

CHAPTER ONE

The Windward Isle

SPRAWLED ON THE COBBLES, the girl was staring up, her dark eyes widened in horror. The slave's knot that bound her hair had shaken loose, leaving dark strands dangling across her face. But she wasn't looking at us.

For some reason she was looking up at a fruit seller, a greying man with gentle eyes. When the Greeks had emerged from the alleyway a moment ago, they must have startled her. A group of bronze-hard Greek soldiers could do that. Coming up behind them, I'd entered the square just in time to see her leap back in surprise. Struggling for balance, she had staggered into a rickety cart. It had toppled over, sending pears

rolling across the cobbles and leaving her sprawled among them.

Now, a shocked silence had fallen across the busy square. “Please . . .” she began, her eyes pleading. I watched, wondering what she was so afraid of.

The fruit seller shook his head, his expression sorrowful. “I can’t change the rules, young lady, no more can you.” He reached down to help her up. “Perhaps . . . it won’t be too bad.”

A breeze stirred his hair and he stiffened. “Best to go now, then. You don’t want anyone else blamed, do you?”

She bit her lip. With a last despairing look around her, she turned to trudge off toward the high castle on the far side of the square. People stared at their sandals as she passed.

Something was terribly wrong here. I’d felt it since we’d landed on the island that morning. Something about the way the townsfolk kept their heads and voices down, avoiding attention. Or perhaps it was the street vendors, holding their wares up in an eerie silence. Even the insistent breeze that had followed us up from the harbour seemed unnatural, snuffling beneath our tunics like a suspicious dog. And now, to my amazement, instead of running off with the spilled pears, the street urchins nearby were neatly piling them back on the fruit-seller’s cart.

I bent to help. “So what’s her problem?” I asked one of the boys, trying to sound casual as I nodded in the direction the girl had gone.

He looked sideways at me, the whites of his eyes showing

like a terrified horse. “Get away from here,” he hissed. “Before you get us polished along with her.” He put his pears in the cart and disappeared into the crowd.

We had sighted the island that morning, six days after our escape from the Cyclops. With our water cisterns empty, there’d been no choice about landing, and the sight of a sheltered harbour with proper wharves for mooring had made the decision easy.

The Greeks were led by a man they called Lopex. His real name was Odysseus, but nobody called him that. And for me, calling him Lopex also made it easier to forget that he was a Greek war leader. I could see him just ahead in the crowded marketplace, leading a delegation of five men to the castle on a hill in the centre of the city. I was pleased that he’d included me. Officially, I was just a slave, and a boy besides, but since I’d proven myself as a healer, and again while fighting the Cyclops, it was clear Lopex had begun to see me as something more. My chest puffed out a bit at the thought as I trailed behind the Greeks.

Up close, the castle was even larger than it had looked from the harbour, topped with a bronze tower pierced by four large, perfectly round holes open to the four winds. The girl had come this way only moments before, but there was no sign of her now.

“So, Alexi? Are you coming?” Lopex was waiting for me to follow, a wry expression on his face. I smiled as I realized he’d

called me by name again and hastened to catch up. The other Greeks were already heading through the large doorway behind a servant who had come out as we approached. As I passed porters in the hall, I couldn't help wondering what their life was like. Their bare feet said they were slaves, but they still looked better fed than I'd been as a free orphan on the streets of Troy.

I twitched at the memory. I tried hard to avoid thinking of that life, but unguarded thoughts sometimes broke through. Troy, the city I had lived in all my life—until a few months ago. Until the Greeks got in.

After ten years of war, they'd somehow broken through the wall, killing everyone I knew and taking me as a slave before sailing for home. Soon afterwards, their own healer had been killed in a raid and they'd forced me, son of a Trojan healer, to take his place. That was probably what had kept me alive so far. And if they'd known I was really fifteen, they would have killed me before we'd even set sail. For once in my life, I'd been glad to be short for my age. If only my sister Melantha . . .

Those thoughts were even more painful. I'd felt sure I had seen her die that night, until my fellow-slave Kassander had said she was still alive. I just wished I could believe him. I forced my thoughts elsewhere by looking around the room we'd been brought into.

"Welcome, travellers." The voice was husky, with a slight lisp. I peered between the broad backs of the Greeks in front of me to see who was speaking.

“I bid you welcome to my land, the kingdom of Aeolia. I am Aeolus, the King.” The king! I wormed forward to see a puffy-faced, shrunken man wrapped in a cloak much too big for him, sitting on an ornate raised chair. He lifted a frail hand in a languid half-wave. Nearby, a knot of brightly dressed courtiers clapped obediently. I peered at the king, puzzled. Surely he wasn’t what everyone was afraid of.

The king gestured vaguely and the clapping trailed off. “Come over here, young man, and tell me who you are.”

Lopex approached the foot of the throne. “My name, Your Majesty, is—”

“Majesty? Majesty?” A frown spread across the king’s face like a cloud. “We don’t use that title here. Call me ‘Your Inclemency.’” He made that gesture again and the courtiers clapped once more, their elaborately styled hair bobbing like birds. “Now, go on.”

“My name, Your—Inclemency—is Odysseus. Of Ithaca. Son of Laertes. I bring you gold and silver plate, ten fine bronze tripods, and able-bodied slaves as a guest gift.”

The king just looked at him, the silence stretching so long I thought he’d fallen asleep. At last he spoke. “Son of Laertes, you say. A credit to your ancestors, you are.” He paused again, nodding to himself. “Indeed, your ancestors.” He sat up suddenly.

“Yes! Let us dine together. The men in your ships, summon them. They may dine—” He broke off, sniffing delicately in our direction. “They may dine in the old barracks.”