

Chapter 1



“ALEXI, WAKE UP!” My sister was leaning over me, her lanky frame silhouetted by the moonlight streaming in the window. Yesterday’s celebration had run long into the night, and I mumbled something and rolled over sleepily, face down on the pine planks.

Melantha shook me again. “I mean it! Listen—something’s wrong!”

Blinking stupidly, I tried to make sense of the noises from our narrow window. Sandals scuttering up the alleyway. Further away, urgent shouts of command. And in the distance, screams.

I got to my feet and leaned out. People were running up

the laneway below, the fear in their faces clear in the moonlight. The blacksmith's wife was dragging her two boys by their wrists, not looking back. A few paces behind, old Phylion the potter was hobbling along in his nightshirt and bare feet, cane tapping urgently against the cobbles. The warm night air was heavy with smoke, and from the direction of the city gates came a red glow and the bronze clash of weapons.

I called down to the blacksmith's wife. "Ascania! What's going on?"

She didn't look up. Her two boys were crying and trying to turn back as she dragged them grimly up the lane. An uneasy feeling stirred in my stomach.

From nearby came a splintering crash. We craned our heads out further. At the entrance to Pylacon's smithy a few doors down, I could just make out the shapes of men in armour, torches flickering yellow in their hands. Melantha gasped and wrenched me away from the window. "Lex! Get down! Those are soldiers!"

"Guards? So—"

She shook her head. "Not city guards. Alexi, those are Greeks!"

"Greeks?" I frowned at her. "The Greeks have gone, remember? Besides, how would they get over the wall? Fly?" High as an oak and wide enough for two chariots to race along the top, the city wall had protected us from the barbarians beyond it for as long as I could remember.

"You know who it is? Just some guardsmen, coming home drunk after the party." The Ilian guard were notorious. I yawned and lay back down on the rough woollen blanket we shared. But as I twisted around, trying to get comfortable, I caught the hollow crunch of wood splintering nearby and a woman's scream, very close. Mela ran to the door and peered out for a moment, then turned to me, her eyes white in the darkness. "Alexi, it's Greeks. I can see them coming up the alley. We have to get out!"

Another door splintered, closer, and there came a harsh, commanding voice. "Every doorway, every building! I don't want a Trojan squadron coming up our backsides because one of you *troglos* missed a house! Now, move! Move!"

I sat up. That was no drunken guardsman. He was speaking Greek! Sweat started from my brow.

"It's too late. They're right across the lane," Mela whispered frantically. "They're checking everywhere. They'll be up here in a moment. Alexi, we need to hide!"

I shook off my panic and peered around the darkened room. Three years of poverty had forced us to sell nearly everything we owned, leaving only a small corner table and the battered tripod and pot we ate from. Nothing to hide us. I glanced at the window but could hear soldiers right below.

As my hand brushed our tattered blanket, I had an idea. Rolling off it, I darted into the corner behind the door and pulled the blanket over my head.

“Mela! Under here!” The moonlight from the window didn’t reach this far. If we were lucky, they might overlook a shapeless lump in the corner.

Mela gave a quick nod but ran to overturn our tiny table and wrench a leg off the stool. As a clatter of brass-nailed sandals came from the stone staircase outside, she snatched up her small dagger and dashed over to squat beside me.

I tugged the blanket over our heads just as two Greek soldiers burst through our door in full battle armour, exploding into the room like huge bronze bulls, ripping the heavy door from its leather hinges. It smashed down across my bare toes and I clenched my teeth to choke off a scream.

The two soldiers prowled around the room, the brass inlays clanking on their leather-strip skirts. Through a rip in the blanket’s coarse weave I could see a smoky tallow torch in the first soldier’s hand. They peered around suspiciously by its flickering light, their eyes black pools beneath their bronze helmets. I was too frightened to breathe. We’d all heard the stories of what the Greeks did to their prisoners. Struggling not to cough as the oily smoke caught my throat, I reached over beneath the blanket and clutched Mela’s hand. Her fingers gripped mine hard.

The second soldier kicked the broken stool, sending it crashing against the rear wall. “*Kopros*,” he cursed, glancing at his companion. “Didn’t I say it would be empty? Let’s go.” He stalked out and clattered noisily back down the steps. The soldier with the torch glared around for a moment be-

fore heading for the door. I felt a surge of hope.

Too soon. His foot stamped down hard on the door as he left, crushing my smashed toes further and sending a fresh bolt of agony through my foot. He spun toward us at my gasp, thrusting his smoking torch into our darkened corner.

Melantha didn't hesitate. Throwing off the blanket, she leapt to her feet, leaving me hidden.

"Don't kill me!" she called out, drawing her slender frame up tall and straight. She swept her hair over her shoulder with one hand as the other gestured urgently behind her back for me to stay still. Uncertain, I hesitated.

The soldier stepped back in surprise, his hand leaping toward his knife. His helmet tilted as he looked her up and down in her thin shift, and a noise escaped from deep in his throat. "Hey, Takis!" he called out the door. "You missed something!"

In a single swift motion he reached out and threw her over one armoured shoulder, then set off through our shattered doorway, Melantha dangling across his back. As he carried her out I saw her hand slip into her tunic.

Ignoring the stabbing agony in my foot, I scrambled out from beneath the heavy door to hear a shriek from outside. Halfway down the stairs, my sister was hanging off the soldier's back, bronze dagger in her hand. Blood spurted from a wound on the back of his thigh, spattering the pale stone with droplets that glistened black in the moonlight.

"Filthy *kuna*!" he shrieked. "I'll kill you!" He dropped his

torch, grabbing her with both hands to hoist her above his head. She snatched at him but he shook her off easily, his helmet tearing free of its strap and clattering down the steps.

As I started down toward them, the dagger in her flailing hand slashed across the side of his neck, opening a long dark gash. Bellowing with rage, he flung her down the steps. I watched in horror as she tumbled down to smash against the stone well at the bottom. There was a crack like a branch snapping and her scream was abruptly cut off.