this; that Xerxes would seek no more in this opening round than to exhaust us by the sheer effort of even easily repelling his troops. The challenge would come, he had told us, when Xerxes dispatched his more seasoned ground troops—those outfitted to challenge us truly, and when we were least prepared.

“Xerxes’ personal contingents are called the Immortals,” he had said. “They are the best of his troops—the finest jewels within the coffer of his army. When he sends them, they will come upon us like frenzied dogs upon a scent, and that is precisely how we shall send them back to Xerxes—rotted curs with their asses whipped and cowed!”

“Forward on!” I screamed. We had advanced so far to the north that now I stumbled over fallen Persians underfoot. They were crushed and trampled; I punted my feet again and again into bellies and skulls. I felt hands grope weakly, pawing at me as I passed. Fingertips hooked into the edges of my greaves, and I let my spear shaft slip against my palm, the tip swinging downward. I shoved the sharpened point downward in a fierce thrust; blood sprayed against my leg all of the way to my thigh, and when I stumbled forward, kicking mightily, I felt the groping fingers slip away.

We forced ourselves upon this first wave of assault until the Persians withdrew, turning from us and retreating along the pass. I could hear the commanders screaming not to follow; I shrieked myself hoarse to draw my columns to staggering halts. Leonidas and Demodocus shouted for the rows to rotate out, to bring fresh shoulders and spear-arms to the lead.

We had barely shifted positions, moving swiftly with the flutists to mark our time before they came again. A new wave surged forward, fresh troops from Xerxes’ endless reserves rushing down the pass in a grim and thunderous procession.

“Forward on!” I shouted to the hoplites along the shield wall, as a new cadence bleated out from the flutes, calling them to their marks. “Forward on—present your pikes!”

The front lines lowered their spears as we charged to meet them, and again, their frontlines could not withstand the brutal power of our shield wall. They slammed into us and the phalanxes carved a trough through them like a blade through loose soil; they fell in all directions, their arms flapping skyward, their spears shattering and swords flying, their fingers splayed helplessly as we marched over them.

Xerxes' archers crouched among the bodies of their fallen fellows and began to pelt us again with barrage after barrage of arrow attacks, hoping to cause a man to stumble and break formation, to let the front line falter. For every Greek who fell from his line, the hoplite behind him was there to immediately push forward, locking his shield against his neighbors' and leveling his pike to keep any advancing enemy from forcing through the ranks.

"Hold the line! Forward on!" I screamed, as Pactolus, a man in one of my column fronts toppled gracelessly. The hoplite behind him charged forward as I shouted out in command; Pactolus fell and was crushed by his fellows as they rushed to fill the space in the shield wall his tumble had left abandoned. I could hear the clatter of bronze-rimmed shields slamming into desperate position together, overlapping and interlocking against strong arms as the hoplites held the line.

Again, we drove the Persians north, and again, Leonidas and the commanders called us back toward the wall. We recoiled in quick time, withdrawing from the channel and back toward our encampments, holding our ranks tightly as Leondias shouted out for rotations in the front lines. "Fortify the ranks!" the officers behind me barked out. "Fall in line and close them tight!"

"They will advance upon you with little challenge at first," Cleomenes had told me the night before. "Do not let it stoke your ego—Xerxes is no fool, and thank the gods, Leonidas knows it. They will wear you down with weaker men. Xerxes has plenty to spare, and he will throw as many at you as it takes to draw you away from your defensive wall—to tire you out and give you little room for easy retreat to safety. Then he will send in the mighty among his forces—there will be the test, lad, when you must plant your feet and grit your teeth. That

will be the moment when your shield-bearers will be weary—and yet their strength must be their most.”

It is coming then, surely, I thought as I stumbled backward, tripping clumsily over bodies littering the bloodstained ground. I shouted out at my columns to fall back with me; their feet fell in rhythm with the bleating of the flutes as we scrambled for position. *The Immortals—the mightiest among the Persians. They have worn us down and now they will send their strongest.*

“Echelas!” I heard someone shout out to me and I jerked my head, my eyes flown wide as I looked over my shoulder. “Dieneces! Eudorus! Himerus! Fall back! Call your columns back!”

I saw Iobates, my commanding officer striding briskly behind me, along the edge of our formation’s rear. Demodocus was with him, his voice overlapping as the two called out simultaneous orders.

“Call your columns back!” Iobates yelled, flapping his hand in the air. “Back behind the wall—let these others press forward! Move! Move!”

Demodocus glanced at me as Iobates hurried toward the next phalanx, his mouth open, barking orders. I blinked at Demodocus, my body still tremulous with adrenaline, sweat streaming from beneath the lip of my helmet and down my brow. He met my gaze and then looked away, cupping his hand to his mouth and calling another phalanx forward. These were Thespians, and shaking with exhaustion and sudden confusion, I turned to Dieneces.

“What is this?” I yelled, even as our ranks broke apart around us, moving swiftly toward the Phocian wall. “What is he doing? Why is he calling us back?”

“I do not know!” Dieneces shouted back. He shoved his way through the men and grabbed me by the arm. “But it is an order—you heard him plainly! Fall back, Echelas! They will not keep for long!”

I wrenched my arm loose of his grasp. “He is calling Thespians forward!” I cried. “Thespians to stand instead of us—regimented Spartiates!”

“I am not the king to decide otherwise!” Dieneses yelled. “And neither are you! Move your ass, Echelas!”

He grabbed me again and hauled me in tow. I looked over my shoulder, staggering clumsily over the heaps of fallen Persians. I could not see Demodocus, but I knew what he was doing. I knew why he was doing it, and I clenched my fists, my brows furrowed so deeply that sweat dripped into my eyes, stinging. “No...!” I whispered. *He is doing this because of me, I thought. He knows the Immortals are coming—he is pulling me back from the front lines!*

Dieneses dragged me back beyond the fortifications of the defensive wall. I could hear the battle renewed ahead of us along the pass as the Immortals charged; the cacophony of shields smashing together, of men shrieking, stumbling, dancing over and into one another reverberated against the mountainsides and shuddered in the air.

“That bastard!” I yelled, jerking at my chin strap, fumbling with my helmet. I wrenched it from my head and let it fly, sending it smashing with a melodic clang against the stones and piled dirt of the wall. “That bastard!”

“What?” Dieneses said, hooking his hand against my elbow. I shrugged loose of him and cried out in frustrated rage. I charged the defensive wall and pummeled my fists against it.

“He called us back!” I yelled, whirling to Dieneses. “Those are not fodder lines we are facing now—those are Xerxes’ Immortals! Demodocus ordered us back—he put Thespians in our place against the Immortals, Dieneses!”

Dieneses stared at me. His face was filthy, spattered with mud and blood, cleaved clean in places from his sweat. “Damn our rot luck,” he said. “Those lucky Thespians. Echelas, what is the matter with you? We have been out there for hours—look at the sun! It is well past midday! Your men

are exhausted—my men are exhausted! Demodocus called us back because there are fresh troops at the ready!”

“That is not why!” I yelled. “That is not why he called us back and you know it, Dieneces! You damn well know it!”

Dieneces walked toward the defensive wall. He stooped, taking my helmet in hand, and then turned to me, glancing warily among the hoplites around us, who had all turned, curious at my tirade. “Echelas, be quiet,” he said.

“I will not!” I snapped as he walked toward me, carrying my helmet. “You know as well as I do that rot bastard called us back on my account! Because of me! Because I am his—”

“Echelas,” Dieneces said in a low voice, his brows narrowing. He met my gaze and my voice faltered as he cut his eyes beyond my shoulder. I glanced, following his gaze, and realized our audience. “Be quiet,” he said. “You are exhausted and overwrought.”

He shoved my helmet at me. “They will call for us when they need us again,” he said. “There are seven thousand men strong here. Let us give them each a turn in the pass.”

I nodded, lowering my eyes to the ground, feeling sweat roll in thin rivulets at the motion, streaming along my cheeks and nose. I gasped for breath, winded and shuddering. I brought my hand to my face and forked my fingers through my sweat-soaked hair. “I...I am sorry,” I whispered.

“Good enough,” Dieneces said, and he brushed past me, walking toward our phalanx members. “Trus, Hypseus—give a hand with Myles. He is hurt—hold him up now and watch his leg. Come on, lads, there are plenty of Persians to go around! Do not stand there in a state—we will all be out again soon enough!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My unit was not called back to the fronts again, and we spent the rest of the afternoon listening to the thunder and shrieks of battle from beyond the defensive wall. The ground beneath us shook as if something enormous deep beneath the crust stirred when our fellows feigned retreat from the north of the wall. It was a practiced routine; one we as Spartiates had rehearsed thousands of times over the last ten years. The Greeks came barreling down the pass for the wall, as if dashing madly for the cover of earth and stones. We could hear the roars and bellows of the Immortals as they gave pursuit; new thunder shuddered the ground as thousands of them surged down the pass toward us. Within brief strides of the wall, the Greek phalanxes whirled to face the oncoming Persian regiments; I lifted my chin toward the top of the wall, listening to the clattering din of thousands of spear points presented in unison, leveled to greet the Immortals.

Xerxes' men plowed headlong into this abrupt spear line. Their shrieks ripped skyward, deafening and shrill as they impaled themselves. I could hear spear shafts snapping like dried kindling as Persian after Persian shoved forward against the spears, until the gruesome weight of so many impaled bodies splintered even the strongest staff. I did not know from my vantage beyond the wall how many Persians died in this feint, but the stink of blood was so powerful as they fell that I could smell it in the wind, seeping through the stones. The sounds of their screaming rang in my ears, echoed inside of my skull; for hours afterwards, I could hear them. I pressed my

hand against the rock and dirt mound we had built to shore the decrepit Phocian wall and felt the earth trembling against my palm with the residual impact of Persians falling to the ground.

As dusk began to settle, the sounds of fighting waned; first, as our contingents moved forward again, pressing north, forcing the Immortals to withdraw, and then again, as the Persians retreated for the night, leaving Leonidas' army alone in the pass. We could hear the sounds of our fellows cheering as they returned to the wall; their victorious howls and cries were picked up from the middle gate, and we all lifted our faces to the fading sun and screamed joyously.

It was a short-lived revelry, however. We were ordered to make our way among the fallen and collect weapons. As I stepped beyond the defensive perimeter and gazed for the first time at the carnage in full, I staggered, my knees nearly failing me, my breath tangled in my throat.

"Gods above..." I whispered.

Thousands upon thousands of corpses littered the ground beyond the wall. They lay sprawled and tangled in the dirt, their weapons scattered about them. The dead carpeted the floor of the pass more than forty men deep in places. As Dieneses and my fellows came behind me, clambering past the wall, I heard the soles of their sandals skitter in uncertain shock against the ground. For a long moment, there was nothing but the sound of the Malian gulf, the sea pounding the shoreline in frothy waves. None of us could draw breath.

Many of the Spartiates had already been dispatched ahead of us. These gathered the wounded and dying Greeks from among the fallen Persians. I blinked in stricken, numb shock as I watched them shove and file pass me toward the camps, dragging and carrying our fellows in tow. I saw faces known to me—some only familiar, and some far more fond.

I picked my way carefully among the slain, stooping to take up fallen swords and broken shields. Soldiers trailed along behind us hauling wooden carts and it did not take long before the wagons were laden with Persian armaments.

The wind had picked up, growing sharp and insistent. We had observed dark clouds out upon the water earlier in the afternoon, and the closer evening drew, the more this storm front encroached upon us. It would be another hellespont; of this, no man among us held any doubt. Whatever the force or duration of the storm, it would not spare us another day's fighting come the morning, and we knew this, too. Its approach simply meant we were pressed to hurry, to rid the pass of weapons as quickly as possible so that the slaves could move in to clear the bodies.

Not all of the Persians were dead yet. That horrified me more than the grisly sight of so many fallen. I could hear them, poor men crying out in feeble voices, moaning in agony, their voices muffled and strained from beneath the corpses of their fellows. I could not see any of them; they were trapped beneath the heaps, but their cries as their life waned in slow, excruciating measure, as they succumbed to their wounds or had the breath crushed from them by the sheer weight of the dead, left me shivering with horror, the fine hairs along my forearms stirring.

I stepped among several mounds of crumpled bodies, and leaned over, reaching for a sword hilt I spied protruding from beneath the corpses. As my fingertips brushed against it, I heard a low, breathless moan from my right, and I danced backward, stumbling clumsily, my hand darting for my own blade. I wrenched my sword from its sheath and shoved it before me, clutching it between my fists in startled alarm.

One of Xerxes' soldiers had survived, and managed to claw and scabble his way weakly from beneath the bodies of his comrades. His legs were still trapped beneath the heap, but he pawed at the ground, hooking his fingertips for desperate purchase in the bloodied earth as he tried to free himself. A spear had caught him in the face, shattering his bottom jaw, laying open his cheek to expose teeth and bone and ripped him open along the shelf of his chin toward his shoulder. It was a gruesome wound, but not immediately mortal. He was bleeding to death, but it was one that would take hours to come—hours in which the young man undoubtedly would suffer beyond any measure I could fathom.

He looked up at me, and I could not move. He was one of Xerxes' Immortals, like the beautiful young men who had come to offer us surrender demands. If he was one of the twelve I had seen before, I would never know, but there was no mistaking his handsome features, the dark cosmetics ringing his eyes, the bronze-plated straps of overlapping leather comprising his armor.

His breath wheezed from the ruins of his face, and blood peppered out of his shattered cheek. His brows furrowed when he saw me, and his lips moved. His eyes were filled with determined, relentless hatred, and he spoke, garbled, hoarse words proffered in his native tongue. I did not understand him, but it did not sound like "bar-bar-bar" to me; his language was lilting and guttural.

His voice faded as he twisted sharply, sucking in a pained, whimpering gasp for breath. His brows pinched again and then he slapped against the ground, his fingers splayed and groping. He had seen the sword hilt that had attracted my gaze, and he reached for it. Even now, as he lay injured and dying, he meant to fight.

He tried to spit at me as I blinked at him, immobilized with helpless horror. When his fingertips fumbled against the hilt of the sword, I snapped from my reverie, shuddering and gasping for breath. I lunged at him, spinning my sword between my hands and clasping the hilt firmly. I drew my arms back over my head, and had one fleeting, stricken moment where I met his eyes, this young man from Persia no older than me. He opened his mouth to speak, to curse me again, his hand scrabbling to grasp his own blade, to jerk it loose from beneath the corpses.

I genuflected, swinging my arms down in the same, swift motion. I drove my sword into his back, punching through just behind his left shoulder and puncturing his heart. I felt the sharpened edges grind against bone, sinking into the heavy meat of his torso. Blood sprayed up in a broad arc as I wrenched the blade loose of ribs and sinew; it splattered against my face and lips, and slapped against my breastplate.

“Hoah...!” I gasped, floundering backward. I lost my footing and fell onto my ass. I stared at the Immortal for a long moment. He lay still against the ground, his gaze unwavering, his eyes half-opened, his mouth ajar. His hand was still draped against the dirt, his fingers hooked against the sword hilt.

“Hoah...” I whispered, feeling my stomach twist, my gullet rising in my throat to choke me. I scrambled to my feet and whirled about, staggering. I vomited; I had little in my gut to come up, but I dry-wretched, buckled over and whooping for breath, feeling the bitter taste of bile fill my mouth and clog my nose.

“A storm is brewing,” I said to Cleomenes. The sun had set, and with the darkness, the wind had grown even stronger. It gusted inland from the sea, buffeting into our encampments, spraying sea foam clear to the cliff faces.

“It will be worse than the last,” he said, lifting his face as if a wolf sniffing the wind. I knelt beside him, pressing a wrapped bundle of bread and cheese between his hands. I had brought him another cloak, as well, and leaned against him as I drew it about his shoulders.

“I smell blood,” he murmured, turning his face slightly against mine, his lips fluttering against my hair. “Are you hurt?”

“No, sir,” I said, sitting back from him and helping him arrange the folds of wool snugly about his neck. “I am aching and sore...battered somewhat, but no worse for the effort.”

He touched my face, fumbling with his fingertips along my brow and nose, pawing lightly against my mouth. He did not believe me; he thought I lied to spare him, and I smiled against his hand. “Cleomenes,” I said. “I am unhurt. The blood is not mine. It splattered on me, that is all.”

He nodded, pressing his lips together, his brows lifted in worry. He lowered his hand from my face and cradled his bundled supper between his palms.

“We did well today,” I told him. “You...you would pleased, sir, and proud. Surely thousands of them fell. The men...they are celebrating before the storm comes. Can you hear them? They...they have built fires for the moment and they are dancing, sir, singing.”

I had thought the news of our triumph would please him, but instead, the tidings only seemed to trouble him. He turned his face toward mine. “Tell me, lad, are your men ready to stand again tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, nodding. “Ready, willing and eager, sir.”

Again, I had hoped to please him; again, I only seemed to distress him. “And the next day?” he asked softly.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“And the next?” he asked, turning his milky eyes toward me. “And the next, Echelas? And the one beyond that?”

I blinked at him, disconcerted. “I...” I began, uncertainly. “I do not...”

“With the dawn tomorrow, there will still be two days left in the Karneia,” Cleomenes said. “Two days left until Latychidas can even mobilize his forces from Sparta. It will take them a week nearly in full—if not more—to arrive here. Can you fend off the Persians that long, lad? I promise you, whatever Xerxes offered you today, he will bring forth again tomorrow tenfold. He will bring it again the day after that, and again after that. Ten days or ten thousand, Echelas—his army is endless, and he knows with each day, you only grow wearier, your numbers only smaller.”

He patted my cheek and lowered his hand. “Enjoy your victory,” he said. “But do not mistake it for what it truly is, lad. A momentary delay of what will only prove inevitable.”

The celebration among the Greeks ended abruptly as the storm slammed into the coast. Thunder crashed overhead, shaking the ground as we crouched beneath our shields. We

had not stripped our armor to best be readied for battle the next day, and driving rain streamed down into the crevices and hollows beneath the edges of our breastplates, coursing down our backs and chests, beneath our arms. Our cloaks flapped about us in the furious wind, slapping in sodden folds against our huddled forms. We clustered together by the cliffs in the desperate—and futile—hope of some shelter. Lightning hissed and snapped through the low-hanging clouds, rendering darkness to near daylight in fluttering bursts.

Dieneces and I pressed ourselves together beneath the overlapping canopy of our shields. We hunkered with our legs folded beneath us and shivered together, tucked nearly cheek to cheek against the storm.

“I have been thinking about what you said,” Dieneces told me, shouting as the wind snatched his voice from his lips and flung it toward the mountains. His words were drowned out almost in full by the melodic cacophony of rain pelting our shield basins.

I blinked at him, rain spattering from my lashes and sputtering from my lips. “When?” I yelled.

“When we were still in Sparta,” he shouted back, drawing closer to me, pressing his shoulder against mine. He leaned toward me, shifting his weight to bear his shield more comfortably, and I tucked my head against his to better hear him.

“I said a lot of things when we were still in Sparta!” I cried. “I have known you for damn near thirty years, Dieneces!”

He laughed, shaking his head, sending water streaming from his hairline down his cheeks. “What you said about love!” he yelled, canting his face to holler in my ear. “About what it is—what it is like!”

This seemed an odd topic of conversation given our circumstances, and the day we had just been through, but things were seldom typical or anticipated when they came out of Dieneces’ mouth, and I went along with it. “And?” I yelled.

“And I have felt that,” he said. “I feel that. I know what it is like. What you mean.”

“Hoah,” I said, nodding. “Hoah, that...that is splendid, Dieneces. Who?”

“What?” he yelled, squinting as a torrent of rain suddenly flooded between our shields, dousing him. I had canted my arm as I spoke to him, letting the water pour down, and I yelped, shoving my shield back into place.

“What?” Dieneces cried again.

“Who?” I shouted into his face. “Who is she? Iphinoe?”

He laughed so hard, he doused himself again as his shield slipped from position. “Gods, no!” he cried. “She is my wife!”

He leaned his forehead against mine and we laughed together. He lifted his chin, speaking directly against my ear. “I never knew what to call it before,” he said. “What it meant, not until you told me. But I feel that way. I just...I just thought...”

He lowered his face toward my shoulder, as if suddenly and uncharacteristically shy, and I laughed. “What?” I asked, turning my cheek against his. “You thought what?”

Dieneces lifted his face. The tip of his nose brushed against mine, and when he spoke, spattered droplets of water danced from his mouth against my own. “I just thought it was called friendship,” he said, his voice so quiet, the wind and rain nearly swallowed it whole.

I blinked at him, startled, drawing back reflexively. He blinked, too, his face suddenly ablaze with color. He leaned away from me, turning his eyes toward the ground. “I am sorry,” he said, and I felt him shift his shield, pulling it away from mine.

“Dieneces, no...” I began, shamed by my response, and the pain I had just suddenly, visibly caused him. “Dieneces—”

“Pay...pay it no mind,” Dieneces said. He scooted sideways, his shield slipping away from my own. “That...it was stupid of me to say it...stupid to even think...I...”

“Dieneces,” I pleaded, reaching for him, but he drew his legs beneath him and stood.

“I am sorry,” he said, hunching his shoulders against the rain, holding his shield above him. He turned around and hurried away, stumbling against the wind.

For all of the lessons Sparta had taught her sons in courage, tenacity and warfare, one was missing—love. Dieneces had never known love from anyone but me; and he had never known anyone else he trusted enough to feel it toward, save me.

He had not understood my reaction to his admittance any more than I had understood Pelorus’ rage at discovering me and Elara making love in the forests. I do not think I could have hurt Dieneces any more had I shoved my sword into his belly, and I spent the night shuddering beneath my shield, seized with profound shame and remorse.

The next morning before dawn, we gathered again in our phalanxes beyond the defensive wall. Dieneces took his place to my left along our rear line, but would not look at me. He kept his gaze straight ahead of him, his lips pressed in a thin line, his brows narrowed slightly.

“I...I could not sleep last night, rot you,” I said quietly.

He did not so much as glance at me. “Yes, it was a right nasty storm,” he said.

“That is not why, Dieneces,” I said.

He still did not avert his gaze, or soften his expression. “I am sorry,” I whispered.

“Do not worry for it,” he replied, his mouth still grimly set.

We might well die that day, and I would be damned if I would greet Hades with Dienesces angry at me. I stepped toward him, breaking formation and not caring.

“What are you doing?” he whispered. “Get back in file, Echelas.”

“Every moment of every day of my life has been blessed because of you,” I told him. “Every breath a measure of greatness, Dienesces, because you are my friend. You are my best friend and my brother, and I love you.”

He blinked at me.

“I am sorry,” I said. “Please, Dienesces.”

The corner of his mouth fluttered upward briefly but fondly. “You are so full of scat,” he told me, offering me a playful shove. “Get back in file before you see us both flogged.”

The Persians came upon us that morning with the dawn’s first light. While our front lines were manned by hoplites still aching and weary from the day before, they charged us with fresh infantrymen, thousands who had not yet tasted of battle in the pass. Again, they came at us with poor armaments to counter our long spears and broad shields, and again, as the day before, when our lines crashed together, the Persian soldiers were knocked back. Again and again, they rushed us; each charge brought new, refreshed troops to their fronts. A sea of men, Megistias had called them, and I was beginning to believe this true; they came upon us like an endless series of brutal, violent waves, slamming into our shield wall. Again and again, for seemingly endless hours, we planted our heels and held our columns. I shrieked myself hoarse again calling commands out to my men. By midday, the unforgiving sun scorched us; we were staggering with thirst, breathless with exhaustion and soaked with sweat. The summer heat baked the towering piles of dead bodies, and the sweet stink of new decay mingled with blood, filling the air with the cloying, gagging odor of death.

Again by early afternoon, just as the Persian fodder ranks withdrew for the inevitable surge of mightier soldiers, Demodocus ordered my phalanx back to the encampment. This time, however, I stormed after him as he marched past our rear line. I caught him firmly by the arm, staying him in midstride.

“Let us stand!” I cried as he turned to me. “We are fresh yet and strong! They will send Immortals next—you will need Spartiates at the front! Let us stand!”

“Withdraw behind the wall, Echelas,” Demodocus told me, his brows narrowing. He flapped his arm, knocking my hand loose of his elbow. “Move your ass, lad, right now.”

“You need us!” I shouted. “Who have you called forward in our place? Malians? Why not send lambs to hold the line? You need Spartiates in place—let us stand!”

Demodocus seized me by the arm and leaned toward me, frowning. “I said move your ass behind that wall,” he told me. “That was not a request, Echelas. It was an order, and you will see it through.”

“Do not do this because of me,” I said and Demodocus blinked as if I had slapped him, his hand slackening against me. “Please,” I begged. “My men are honorable. They have dug in their heels the morning through, Demodocus. They deserve to hold their line. Please do not turn them back now. Not because of me.”

Demodocus looked at me for a long, stricken moment. We could both hear officers shouting out in alarm; a new contingent of Persians was moving on the double, drawing south along the path. “Go,” he whispered to me.

“Demodocus...” I objected.

“Go behind the wall,” he said, his brows lifting in pain. “I...I will beat you myself...whip you lame, Echelas, if you disobey my order.”

I blinked at him, angry and hurt. “Yes, sir,” I whispered.

He let me go and turned, storming away. He began to shout again, drawing his hands to frame his mouth. "Close the line!" he roared. "Draw it forward! They are coming! Stand ready!"

"I do not understand him," I said. I sat on a crumbled outcropping of stone with my elbows on my knees, my fingers tangled in my hair.

"Yes, you do," Dieneces said. From beyond the perimeter wall, we could hear the din of renewed battle, as again the charging lines crashed together.

"We can hold our place," I snapped in frustration, looking up at him. "For at least ten years now, every man in our ranks has practiced battles just like this—from dawn until dusk, Dieneces! We can hold a damn line in our sleep, it is so instilled within us!"

"Would you send Iacchus in to hold the line?" Dieneces asked me, and I blinked at him. "If you were Iacchus' commander, and death was plowing toward him, would you let him hold his place, or would you order him back?"

"That...that is unfair," I told him.

Dieneces arched his brow. "Yes," he said. "It is. But there you go."

He turned around and limped away, leaving me alone.

"This is odd," I remarked. Evening was upon us; just as the day before, the Persians had engaged us with relentless ferocity the day through, abandoning the pass in retreat as dusk approached. Once again, we had been sent out beyond the wall to scavenge weapons from among the dead. The smell was absolutely stifling; I drew in shallow, gasping breaths through my mouth to avoid inhaling the stink of rot into my nose.

"What?" Dieneces asked, tromping past me toward a cart, his arms laden with broken spears and snapped bows.

"The soldiers," I said, turning in a slow circle. I carried a torch in my hand and held it aloft to broaden its circumference of illumination. "None of these new ones are Immortals."

"How can you tell?" he asked, grunting as he let his load of weapons tumble into the wagon.

"Remember the riders who delivered the surrender demands?" I said. "I think those were Immortals—Xerxes' personal guards. They had better armor than most of these we have seen. I saw plenty of them yesterday among the slain."

"No, I mean how can you tell who is newly dead and who is somewhat more accustomed?" he asked, walking toward me.

"The ones from yesterday are underneath," I said, poking a heap of corpses with my toe, stirring a large, thrumming cloud of black flies. "Why did Xerxes not send Immortals against us today?"

"He has five million men to choose from," Dieneces said. "Perhaps he favors variety."

I turned around, looking behind us at the cliffs of Kallidromos. Beyond that towering ridge of stone lay a channel carved into the mountains that formed the path of Anopaea. I thought of Clesonymus slipping away in the night, disguised as a Malian farmer named Ephialtes, and I shivered slightly.

"Or perhaps he has sent them someplace else," I murmured. Dieneces came to stand beside me, and we both looked up at the mountains.

"Go and find Demodocus," Dieneces said quietly. "I will finish here."

I nodded, still studying the cliffs. "Alright," I said.

I walked through the encampment, searching for Demodocus. It was unnerving to make my way past the various camps; wounded men lay as comfortably as they could be arranged among faces familiar to them. Despite the massive number of Persian dead, we had suffered our own losses, and

their spears and swords had taken their toll. The evening was filled with quiet moans and whimpers; punctuated by occasional shrill and agonized shrieks, or delirious cries for loved ones. I marked a brisk pace, struggling not to look too long at these suffering men—or those who tended to them with anguished and tender expressions fighting for dominance in their faces.

I found Demodocus at his campsite, meeting in apparent counsel with Demophilus of the Thespians and several other Greek commanders. Leonidas was with them, sitting before a campfire and sipping from a skin of wine. There was another man, too, whom I did not recognize, and who seemed to be the focus of their attentions. When I approached, they turned at my footfalls in the loose gravel and dirt, and their murmured conversations faded.

The unfamiliar man blinked at me, his dark eyes somewhat startled in the firelight, his mouth agape, poised in midsentence. He was shivering despite the warmth of the evening, and had been bundled in multiple cloaks. His hair was damp and disheveled, his beard unkempt.

“Echelas,” Demodocus said, rising to his feet. He walked toward me, positioning himself deliberately to block my line of sight. He did not slow as he drew near; he placed his hand on my shoulder, turned me about and led me away from the fire. “What is it?”

“Who is that?” I asked, puzzled, trying to glance over my shoulder.

“Who?”

“That man you do not want me to see,” I said, and I frowned, ducking away from his hand. “Who is he?”

Demodocus paused, folding his arms across his chest. “His name is Tyrnhastides,” he said. “He is from Cyme, in Ionia.”

I blinked at him, startled. “Ionia...?”

Demodocus nodded once. “He came to us by sea only an hour or so ago, afloat on some broken bits of hull. He abandoned the Persian camps and risked his life to reach us.”

"He is Persian," I whispered.

"He is Greek," Demodocus said. "Just like you, Echelas, and me. He cannot help the circumstances of his state. He has come to us in friendship, to stand with his native people."

I looked at him. "Demodocus, there are no Immortals among the dead today," I said. "Xerxes did not dispatch any, not even at the end."

"I know," Demodocus told me quietly. "Tyrrhastiades told us."

I glanced toward this mysterious, scrawny man, and then again at my father. "They have taken to the mountains," I said. "The path of Anopaea."

"Yes," Demodocus said.

"Clesonymus is showing them the way," I said.

His brows lifted as though something within him panged. "A man named Ephialtes came to the cavalry camp late last night," he said. "Asking for council with Xerxes. Tyrrhastiades knows that much. It is where he found the idea to swim southward to reach us."

"It was Clesonymus," I said. "He is leading them through the mountains."

"For his sake, he had best hope that he is not," Demodocus said, and his brows pinched, the corners of his mouth turning downward. "I will run him through myself if he is."

"What...what will Leonidas do?" I asked.

"I do not know," Demodocus replied. "I am not Leonidas."

I glanced at him, frowning at this, and he flapped his hand at me. "He will call us together and tell us all when he is ready," he said. "Go on in the meantime. Gather weapons from the pass."

"Yes, sir," I said, walking away, hunching my shoulders in begrudging concession.

“Xerxes has sent ten-thousand Immortals along the path of Anopaea,” Leonidas told us later that night. Just as Demodocus had promised, he had summoned all of his officers together. We stood in a circle around a large bonfire, and he walked among us, his expression solemn. “Tyrrhastiades said they left with the dawn. They have traveled the day through, and they will not rest or pause tonight. We cannot hope that the Phocians can hold them off for long. They will have reached the east gate by the new morning.”

A murmur of alarm fluttered through the assembled officers at this. “Then I say we beat them to it,” Hicetaon, one of the Malian leaders said. He stepped forward into the broad circumference of firelight to face Leonidas. “We gather our troops tonight—this moment—and we make for the south. We leave the pass to them.”

“If we abandon the pass, there will be no stopping them,” Demophilus of the Thespians said. He, too, stepped forward, looking somewhat surprised by Hicetaon’s declaration. “Xerxes will seize the entire eastern shore of the mainland. We will never have time enough to alert the fleet in the gulf that they might withdraw.”

“Rot on the fleet,” Hicetaon snapped, turning to him. “They have drawn their ships southward already with the storms—past Chalcis and toward Eretria, I am sure. They have left us here to stand on our own while they make their own war in the southern gulf.”

“No matter the fleet’s position, if the Persians come upon us from both sides, we have no hope,” one of the Locrian commanders named Phereclus said. “Come the morning, there will be no escape from this pass. We will be trapped here and slaughtered. Hicetaon is right. I say we abandon Thermopylae.”

The Greek commanders and officers began to argue back and forth, their voices rising more and more sharply. They closed their hands into fists and stood toe to toe with one another, debating vehemently.

“Well, I will not leave my men here as fodder!” Hicetaon shouted out over the din. “Already too many have fallen to Xerxes to suit my heart! Malis marched with Leonidas—we sent you our good sons—because we were told we would only hold the pass until the Spartans could arrive in full! I will not sacrifice my hoplites to a worthless, futile cause!”

“If we stand together, it will not be futile,” Demophilus argued. “I say we arm the slaves. Leonidas has brought the Dweller Greeks of Laconia with him, and they have not yet been called to the lines. We arm every man in this pass and see them stand fast.”

“Why do you not wade out into the sea and stave the tide with your palms, Demophilus?” Phereclus asked. “What good are slaves armed, or simple men with spears in hand against this army? You only offer Xerxes more Greek lives to claim!”

More dissention erupted; sharp words and heated voices raised and overlapping as the men shouted and snapped. After a long moment, Leonidas held up his hands. Slowly, but certainly, silence fell, and he looked around, his brows narrowed, his mouth twisted in a grim frown.

“Hicetaon, take your men and leave,” he said. “And you, Phereclus, if that is where your heart would guide you. I will not lie to any among you and tell you we will live through this. I will not make you stay to hold this pass, to sacrifice your men. Any who would leave this place should do so freely and swiftly. Move yourselves southward and bolster Latychidas’ troops when they march. Fight for Greece another day—there will plenty more than these if any among us should live to see them.

“But as for me,” he said, turning in a slow circle, his chin lifted proudly. “As for the sons of Sparta who follow me, we will keep to this pass. We will take our marks with the dawn and we will plant our heels into the dirt. We will fight shoulder to shoulder and shield against shield, and though we may fall, we will keep Xerxes from this path for as long as we are able. I have given my word to Greece to see this done.”

He looked among the commanders. "Do what you must," he said. "Know no shame, whatever your decision. But Sparta will make her stand here."

He shouldered his way through the crowd of men and walked away, leaving us to stand in bewildered, conflicted silence around the fire.

"Abas, you will take Ilus with you back to Sparta," I said to my slave. I had come to send them away—Abas and Cleomenes, and as I spoke, Abas looked at me, wounded. "You will keep with him, tend to him. Go to my wife, tell her to make arrangements for accommodations for you both, lodging in Sellasia, or one of the eastern Dweller villages."

"I would like to stay here with you, sir," Abas said quietly.

I had been helping Cleomenes rise slowly to his feet, keeping my arm about his waist to steady him in his efforts. I glanced at Abas in surprise. "That...that is very generous of you," I said. "And brave besides, lad, but I...I would see you return to Laconia with Ilus."

"I am not going anywhere," Cleomenes growled, planting his hand against my breastplate and trying to push me away from him. "I am staying right here. The boy can help me as well here as elsewhere."

"Neither of you are remaining," I said, frowning. "The Immortals are along the path of Anopaea as we speak. They will be at the east gate by morning. Both of you are leaving for the south."

"My place is here," Cleomenes said.

"No, it is not," I replied.

He caught me by the chin, closing his hand against my face. I was surprised by the strength in his fingers, and I gasped. "There is no place for me in Sparta, be it among the Dwellers, Tremblers or slaves," he said. "My time there is finished and here is my fate, Echelas. You will not rob me of it. I have struggled my life through to see it come to this."

“And what will you do?” I asked, ducking away from him. “You can scarcely hold your own balance, much less a shield and spear.”

“Give the boy the shield, and me the spear,” he snapped. “I am blind, not helpless. I can still shove it forward as readily as any other man.”

“You are not staying here,” I said.

He leaned toward me, his brows drawn with determination. “You cannot keep me from it, Echelas,” he said.

“There you are, Echelas—good then,” Demodocus said, walking briskly toward me as I returned to our camp. Between Cleomenes and Abas, neither would listen to reason and leave, and I was frustrated and frightened for them, aggravated and anxious.

“Sir?” I asked, as Demodocus approached. He held something in his hand; a long, narrow tube made of leather, bound with cords of sinew. He held it out toward me, and I took it from him, blinking in puzzlement.

“It is an urgent message to Latychidas and the Ephors from Leonidas,” Demodocus said. “Letting them know what has come to pass. The others are withdrawing—only the Thespians and Thebans have agreed to remain. Even with the Dwellers armed, and the slaves besides, we cannot hope for more than two thousand among us. They must get reinforcements to us if we are to have a chance. I need you to deliver it for me.”

“What?” I whispered. I nearly dropped the tube on the ground between my feet. I stared at Demodocus in stricken disbelief.

“You are the fastest runner here,” he said. “And time has never been more important. You must take that letter to Sparta and see it into Latychidas’ hands.”

“I...I will not,” I whispered, shaking my head.

Demodocus blinked at me, his eyes widening. “What?”

"I will not," I said again, my voice hoarse and tremulous. "What...what are you doing? Why are you doing this?"

His brows narrowed. "I am dispatching an urgent message at my King's order with the man among my hoplites of the greatest speed. A hoplite who is defying me to my face at the moment."

"But the others," I said. "The other Greeks are moving southward. They could deliver—"

"No army can cover this terrain more quickly than a lone man on foot," he said.

"That is not why you are doing this," I whispered.

He looked at me for a long moment, scowling, and then abandoned pretense. His face softened, his shoulders slumped and he uttered a sigh. "No," he said, looking at the ground. "It is not. But you will listen to me, and you will obey me, no matter the reason. You will go back to Sparta."

"I will not," I said, and he looked at me, anger in his eyes again. "I know you want to protect me. I know that you...you only mean to keep me safe from harm. I understand. I...I would do no less if I was in charge over my own son."

He blinked at me, and I could see his anguish in his face, the lift of his brows. "Echelas..." he said.

"Please, Demodocus," I said. "Let me stand with you. Let me stand with Sparta—for Sparta. I am not afraid to die."

"Do not say that," he said. He caught my face between his hands and leaned toward me, his brows furrowed. He looked angry with me—furious, in fact, but I knew he was not; there was too much of Pelorus within him. He was frightened for me; terrified beyond reason. "Do not say that—do not ever say that, Echelas. You...you are my son, and I will not watch you die here."

"I am your son," I told him. "But I am a son of Sparta, too."

He blinked at me, pained. "Do not do this to me," he said. "I beg you, Echelas."

Once again, Cleomenes' words came to me, serving as they often seemed to. I looked at my father, realizing his pain, but unable to spare him. "I am sorry, Demodocus," I whispered. "But you cannot keep me from it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hoplites of Sparta stood in quiet clusters around our campfires, watching the other regiments of Greek allies prepare to leave. The Locrians, Arcadians and Malians were all departing Thermopylae for the south. Leonidas had found another courier to take my place; a young Spartiate named Pantites, and though he had already left the pass with the call for reinforcements, none of us held much hope.

Leonidas had addressed the contingents of Dwellers who had marched with us from the Peloponnese. He had spared them no sentiments, and told them they were free to choose the southward path to their homes. He had ordered all of the Spartiates to dispatch their slaves back to Laconia as well. A peculiar silence had swept upon us when without fail, every Dweller and slave refused to leave. Leonidas had stood before them, his lips pressed together in a thin line as one by one, these men who owed no allegiance to our king—and certainly none to our cause—pledged themselves to him. He had said nothing at first, and it might have been only a trick of the firelight and shadows, but I could have sworn there were tears gleaming in his eyes. He had nodded once and then shouted out to the Spartiates, ordering us to distribute weapons and armor among the Dwellers and slaves.

Demophilus refused to leave, or to allow the withdrawal of his troops. What the Thespians lacked in numbers, they more than made amends with simple, striking courage, and as the larger contingents from stronger states abandoned the pass, they passed the Thespians with their

heads lowered, their eyes averted in shame. The Thebans, too, pledged their allegiance to Leonidas and would not leave. Their senior commander, Thersanor shouted out to his men, delivering an impassioned speech to rally them to the cause, but to judge by their faces as they glanced among one another, they did not necessarily share his enthusiasm or resolve.

Cleomenes had told me not to trust the Thebans; I wondered why Thersanor might have ordered them to stay when presented with free opportunity to leave. Thebes lay south of Thermopylae, directly in Xerxes' path once he made it beyond the pass, and Thersanor had told his men because of this, they would take their stand. I suspected another underlying reason.

"Keep an eye on them," I whispered to Dieneces, nodding my chin toward Thersanor and his officers as they marched past us.

"The Thebans?" he asked, arching his brow. "Why?"

"Cleomenes said not to trust them."

Dieneces uttered a quiet snort. "They are staying behind while the others are leaving," he said. "That raises them a fair standard higher than most in my opinion."

"Just watch them, Dieneces," I said. "Especially when they are called to the front."

He glanced at me. "You think they will betray us?"

"I do not know," I murmured as Thersanor and his officers leaned their heads together in quiet counsel. "If Thermopylae falls, Thebes is not so far behind. Here is a good chance for them to barter with Xerxes if they can. They will not have such an opportunity when the Persians arrive at their doorstep."

We stood with our phalanx mates and watched the Greeks withdraw. Their feet fell in a solemn rhythm against the ground as they marched, marking a nearly funereal cadence. We watched them, our cloaks damp, our bodies aching, scraped, filthy and sore, our expressions somber and impassive. They would not look at us. Just as they had averted their gazes from the Thespians, they turned away from the Spartans. They

hurried past us with their injured in tow, carrying litters with moaning, feeble men sprawled across them, or helping fellows limp beside them. They left us, and suddenly, in their wake, the scrap of earth bridging the sea and the cliffs seemed massive and expansive. Two thousand of us remained; Thermopylae had become our burden alone to bear.

The sky was still dark, the dawn hours yet ahead of us, when Leonidas ordered the remains of our food rations distributed. Every loaf of bread, wheel of cheese, basket of dried fruits and skin of wine was passed among us; Leonidas called for the Thessalian stores we had seized in our raids to be opened and shared, a veritable feast the likes of which I had never seen in all of my days. “Eat heartily, lads!” Leonidas shouted out to his, his voice echoing against the stark walls of the mountainsides. He strode among us, a wineskin in hand and hoisted it high. “We are dining in Hades!”

For the first time in thirty-two years, I understood what “gluttony” was; I ate until my gullet was so swollen, I had to stagger to the beach and wretch. I was not alone in my overindulgence; Dieneces, too, offered his gut’s homage to the tide, as did most of my phalanx mates. Dieneces and I crumpled to our knees in the sand, leaning together and laughing when we were finished; it was either laugh or weep, and we were torn between the two.

“Hoah—now I have room for more!” Dieneces declared, patting the stomach of his breastplate while he uttered a loud and decidedly pungent-smelling belch.

I fell against him, laughing. “There is plenty more to be had,” I told him, and we both snorted.

After a long moment, as our laughter dwindled, Dieneces looked at me, his dark eyes large and frightened. “When I fall, will you stay with me?” he whispered.

I caught his hand, lacing my fingers through his and squeezing fiercely. “Yes,” I told him. “If I fall first, will you keep by my side?”

“Yes,” he promised, nodding.

I hooked my arm around his neck and hugged him tightly, shuddering against him. He clutched at my shoulders, and gasped softly against my ear.

We returned to the fireside just as Leonidas stood once more to address us. He gazed among us as our voices fell quiet, as our eyes turned toward his, but at first, he did not speak. He looked at us as a father might sons who have pleased him beyond his fondest considerations, and after a moment, he lowered his head, averting his eyes toward his toes.

"I am honored for you all," he said. "And humbled at the same. A man can only aspire in the measure of his days to find himself in such company, his place among numbers as noble and courageous as these."

He looked up and scanned among the gathered men. "Dieneces, son of Camesus, will you stand and come forward?" he called. Dieneces and I blinked at one another at this unexpected beckon, and then Dieneces stepped forward, walking to stand beside the king.

"As the orator who claimed a Pythian laurel for your gifts," Leonidas said. "I would be grateful if you might not offer words in my stead, verses from Tyrtaeus' ode to courage that speak with more eloquence and passion than I might ever hope to convey or express."

Dieneces blinked in surprise. "I...I would be honored, sir," he said.

Leonidas lowered his head in deference, as if an ephebe before his mentor. "As would we all," he said.

Dieneces turned to us. Anyone else on any occasion—but this especially—might have choked for breath, the measures of poetry lost to their minds, but not him. He raised his chin and opened his mouth, and just as he ever had, he spoke to us, delivering words we all knew fair to heart as if they had only just occurred to his mind; as if we listened to them fresh and new, presented for the first time.

"For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can endure to face the blood and the slaughter, go

close against the enemy and fight with his hands,” Dieneces declaimed. He began to pace in long, slow strides, marking the cadence of his recitation with his footsteps. “Here is courage, mankind’s finest possession. Here is the noblest prize that a young man can endeavor to win—and it is a good thing his city and all the people share with him, when a man plants his feet and stands in the foremost spears relentlessly, all thought of foul flight completely forgotten and has well trained his heart to be steadfast and to endure, and with words encourages the man who is stationed beside him.”

His gaze settled upon mine, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a wry, fleeting smile. “Here is a man who proves himself to be valiant in war. With a sudden rush, he turns to flight the rugged battalions of the enemy, and sustains the beating waves of assault. And he who falls among the champions and loses his sweet life, so blessing with honor his city, his father and all his people, with wounds in his chest where the spear that he was facing has transfixed that massive guard of his shield, and gone through his breastplate as well—why, such a man is lamented alike by the young and the elders, and all his city goes into mourning and grieves for his loss. His tomb is pointed to with pride and so are his children—and his children’s children, and afterward all the race that is his.

“His shining glory is never forgotten, his name is remembered and he becomes an immortal—though he lies under the ground—when one who was a brave man is killed by the furious war god standing his ground and fighting hard for his children and land.”

I watched Dieneces speak, transfixed by his poise, immobilized by the power of his voice. He had never failed to move me, and as I watched him, I felt tears sting my eyes; tears to realize this magnificent young man I called my friend likely delivered his last—but greatest—recitation, and tears of fierce and unwavering pride to know that I would die with him. I would die for him.

“Thus a man should endeavor to reach this high place of courage with all of his heart!” Dieneces cried to us. He lifted his hands as if beseeching us to greatness, his fingers

splayed toward the sky, his voice loud and commanding. “And so trying, never be backward in war!”

He shifted without pause into other verses by Tyrtaeus—those I knew he loved most of all. He recited them with fluidity, as if they had been written in procession and always meant to be offered together aloud. He closed his hands into tight fists, and tilted his head back, shouting to us, to the Persians, to the gods themselves in defiance.

“Let him take a wide stance and stand up strongly against them!” he roared, his voice reverberating off of the mountainsides. “Digging both heels in the ground, biting his lip with his teeth, covering thighs and legs beneath, his chest and shoulders under the hollowed-out protection of his broad shield while in his right hand he brandishes the powerful war-spear and shakes terribly the crest high above his helm! Let him fight toe to toe and shield against shield hard driven, crest against crest and helmet on helmet, chest against chest, let him close hard and fight it out with his opposite foe!”

“Young men, fight shield to shield and never succumb to panic or miserable flight! Steel the heart in your chests with magnificence and courage. Forget your own life when you grapple with the enemy—let each man spread his legs, rooting them in the ground, bite his teeth into his lips and hold!”

Dieneces lowered his hands, trembling. He looked among us, blinking as if he emerged from a reverie. Silence greeted his wide-eyed gaze, and I rose to my feet. “Hoah, Dieneces!” I shouted out to him, lifting my wineskin.

One by one, the others took up my cry, and within moments, our voices shuddered together like thunder against the belly of the sky. If the Persians did not hear us from their encampments to the north—if Xerxes himself did not sit up from his pallet and tremble with a measure of trepidation in his heart at the din, then I decided that he was deaf—and ignorant besides.

“Death will be upon us with the dawn.”

Those were the Arcanian seer, Megistias' words upon offering the morning sacrifices. We did not need prophecies to promise such ill tidings, however; a group of fifteen Phocians had reached our encampment as the sky had begun to lighten with encroaching sunlight. They had stumbled about in a state of shock, taking into bewildered account the significant lack of hoplites remaining in the pass, and then had told us that thousands of Persian soldiers—Immortals from the description of their armor and armaments—had come upon the Phocian campsite along the mountain ridge only hours earlier. The Phocians told us grim stories of how they had made a stand, but had been so horrendously outnumbered, they had been left no choice but to flee their positions.

"They turned loose on us with their bows, and men fell all around me," one of the Phocians said. "You could hear the fletchings like wind, hissing and snapping and then there was nothing but screaming and feet slapping the dirt."

By their accounts, the Phocians had done their best to stand their ground against impossible odds, and it sounded brave and noble. I remembered what Cleomenes had told me, however, and imagined the truth could well have been lost in the recounting.

"The Immortals are within hours of us, then, if even that," Demodocus said quietly. He kept turning his gaze over his shoulder, as if expecting to find a surging crowd of Immortals charging toward us from the east gate at any moment. Leonidas had given those straggling survivors of the Phocian ranks the same choice he had offered the other Greeks—make a stand with us at the hot gates, or retreat for safer ground while there was still time. The Phocians had apparently had their fill of death for one day; they left us as quickly as they had arrived.

We were taking our positions in the hot gates, and Demodocus and I stood together for a moment before finding our places among the ranks. Until that morning, Leonidas had been ordering us along the narrowest part of the pass just beyond our defensive wall; today, he had called us forward into the broader basin where the hot springs drained. More men could erect a wider shield wall here. He meant for us to greet

the Persians headlong and with all of the might we could muster. He had also abandoned most protocol in positioning; with so many among us unaccustomed to regimented battle or rank and file, he had stationed his officers throughout the columns and rows. Leonidas himself had taken the senior commanding position at the front line, in the right corner of the lead phalanx. Demodocus would be taking a similar position in an adjacent formation; Demophilus would stand in this post among his Thespians.

In the previous days, Dieneces and I had kept to our places as line officers at the rear of our phalanx, even as the rows had rotated forward. Today, we would be moving with them. Leonidas had fortified his front line shield wall with the strongest among us. Dieneces and I were not to be along the front at the first, but our positioning there was inevitable. No matter how strong our men might be, they could only stand so long before exhaustion and Persian spear points would drive them back.

“When the shield wall goes, it will go quickly,” Demodocus said to me. “And likely all at once. If you see a man falter, do not save your breath—call the next forward. If it falls, forget your spear. Move back and draw your sword. They will be upon you in a flood. There will be no stopping them.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He looked at me and I met his gaze. He nodded his chin once, and hefted his spear in hand. He walked away from me toward his place among the ranks, his brows furrowed slightly, his lips pressed together as though he struggled to contain words he longed to speak.

Before I moved to my position, I walked among the slaves ranks, looking for Abas and Cleomenes. I found them together and was not the least bit surprised to discover Cleomenes shouting out to the slaves, ordering them into rows; there was enough authority to the sharp edge of his voice that they obeyed him. They all wore ill-fitting, handed-down armor and armaments; whatever we could scavenge from the fallen Persians or beg away from the retreating Greeks, we had given to the slaves and Dwellers. Cleomenes sported an old,

dented helmet with a mangy horsehair crest; he wore it as proudly as if it was newly polished Spartiate bronze.

I draped my hand against his shoulder to attract his attention, and he turned to me. I could not help but to smile; he was blind and old, half-lame and unsteady, but he looked every measure a venerable Spartan king.

“You should be in your line,” he told me.

“I am on my way,” I replied. “I just...I wanted to make sure...”

He reached up, pressing his hand against my mouth. “Do not worry for me,” he said. “Do not worry for anyone but yourself this morning, lad. Take your place and dig in your heels. Farewells and fond wishes are useless and simpering. Go.”

He drew his hand away and turned back toward the slaves, calling out again.

“Thank you, Cleomenes,” I said quietly.

He did not so much as cant his face in my direction. “You are welcome, Echelas,” he said. “Now go away before you see me embrace you and weep. I have found some measure of dignity here at the last, thanks to you. I would as soon keep it, if you do not mind.”

I smiled at him. “Yes, sir.”

The sunrise found us at our marks. Dieneces and I stood side by side, our shields overlapping. The morning was unseasonably cool; the crisp air rolling in with the waves from the gulf mingled with the hot spring flows, creating a soft, hazy mist that draped the ground. I could smell the salt of the sea intermingling with the lingering odor of decay. I could not recall that the sun had ever seemed so bright to me before, or that the sound of the sea had ever played so much like music as it did all at once.

I thought I heard the sounds of distant drums, some faint but distinct cadence and a heavy silence fell upon our ranks as we strained to listen.

"They are coming," Dieneces breathed.

I nodded and looked to the north. I could not see much above the rows of helmet crests, the prosceniums of shields, the pointed tips of spears, but I could hear them. I could hear Xerxes' army coming down the pass toward us; the ground beneath my feet shivered with the forceful impact of their footfalls and I could not breathe.

"They...they are marking double time," I whispered.

"More than that," Dieneces said. "Triple at least."

I heard an unfamiliar scraping sound, a tremulous scratching. It took me a long moment before I realized it was my shield against Dieneces'; my arm was shaking, my shoulder shuddering with fear.

I glanced at Dieneces and he met my gaze. "One last time, then," he said, shifting his grip on his spear shaft.

A murmur of sound fluttered through the ranks from the front lines when the Persians came into view. I heard the commanders calling out, and suddenly the flutes trilled and we began to move forward. I could not see the Persians. There was nothing in my line of sight but the backs of heads, the wagging, flapping tails of helmet crests, the rims of shields. Sunlight winked off of spear tips, and I could hear our heavy steps falling in measure together; our bronze armor clattering in disharmonic melody. The flutes called us to double time, and our pace quickened, our strides broadened. Now the earth pounded against the soles of my sandals, and I could feel the impact of each step reverberating into my knees, shivering up my thighs.

I could not breathe. I was shaking so hard my shield slapped against Dieneces'. I could hear him whispering, reciting his beloved verses over and over, as if the words held magical qualities, something comforting and sacred to him.

"Let him fight toe to toe and shield against shield hard driven," Dieneces whispered. "Crest against crest and helmet on helmet, chest against chest; let him close hard and fight it out with his opposite foeman..."

I could not breathe. Dieneces' words were drowned out as we were called to triple time and our feet striking the earth became like drumbeats, a thunderous din. I heard Demodocus shout out from somewhere ahead of me; my father's voice sharp and clear in the morning air.

"Forward hold! Present pikes!"

A new clatter arose as the shield wall shifted their positions while they marched, hoisting their spears and presenting their points towards the Persians. I could not see them. I did not look beyond the man in front of me, the basin of his shield and helmet awash and dazzling with sunlight. It occurred to me I did not know his name.

"Forward hold and mark it now!" Demodocus cried.

I heard the Persians, their voices raised together in a loud cry. I felt the earth beneath me shake as if it had slipped loose of its moorings. They charged at us, and I could not hear the flutes. I could not hear Demodocus' orders. I could hear nothing but the pounding rhythm of feet against the ground.

"Here they come!" someone screamed. "Hold the line! Hold the line! Hold the—"

I felt them crash into our shield wall. The impact was so brutal as we fell together that the man in front of me staggered back, stumbling into my shield. I dug in my heels; I could feel the force of Xerxes' army forcing us backward, and my feet slipped in the dirt as the man in front of me struggled to regain his balance. There was nothing but thunder; a tremendous, shuddering din of metal against metal as shields slammed together, as spears punched forward. Shrieks ripped through the ranks; shrill, terrified, furious screams, and then we began to fall.

"Hold the line!" someone shrieked, and I watched in horror as shield rims in front of me dipped from view. The front line fell, and the rows behind it surged forward to fill the abandoned spaces, but our hoplites shoved for position against a forward thrust of Persians. It was like trying to hold back the tide with your hands.

I moved forward, ramming my shield mightily into the back of the man ahead of me, forcing him to move. "Hold the line!" I screamed. "Move forward! Forward!"

Somehow we had come to be at the front. I did not realize it until the man in front of me fell, and I plowed over him as he tumbled. I nearly lost my balance, and danced clumsily, hopping over his body, and then I heard Dieneces screaming, his voice shrill and panicked. "Raise your shields! Raise them up! Hold the line!"

I drew my shield up and realized there was nothing in front of me but Persians. I could see them now, these dark-skinned men of Xerxes, with their armor gleaming, their short spears skewering through the ranks. I slammed my shield against Dieneces' and we leaned together, gritting our teeth as the force of the Persian front line shoved against us. I planted my feet, but felt myself sliding backward, my heels cleaving deep troughs in the dirt.

I screamed, drawing my spear back and ramming it forward. I could not see anything except the back of my shield; I felt the spear point punch into something resistant and I buckled my knees, shoving against the staff. I heard screaming and wailing; I wrenched my arm back, tearing my spear loose of whatever I had struck, and then I lunged again, stabbing with the spear.

Something hit the front of my shield hard, and I staggered, nearly losing my footing. There were bodies on the ground; men sprawled and squirming underfoot, and I staggered against Dieneces, fighting to keep my shield against his. I felt hands slap and paw against my legs, my greaves. I kicked wildly, driving my sandals into these groping, desperate men, punting them away.

Something hit me again; I felt pain sear through my arm as the impact shattered my wrist. The handstrap of my shield that I had been clutching snapped, and my hand slapped loose; I groped for the next strap and curled my fingers around it.

“Hold the line!” Dieneses shrieked, hefting his spear back and shoving it beyond his shield. “On your left! Your left!”

I rammed my spear forward and this time, when I wrenched it back, I held only a splintered half in my fist. Something smashed into my shield, and I could hear the scrape of a sword blade against the outer surface as it stabbed and smacked. I shrieked, casting aside my shattered spear and putting all of my weight behind the shield. The Persian attacking me stumbled and fell; I floundered over him, planting my heels in his gut, and I felt a searing, sudden pain as he shoved his sword blade into my thigh.

I looked down and staggered sideways, kicking him mightily. His hands slipped loose of his hilt, but the sword remained, buried deep in the meat of my leg. I grabbed it, wrenching it loose. Just as I pivoted, settling my weight clumsily to try and hold the line, somewhere to my left, the shield wall fell. I was knocked sideways, sprawling into Dieneses as the line broke and the Persians surged forward. Dieneses and I went down in a tangle of legs and arms, our shields slamming together. I landed atop him, smashing the wits and breath from him, and I could not rise; I was kicked, punted, stepped on and smashed as hundreds of Persians shoved through the break in our front like water rushing through a crumbled levy.

I pawed for my hip, my sword, getting my feet beneath me, struggling to stand. Dieneses shoved against me, screaming, reaching for his own sword. Somehow we rose, and I staggered back, pressing my shoulders against him. All I could see was a flurry of faces darting past me; Persians and hoplites alike ramming into me, shoving against me. I drew my sword back and began swinging wildly. I tried to scream, but my throat was raw, my voice hoarse. I watched blood spraying in the air, splashing against my face as again and again, I brought my sword up and pistoned it down, driving the blade with all of my might into passing necks and shoulders, into helmets and skulls.

“He has fallen!” I heard someone scream from my immediate right. I thought it was Dieneses, and I whirled. As I

did, I met his gaze, his eyes flown wide, his face ashen, his mouth blood-smeared and agape.

“Move!” he shrieked. “Move! Move!” He rammed his sword forward directly at my face, and I ducked toward my right shoulder as the blade punched through the air where my nose had only just been. I felt something excruciating slam into my lower back, knocking the breath from me in a strangled cry; a sword slammed through my breastplate from behind me. Blood slapped against the side of my head as Dieneces shoved his blade through the face of the man who had just attacked me.

The Persian fell away, dragging Dieneces’ sword with him. “Get it out of me!” I screamed, turning to him. The sword was buried deep in my back; I could feel it, and I drew my shield up, hunkering behind it to protect us both. “Get it out of me! Pull it loose!”

Dieneces closed his fists about the hilt and I heard him scream with effort and anguish as he jerked the length of blade from my body. I staggered, swooning at the pain, my knees abandoning me, and I felt his hand close firmly against my shoulder, forcing me to keep on my feet.

“Come on!” he screamed in my ear, dragging me backward in floundering tow. “Come on! Come on!”

“He has fallen!” someone screamed again, and then we nearly staggered headlong into Pedaeus and a clustered group of Spartiates. I blinked at Pedaeus as he stared at me and Dieneces, his mouth hanging open, his eyes flown wide with terror. “He has fallen!” Pedaeus shrieked. “Help us! We have to get back behind the wall!”

“Who...?” I whimpered, and then I saw why they had gathered so closely together. Three of the Spartans struggled to bear a man aloft between them—a man whose gut had been torn open, and whose form was soaked with blood. “Leonidas...!”

“They are trying to claim him!” I heard someone else bellow, and I jerked my head to see my father. Demodocus was among the Spartiates who were trying to protect Leonidas

from the Persians. If he saw me—if he realized who I was in that moment of frantic terror and blind panic—it did not measure in his face.

“Keep them from him! Back behind the wall!”

Demodocus roared, lunging forward, shoving his shield into Persians as they rushed at him. Five more Spartiates came together with him, interlocking their shields, trying to present a desperate barrier against the Persians. Dieneces turned loose of me and waded into the fray, swinging his sword and shrieking as he tried to drive them back. I stumbled against Pedaeus; he had turned away from me to seize Leonidas’ limp, lifeless form from the others.

“Help me!” Pedaeus wailed, turning to look at me wildly. He draped Leonidas’ arm over his shoulder and flapped his hand at me. “Help me! Hold him!”

I caught Leonidas’ other hand against mine and drew his arm over my shoulder so that he dangled between me and Pedaeus. He was heavy; his sudden weight against my back left me staggering, moaning, and I began to whoop for breath, choking on blood.

“Hold him, damn you!” Pedaeus screamed, and then he began to move, rushing forward. I stumbled, trying to match his pace, to hold Leonidas upright. Hoplites moved with us, surrounding us, enfolding us as best they could, driving back the Persians. I lost sight of Dieneces and Demodocus.

Pedaeus was weeping. Never in my days might I have believed it. He gasped for breath as we both staggered along, dragging our king between us. “Bastards!” he screamed, blood spraying from his mouth. His helmet was gone; the right side of his face laid open and coursing blood. “All of them bastards!” He looked at me, shocked and stricken. “They killed our king!” he shrieked and for the first time, I realized Leonidas was not grievously injured and unconscious. “They killed our king and now they want his body! Bastards! You cannot have him!” He turned, craning his head as he cursed the Persians with all of the breath he could muster. “You cannot have him!”

We made it past the hot gates, back to the defensive wall. The hoplites defended us as we dragged Leonidas past the mound of stone and dirt. For the moment, at least, the Persians could not pass; the Greeks made a stand to keep them from us, and we could hear the clattering, banging, shrieking sounds of battle from beyond the wall.

Pedaeus turned Leonidas loose and began to stagger around in absolute, stupefied shock. I struggled to lower Leonidas carefully to the ground. I knelt beside him, shrugging off my shield. I leaned over the King, fumbling with the ties of his helmet, loosening them beneath his chin. I drew his helmet from his head and cradled his face between my hands.

“Sir...?” I gasped. I could not feel his breath against me, and I knew Pedaeus was right. I gasped again, stunned tears flooding my eyes.

I blinked up at Pedaeus. “Call...call them back,” I said.

He was still reeling about and paused, stumbling, looking down at me.

“Call them back!” I screamed, balling my hands into fists. “Back behind the wall! Call them back now!”

He stared at me, dazed and not understanding. I staggered to my feet, grabbing my shield again. “We...we have a chance here...” I said, as I shoved my arm into place in my shield, struggling to shoulder its weight. “Behind the wall, we...we can stand...”

I marched toward the wall, screaming at the hoplites who were already clambering around its sheltering perimeter. “Call them all back!” I yelled. “Where are the flutists? Call a retreat! Get them back here!”

“Fall back!” the men began to shriek, calling out over the wall. I shoved and shouldered my way past them, and leaned out over the stones. The other hoplites heard the order, and began to withdraw, moving in shifts, one group defending another from pursuit as they scrambled in turn for the wall.

“Fall back!” I cried. “Fall back beyond the wall! Fall back!”

I felt my foot scrabble for purchase, lost my balance and yelped, tumbling to the ground. I slammed hard against the dirt, and pain lanced through my wounded back and thigh. I convulsed, choking up a spewing mouthful of blood. I could not whoop in air past this sudden flood, and I clawed at my throat, choking.

Someone caught me by the cloak, fingertips hooking roughly beneath the edge of my breastplate, and I was hauled to my feet. The moment I was upright again, I coughed up blood. I buckled, gagging, but mercifully, I could breathe again. I blinked up at Alphaeus, blood dripping from my lips, smeared against my chin.

"Where is Leonidas?" he cried.

"Dead," I gasped, spitting more blood out. "He...he is there..." I pointed, my finger shaking in the air. "He is dead. Call...call them back, Alphaeus. They...we have to fall back."

Alphaeus stepped toward me, pressing his hand briefly against my shoulder. "Echelas," he said. "We have fallen back, as many as who could."

I blinked, looking past his shoulder. There were no more than two hundred men making their way past the wall, gathering together beyond its shelter.

"The Thebans have the mound," Alphaeus told me, nodding his chin. "They have archers fending them off, but they cannot hold."

I looked behind me, toward a low outcropping of stone and rock among the foothills by the wall. I could see the Thebans, as though they had nestled here all along, out of harm's way. They fired upon the battlefield beyond the stone wall with their bows.

"They will come," I said, turning to Alphaeus. "They...the Persians will come. They cannot claim Leonidas. Bring...bring him among us. Call everyone together. Get them by the wall. We...we have to stand there. We..."

"They are coming!" someone shrieked, and Alphaeus and I both jerked our heads toward the cry. A slave boy left behind at our encampment to watch for the Immortals' arrival

from the south came rushing toward us, his eyes flown wide with terror. "They are coming!" he screamed. "They are coming!"

"Where...where is Maron?" I whispered, turning again to Alphaeus. "Where is your brother?"

"Dead," he told me.

"Where is Demophilus?" I asked, looking around, staggering in place.

"Dead," Alphaeus said.

"What of Iobates?" I asked. "Eudorus? Himerus?"

"Eudorus, I do not know," Alphaeus said. "Iobates fell with the front line. Himerus was beside me when the shield wall broke. I have not seen him since."

"Artemis above..." I whispered. "Where is Demodocus? Where is Dieneces?"

Alphaeus nodded past my shoulder. "Here they are now," he said.

I turned, and gasped softly with relief. It was short-lived, however, and my breath turned to an anguished moan. Dieneces stumbled toward me, dragging Demodocus with him. Demodocus was covered in blood; the front of his breastplate dented and battered.

"No..." I whimpered, and I rushed toward them. I put my arms around Demodocus, letting him fall against my chest as Dieneces turned him loose. "What happened?" I cried, kneeling, unable to support Demodocus' weight. I did my best to cradle him in my arms, to hold him against my breast. A spear or sword had punched squarely through his chest; that he had not yet died from the wound seemed impossible. I stared up at Dieneces, stricken. "What happened?"

"They...there are so many of them," Dieneces said. "I...I could not...keep them from him."

"Father!" I cried, folding myself over Demodocus. He was dying; I could feel it in the faint, feeble draw of his breath against my face. "Father!"

He never roused. I do not know if he was aware of me or not, of my arms about him, my tears against his face. His eyes never opened, his voice never uttered. One moment, he was heavy against me, struggling for breath, and the next, his weight shifted as he slackened, going limp in my embrace. His breath whistled slightly; blood peppered against my face and then he was still. I shuddered, weeping. “No...” I whispered. “No...no...”

The Persians breached the wall, charging through the surf to circumvent its edge. They began to pour beyond the perimeter, and those few hoplites who remained charged forward to meet them. I staggered to my feet, letting Demodocus fall away from me.

“Help me,” I said to Dieneces. I turned, rushing toward Leonidas’ body. I stooped, grabbing him roughly beneath the arms and dragging him against my chest. “Help me!” I screamed at Dieneces, struggling to stand, to force my feet beneath me.

“Do we surrender?” Alpheus asked, running toward me. A group of maybe fifty men accompanied him, mostly Spartiates, but some Thespians besides.

“Gods, no!” I shouted, staring up at Alpheus as if he was mad. “Draw your swords and stand with us! Help us move him to the wall!”

We wrestled with Leonidas’ unwieldy corpse, hauling him toward the defensive wall, the place where the mound rose above it, offering the greatest hope of any shelter. Just as we let Leonidas crumple to the dirt, we heard new thunder—the Immortals charged down the pass from the east gate in a horrifying torrent, thousands of them.

“Artemis defend us...” Alpheus whispered, as the few of us that remained spread ourselves about, hoisting our shields and leveling our swords.

“Artemis be damned,” Dieneces hissed, and he spat. “We are sons of Sparta. We will damn well defend ourselves.”

“Do not let them take the king,” I said as the earth beneath us shuddered, the walls of men closing all around us. “Do not let them—”

The Persian archers began to fire. “Get down!” I screamed, drawing my shield up. I threw myself sideways, sprawling atop Leonidas’ form, hunching my shoulders. I heard the arrows slam against the basin of my shield. I was too late in scrambling my legs beneath its circumference; I felt arrows punch through my greaves, skewering into me. I gritted my teeth against screams, and ducked my head all the more. I could hear the others shrieking as arrows caught them, too. When the rain of arrows waned, I lowered my shield and staggered to my feet.

“Bastards!” I screamed, clutching my sword and swinging it at the Persians. “Bastards! You bastards!”

They launched another volley of arrows; Dieneces tackled me. Our shields clanged together as he fell against me, sending my feet from beneath me. We landed hard atop Leonidas, both of us grunting for breath.

“Get off!” I gasped, shoving Dieneces back. I staggered to my feet again, reeling clumsily. Again, I shoved my sword toward the Persians. “Bastards!” I screamed, blood and spittle flying from my mouth.

“Cowards!” Dieneces bellowed. He had lost his sword, but snatched large rocks in his hand, letting them fly toward the Persians. “Coward bastard rots!”

They sent another pelting of arrows against us and then tired of the game. They charged; sending us scrambling back for position. As the Persians rushed against us, I fought with anything I had left to defend myself with. I swung my sword around again and again until the blade was battered from my hand. I smashed into them with my shield, whirling about and driving the broad plate into them until the repeated impacts shattered my arm and I could no longer raise it on the fulcrum of my shoulder. I managed to wrench it loose and then fought them with my fist and feet, charging into their numbers, kicking and swinging.

When they pierced me with their swords, I did not feel it. When their blades punched into my shoulders, back, gut and breast, all I felt was dim and insistent pressure. I did not realize that I was soaked in blood, my helmet lost, my skull battered, my scalp torn open. A sword strike hissed past my cheek, cleaving a deep gash and sinking into the juncture of my throat and shoulder, landing just beneath the edge of my breastplate. I did not feel it. I did not realize the sudden, hot spray of fluid against my face was my own blood; something vital within me had just been torn open.

When I fell, I could not rise again. I struggled to, pawing helplessly in the dirt, my fingers hooked and scrabbling. I kicked my feet, but there was no strength left in my legs. The ground beneath me was muddy and slippery; my blood soaked the dirt and my hands could find no purchase.

The Persians left me when I crumpled facedown, gasping for breath, blood in my mouth. I could feel the thrumming in the ground as they swarmed past me, but I was forgotten to them, something to be abandoned.

“Echelas...”

I opened my eyes. Dieneces was lying nearby. The left side of his face was nearly gone; shattered, broken, bloodied and gashed. He lay on his belly in a broadening pool of blood; a sword had caught the shelf of his chin, and I could see the grim line where his throat had been carved open.

“Dieneces...” I whispered. His eyelids fluttered as his mind faded, and I began to weep. “Dieneces...!”

I reached for him, my hand groping weakly in the dirt between us. He moved his hand slowly, trembling, and I closed my fingers tightly, clutching at him. “I am here...” I whimpered. “I am right here, Dieneces...I...I am right here...”

He nodded his chin once and then closed his eyes. His shoulders shuddered slightly and then he was still. I shook uncontrollably, weeping. “Dieneces...” I gasped. “Dieneces...!”

All at once, the sounds of the Persians rushing around me faded, and there was nothing but the soft whisper of wool; a cloak rustling as someone knelt behind me. I felt a hand drape gently against my shoulder.

“Echelas,” I heard a soft voice say. I could not see Dieneses anymore; my vision seemed to be failing me, my sight shrouded in sudden shadows that grew darker, like encroaching dusk. “Echelas,” the voice said again, and I recognized it. I closed my eyes and understood. The corner of my mouth lifted in a faint, fleeting smile.

Stop smiling at me.

“Echelas,” Pelorus said, his voice filled with kindness. “Come with me.”

I nodded once, and the shadows fell. “Yes, sir,” I said.

EPILOGUE

By midday, it was over. The Thebans who had held the mound just beyond the perimeter wall surrendered in a token gesture to see their city spared, just as Cleomenes had predicted. Twenty thousand Persians died at the hands of the Greeks in the pass of Thermopylae, and Xerxes ordered hasty burials for them all, lest the rest of his army see them as they marched through, and grow disheartened by the loss.

Leonidas' body was crucified; his head severed and mounted on a post as a symbol of the Persians' victory. Xerxes led his army from Thermopylae into Greece, but he found no victory in the end. The sacrifices of the few who had made their stand served to galvanize the whole of the Greek population nearly without fail, and they were able to repel Xerxes' best attempts at invasion, to drive him from their lands.

In Sparta, a memorial was erected in honor of the three hundred sons whose lives had been lost at Thermopylae. The names of these Spartiates were etched in stone and it is said that for more than thirty years after Thermopylae, a Spartan woman would come daily to stand before it. Every morning found her there, no matter the weather or season.

She would spend hours simply gazing at the statuary, her dark eyes traveling across the inscriptions along the stone placard. Every morning, she would read the names, and she would reach for the stone, brushing her fingertips against one carved there. It is said that at her touch, the lovely measure of her mouth would unfurl in a pained but tender smile, as if her heart was moved with bittersweet recollection, by memories she could not bear to recall, but never quite dared to forget.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Definitely an author to watch.” That’s how *Romantic Times Book Reviews* magazine describes Sara Reinke. *New York Times* best-selling author Karen Robards calls Reinke “a new paranormal star” and Love Romances and More hails her as “a fresh new voice to a genre that has grown stale.” *Dark Thirst* and *Dark Hunger*, the first two installments in her Brethren Series of vampire romance are available now from Kensington-Zebra Books. Other available titles include the fantasy series, the Chronicles of Tiralainn.

Before turning to romance subgenres, Reinke explored writing historical fiction, and became fascinated with the culture of ancient Sparta, and the legendary Battle of Thermopylae, which is considered by historians to be “the Alamo of the ancient world.” *Son of Sparta* was originally completed in 2005.

Reinke is a member of Wild & Wicked Authors and the Louisville Romance Writers chapter of Romance Writers of America. Find out more about her and upcoming titles at www.sarareinke.com

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