

## Chapter Three

I STOOD IN THE field. In my hands were two pairs of dice, a gift. Not from my father, who'd never think of it. Not from my mother, who sometimes did not know me. I could not remember who had given them to me. A visiting king? A favour-currying noble?

They were carved from ivory, inset with onyx, smooth under my thumb. It was late summer, and I was panting with my run from the palace. Since the day of the races I had been appointed a man to train me in all our athletic arts: boxing, sword-and-spear, discus. But I had escaped him, and glowed with the giddy lightness of solitude. It was the first time I had been alone in weeks.

Then the boy appeared. His name was Clysonymus and he was the son of a nobleman who was often at the palace. Older, larger and unpleasantly fleshy. His eyes had caught the flash of the dice in my palm. He leered at me, held out his hand. 'Let me see them.'

'No.' I did not want his fingers on them, grubby and thick. And I was the prince, however small. Did I not even have this right? But these noble sons were used to me doing what they wished. They knew my father would not intervene.

‘I want them.’ He didn’t bother to threaten me, yet. I hated him for it. I should be worth threatening.

‘No.’

He stepped forward. ‘Let me have them.’

‘They’re mine.’ I grew teeth. I snapped like the dogs who fight for our table scraps.

He reached to take them, and I shoved him backwards. He stumbled, and I was glad. He would not get what was mine.

‘Hey!’ He was angry. I was so small; I was rumoured to be simple. If he backed down now, it would be a dishonour. He advanced on me, face red. Without meaning to, I stepped back.

He smirked then. ‘Coward.’

‘I am no coward.’ My voice rose, and my skin went hot.

‘Your father thinks you are.’ His words were deliberate, as if he were savouring them. ‘I heard him tell my father so.’

‘He did not.’ But I knew he had.

The boy stepped closer. He lifted a fist. ‘Are you calling me a liar?’ I knew that he would hit me now. He was just waiting for an excuse. I could imagine the way my father would have said it. *Coward*. I planted my hands on his chest and shoved, as hard as I could. Our land was one of grass, and wheat. Tumbles should not hurt.

I am making excuses. It was also a land of rocks.

His head thudded dully against stone, and I saw the surprised pop of his eyes. The ground around him began to bleed.

I stared, my throat closing in horror at what I had done. I had not seen the death of a human before. Yes, the bulls, and the goats, even the bloodless gasping of fish. And I had seen it in paintings, tapestries, the black figures burned on to our platters. But I had not seen this: the rattle of it, the choke and scrabble. The smell of the flux. I fled.

Sometime later, they found me by the gnarled ankles of an olive tree. I was limp and pale, surrounded by my own vomit. The dice were gone, lost in my flight. My father stared down angrily at me, his lips drawn back to show his yellowing teeth. He gestured, and the servants lifted me and carried me inside.

The boy's family demanded immediate exile or death. They were powerful, and this was their eldest son. They might permit a king to burn their fields, or rape their daughters, as long as payment was made. But you did not touch a man's sons. For this, the nobles would riot. We all knew the rules; we clung to them to avoid the anarchy that was always a hair's breadth away. *Blood feud.* The servants made the sign against evil.

My father had spent his life scrabbling to keep his kingdom, and would not risk losing it over such a son as me, when heirs and the wombs that bore them were so easy to come by. So, he agreed: I would be exiled, and fostered in another man's kingdom. In exchange for my weight in gold, they would rear me to manhood. I would have no parents, no family name, no inheritance. In our day, death was preferable. But my father was a practical man. My weight in gold was less than the expense of the lavish funeral my death would have demanded.

This was how I came to be ten, and an orphan. This is how I came to Phthia.

Tiny, gemstone-sized Phthia was the smallest of our countries, set in a northern crook of land between the ridges of Mount Othrys and the sea. Its king, Peleus, was one of those men whom the gods love: not divine himself, but clever, brave, handsome, and excelling all his peers in piety. As a reward, our divinities offered him a sea-nymph for a wife. It was considered their highest honour. After all, what mortal would not want to bed a

goddess and sire a son from her? Divine blood purified our muddy race, bred heroes from dust and clay. And this goddess brought a greater promise still: the Fates had foretold that her son would far surpass his father. Peleus' line would be assured. But, like all the gods' gifts, there was an edge to it; the goddess herself was unwilling.

Everyone, even I, had heard the story of Thetis' ravishment. The gods had led Peleus to the secret place where she liked to sit upon the beach. They had warned him not to waste time with overtures – she would never consent to marriage with a mortal.

They warned him too, of what would come once he had caught her: for the nymph Thetis was wily, like her father Proteus, the slippery old man of the sea, and she knew how to make her skin flow into a thousand different shapes of fur and feather and flesh. And though beaks and claws and teeth and coils and stinging tails would flay him, still Peleus must not let her go.

Peleus was a pious and obedient man and did all that the gods had instructed him to do. He waited for her to emerge from the slate-coloured waves, hair black and long as a horse's tail. Then he seized her, holding on despite her violent struggles, squeezing until they were both exhausted, breathless and sand-scraped. The blood from the wounds she had given him mixed with the smears of lost maidenhead on her thighs. Her resistance mattered no longer: a deflowering was as binding as marriage vows.

The gods forced her to swear that she would stay with her mortal husband for at least a year, and she served her time on earth as the duty it was, silent, unresponsive and sullen. Now when he clasped her, she did not bother to writhe and twist in protest. Instead she lay stiff and silent, damp and chilled as an old fish. Her reluctant womb bore only a single child. The hour

her sentence was finished, she ran out of the house and dived back into the sea.

She would return only to visit the boy, never for any other reason, and never for long. The rest of the time the child was raised by tutors and nurses, and overseen by Phoinix, Peleus' most trusted counsellor. Did Peleus ever regret the gods' gift to him? An ordinary wife would have counted herself lucky to find a husband with Peleus' mildness, his smile-lined face. But for the sea-nymph Thetis nothing could ever eclipse the stain of his dirty, mortal, mediocrity.

I was led through the palace by a servant whose name I had not caught. Perhaps he had not said it. The halls were smaller than at home, as if restrained by the modesty of the kingdom they governed. The walls and floors were local marble, whiter than was found in the south. My feet were dark against its pallor.

I had nothing with me. My few belongings were being carried to my room, and the gold my father sent was on its way to the treasury. I had felt a strange panic as I was parted from it. It had been my companion for the weeks of travel, a reminder of my worth. I knew its contents by heart now: the five goblets with engraved stems, a heavy knobbed sceptre, a beaten-gold necklace, two ornamental statues of birds, and a carved lyre, gilded at its tips. This last, I knew, was cheating. Wood was cheap and plentiful and heavy, and took up space that should have been used for gold. Yet the lyre was so beautiful no one could object to it; it had been a piece of my mother's dowry. As we rode, I would reach back into my saddle-bags to stroke the polished wood.

I guessed that I was being led to the throne room, where I would kneel and pour out my gratitude. But the servant stopped

suddenly at a side door. King Peleus was absent, he told me, so I would present myself before his son instead. I was unnerved. This was not what I had prepared myself for, the dutiful words I'd practised on donkeyback. Peleus' son. I could still remember the dark wreath against his bright hair, the way his pink soles had flashed along the track. *That is what a son should be.*

He was lying on his back on a wide, pillowed bench, balancing a lyre on his stomach. Idly, he plucked at it. He did not hear me enter, or he did not choose to look. This is how I first began to understand my place here. Until this moment I had been a prince, expected and announced. Now I was negligible.

I took another step forward, scuffing my feet, and his head lolled to the side to regard me. In the five years since I had seen him, he had outgrown his babyish roundness. I gaped at the cold shock of his beauty, deep-green eyes, features fine as a girl's. It struck from me a sudden, springing dislike. I had not changed so much, nor so well.

He yawned, his eyes heavy-lidded. 'What's your name?'

His kingdom was half, a quarter, an eighth the size of my father's, and I had killed a boy and been exiled and still he did not know me. I ground my jaw shut and would not speak.

He asked again, louder: 'What's your name?' My silence was excusable the first time; perhaps I had not heard him. Now it was not.

'Patroclus.' It was the name my father had given me, hopefully but injudiciously, at my birth, and it tasted of bitterness on my tongue. 'Honour of the father,' it meant. I waited for him to make a joke out of it, some witty jape about my disgrace. He did not. Perhaps, I thought, he is too stupid to.

He rolled on to his side to face me. A stray lock of gold fell half into his eyes; he blew it away. 'My name is Achilles.'

I jerked my chin up, an inch, in bare acknowledgement. We regarded each other for a moment. Then he blinked and yawned again, his mouth cracked wide as a cat's. 'Welcome to Phthia.'

I had been raised in a court and knew dismissal when I heard it.

I discovered that afternoon that I was not the only foster child of Peleus. The modest king turned out to be rich in cast-off sons. He had once been a runaway himself, it was rumoured, and had a reputation for charity towards exiles. My bed was a pallet in a long barracks-style room, filled with other boys tussling and lounging. A servant showed me where my things had been put. A few boys lifted their heads, stared. I am sure one of them spoke to me, asked my name. I am sure I gave it. They returned to their games. *No one important.* I walked stiff-legged to my pallet and waited for dinner.

We were summoned to eat at dusk by a bell, bronze struck from deep in the palace's turnings. The boys dropped their games and tumbled out into the hallway. The complex was built like a rabbit warren, full of twisting corridors and sudden inner rooms. I nearly tripped over the heels of the boy in front of me, fearful of being left behind and lost.

The room for meals was a long hall at the front of the palace, its windows opening on to Mount Othrys' foothills. It was large enough to feed all of us, many times over; Peleus was a king who liked to host and entertain. We sat on its oakwood benches, at tables that were scratched from years of clattering plates. The food was simple but plentiful – salted fish, and thick bread served with herbed cheese. There was no flesh here, of goats or bulls. That was only for royalty, or festival days. Across the room I caught the flash of bright hair in lamplight. *Achilles.* He sat with a group of boys whose mouths were wide with laughter at

something he'd said or done. *That is what a prince should be.* I stared down at my bread, its coarse grains that rubbed rough against my fingers.

After supper we were allowed to do as we liked. Some boys were gathering in a corner for a game. 'Do you want to play?' one asked. His hair still hung in childhood curls; he was younger than I was.

'Play?'

'Dice.' He opened his hand to show them, carved bone flecked with black dye.

I started, stepped backwards. 'No,' I said, too loudly.

He blinked in surprise. 'All right.' He shrugged, and was gone.

That night I dreamed of the dead boy, his skull cracked like an egg against the ground. *He has followed me.* The blood spreads, dark as spilled wine. His eyes open, and his mouth begins to move. I clap my hands over my ears. The voices of the dead were said to have the power to make the living mad. *I must not hear him speak.*

I woke in terror, hoping I had not screamed aloud. The pinpricks of stars outside the window were the only light; there was no moon I could see. My breathing was harsh in the silence, and the marsh-reed ticking of the mattress crackled softly beneath me, rubbing its thin fingers against my back. The presence of the other boys did not comfort me; our dead come for their vengeance regardless of witnesses.

The stars turned, and somewhere the moon crept across the sky. When my eyes dragged closed again, he was waiting for me still, covered in blood, his face as pale as bone. Of course he was. No soul wished to be sent early to the endless gloom of our underworld. Exile might satisfy the anger of the living, but it did not appease the dead.

I woke sandy-eyed, my limbs heavy and dull. The other boys surged around me, dressing for breakfast, eager for the day. Word had spread quickly of my strangeness and the younger boy did not approach me again, with dice or anything else. At breakfast, my fingers pushed bread between my lips, and my throat swallowed. Milk was poured for me. I drank it.

Afterwards we were led into the dusty sun of the practice yards for training in spear and sword. Here is where I tasted the full truth of Peleus' kindness: well-trained and indebted, we would one day make him a fine army.

I was given a spear, and a calloused hand corrected my grip, then corrected it again. I threw and grazed the edge of the oak-tree target. The master blew out a breath and passed me a second spear. My eyes travelled over the other boys, searching for Peleus' son. He was not there. I sighted once more at the oak, its bark pitted and cracked, oozing sap from punctures. I threw.

The sun drove high, then higher still. My throat grew dry and hot, scratched with burning dust. When the masters released us most of the boys fled to the beach, where small breezes still stirred. There they diced and raced, shouting jokes in the sharp, slanting dialects of the north.

My eyes were heavy in my head, and my arm ached from the morning's exertion. I sat beneath the scrubby shade of an olive tree to stare out over the ocean's waves. No one spoke to me. I was easy to ignore. It was not so very different from home, really.

The next day was the same, a morning of weary exercises, and then long afternoon hours alone. At night, the moon slivered smaller and smaller. I stared until I could see it even when I closed my eyes, the yellow curve bright against the dark of my eyelids. I hoped that it might keep the visions of the boy at bay.

Our goddess of the moon is gifted with magic, with power over the dead. She could banish the dreams, if she wished.

She did not. The boy came, night after night, with his staring eyes and splintered skull. Sometimes he turned and showed me the hole in his head, where the soft mass of his brain hung loose. Sometimes he reached for me. I would wake, choking on my horror, and stare at the darkness until dawn.