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SIREN'S CALL

MERLINE LOVELACE



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"You'll not escape to alert the city," Alexander commanded.

"Are you seer, as well as sailor?" Phaedra snapped. "Do you think you can look into the future?"

"Your future I see, at least," he responded before turning to help the lieutenant work the ropes.

"And what do you see for me, Athenian? What do you plan to do with me?"

His gaze slid over her in slow, silent contemplation, lingering on her breasts, then on the length of her thigh. When his eyes met hers once more, Phaedra stiffened at the heat she saw in them.

"You'll not find me easy," she warned, her voice low and deadly.

His lips curved. "Nay, I suspect not...."

As an air-force officer, **Merline Lovelace** served tours in Taiwan and Vietnam, at the Pentagon and various bases across the USA. She loved every moment of her time in the military, and only the lure of an equally exciting new career could convince her to hang up her blue suit in 1991.

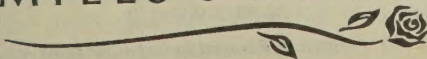
Since then, she's written both sweeping historical sagas and contemporary romances. When she's not glued to the keyboard, she and her husband enjoy travelling and chasing little white balls around the golf courses of Oklahoma.



# SIREN'S CALL

Merline Lovelace

MILLS & BOON®



To Tom and Marie—  
our partners in adventure and most treasured friends

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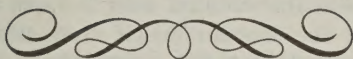
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## Chapter One



She rose from the waves like a slender, raven-haired sea nymph, her naked body gleaming in the gathering dawn.

“By the beard of Zeus!”

Alexander’s muttered exclamation hovered on the mist. He slid to a halt halfway down the steep cliff path and pressed back against the granite wall, his eyes narrowed on the figure below. Behind him, his lieutenant dropped into an instinctive crouch and hefted his sword.

“What is it, Captain? What do you see?”

His tense whisper barely carried over the sound of the sea washing against the rocky shore. Alexander nodded toward the figure standing knee-deep in the swells.

The lieutenant’s breath eased out in relief. “’Tis just a woman.”

“Nay, Darien,” Alexander muttered. “Not *just* a woman. The gods have sent a sea sprite to bless our mission.”

The mist curled, then parted, giving both men a clear view of the female form outlined against the first streaks of dawn.

“She looks most human to me,” the younger man drawled. His dark eyes inspected her thoroughly before turning away to scan the surrounding cliffs for signs of her companions.

Relaxing his rigid hold on the hilt of his sword, Alexander propped one sandaled foot on a tumbled boulder. His every instinct, honed by years of warfare and command, told him that he and Darien shared this small, rocky cove only with the woman below. They had some time yet before the sun rose fully and they could make their escape. For a moment, at least, he would enjoy this unexpected gift from the gods.

And gift it was, he decided with a ripple of masculine appreciation as the woman raised both arms to lift her heavy curtain of wet hair. She paused, hands buried in the dark, streaming mass, face turned to the far horizon, where the sun's rays broke through the mist.

She wasn't beautiful—that much Alexander could see in the gathering light. Her body was slight, and far too slender, unlike the generously rounded figures of the women who graced his household. Her profile revealed a nose short by the standards of the day, and a chin that hinted at a firmness unbecoming in a female. But washed in the glow of dawn, her skin gleamed like the finest pearls and curved smoothly over hip and buttock. Small, firm breasts thrust upward, like tender offerings to the morning. She seemed to belong to the sea, letting it lap about her thighs as if accepting the soft touch of an attentive lover.

Alexander felt the first tendrils of desire curl low in his belly. To a man long used to taking what the sea offered as the spoils of war, the temptation to sweep down and claim this unexpected prize grew with each passing moment. Yet he was strangely loath to disturb the beauty of the scene and the mystical aura of the woman below. A wry grin curved his lips as he straightened to ease the sudden tightening in his loins. It wasn't the first time the poet in his soul had battled with the warrior in his blood.

The lieutenant's low voice sounded just behind his shoulder. "Captain, we must get to the boat before the sun fully rises if we're to catch the morning winds. We'll have to—"

Darien broke off his hurried speech as the woman low-



ered her arms. With slow, languorous movements, she twisted her hair into a thick rope, wringing out the last of the sea, then turned and waded toward the shore. Her fingers trailed through the water, leaving an iridescent stream in their wake.

Alexander eased back against the curve of the cliff wall to shield himself from view. He felt a real regret that the brief interlude was over. For a few moments, as the sea lightened from black to gray to emerald green and a woman stirred his senses, he'd held the urgency of his mission in a separate part of his mind. The nymph below had given him a brief respite from the threat of war. Now, reality pushed forward once again. Alexander nodded to Darien.

"We'll go down to the boat as soon as she leaves the cove."

Together they watched the woman stop beside a small pile of clothing on the pebbled shore. With careless grace, she pulled a length of linen over her head, then wrapped a cord around her waist to form a loose tunic. The short skirts of her chiton clung to her wet thighs and her firm, rounded rear cheeks as she bent and retrieved a pair of sandals and a small cloth bundle.

Alexander's last lingering remnant of desire fled instantly when she turned and headed, not toward the path that led to the fishing village still sleeping in the distance, but directly toward them.

"What in the name of the gods does she do?" Darien hissed.

Frowning, Alexander motioned him to keep silent.

The woman picked her way over the stony shoreline, each step bringing her closer to the sleek boat they'd hidden in a shelter of rocks directly below. The captain's eyes swept the shore beyond their craft's hiding place, then narrowed sharply.

Just beyond the tumble of rocks that hid their boat, a low stone promontory jutted out into the sea. Cut into the stone were shallow steps, worn smooth by the wash of waves and



the tread of human feet. The steps led up to a small marble altar overlooking the sea, one that neither Alexander nor his lieutenant had noticed when they beached their craft in the moonless dark of the night before.

His face grim, Alexander nodded toward the altar. Darien saw the offering stone, and his expression hardened as he grasped the implications.

The woman was obviously a priestess or a designated handmaiden, come to give the morning offering to the god or goddess that protected this stretch of coast. She'd purified herself in the sea first, and would now climb the path to the altar. Unfortunately, that same path would take her directly past their boat.

A rattle of pebbles carried over the sound of waves slapping against the shore. She was directly below them now, just a few yards from the rocks that hid the craft.

Alexander signaled to Darien to allow her to pass, then follow him as he descended the last few yards of cliff face and circled behind her. The lieutenant nodded, his hand moving to his belt to slip his dagger from its leather sheath.

Phaedra lifted one hand to brush the heavy strands of wet hair from her eyes. Her other hand clutched her sandals and a small bundle of linen-wrapped barley cakes to her breast. She kept her eyes on the uneven surface beneath her feet as she negotiated her way across the shore. Despite her careful pace, one foot slipped on a slick stone and crunched against unyielding rock.

"Great Hera's—"

She bit back the oath as she hopped on one foot, rubbing her sore toes. The pain receded, but to her dismay she discovered that she'd smashed the precious bundle against her chest. With a dire sense of foreboding, she dropped her sandals and unwrapped the linen cloth. As she'd feared, the delicate, sesame-flavored barley cakes lay in crumbs on her palm.

Oh, no! Not this morning, of all mornings! Not when

she'd wanted desperately to bring a pure offering to the ritual. Not when she'd planned to make one last, urgent plea for strength to Artemis, the virgin goddess who took a special interest in the affairs of women.

Phaedra stared down at the broken bits, praying this wasn't an omen of the night to come. Her fingers closed over the crumbs. Sternly she told herself that she was wrong to dread mating with the warrior her uncle had chosen for her. She'd been a widow far too long, almost five years now. Someone of her wealth and rank had no right to remain unwed. A woman's duty—nay, her whole purpose in life—was to marry and bear strong sons and daughters. Among the Greeks, her tribe especially held that duty sacred. Like all Spartan women, Phaedra had trained since early childhood in a rigorous program of athletics so that she would produce sound, healthy babes. Just because the warrior who had won the right to her bed and her body made her shiver with distaste, that was no reason to shirk her woman's duty.

Swallowing, Phaedra fought the urge to turn and throw the crushed cakes into the sea. Much as she might curse her uncle for giving her to such a husband, she would not offend the goddess with a disrespectful act. Not now, not with war looming between Sparta and Athens. She was too much a daughter of Sparta to call down the wrath of Artemis on her or her city. Phaedra sighed, knowing that her only recourse was to finish the morning ritual. Then she would rejoin the troops who waited to escort her back to the city. And to the man who would claim her.

Fighting the reluctance that coiled like a serpent in her heart, Phaedra forced herself to stoop and retrieve her sandals. As she did, a bright flash of color half hidden by the tumbled rocks caught her attention. Frowning, she picked her way over the shore and bent to look closer. A boat was concealed behind a screen of rocks. It was too big to be a fishing boat, and in any case no local fisherman would dare beach his craft within this sacred cove. It must belong to a

large ship, she decided, most likely a trireme. She didn't recognize the name device carved on its high, curving prow, however, or the red-and-blue pattern painted on its hull. If this boat was from a warship, it wasn't one of Sparta's. A frisson of alarm snaked down her spine at the realization that an unknown ship of war prowled the waters close by.

Her alarm spilled into a sudden awareness of danger as a shadow slid over her shoulder and darkened the hull. Before she could whirl to discover who intruded in the sacred cove, an iron hand wrapped around her waist and slammed her back against a solid wall of flesh. A hard, rough palm slapped over her mouth.

"Be quiet, woman, and we'll do you no..."

Phaedra recognized her attacker's accent before the words were half out of his mouth. An Athenian! Here, not ten miles from the gates of Sparta itself! Just a few miles from the harbor that housed Sparta's war fleet! Without conscious thought, she reacted to the enemy's presence. Using the strength gained through years of vigorous training, she rammed an elbow back into his stomach.

"*Argh!*"

The arm around her waist loosened, but didn't drop. In a smooth, twisting movement, Phaedra wrapped her right ankle around the one behind her and jerked it forward. Her attacker went down with a crash. Still held by his arm, Phaedra went with him, but she used her momentum to plant all her weight squarely on his stomach. His breath left with a startled *whoosh*.

Breaking free of his hold, Phaedra scrambled to her feet and faced her attacker. She drew her foot back as far as the crowding rocks would allow. In the split second before she swung her foot forward, she absorbed the body sprawled before her. It was an athlete's body, long and lean and powerful, with corded muscles covered by tanned, supple skin and a dusting of fine golden hair. A worthy opponent,

she thought with reluctant admiration as she thrust her foot forward in a vicious arc.

Just before the blow connected, her attacker's hand whipped up to grab her ankle. Yanking his arm back across his chest, he pulled Phaedra off balance. Once more she landed on his stomach, and once more she used all her weight. But this time he was ready for her. His muscles locked, and Phaedra hit the rock-hard wall of his abdomen with a force that knocked the breath from her lungs.

She straddled his body, her eyes wide with shock. She couldn't remember the last time any man had brought her down.

"Cease, woman!"

Ignoring his grunted command, Phaedra began to twist and kick. She was in an awkward position, with one leg pulled taut by the rogue's outstretched arm and the other knee bent under her. Writhing, she tried to free her captured ankle.

When that failed, she curled her fingers into claws and lunged forward. At the last instant, the man flung up his forearm to deflect her aim. Before she could recover her balance to strike again, he'd clamped his fingers around her wrist. To her chagrin, Phaedra found herself now anchored by one hand and one foot. She wriggled furiously, trying to break free.

"Cease!"

"Not until you release me," she panted, her teeth clenched.

"Your struggles are far more likely to bring me to release than you."

His gasping words made no sense to Phaedra...until she paused to drag in a quick swallow of air and felt the thickness of his manhood lodged against her rear cheeks. Her violent struggles had ground her bottom into his loins. She had no doubt now as to his meaning.

Her eyes flew to his face. To her utter astonishment, laughter danced in the blue eyes staring back at her through

a screen of gold-tipped lashes. Her jaw dropped. He laughed! The churl dared to laugh at her!

"Athenian swine," she spit, her fighting spirit well and truly aroused. "You'll not find accosting a Spartan woman amusing for long."

Scrabbling in the rocks beside her with her free hand, Phaedra closed her fingers around a flat, heavy stone. Her eyes flashed with triumph, and a mocking smile curled her lips. She had him now. He was defenseless beneath her, with one fist still locked around her ankle and the other around her wrist. He'd have to release her to protect himself.

"Prepare to meet your ancestors," she snarled. Her arm swung back just as the stones behind her rattled.

"No, Darien!" her attacker shouted.

His words were the last Phaedra heard before the world shattered into bright shards of pain, then dissolved into darkness.

Alexander rolled to one side, cradling the crumpled body in his arms. His brows drew together in a deep slash as he laid her out on the stones and knelt to press his palm against the warm flesh of her throat.

"You need not have struck her!" he snapped at his lieutenant.

Unperturbed, the younger man surveyed the prone body. "I could see you were enjoying your wrestling match, Captain, but I wasn't sure who would be the victor."

Alexander felt a steady pulse of life force beneath his fingers. Dragging in a deep breath, he sat back on one heel and sent his lieutenant a rueful half smile.

"Nor was I sure, Darien. I came close to being unmanned, first by her wriggles, and then by the rock she hefted."

"Aye," the younger man drawled. "I can see myself now, reporting to the Council that a Spartan maiden defeated one of Athens' best sea captains in hand-to-hand



combat. Those doddering old men are all aquake as it is over the enemy's prowess! Such a tale would send them on their knees to Sparta, begging to extend the peace at any price."

Alexander smiled, but made no comment. His fingers trailed lightly down the smooth skin of the woman's throat before he rested his arm across his knee and tried to decide how best to handle this unexpected development.

"We'll have to kill her, Captain."

Beside him, Darien reversed his dagger until the heavy ornamented hilt he'd used to fell the woman was once again in his firm grip. The iron blade gleamed dully in the dawn light.

"We can't leave her alive," the lieutenant said urgently when Alexander made no reply. "Our orders were specific. We must conceal our presence in Sparta at all costs. She recognized you as Athenian, and will spread the alarm."

"We don't make war on women," Alexander said mildly.

"But..."

"Especially not women such as this."

Darien's eyes flicked over the sprawled figure. "What's so special about this one? She's slight, and as spare as an oar. There's no softness there to cushion a man's bones when he mounts her."

"Ah, Darien," Alexander murmured, "I thought I'd trained you better. You must look beyond the ship's outer hull to the heart of the crew that mans it."

Ignoring his lieutenant's undignified snort, Alexander studied the unconscious woman. Her black hair, still wet and shining from the sea, was splayed across the rocks. Its dark sheen reminded Alexander of a panther's skin he'd once seen decorating the floor of a Persian prince's tent. She'd fought like a wildcat, too, her green eyes glowing and feral. His stomach ached from the thrust of her elbow and from the force of her weight landing atop it. For a small woman, she carried a surprisingly healthy tonnage.

His gaze lingered on the curve of an ivory-hued hip showing through the side slits of her chiton. He allowed himself a few seconds to enjoy the view before he brought his mind to the problem at hand. Reason told him Darien was right, that they dared not leave a witness behind. Not when they had yet one more night's work to do before they rejoined the fleet and sailed for home. Nor did it make the least sense to take her with them. She could only complicate an already dangerous task.

But at that moment she gave a small, mewling whimper of pain. The forlorn little sound was so unlike her hissing, spitting fury of a few moments before that it decided the matter instantly in Alexander's mind. She was but a woman, after all. He'd not leave her lying helpless and hurt on this deserted beach. Nor would he throw her lifeless body to the fish.

"We take her with us."

Darien's black brows drew together. "We've another shipyard yet to reconnoiter this night, Captain. We dare not take a captive."

"She goes with us."

"But what will we do with her when we rejoin the fleet tomorrow? We can't take her aboard the *Nike*."

With the patience of one long used to handling the diverse, boisterous and often opinionated citizen crews of Athens' warships, Alexander shrugged. "I'll decide that when the time comes."

"A woman aboard ship draws down the wrath of the gods," the younger man argued. "Remember the storms that nearly swamped us when the helmsman brought those Egyptian whores aboard two voyages ago?"

"Aye, and I remember, as well, how much the crew enjoyed the voyage before the storms hit. Yourself included." Alexander flashed his lieutenant a quick grin as he lifted the limp body in his arms. "Come, Darien, cease your protests. You know full well slitting the throat of a

helpless woman would enrage the gods far more than taking her aboard ship."

"That one looked far from helpless to me," Darien muttered, but he made no further argument. He knew Alexander too well. Once the captain had assessed the risks and made his decision, there was no swaying him. So far, at least, his decisions had all met with spectacular success and brought considerable plunder to his crews, which was why men fought to serve in his ship's company. Even when the draw of the lot gave them an old, leaking hull, the sailors knew that Alexander, son of Porthos, would make up in seamanship and daring what his craft lacked in speed. Still, a female aboard always meant trouble! Darien sent a silent prayer to the gods of the sea as his captain carried the unconscious form to the boat.

"She is but a woman," Alexander told the dubious lieutenant, "hurt and weakened. Surely, between us, we can manage one slight female."

An hour later, Alexander knew the folly of his misplaced confidence. He stood over his captive, legs spread wide against the rolling of the boat, fists planted on either hip. There was no trace of amusement now in his blue eyes as he raked the bound woman.

"I swear by Poseidon's beard, I'll hoist you upside down from the mast if you try again to kick the hull."

Furious green eyes glared at him over her gag. She muttered something into the sailcloth stuffed in her mouth, words that Alexander neither understood nor wanted to understand. Never had he heard such vile curses from a woman's lips as before he'd cut her speech off with the gag.

Deliberately she gathered her feet for another kick at the thin planking.

"Do not!" Alexander growled in warning.

Her eyes narrowed to glittering emerald slits. She straightened her knees.

He halted the kick in midswing by jerking back on the strap binding her ankles. "Great Zeus, woman, are you mad? Do you *wish* for me to cut your throat?"

Straddling her hips, he flipped her onto one side and tethered the leather around her ankles to the one wrapped around her wrist. Her back arched, and she fought against the restraint, just as she'd fought against him and Darien since the moment she'd regained consciousness.

"Be still, or the leather will tighten and eat into your flesh," he snapped. "And I'll be damned by all the gods if I'll loosen it."

Her short tunic rode up her hips as she twisted, and for a moment Alexander was tempted, very tempted, to use the flat of his hand against the bared bottom that presented itself. After a brief, violent struggle with himself, he rose and braced one hand against the mast.

Head back, Alexander dragged sharp, clean air into his lungs to cleanse himself of this unaccustomed anger. He couldn't remember the last time he'd lost his temper, even with the rawest, most unskilled of his oarsmen. Nor could he remember ever feeling the least urge to beat a woman. That his palm now itched to smack the smooth flesh so close at hand astounded him as much as it irritated him.

At his feet, the woman huffed into her gag and shifted amid the tackle scattered about the skiff's bottom. Alexander surveyed her bowed body and rubbed his sore ribs. The damned female had regained her senses just as they sailed out of the small cove. Before either he or Darien could react, she'd lunged over the side into the sea. She'd made little progress toward shore before Alexander's long, sure strokes had overtaken her. But he'd earned five bloody claw marks across his chest and several mouthfuls of seawater before he managed to fling her aboard again.

Even then, she'd fought. As Alexander hauled himself over the side, she'd grabbed an oar and swung it with all her strength. The blow had nearly toppled him back into the sea. Swearing, he'd held her down while he bound her

flailing limbs. The gag had gone into her mouth to stifle her earsplitting shrieks and curses.

By the gods, Alexander thought as he massaged his sore flesh, he'd met many women in his time, and bedded a good number of them, but never had he encountered one like this. He sent a short prayer of thanks to Hestia, goddess of the hearth, for his household of docile, well-mannered females.

"Hurt and weakened, eh, Captain?"

Alexander's lips twisted in a wry grimace as he settled himself on a plank set in the middle of the boat. "No wonder Spartan women have freedoms unheard-of among the other Greek tribes. I doubt if even their husbands can control them if they're all as ferocious as this one."

"'Tis said that the unmarried girls train with boys in the arena, wearing naught, to tone their bodies and display themselves to would-be suitors." Darien shook his head in mingled disbelief and disgust. "None but a boorish Spartan would want so immodest and uncomfortable a wife."

A muffled sputter drew both men's gaze to the tangle of ropes and ivory limbs at the front of the boat. The woman's wet hair hid half her face, but even through the disordered black mane they could see the unquenched fire in her eyes.

"You have to admire her spirit," Alexander said slowly. "She holds true to her tribe. A Spartan finds more dishonor in surrender than in defeat."

"Aye, and more honor in the death of his enemies than in his own. I still say we should toss her overboard before she sinks us, or brings the mast down on our heads."

Alexander ignored Darien's suggestion. Above him the square-rigged sail bellied and snapped as the winds gusted capriciously. With a sailor's unthinking response, he shortened the leeward sheet and brought the skiff a little closer into the wind. The boat steadied as the sail caught the breeze, its blunt prow pushing through the swells. Currents of air cooled Alexander's heated skin. The familiar wash of waves against a wooden hull helped restore the sense of



balance he always felt when sailing on fair seas. He rubbed his sore ribs once more, and his ready sense of the ridiculous chased away the last of his annoyance. If anyone had told him when he volunteered for this mission a week ago that he'd be in more danger from one slight female than from the entire Spartan army, he'd have laughed in his face.

"We'll make Limera before dusk if this wind holds," Darien commented.

"Aye," Alexander nodded, his even humor restored. "Give me the tiller and try to sleep. We've a long day and an even longer night ahead."

## Chapter Two



Phaedra lay amid the tangled ropes and sluggish water in the bottom of the boat and prayed for strength. Minutes passed, lengthening into what seemed like hours. The pain from the blow to her head receded slowly, only to be replaced by other, more urgent aches. As the Athenian had predicted, her bonds had tightened, and the leather now cut into her flesh. To add to her discomfort, nausea churned in her stomach with each wave slapping against the boat's hull. She closed her eyes and fought the roiling sensation in her belly. If she was sick now, with this noxious cloth clogging her mouth, she'd choke on her own gorge. Despite her best efforts, her stomach convulsed and sent the acrid taste of bile into her throat. She moaned into the gag.

A whisper of cool iron brushed her cheek. Phaedra jerked her head back, and regretted the movement instantly. Dull pain swelled in her temples. She lay still, eyes closed, and waited for the black waves to recede. The feel of a knife slicing through the leather strap of her gag made her eyes fly open. The golden-haired Athenian, the one she'd sent crashing to the rocks, the one the other called captain, knelt beside her.

Choking, she spit out the dry, rough sailcloth.

"Here, drink this. Slowly, slowly."

A rough, callused palm supported her neck. She sucked

greedily at the goat skin held to her lips. Never, in all her years, had she tasted anything as wonderful as the tepid water that spilled down her parched throat and across her cheeks. If she was ever asked to describe the nectar drunk by the gods, she'd give it just this same brackish flavor and scent of bilge.

"If you promise not to take another oar to my ribs, I'll loosen your bonds."

Peering through salt-encrusted lids, Phaedra caught the half-stern, half-rueful expression on the captain's face before he bent to reach behind her.

When the leather thong tethering her wrists to her ankles gave way, she straightened involuntarily. Biting down on her lower lip, hard, she stifled another moan as needles of fire stabbed into her aching knee and shoulder joints. Nausea welled up once more and closed her throat. Dimly Phaedra felt a sawing at her ankles, and the leather binding them fell free. She heard a swift, indrawn breath, and then the knife cut through the ties at her wrists, as well. The captain lifted her and propped her back against the mast.

"I warned you not to fight the bonds."

Phaedra opened her mouth to tell him how little a Spartan regarded any warning from an Athenian's lying lips. At that moment, the boat dropped into a trough like a bucket plunging to the bottom of a well. The tepid water in her stomach sloshed. Her eyes widened, and she grabbed for the side of the boat.

The captain caught her shoulder. "For the love of Zeus!" he thundered. "Do not try it!"

Desperate, she tugged at his hold. "Release me, Athenian. I'm...I'm about to lose my..."

She never finished her gulping sentence. Surprise flickered on his face, and then a quick, unsympathetic grin. With a low groan, Phaedra pulled away and bent over the side. The Athenian supported her heaving shoulders with strong, steady hands.

When at last she leaned back against the mast, Phaedra

was teary-eyed from retching and utterly shamed by her weakness. Opening one eye, she gave him an evil look.

"If you dare to laugh, I swear the gulls will feast on your entrails before this day is through."

Blue light shimmered in his eyes, but he only handed her the goatskin. "Here, drink again. It will cleanse your throat."

Phaedra lifted the skin with shaky, nerveless hands. As much water trickled down her chin as into her raw throat. The light faded from the Athenian's eyes as he watched her, his sun-bleached brows drawing together. When she lowered the odorous skin, he took her hand in his and began to massage the bruised, swollen flesh at her wrist.

"Do not touch me."

He ignored her feeble attempts to pull free. His fingers worked a steady, painful magic. Despising herself for her weakness, Phaedra bit back a groan as stinging life rushed back into her numbed fingers.

"I'm sorry for the pain," he murmured, his gaze on her discolored flesh.

His sympathy stiffened her spine. "I'm not. Wounds taken from the enemy are a badge of honor."

The kneading slowed, then resumed its steady rhythm. "Why do you call me enemy? Sparta and Athens are not at war."

"Is it then the Athenian way to abduct the women of their allies?" Scorn deepened the husky timbre of her voice. "Why have you taken me, if our cities are not at war?"

A crooked smile lifted one corner of his lips. "I begin to wonder myself."

The mockery in his voice bolstered her weakened defenses. "Do not think me a fool, Athenian. Although your ambassadors are even now at the palace, pleading to maintain the peace, we are at war. Your very presence on Spartan soil tells me that."

He arched one brow. "How do you know of our ambas-

sadors' comings and goings? Are you of the king's household?"

Phaedra caught her slip immediately. These rogues didn't know the prize they'd captured, and she would not be the one to tell them. Deftly she turned the question aside. "All Hellas knows it is the Athenian way to beg for peace, then attack without warning."

"Think you that we attack, in this poor vessel?" The amusement that was beginning to rasp upon her like a stir-gil curved his mouth.

"I think you lay the groundwork for a surprise assault," she returned stiffly.

"So you are schooled in naval warfare, as well as the martial arts? The women of Sparta are indeed as...unique as is rumored."

"I wouldn't disparage the women of my tribe, were I you," she replied venomously. "Such a woman brought you down most handily."

"Aye," he admitted with a lazy grin. "Although you used little of your hands and much of other, more interesting parts of your body."

"However it was done," she ground out, "your brains would even now be decorating the rocks had not your cowardly companion taken me unawares."

Behind her, the dark-haired one snorted. Phaedra lifted her chin. "Or is that the Athenian way? To slink about in the dark like dogs and strike women from behind?"

"Stuff the sail back in her mouth, Captain," the younger man said in disgust.

Despite her brave words, Phaedra's stomach heaved at the thought of the noxious gag. She swallowed convulsively.

The captain paid no heed to his lieutenant's suggestion. Releasing her left arm, he lifted the right and began the same steady massage. Unable to do anything else, Phaedra leaned her head against the mast and studied the man through the screen of her lashes.



Great Hera, mother of the gods, he was a formidable foe. His short linen tunic, held together by a leather sword belt that rested low on lean hips, was molded to his frame by the sea breezes. The thin material displayed in precise detail the musculature of his broad chest and powerful shoulders. Phaedra noted with satisfaction the bloody scratches that trailed down one shoulder. At least she wasn't the only one who would bear the marks of their combat. Emboldened, she lifted her gaze to study his face.

The sun had weathered his skin to an oaken shade. His wind-tossed golden hair was kept from his face by a thin leather strap tied around his brow. Beneath thick, sun-bleached brows, eyes as blue as the sky on a summer day focused on her wrist as he worked it. His ancestors must have come from the north with the first waves of Ionian explorers long ago, Phaedra guessed dispassionately. Such coloring was increasingly rare among the Greek tribes now, after many generations of intermarriage with the native peoples of the Aegean. She studied the planes and angles of his lean face, trying not to be impressed by a masculine beauty such as she had only seen gracing the statues of the gods.

Used to the dark-bearded men of her tribe, Phaedra found the golden bristles on his cheeks and chin oddly disconcerting. It was as if the beardless face of a youth sat atop the body of a male in his prime. Nay, not a youth, she amended, glancing once more at his eyes. The lines at their corners bespoke his years, which she guessed to be some ten more than her own. Yet he appeared younger, perhaps because of the amusement that all too often softened the sharp planes of his face. Even as it did now! He'd not laugh at her for long, Phaedra vowed.

"Nay, don't bristle up and begin hostilities anew," he said, as if reading her mind. "We've hours yet to endure in this small craft. I've no mind to bind you again and cause you more discomfort."

"Comfort is not such a consideration with us as it is to your tribe, Athenian."

He shrugged aside her barb. "I am Alexander, son of Porthos. And you?"

Phaedra did not deign to answer.

"Come, tell me your name and your house. I don't know how long we'll be together, and I would not continue to address you as 'Woman.'"

"I would that you not address me at all."

"Your wishes don't hold much weight at the moment, little one. Who is your lord?"

"I have no lord."

His gaze slid down her neck, to linger on her breasts and hips. "You're overold to be yet a virgin. Are you widow, or were you given to the gods as priestess?"

Overold! Phaedra felt the weight of her two-and-twenty years as she glared up at him. "I am widow, but was to have wed a mighty warrior this very night. You'll not fare well at his hands when he avenges the insult you do me."

"You avenge yourself well enough on your own," he said with a rueful grimace. "Nay, do not tug at your wrist. Who is this warrior I must fear?"

Not sure how far the word had spread that Sparta's great heiress was at last to take another husband, Phaedra merely shook her head. "You'll know him soon enough, to your peril."

The Athenian released her, and Phaedra snatched her hand back. He draped one arm across his knee, studying her.

"Very well. Since the sea gave you to me, I'll call you Thedis."

Phaedra's mouth curled in distaste, but she made no comment. If he wished to name her after the plump sea nymph whose wanton and quite insatiable hunger for mortal men led her ashore each full moon to spread her pale white thighs for any male she chanced upon—more the fool he. Phaedra hadn't felt hunger, wanton or otherwise, for

any man in many years. Nor did she expect to. Especially not with the warrior who would have taken her to bed this night. A cold shiver darted down her spine at the thought, and she was suddenly, chillingly aware of her present predicament. Heart pounding, she lifted her chin.

“What will you do with me?”

For a long moment the captain surveyed her through the screen of his lashes. “I’m damned if I know,” he said finally, rising to his feet. “Take your ease, Lady Thedis, and worry not about your fate. It’s in the hands of the gods.”

Balancing easily against the boat’s roll, he ducked under the sail and moved to the prow. “You’ve got the oars, Darien,” he called over one shoulder. “Wake me in an hour. Or sooner, if the lady makes any untoward movement.”

Surprised that her inquisition was so quickly over, Phaedra sucked in a quick breath of relief. She’d expected worse—much worse—when the questioning began. A Spartan wouldn’t hesitate to choke or beat the answers he desired out of a captive. Contempt for the Athenian’s softness slowly edged aside her relief.

While the dark-haired lieutenant watched her from the stern, Phaedra rested her head against the mast and assessed her situation. A quick glance at the sun told her it had not yet reached its zenith. Only a few hours had passed since she was taken, too few for her to have been missed. No doubt her escorts still lolled about the posting house in the village, casting bones and ogling the slave women while they awaited their mistress’s return from the sacred cove. They’d not expect to see her much before the noon hour. It would be hours more before they took word of her absence to her uncle.

Thoughts of her uncle sent a ripple of dread down Phaedra’s back. Arkhidamos, known as Naxos, was the stronger and harsher of Sparta’s two kings. He’d be beside himself with rage when she didn’t return for the wedding feast

planned for this night. After years of withholding her hand and her wealth from the suitors who clamored for it, he'd finally found one to give her to. One whose ambition played right into the king's hands. One whose brute strength was matched only by his stupidity. The fool had forfeited half of Phaedra's dowry, the half she must by law give into his custody, for the honor of aligning himself with the royal house. Naxos would never forgive her for letting herself be taken by these scurvy Athenians and spoiling his plans for her.

Complicating her personal dilemma were the political ramifications of her capture. If the Athenians knew they held one of the king's blood, they'd use her as a hostage to wring concessions from her uncle. Or as bait, to lure him into war before he was ready. As much as she hated her uncle, Phaedra loved her city. The thought of bringing war to Sparta before her allies sent the levies of men and ships that they'd promised made Phaedra cringe. These rogues must not learn who they held. She would escape before they used her—for any purpose.

The day lengthened, with nothing but the shifting winds and some dried salted fish to break the monotony of the voyage. Alexander relieved Darien and stretched his long frame out comfortably in the thwarts, the steering oar tucked firmly under one arm.

Twice he tried to lure his captured nymph into speech, only to be rewarded with a disdainful stare from her great sea green eyes. Lulled by the rhythm of the waves, he sprawled restfully and studied his prize through half-closed lids. The trim lines of her lithe body fascinated him as much as her stubborn refusal to bow to his strength or his authority.

She was well-born, he knew. No common maid or slave would speak with such cold contempt or dare defy him so. Yet she had none of the airs and graces of any lady of his acquaintance. Nay, this Lady Thedis was as unlike the well-

bred, submissive women of Athens as a hawk was the plump doves that nested under the eaves. Or as the sleek panther she so resembled was the overfed cats that curled in the warm corners of the kitchens.

Lazy thoughts of taming this wild creature, of gentling her to his hand, drifted through Alexander's mind. She'd make a magnificent mistress, he decided. Where a man expected obedience and chastity in a wife, he looked for more, much more, in the one who shared his passions. Courtesans with the fire this woman possessed were prized above gold among the sophisticated men of his acquaintance.

At that moment the lady lifted her hand to brush her tangled hair from her eyes. Her gaze caught his, and her chin lifted arrogantly before she looked away.

Alexander's lips twitched. He suspected that schooling the Lady Thedis to the role of courtesan, or even that of proper captive, would require more energy and a stronger arm than most mortal men possessed.

"There is Limera, Captain, on the horizon."

Darien's low voice broke into his musings. Alexander straightened and squinted at the far shore. The lieutenant was the best bow officer in the fleet, with keen eyes that could identify familiar landmarks or the name device on a ship's prow at great distances. If he said the hazy, far-off smudge of white against the gray of the surrounding cliffs was Limera, the city they'd come to infiltrate, then Limera it was. Glancing up at the sun, Alexander reckoned they had less than an hour of daylight left.

"Bring down the sail," he commanded quietly. "We'll wait until the sun strikes the water, then go in under oar."

Phaedra sat up in the bottom of the boat, her heart racing and her eyes on the far shore. Limera was a port city, one of Sparta's allies. She would supply ships for their cause. If Phaedra could break free of her captors when they went ashore, she could find succor within the city and warn them



of the Athenians in their midst. Excitement rushed through her veins, and she slanted a quick look at the captain.

To her chagrin, he was watching her with that damnable glint in his eyes.

“Nay, little one. You’ll not escape to alert the city.”

“Are you seer, as well as sailor?” she snapped. “Do you think you can look into the future?”

“Your future I see, at least,” he responded before turning to help the lieutenant work the ropes.

Determined to know the worst, Phaedra waited until he’d reseated himself. “And what do you see for me, Athenian? What do you plan to do with me?”

His gaze slid over her in slow, silent contemplation, lingering on her breasts, then on the length of her thigh. When his eyes met hers once more, Phaedra stiffened at the heat she saw in them. She was no timid virgin, that she could not recognize lambent male lust. Fears she’d kept at bay throughout the long, interminable day raced through her.

“You’ll not find me easy,” she warned, her voice low and deadly.

His lips curved. “Nay, I suspect not.”

With every creak of the leather straps that held the oars against the tholepins, Phaedra’s determination to escape grew apace with her nervousness. If she’d had any doubts before about what these Athenians planned for her, she had none now.

The sun slipped into a wine-dark sea, and their craft crept closer to the shore. Phaedra felt her muscles tensing as she tried to judge the water’s depth. She knew she couldn’t outswim the captain. Her one abortive attempt had shown her that. But if Athens dominated the seas, Sparta ruled the land. Let her feet but touch solid earth, and he’d never catch her. She always outran the warriors she raced against in her thrice-weekly training sessions. She’d easily leave this waterlogged sailor behind.

“Hold, Darien.”

The captain's quiet command cut through her intense scrutiny of the murky waters. She glanced up as the lieutenant shipped his oars, resting his muscular arms on their length. The boat rocked as the captain knelt at her side.

"I must bind and gag you before we get too close to shore."

"No!"

"Aye."

Too late, Phaedra realized she should have taken her chances in the sea. With a quick twist, she dived for the side of the boat. A hard hand on her arm brought her back. Her bottom landed on the boards with a painful thump.

"Be still. I would not hurt you more."

Swallowing bitter waves of disappointment, Phaedra ceased her struggles. She knew enough of the captain's strength by now to recognize that she wasted her energy in fruitless battle. Without surprise or the momentum of her weight to aid her, she couldn't overcome him.

Holding her firmly between his knees, he wrapped thick pads of folded sailcloth around her bruised wrists and secured them in place with a thin strip of leather.

Phaedra's brows rose as she perceived what he was about. That he would shield her aching flesh from the leather strap astonished her, then filled her with scorn. The fool! No warrior she knew would show such softheartedness to a captive.

He bound her wrists, then lashed them to the spar. Her arms stretched above her, not high enough to cause discomfort, but too high to allow movement. His hand cupped her chin, turning her face to his.

"I mislike having to gag you. But I can't take the chance you'll scream and alert anyone who might be near our landing site."

"And if I give you my word that I won't?"

His white teeth gleamed in the gathering dusk. "Would you trust my word in such a situation?"

Knowing it was hopeless, Phaedra let her lip curl in a

deliberate sneer. "I'd never trust the word of any Athenian."

"I thought as much."

His thumb traced a line across her lower lip. Phaedra sucked in a quick breath and tried to jerk out of his hold.

"I've dampened the cloth so it won't make you ill again."

"It was your touch, not the gag, that made me retch—as it does even now. Take your hand from my face."

The lieutenant gave a derisive grunt. "You should take it from her face and apply it to her backside. 'Tis obvious Spartan females heed not the adage that the woman least heard is most honored."

Neither Phaedra nor the captain bothered to respond. Their eyes locked in a battle that was somehow more personal, more intimate, than before. Phaedra felt the heat of his hand on her chin, and shivered.

With a last brush of his thumb across her lip, his hold firmed on her jaw. "Open for me, little Thedis. Don't make me force you."

The soft command raised the fine hairs at the back of her neck. In the eyes so close to her own, she saw the age-old determination of a man confronting an unwilling woman. Swallowing, she opened her mouth to say him nay, and found it filled with damp, disgusting sailcloth.

Dark water lapped at the hull as they rowed into a shallow cove some time later. A sudden rattle of stones on the cliffs above broke the soft stillness of the night. Alexander's heart leapt into his throat.

"Down!"

With one hand he pulled the woman to the boards and covered her body with his. For long, heart-stopping moments, no one in the boat moved, the men because they dared not, the woman because she could not.

"Naaaaaa!"

A goat's bleating cry carried across the swells. Alexan-

der's breath eased out in a low laugh. Sliding over the side, he lifted his stiff, indignant Thedis and carried her to shore. Her legs wobbled when he set her down, and he supported her with an arm about her waist. Holding her up, Alexander made her walk. As her legs gained strength, she pulled against his arm. He released her waist, but kept a firm grasp on the short length of leather that dangled from her bound wrists. Tugging her behind him, he moved to where Darien had hidden the boat in the shadows.

"We've hours yet before the moon dims enough for us to finish our task."

"Aye," the younger man agreed.

"Walk the stiffness from your knees and set up a watch above. Use the signal we agreed upon if you see aught that alarms you. I'll guard the boat and attend to the Lady Thedis until we must leave."

"Just take care she doesn't attend to you," Darien suggested dryly, slipping his knife from its sheath. With a half salute, he melted into the shadows at the base of the cliff.

Alexander watched until he disappeared, then turned to the woman at his side. His fingers tightened on the leather strap.

Phaedra clenched her teeth on the wad of sailcloth as the night seemed to close around her. She stared up at the dim outline of the captain, her heart pounding. He loomed tall and menacing in the cast of the moon. Apprehension slithered along her skin. He'd sent the lieutenant away apurpose, she knew with chilling certainty. She also knew this man would take no joy of her. She'd kick and scratch and...

"'Black as a raven's wing, tossed upon the night.'"

Phaedra blinked, not sure she'd heard his soft murmur correctly. He reached out to lift a twist of her hair, and she took an instinctive step back.

"'Thrown to the stars to rise, glorious and golden, upon the dawn.'"

Her brow furrowed, and she shook her head.

The captain's low laugh carried over the short distance

between them. "Aye, you're right. 'Tis poor poetry at best. But the moon's light on your hair is the stuff of verse, wretched as it is."

He turned toward the cliffs. "Come, lady, you may as well rest. We've a wait ahead of us yet."

Phaedra stumbled behind him, her mind whirling with confusion. She had expected him to...to ravish her, and he spouted verses! Had she mistaken the banked fire in his eyes when he took his leisurely and most disturbing survey of her breasts? No, she'd seen that look often enough in her widowhood to know it.

Did he but toy with her? Did he think to undermine her resistance with pretty words and false assurances? Aye, that was it, she decided, watching with cold eyes as he kicked aside a few scattered stones to clear a space. Her fingers curved into claws.

He slid down, his back to the cliff, one knee upraised. "Sit, and take what ease you may."

Phaedra stood.

The Athenian sighed. "Don't make me bring you down. This rock is most unyielding." He shortened the leather strap in a gentle warning.

Her eyes glittering, Phaedra sank to her knees on the cool stone. She watched him through narrowed lids, and her muscles tensed against the attack she knew would come. His comfortable pose was but a ruse to lull her into letting down her guard. She'd not be taken in by the way he leaned his head back against the rock, not by the way the moon's glow softened the shadows of his lean, sculptured face. The moments crawled past.

Gradually the sounds of night rose over the rush of the sea. The sweet, shrill chirp of crickets in the rocks above. The distant call of a goat. The even breathing of the man beside her. Slowly, imperceptibly, she relaxed her knotted muscles and let her rigid spine slump.

"It appears we have the cove to ourselves. Turn your head, Lady Thedis, and I'll remove the gag."

With a sag of relief, Phaedra turned and bent her head. His hands buried themselves in her hair, fumbling with the knot. Phaedra felt the rough pads of his fingers rasp the back of her neck. They were the only part of him that was rough, she thought. The rest of his skin was smooth and supple. No doubt he rubbed it with olive oil, as did most sailors, to protect it from the sun and wind. Disconcerted by the direction of her thoughts, she jerked her head away as soon as the knots came loose, and spit out the cloth.

The night settled upon them as they sat, unspeaking. Phaedra slanted a sideways look at the end of her wrist strap, still wrapped around the captain's fist. She calculated her chances of jerking free, then bit back an impatient sigh as she realized it was hopeless. Despite the man's relaxed pose, he could easily subdue her, bound as she was. She'd have to wait until the moment was more propitious.

A flash of silver sliced through the dark waters just beyond the shoreline.

"A dolphin," the captain murmured. "Poseidon's own messenger." He turned to Phaedra, his face cast in shadows. "Think you he brings us some word, some warning?"

"Of your death, I doubt not," she retorted.

"Nay, I prefer to think Poseidon sent him to see how his little sea nymph fares."

"She'd fare better if you'd release her."

His soft, infectious laugh hung on the night air, and Phaedra had to fight the unexpected urge to smile in return. A sense of unreality crept over her. She couldn't quite believe that she was here, on a barren stretch of unfamiliar coast, bandying words with an Athenian! One who could have modeled for a statue of Apollo.

The darkness she'd dreaded during the long hours in the boat now settled around her like a silken net. With some bewilderment, Phaedra realized that this night was not turning out at all as she'd expected. She stiffened, remembering suddenly that this was to have been her wedding night. That even now the huge, brutish warrior chosen by her uncle



would have been claiming his rights to her body. And she would have been lying rigid and silent, trapped by her woman's duty. She shivered, as if a dark cloud had passed before the moon.

"Let me warm you."

Before Phaedra quite realized his intent, the captain shifted and drew her between his legs, settling her back against his chest. His strong arms cocooned her. Stunned, Phaedra tensed and waited for the worst.

"Relax, little one. Let your body take my warmth."

His breath stirred the fine hairs at her temple. Phaedra gave another, involuntary shiver.

His arms tightened, blanketing her in smooth male heat. Warm hands slid down to her elbows, then back up, leaving a trail of gooseflesh. Phaedra sat rigid, startled and more than a little confused by the tingling sensation that deepened with each stroke of his palms.

## Chapter Three



“You feel like marble under my hands, smooth and sleek and cool. You’ve not the plump flesh of your namesake, Lady Thedis.”

The captain’s teasing voice broke the stillness of the night and distracted Phaedra from the movement of his hands on her arms.

“I wish you would not call me by that disgusting name,” she mumbled, still somewhat stunned by her body’s treacherous response to this...this Athenian.

“’Tis said she’s a most playful sprite.”

“I know what’s said of her,” Phaedra snapped. “She’s a lascivious, wanton by-blow of the mighty Zeus who once seduced Poseidon and now hungers for mortal men.”

She more than hungered, if the songs sung in Sparta’s men’s clubs held even a grain of truth, Phaedra thought in disgust. On nights such as this, the nymph would rise from the sea to seek a man to lie with, any man. A man who would mount her and writhe between the cushion of her thighs. A man who would...

Phaedra’s thoughts skittered to a halt. In stunned disbelief, she felt a moist heat curl low in her belly, one she hadn’t felt in years. She’d not lain with any man since her husband’s death in battle, or even with him all that many times. Sparta discouraged married couples from setting up

joint households, not wanting an attachment between them to weaken their dedication to the state. She'd mated with her warrior husband but half a dozen times in their brief marriage. And never, on the few occasions they'd tasted passion, had he stoked her woman's heat as this Athenian was now doing. Never had his touch seared her skin, or created a sudden, disconcerting moistness at her core.

'Twas reaction to the fear and fury and uncertainty of her situation, Phaedra told herself sternly. 'Twas the thought of the wanton nymph. 'Twas not the captain's hands, or the feel of his chest against her back. He was the enemy, an Athenian, for the love of Zeus! Gritting her teeth, Phaedra stared out at the sea and endured his hands, while one small, rebellious corner of her mind wondered why he did no more than stroke her arms. Why did he not take her?

Why didn't he take her? Alexander asked himself. He had time yet before the moon dimmed. There was no sign of intruders in the cove, no low whistle from Darien to signal his return. Why didn't he ease the ache building in his loins with each stroke of his hands on the warm ivory of her skin? The gods knew he wanted her—had wanted her since the first moment he saw her, bathed in the dawn mists.

He glanced down at the dark head resting with obvious reluctance against his shoulder, at the bound wrists cradled in her lap. Alexander frowned, regretting the necessity of such restraints. True, women suffered many indignities when taken in the heat of battle or carried off as the spoils of war. But here, in this quiet cove, war seemed far away, and the only heat was that between his legs. His manhood rose, as if mocking his attempt at self-control.

Phaedra felt his rod stiffen and swallowed a sudden panic, tinged with some dark, inexplicable excitement. The air thickened around her. Blood began to pulse in her veins.

Alexander breathed in the scent of the sea-washed woman and tightened his arms.

Tension, palpable and raw, rose between them, hovered on the night, sharpened their senses.

Phaedra tingled with a spiraling sense of anticipation. Finally she could bear it no longer. By nature she was forceful and direct, and she would rather meet her fears head-on than wait like some helpless rabbit for him to pounce. Twisting in his hold, she lifted her chin.

"If you try to take me, I'll fight you. You'll have no pleasure in the joining."

Alexander felt the challenge of her words slice into his gut. With every ounce of discipline he possessed, he fought a sudden, fierce desire to prove her wrong. To show her just how much pleasure their joining would give him. And her.

"Somehow I knew that you would not make the task easy," he managed with a slight drawl.

Phaedra's jaw sagged. Task? Was that how he viewed it? As a *task*? Her eyes narrowed as a sudden, disconcerting suspicion took hold.

"Do you dislike women? Are you one of those fishes that swim in pairs?"

He stared at her, blank surprise widening his eyes.

"So that's why you do not use me," she muttered in disgust.

His shout of laughter made her jump.

"No, little one," he sputtered, "I'm not one to sail in the ship's stern."

"Well, then, why do you not—" Phaedra clamped her mouth shut.

"Why do I not take you?" Still grinning, he cupped her chin and lifted her stiff face to his. "I'm finding it more difficult by the moment not to, my Thedis."

For a long, shimmering moment, Phaedra stared up at him, devouring the silvered sheen of his hair in the moon's light. The shadowed planes and angles of his face. The glint of laughter in his eyes. By all that was holy, it was hard to remember that he was the enemy!

But enemy he was. She drew in a ragged breath, jerked her head out of his hold, and injected all the cold disdain she could into her voice.

"Do not call me by that name."

A low, warbling whistle cut through the night. Before she quite knew what had happened, Phaedra found herself scooped up in the captain's arms and carried to the boat. With quick, sure sailor's knots, he bound her ankles once more, then tested the straps around her bandaged wrists. Satisfied that they held, he secured her to the mast and stuffed the cloth into her resisting mouth.

"We'll be back before dawn, if all goes well. If it does not..." His hand lingered on the curve of her thigh. "If it does not, a fisherman or goatherd will find you soon enough."

With that, he tossed a piece of sail over her and was gone.

Phaedra sat in the sudden darkness, her senses whirling. One moment she was in his arms, her heart thumping like a frightened deer's, the next moment she was tossed into the boat like a discarded oar. Shame at having relaxed her guard, even for a moment, swept through her. All the while he laughed and teased and toyed with her, the cur had been awaiting the signal from his accursed lieutenant. Even now the two of them slipped through the night to spy on one of Sparta's allies and plot her destruction.

Phaedra waited. Her mouth was clamped against the sail-cloth, and her ears strained for any sound that they might still be close. She heard nothing but the breath pushing through her nostrils. She waited a while longer. Then longer still. When at last she was sure they were well gone, she began to twist her wrists and work at the pads that protected them.

The thick cloth buffered the straps, but didn't completely ease the bite of leather on her swollen flesh. Phaedra flexed her wrists, and her heart hardened with every twist of pain. A sweep of scorn for the Athenian's softness filled her.

He'd thought to spare her with these bandages. His very softness would prove to be his undoing.

"There are the shipyards, Captain."

Alexander nodded, his gaze intent on the dim, oblong shapes across the bay. Above the row of sheds, a tumble of whitewashed buildings clung to the steep hills surrounding the bay. In the moon's waning light, he could see a marble temple crowning the city's highest hill. He pointed to two stone arms built out into the bay, with a narrow opening between them to allow ships to pass.

"We should have a clear view of the yards from those moles. I see no guard towers on them, only that small building to house the beacon fires. You take the mole on the right. I'll take the left."

"And these Limerians think to side with Sparta in challenging Athens!" Contempt laced Darien's voice as he pulled off his chiton. "They scramble to build ships, but don't have the sense to guard them properly."

Alexander stripped with quick efficiency. He had his own doubts about this small city's ability to produce the ships it was rumored to have promised Sparta. Limera was a minor maritime power, with an existing fleet of only twenty triremes. Still, the lack of security surprised him.

"Don't dismiss the Limerians too quickly, Darien. That they've undertaken to double their fleet at all is enough to worry the Council. Ready?"

At the younger man's nod, Alexander slipped into the dark water, then waited until the lieutenant had eased in beside him. Careful to control their backsplash, the two men cut through the swells. Alexander waved to Darien as they approached the stone quays, then used a strong, noiseless breaststroke to gain his objective.

After scrutinizing the rocks, he levered himself out of the water. These man-made moles were supposed to control access to the harbor and protect it from attack. Yet no chain stretched across the opening between the two stone arms.



No guards with spears and shields stood ready to leap aboard an unfriendly ship.

Making a mental note of the city's lack of defenses, Alexander lay flat on his belly and surveyed the slips on the far shore. He could see them clearly now—long, peaked-roofed structures built right down into the water of the bay. The columned sheds appeared of sufficient length to house a trireme's hundred-and-twenty-foot hull, but they rose out of the water at too steep a slant, he noted. Ships released from their fittings to slide back into the water would bend with unnecessary stresses when they hit. Storing that bit of information away for later examination, Alexander began to count the hulls inside the shadowed sheds.

When he regained the shore sometime later, Darien was already squatting beside their discarded clothing.

"What was your count?" Alexander asked, hunkering down beside him.

"Fourteen, Captain."

There was no trace of contempt in the lieutenant's voice now. That the Limerians could have completed so many new ships in such a short time obviously worried him as much as it did Alexander. The younger man gnawed on his lower lip.

"That makes a total of fifty-two hulls we've seen under construction or newly launched in three nights of counting."

"The Council will not be best pleased," Alexander commented, rising to drag the linen tunic over his head.

"They'll crap in their chitons," Darien agreed with a sailor's bluntness. "Maybe now they'll listen to your arguments for a preemptive strike. If we destroy these ships before they're fully outfitted, we'll save lives—many lives—in the future."

Alexander fastened his sword belt low on his hips. "Such a strike would shatter the illusion of peace that the Council clings to."

"'Tis just a matter of weeks, if not days, before Sparta

and her allies attack.” Darien’s voice shook with low, frustrated anger. “We should blunt their spear while we may.”

Alexander shrugged off his own unease and grinned. “It’s not me that needs convincing. Save your breath for the trip back to the boat and our report to the other captains.”

He led the way back up the steep rocks. As soon as they reached the level ground at the top of the cliffs, Alexander broke into a loping run. Now that their mission was all but done, he was impatient to rejoin the fleet that lurked just over the horizon and discuss his findings with the other captains. His mind whirled with the numbers and status of the hulls they’d seen, and with the report he’d make to the Council. Not until they were halfway back to the cove did Alexander think of the woman who awaited him. He spent the rest of the trip trying to decide what in Hades he would do with her.

He couldn’t let her go—not yet, anyway. They couldn’t push off until dawn, when the sun’s position would guide them to their rendezvous with the fleet. Even then, Alexander dared not release her. His orders were to conceal his presence in enemy territory at all costs. The Council feared provoking an attack when there was yet hope of extending the peace. He had no choice. He’d have to take her with him.

As he crossed the pebbled shore to the small boat, Alexander wondered at the spear of satisfaction it gave him to know that the little sea nymph was his yet a while longer.

“By the beard of—”

“Let me guess.” Darien stopped behind him. “The wench has kicked out the boat’s sides? She’s torn the sails to shreds with her teeth?”

“She’s gone.” Alexander lifted a bloodstained bandage from the bottom of the boards. “She twisted the pads from her wrists and slipped them free.”

“Holy Zeus!”

Alexander's fists closed around the pad, his mouth set in a grim line. "The blood's not yet dry. She's not gone far."

Both men turned to study the dark outline of the cliffs they'd just come down.

"There were two paths leading toward Limera," Darien said.

Alexander nodded, his eyes intent. "We had no sight of her on the one we took, nor did we hear any sounds of alarm. She must have taken the other path, though 'tis longer. Or tried to escape along the shore. There's a chance yet we can catch her."

"I'll search the shore," Darien volunteered.

When the lieutenant would have spun away, Alexander halted him with a hard grip on his forearm.

"We don't have much time. If aught happens to delay either one of us, the other must launch the boat at dawn and take the information we've gathered to the fleet."

"I won't leave you here!"

"You will! As I'll leave you if you're not back."

Alexander's grip tightened until his fingers pressed against bone. After a long moment, they loosened, and he flashed Darien a quick grin.

"Although explaining to my sister how I left her betrothed behind will be even more difficult than explaining to the Council how I lost the best bow officer in the fleet. Take care, Darien."

"Aye. You, also, Alexander."

Phaedra stopped to suck in a panting breath. She leaned against a boulder and crossed her arms above her breasts, trying to halt the blood that still dripped from her raw wrists. The shades take that accursed sailor and his damned knots!

It had taken far longer than she'd anticipated to work the pads free and slip her hands through the blood-slick loops of leather. She'd had to fight a rushing panic when she at last clambered out of the boat and saw how low the moon

rode in the night sky. She had no way of knowing how long the captain had been gone, nor how far the city lay from their landing site. Nor did she know which of the two paths that wound into the rugged countryside above the cliffs they'd taken. She knew only that they'd be back before the dawn. She'd run with cautious speed down the nearest path, her ears alert for any sound.

Dragging in a deep breath, Phaedra pushed herself upright and began to run once more. Her feet barely touched the uneven, rock-strewn path. She dared not run at her full speed, not when the Athenians might appear at any bend or turn, but her pace was swift nevertheless. The faint red glow of dawn spurred her on.

Alexander touched the dark smear on the boulder's surface and smiled in savage satisfaction. He wasn't far behind her now. He'd picked up the trail of spattered blood almost immediately. Even in the dim light, there was no mistaking the liquid gleam against the weathered stones. She was yet some miles from the city. He'd take her.

Phaedra heard him before she saw him. The steady, rhythmic beat of his soles against the rock, discordant with her own shorter stride, seeped into her consciousness. She took a quick look over her shoulder. Against the graying light, she saw a flash of white. Throwing her head back to whip the hair from her eyes, she lengthened her stride. Heedless now of noise, she ran with all her soul.

Alexander spotted his prey, and a deep, visceral thrill coursed through him. With every hard, pounding stride, the chase bit deeper into his being. With every glimpse of her slender legs as she fled, the hunt took on new dimensions. No longer was he pursuing her to preserve his mission's secrecy or to keep her from disclosing their presence. Now he was stalking his prize, the one given him by the gods, the one seeking to escape him. The one who had heated his blood and stirred his loins.

Throwing another quick look over her shoulder, Phaedra saw that he'd gained on her. Panic clogged her throat, in-

terfering with her measured breathing. By the gods, how had he come so far, so fast, this poetry-spouting, softhearted Athenian? A primitive fear laced through her blood, the deep, bone-chilling fear of a quarry with the feel of a huntsman's breath on its neck. The fear of a woman who runs from a man who would have her. She knew, in the darkest recesses of her mind, that this time the Athenian would not stay his hand. This time he'd not laugh and tease and deny the base instincts that hardened his body. Gasping now for each tortured breath, she flew through the glimmering dawn. Abandoning the path, she headed for the rough terrain to her left. She'd try to lose him in the rocky ledges. Beneath her feet, the ground heaved in uneven cracks and crevices. She jumped one deep chasm, and headed straight for another.

Alexander's heart slammed against his ribs when he spied the gaping ravine not twenty yards in front of her. There wasn't yet enough light to see how deep it was, but it was surely too wide for her to leap across.

"No! Don't try it!"

His shout echoed from the rocks. With a last, desperate spurt of energy, he leapt the distance between them. His arm locked around her waist just as she launched herself into the air.

He threw himself sideways, landing with a thud that knocked the breath from his lungs. The lip of the crevice crumbled beneath their combined weight. For a long, heart-stopping moment, they hung on the edge, scrabbling for purchase. Then, slowly, inexorably, they slid over the side.

Alexander tried to shield her as they tumbled down the steep slope in a tangle of limbs and twisted bodies. A dry, thorny bush lashed his face. Shale scraped his back. Her tunic caught on a sharp rock, ripping across the shoulders.

They landed, locked together, at the bottom of a narrow ravine.

"Are you hurt?"

Alexander buried his fists in her hair and turned her face



up to his. Fear gnawed at his innards when her dark lashes fluttered once, then lay still along her cheeks.

“Open your eyes, Thedis! Tell me where you hurt!”

With an obvious effort, her lids lifted. Her eyes were dull and flat at first, then slowly focused on his face. She dragged in a deep breath.

“It would...take more than that...little tumble to hurt a Spartan,” she gasped. “And do not call me by that...disgusting name!”

Alexander's breath hissed out in a ragged combination of relief, victory, and laughter. With a low groan, he tightened his fists in her mass of dark hair, raised her head to his and covered her mouth in a savage kiss.

The world rocked under Phaedra. She thought at first she was still tumbling down the slope, so violently did her senses whirl. Heat seared her mouth, arced along her skin. The tang of male sweat filled her nostrils, and mingled with her own rising scent. His tawny head blocked the pale light, narrowing her world to one dominated by his touch and his taste. Rough hands tilted her head, hard lips plundered hers.

For a brief, unthinking moment, Phaedra responded. Something elemental, something basic and primeval in her, rose in answer to his ravening hunger. Her blood, still heated from the chase, flamed into burning, wanting need. She arched under him, thrusting her hips up to meet his. Her arms wrapped around his waist, and her broken nails scored his back.

“Open for me! Give me your mouth!” he demanded hoarsely.

Phaedra slanted her head to give him entry, and his tongue plunged into her moist, eager mouth. He tasted of dark wine and salt spray and hot, hungry male. Her legs lifted and twisted around his thighs.

Alexander grunted as her breasts scraped against his chest. Small, stiff nipples scorched his flesh wherever they touched. Keeping one hand buried in her hair, he sought the mound of her breast, shaping and kneading and taking

fire from its woman's shape. When she moaned and raised one knee to rub her thigh against his hip, Alexander felt the tattered remnants of all that was civilized in him go up in flames. He wanted this woman with a need so raw it consumed him, and he would have her. His hand slid down to her thigh, lifting it higher, positioning her.

In the last sane corner of her mind, Phaedra realized his intent...and her complicity. As if from a distance, she saw herself panting and writhing beneath him. A shame more bitter than any she had ever known washed through her, dousing the fires in her blood. This was to have been her wedding night. She, a proud daughter of Sparta, was to have mated with a man of her tribe, a warrior who had won her by right of arms. Instead, she rutted like a dog in bare dirt with an Athenian. An Athenian!

Twisting her hip, she blocked the thrust that would have speared her womanhood and her honor. Her hands fisted and pounded on the shoulders pressing her into the earth.

"HOLA! Look ye here!"

The muffled shout registered on the edges of Phaedra's consciousness. Looking up, over the captain's shoulder, she saw a dark face crowned by a conical bronze helmet peering down at them from the edge of the ravine.

The Athenian's hips ground against her, reclaiming her attention. "Stop!" she panted.

"Oh, no, my little sprite," he growled. "This time I take what the gods have offered."

Her head thrashed to one side to avoid his kiss. In response, he bent and took the tendons of her neck between his teeth, as a stallion does to control the mare he mounts.

Phaedra beat on his shoulders with her fists. "Stop, you fool! There are—ah!"

He'd bitten her! Great Hera, he'd closed his teeth on her! Not hard enough to cause real pain, but hard enough to make the breath slam from her body.

"Whooee!"

"That's the way, farmer!"

“Save some for us!”

The chorus of catcalls and jeers cut through the roaring in Alexander's ears. With a startled oath, he rolled to one side and sprang to his feet. Sword in hand, he straddled the woman and looked up at the leering soldiers leaning over the edge of the gully.

“‘Tis no farmer!” one of them exclaimed.

“Whatever he is, he'll share with us or be spitted on his own blade,” another snarled.

Alexander's fingers tightened around the hilt as he counted heads. There were four that he could see. Probably a patrol from Limera. His heart slowed its frantic pace as he assessed the situation.

Phaedra scrambled back, away from his protective stance. Jumping to her feet, she clutched the edges of her torn tunic with one hand and pushed her tangled hair from her eyes with the other.

“Limerians! I am of Spar—”

Her breath left with a gasp as the captain whipped around and yanked her to his side. One rigid arm clamped around her waist, bonding her body to his. His eyes blazed down into hers.

“You'll fare much worse at their hands than at mine,” he warned her in a low, urgent voice. “Those are but rough soldiers, and there are many of them.”

Scorn flooded her eyes. “I'd rather take my chances with such as they than lie with the scum of Athens!”

His mouth thinned to a hard line, but a rattle of stones prevented any further response. He whirled to face the soldiers with Phaedra pinned to his side.

Their burly, gap-toothed leader—a sergeant, by the look of him—slid down the slope with an agility that belied his bulk. The others followed, crowding the mouth of the narrow ravine.

“Who are you? What do you do here, outside the walls of Limera?”

On either side of the leader, pikemen leveled sharp, pointed spears at Alexander and his writhing captive.

"He's Athenian," Phaedra shouted, then doubled over as the iron band about her waist contracted painfully.

"Athens and Limera are not at war," Alexander countered quickly. "Do you accost all visitors to your city?"

"What do you here?" the leader repeated in a low, suspicious growl.

"I but amuse myself with this slave I purchased in your agora. She escaped, and I ran her down."

"Don't believe him!" Phaedra gasped. "I am of Sparta!" She clawed at the rigid muscle cutting off her air.

"I am Phaedra, niece to King Naxos of Sparta!"

The captain's arm clenched harder.

"This man abducted me." Faint and dizzy, she managed to wheeze out the words. "He's Athenian, I tell you, come to spy on your ships."

The soldier's eyes narrowed to dark slits. Alexander knew the moment the man decided to believe her by the way his sword lifted in his meaty fist. With grim resignation, Alexander let the drooping woman sink to the ground behind him, and hefted his sword. He'd faced worse odds during fierce sea battles, when the fight raged from ship to ship and spilled onto shore. A feral gleam lit his eyes.

"Take him," the sergeant snarled.

One of the pikemen sidled forward and made a two-handed jab at Alexander's chest. The captain sidestepped it easily. A powerful slash of his iron sword severed the wooden shaft.

While the first pikeman scrambled back, a second edged forward, then a third. Their awkward thrusts were easily parried. At the realization that he faced untrained rabble, Alexander decided to attack. He swung his sword in a vicious arc and took one step forward, then another. The soldiers fell back, stumbling over each other in the narrow ravine. Gathering his muscles for the kill, Alexander

lunged. A pair of slender arms wrapped about his legs from behind and brought him crashing down.

He twisted onto his back. His hand still clenched his sword, but he knew the battle was lost. The point of a spear cut into the flesh at the base of his throat, and a heavy, booted foot stomped on his sword arm. At his knees, a wide-eyed, panting sea sprite stared at him through a tangle of black hair.

The walk to the city was the longest Phaedra had ever endured. With each step, the soldiers taunted the bound Athenian. Blood from their spears ran in narrow rivulets down the planes of his back and streaked his arms. Phaedra told herself repeatedly that it was no more than he deserved. But when the beefy leader pulled a short leather whip out of his belt and used it to keep the captain moving, she had to bite back an involuntary protest. The vile curse the Athenian uttered, and the look he shot her over the soldier's head, made her swallow the unspoken protest.

By the time they had passed through the double set of gates in the city's walls and trudged up an uneven, dirt-packed street, she was dizzy with hunger and fatigue. Box-like, windowless houses of mud brick crowded in on either side of the street, all but shutting out the morning light. Dogs and pigs rooted in mud and garbage. Night soil tossed from upper-story sleeping chambers made the way torturous and added to the assault on Phaedra's quivering nostrils.

Their small procession became the immediate focus of attention. Slave girls with water jars on their shoulders, farmers from the countryside tugging at produce-laden donkeys, bareheaded citizens on their way to the agora for shopping and the business of the day, all stopped to stare. Occasionally someone would call out a question to the soldiers and buzz with interest at the reply. The crowd trailed behind them as they made their way to a large columned building set at the far end of the agora. This was where the



business of the city was conducted, Phaedra knew, here, in the heart of the marketplace. This was where the city fathers met in council to make laws and dispense justice. This was where she would rid herself once and for all of the Athenian. Assuming the Council believed her, she amended, swallowing the dryness in her throat.

“She claims she is niece to King Naxos, Excellencies.”

The soldiers pushed them both inside a high-ceilinged chamber. Stumbling with weariness, Phaedra tripped over the marble lintel. After the bright sunlight outside, she saw only dark, shadowy figures clustered on benches to one side of the hall.

“She says she was abducted by this one, an Athenian, who came to spy upon our city. We found them fornicating in the hills above the city.”

## *Chapter Four*



“How could you let yourself be taken?”

“It was not by my choice, uncle.”

Phaedra battled the grit and lack of sleep that stung her lids. With her last reserves of strength, she forced herself to sit upright in the backless lyre chair while Naxos, king of Sparta, paced the chamber where she had awaited his arrival. His red cloak, the distinctive badge of the Spartan warrior class, swirled about his ankles with each angry step.

“So you say, niece.”

His mouth twisted with an ugly sneer that marred the strong lines of his face, a face many women of Sparta considered handsome. With his short, curling black beard, flashing dark eyes and powerful physique, Naxos was every inch the warrior king.

Halting in front of Phaedra, he leaned over her, one hand on each of the fragile chair’s arms, boxing her in. She refused to flinch, although a familiar shiver of dread prickled her skin.

“If you speak the truth, ’tis the first time you’ve been bested by any man, or taken against your will.”

“Yes, it is.”

Her soft words hung on the air between them. A slow flame kindled in his black eyes, hot and unnatural.

"You should not have fought me so these many years, niece, nor scarred me with your claws."

By the sheerest effort of will, Phaedra kept her eyes from sliding to the puckered scar at the corner of his right lid.

"You are my father's brother."

"He put you in my care when he lay ill and you were yet a young widow. You owed me obedience in all things."

"Not in that, uncle! Not in that!"

With an exclamation of disgust, Naxos thrust himself away. He strode to the far end of the room, breathing heavily. By the gods, this she-cat had been a curse upon his head since the day he took her into his household. She'd tormented him with her sinuous body and athletic grace, and taunted him with her stubborn refusal to satisfy his lust.

His desire had crept upon him, shaming him when he remembered his brother's charge to care for her, but tainting his pleasure when he coupled with his wife or with slaves or flute girls. Naxos knew he should have sent his niece away, or given her to one of the warriors who demanded the right to compete for the wealthy widow in the arena. But he'd refused to allow a contest of arms, despite Phaedra's growing insistence that she be allowed to wed. Not even his wife's gathering suspicion could turn aside his obsessive desire for his niece.

A raging blood lust from a successful raid and too much sour wine had finally sent him stumbling into Phaedra's chamber. She'd fought and cursed and all but torn out his eyes. Her screams had brought her aunt running. A sturdy, phlegmatic woman whose wealth provisioned Naxos' armies, she'd informed her lord that he would arrange Phaedra's marriage immediately. He'd done so, with rage and lust burning in his loins. As they burned there even now. He whirled and leveled an accusing stare on her.

"Had you lain with me, I might not have given you to one such as Alcibar."

"Had I lain with you, even one such as Alcibar would not have wed with me."

Her scorn fired his rage. "Do you think he'll have you now? After you have rutted in the dirt with an Athenian?"

"I did not join with him, uncle," Phaedra replied wearily. "I've told you that many times over."

"The soldiers saw you, twisting and writhing under him!"

"They saw me trying to win free."

He wanted to believe her. Great Zeus, he wanted to believe that no white-bellied Athenian had tasted the flesh denied him! But the soldiers' leering account, and his own frustrated desire, seared his mind.

"Whether you lay with him willingly or not makes no difference to his fate—or yours, niece."

With his cloak snapping at his ankles, he strode from the room.

Phaedra stared after him. The cold, sick feeling that Naxos always brought within her gripped her chest, but this time it was overlaid with something new, something even worse. Phaedra wrapped both arms around her middle and began to rock back and forth in the chair.

Great Hera, why should she care what her uncle did with the Athenian? The man had spied on Sparta and her allies. He'd plotted to bring war and devastation to Phaedra's people. He'd abducted her. He deserved whatever her uncle did with him. Yet the image of his laughing eyes glazed with the pain Naxos would inflict upon him tormented her. The thought of his smooth, supple skin torn and bleeding made Phaedra want to retch.

For a moment she considered the wild notion of bargaining with her uncle for the Athenian's life, of purchasing him to work as a slave on one of her own estates. She dismissed the idea almost as soon as it occurred to her. Any intervention on Phaedra's part would only fire her uncle's rage and make the captain's death even more prolonged and painful. Her arms tightened around her middle.

"My lady, we are sent to assist you."

Phaedra looked up to see two slaves hovering at the lin-

tel, their eyes wide and staring. Slowly, like an old woman too ancient to move and too weary to care, Phaedra let them lead her to the baths.

The chains took Alexander's weight as a fist plowed into his belly. Iron bit into his wrists, and a new, sharp pain warred with the gut-clenching ache from prior blows. The raw scent of sweat and blood and hatred filled his nostrils.

Through a haze of red, he heard the Spartan's voice. "You will tell me what information you've gathered, and what your Council will do with it."

He opened his eyes and willed himself to focus on the king who stood before him, fists curled. The burning rage in the man's dark eyes gave Alexander the strength to twist his lips into a semblance of a grin.

"You but waste your arm, Naxos," he ground out. "Save your strength for beating your slaves. They may cower at your feet. I will not."

The Limerian lords crowded into the small cell shifted and cast sidelong glances at the king. Alexander felt a stab of satisfaction at their fearful looks. The savagery with which the Spartans had put down a revolt by their slaves a few years before had become legend throughout Hellas. Although it had enhanced their reputations as cold-blooded, ruthless warriors, it had also made them seem dangerous allies for smaller, less warlike tribes. Whatever seeds of discord Alexander could sow between Sparta and her allies in his last hours would add some honor to his death.

"You'll not be so proud, or so cocksure, when I'm done with you, Athenian. You'll beg for the strangler's rope."

Alexander managed a creditable sneer. Concentrating on the man beside him and not the agony in his stomach, he spit into the fouled straw.

"Thus is Sparta's way. You dispatch neither enemies nor slaves cleanly, with honor, but wallow in their blood like lowborn butchers on market day. Your allies are right to



watch over their shoulders when they go into battle with you."

His taunt succeeded in its aim. Alexander sucked in a quick breath as Naxos reached across his chest for the sword that hung at his waist. At least his end would be clean.

The iron blade sang as it drew clear of the leather scabbard.

"Nay, Naxos." A Limerian elder took hold of the Spartan's arm. "'Twas our city he spied upon. We should have the right to his death."

"'Twas my niece he defiled!" Naxos raged.

Alexander's eyes narrowed against the pain clawing at his gut.

The older man nodded, but kept his bony grip on the Spartan's sword arm. "We both have reason to see his blood wash the stones. But think, man! 'Tis not often an Athenian ship captain is taken alive. His death should not occur here, in this dark cell. It should be an occasion of great ceremony, a spectacle for our people."

"You cowardly old—"

Alexander's snarl was cut off as Naxos swept around, his arm arcing in a vicious swing. The pommel of his sword smashed into the captain's face. Alexander's head flew back, and blood spurted from his nose.

"You see!" the elder argued. "Let our men watch an Athenian bleed and twist in pain just like any other mortal. 'Twill fire them for the coming battles."

The contempt that filled Naxos' eyes said more clearly than words what he thought of men who needed to be fired for battle. But he shook the old man's hand from his arm and slid his sword back into its scabbard.

"This evening, then. Prepare the sacrifices, and summon your people to the temple." His voice was a lethal snarl. "And you'd best make sure the soothsayers read the omens appropriately."

The old man lowered his voice. "Don't worry. We'll

sacrifice a fine bull. In his entrails I'll find the signs that send the Athenian to his death with all due ceremony."

When they left, Alexander straightened slowly. Blood from his smashed nose clogged his throat, and white-hot pain blurred his eyes. After what seemed like eons, his senses steadied. He stretched to ease the bite of the chains on his wrists.

Disappointment that the end would not be clean after all worked its way through his veins. He had no fear of dying. Any man who sailed a ship into battle chanced death with every stroke of the oars. But the manner of his end galled him. By the gods, he wished the Spartan had used his sword. He'd rather that by far than be used as a sacrificial symbol to spur the weak-kneed Limerians' courage.

"Was she worth it, Captain?"

A grinning guard thrust his face close to Alexander's. Foul, garlic-laced breath overpowered the odors of the cell.

"The little Spartan? Was she worth it? Was a quick tumble worth what's to follow?" The guard leaned closer, gleeful malice lighting his eyes.

Despite the blood and sweat caking Alexander's face, despite the pain wracking his body, a twisted travesty of a smile edged along his lips.

"That's a question men have pondered since the gods put women on the earth."

The same question nagged at Alexander through the endless hours that followed. His physical endurance, enhanced by years of training, allowed him a gradual mastery over his body. By imperceptible degrees, his agony eased to a throbbing ache deep in his belly. Breathing through his open mouth, he managed to ignore his broken nose, his blood-caked nostrils. But not all his endurance could provide relief from the thoughts that scourged his mind.

He could blame no one but himself for his present condition. He was the one who had chased the woman long past the time it was safe or prudent to do so. He was the

one who had tumbled with her down the ravine, then lost himself in the tangle of her silken limbs and the taste of her lips.

Had he the chance, he'd take the same risks again, run the same relentless race. Only this time he'd make sure he enjoyed the prize before it was snatched from his hands.

The irony of the fact that he would pay with his life for a ravishment he hadn't consummated wasn't lost on Alexander. The gods often played such jokes, to keep men humble and mindful of their capricious power. Alexander was poet and philosopher enough to appreciate the whims of fate. But, by all that was holy, he'd take his seat to be rowed across the river of death with much greater acceptance if he'd had at least one taste of his little Thedis.

Nay, not Thedis. Phaedra. Alexander rolled the name around in his mind, thinking that it suited her. She was as proud and indomitable as the legendary wife of Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur and founder of Greece's first great city. But, unlike her namesake, who lusted for her stepson, this Phaedra had strength and courage, and a savage honor.

A regret that she would pay for his folly lanced through Alexander. Whether she was an innocent victim or a willing accomplice, she would suffer the slurs of her people for having lain with an Athenian. Although she'd preserved her honor, 'twas obvious Naxos did not believe her. Nor would he believe Alexander if he tried to defend her. There was something in the man's eyes that told the captain he wanted to see his niece humbled. Something dark and unnatural.

A futile surge of rage washed over Alexander, and he twisted in his chains.

Phaedra paced restlessly in her chamber. Neither a bath nor a soothing massage had unknotted her tense muscles. She'd not been able to sleep, or eat. A simple repast of wine and cheeses and oat bread sat untouched on a hammered-bronze tray beside her couch. The hours crawled by. She traveled the length of the chamber, staring sightlessly

at the view of the sparkling bay through the high, square windows, then turned and paced back again.

The sun dropped until its rays sliced through the high windows.

“’Tis time, lady.”

She spun around, her floor-length linen chiton whirling about her ankles. The slaves had folded it over and draped the fabric so that a flap of material fell from the clasps at her shoulders, like a short cape. Unused to the cumbersome style and longer skirt, Phaedra steadied herself against a marble column to keep from tripping.

“King Naxos awaits you in the courtyard.”

Phaedra’s fingers clenched against the hard marble. Dragging in a deep breath, she straightened. “I’m ready.”

She soon found, however, that she was not at all prepared for either the crowd or the long, tortuous ceremony that followed. Rituals in Sparta were quick and to the point. Justice was not open to debate. There were no written laws to haggle about, no citizen priests to elevate the everyday business of propitiating the gods to a dramatic art.

Limera, with its strategic position as a key seaport serving both Crete and the Greek peninsula, had absorbed more exotic, sophisticated ways than the insular, isolated, fiercely closed society of Sparta. These Limerians made an elaborate show of satisfying their gods. As she walked in the procession that wound through the streets to the temple overlooking the city, Phaedra ignored the whispers and occasional sniggers when the crowd identified her. She concentrated with every fiber of her being on the ceremony to come.

At the head of the procession marched elders, some with garlands of myrtle around their neck, others with wreaths woven from fig leaves on their brows. Behind them strode Naxos, his red cloak absent on this holy occasion, but his demeanor no less fierce and regal. The sacrifice, a huge bull with myrtle leaves laced through its horns, was prodded along by acolytes in white. Flute players danced around

the animal, piping shrill notes to disguise the beast's protests at the indignity of the prods. It would never do for the people to think the sacrifice went unwillingly to the altar, Phaedra thought with a touch of cynicism.

Her gaze shifted to the broad, bloodstained shoulders of the man being led through the streets behind the bull. She ran her tongue across dry lips as the crowd ahead parted and gave her a clear view of his back. He bore the marks of a vicious beating, yet gave no sign of pain or fear. Head high, hands bound behind him, golden hair gleaming in the sun's light, he placed one foot in front of the other with deliberate precision.

Hidden in the folds of her gown, Phaedra's fists clenched. Would they never reach the plaza in front of the temple? For the first time, she doubted her own strength. Could she endure the ritual ahead?

When at last they rounded a steep curve that opened onto the barren sweep of rock before the temple, her blood was pounding in her ears. A low marble altar was set in the middle of the open space, where brisk breezes from the sea far below would carry away the smoke and stench of burning sacrificial flesh. Phaedra's nails dug into her palms as attendants swept the ground and the altar itself.

The elders spread around the altar and passed a basin of lustral water from left to right, each man sprinkling his hands, head, beard and clothes to purify himself. The one designated to make the offering stepped forward.

"Silence, all ye who witness this ceremony. Let no sound or word of ill omen reach the ear of Dionysus, in whose honor we make this sacrifice."

The crowd around Phaedra settled slowly. Whispers were cut off. Murmurs died away. Soon, the only sounds were the distant call of gulls wheeling above the sea and a low snuffling as the bull shifted from hoof to hoof. Satisfied, the elder nodded to an attendant. A smooth-faced young boy circled the group, sprinkling barleycorn from a woven basket on the altar and the bull.



As he passed among the crowd Phaedra lifted her head and looked to the prisoner. Shock raced through her. His face! His once-beautiful face! A tide of regret at the loss of such masculine perfection swept over her. Across the barren sweep of rock, their eyes met. Her heart thudded. She ached with the need to call out to him, although she had no idea what she'd say. And then, incredibly, his lips twisted, and he grinned. The roguish glint she knew so well sprang into his eyes and ignited Phaedra's fury.

The fool! The idiot! Could he not at least go to meet his ancestors with proper dignity? She took refuge in the anger sweeping over her, refusing to recognize that it disguised a pain she had never before known.

It was some moments before she realized that the buzzing in her ears was not the thrumming of her own blood, but a murmuring from the crowd around her. The excited whispers grew slowly, swelling in intensity. Phaedra frowned as an elder stepped forward.

"Silence! You profane the sacrifice!"

A low rumbling carried from the back of the crowd. One high-pitched voice pierced the din.

"The gods profane the sacrifice! They've sent the enemy to stop it. Open your eyes and see the ships in the harbor!"

Naxos gave a vicious oath and shoved his way through the crowd to the edge of the plaza. The elders surged behind him. Phaedra followed, jostling and elbowing her way to a clear view of the sea below.

Her breath caught at the line of sleek warships rounding the cliffs at the mouth of the harbor. Sunlight glinted on the bronzed figures on their high, curved sterns and illuminated the fierce eyes painted on the prows. Even from this distance Phaedra could see the long, protruding rams on the front of each ship slicing through the green waters with deadly speed. She heard a chorus of sharp slaps as the hundreds of rowers on each trireme cut their oars into the water in time to the chanter's call. In the space of two heartbeats, the lead ship had swept through the unguarded

opening in the moles. Turning, it banked its port oars and pulled close to the stone arm. A platoon of marines, the famed Athenian hoplites, jumped from the upper decks and raced along the quay. A second ship, and then a third, pushed into the harbor.

"You fools!" Naxos shouted, whirling on the elders clustered beside him. "Where are the chains? Where are the guards to defend the moles?"

"They have none." Alexander's voice cut through the hysterical babble of replies.

Naxos spun on his heel. Drawing his sword, he raced across the plaza to the Athenian. Phaedra followed, pushing her way through the stunned crowd.

"This is your doing!" Naxos shouted. He stood before Alexander, his feet planted wide, his sword gripped in both fists.

"You'll not swing that blade, Naxos. Not now. Not with my men racing toward the slips."

The Spartan lifted the heavy sword above his head. "Do you think a few Athenian sailors frighten me?"

"Not you, perhaps, but them, yes!" A fierce blue flame leapt into the captain's eyes as he jerked his chin toward the elders rushing across the plaza. "Behold your allies, Spartan. They all but foul the sacred ground in their fright."

"Then they'll have to find their manhood, because I'll see you dead." The king's muscles bunched as he swung the sword.

"No, uncle!"

Not stopping to think, not knowing why she did it, Phaedra flung herself into Naxos. Her weight knocked him off balance, and his sword sliced through air. Before he could recover, Limerians surrounded him. Phaedra found herself pushed to the edge of a clamoring, shouting, gesticulating group.

"We must release the Athenian," the elder panted. "His ships blockade the harbor, and his men even now overrun the slips. We can trade his life for our triremes."

"His life is forfeit!" Naxos shouted. "I'll not release him for a few ships!"

From the edge of the crowd, Phaedra saw the elder's chin lift. His spine stiffened, giving a hint of the warrior he must once have been. Wrapping his dignity around his thin frame like a cloak, he silenced the others with a quick slice of his hand. Turning, he met Naxos' eyes squarely.

"Those are our ships you dismiss so casually. If you want our pledge of alliance, you'll not strip us of the means to fight or to defend ourselves. You'll save your private battle with the Athenian for another place, another time."

The old man had chosen his words with cunning shrewdness, Phaedra realized. Spartans prided themselves on the subjugation of personal desires to the good of the state. The individual must always defer to the will of the group. Kings, especially, must put their city before their own interests.

Naxos' scarred right eyelid twitched. After a long, charged moment, he sheathed his sword and pushed his way through the crowd. Taking Phaedra's arm in a brutal grip, he snarled at the elder.

"Save your skins and your ships, then. Send an emissary to treat with them."

"Wait!" Alexander's abrupt command made the elders jump and brought Naxos to a halt. "There's no need to negotiate. Those are my men. Release me now, and they'll not fire your ships or your city."

Only Alexander knew that his men were under strict orders from the Athenian Council to do nothing that would incite the Spartans or their allies to war. Any man who struck the first blow in what would quickly escalate into full-scale war would face censure, if not death, upon return to Athens. Damning Darien for disobeying his orders and putting himself and his crews at risk, Alexander kept his face impassive and prayed his bluff would save them all.

"Release him," the elder ordered.

An attendant snatched the knife out of the sacrificial bas-

ket and sliced through the ropes that bound his wrists. Alexander's shoulders and back screamed in protest as he dragged his arms forward. Ignoring the pain, he stepped forward.

"I will have a hostage to ensure you do not attack while my men withdraw."

The elder gasped. "By the sons of Zeus, you Athenians are indeed bold beyond wisdom!"

Alexander met his eyes. "In the midst of calamity, prudence gains little. Only boldness will win the day. I'll take the woman as hostage."

The men around him fell back, startled. Across a few feet of windswept granite, he faced the Spartan king.

Phaedra struggled in her uncle's savage hold. "No! No! Do not give me to him!"

With a violent pull, Naxos swung her around and looked down into her eyes.

Phaedra stared up at her uncle and knew that her fate hung in the balance in that instant. She had only to blink, to give him some sign that she would acquiesce to his base desires, to avoid captivity with the Athenian.

Silence thundered between them. Tension escalated, then broke.

Naxos sent her sprawling at the feet of the Athenian. "Take her!"

The curse that fell from Phaedra's lips sent the old men scrambling backward and drove the color from Naxos' face.

Grinning, Alexander reached down and hauled her to her feet.

## Chapter Five



Phaedra knew she was paying now in full measure for whatever sins she'd committed in her life. While yet living, she'd descended into the dark, noisome underworld.

"You must drink some water or wine."

She groaned pitifully and slapped at the lieutenant's hand. "Go away."

"Lady Phaedra, listen to me! You've not taken any liquid in nigh on two days. The captain says you must replace what your body has given up."

"Let me die in peace, Athenian," she muttered, and then watched as the heartless lieutenant gave an unsympathetic snort and sat back on his heels.

"You don't die of seasickness. You but lose your dignity."

"I've lost more than that, and well you know it," she croaked. "My stomach long since went overboard, and then my senses. Leave me be."

"After you drink."

Giving up the unequal struggle, Phaedra let the water dribble down her throat. She lay back, praying it would stay in place. The ship dipped into a swell, and she groaned again.

To think she'd considered her time in the little boat, when the captain had first taken her, torturous! That mild



bout of queasiness could not begin to compare with the nausea that had wracked her since the first moment she was carried aboard his accursed ship. The long, sleek triremes that had glided with such deadly grace into Limerá's harbor were in fact wooden harbingers of hell. No wonder only brainless, sadistic Athenians took to them as they did. No one with a grain of sense would subject himself to such tossing, rolling torture.

Adding to her misery were the smells and the heat and the incessant, pounding noise. Sounds battered her ears—wooden oars crashing against tholepins with every stroke, timbers groaning, waves slapping against the hull. The strokesman sang the count in a voice loud enough to carry the length of the long, narrow ship, and the flutist piped a shrill, piercing beat. With every thwack and thump of the oars Phaëdra felt as if the top of her skull were spinning loose. She might have withstood the noise, though, were it not for the suffocating smell.

The reek of sweat from the ship's complement of two hundred men mingled with that of the mutton fat used to grease the leather thole straps. Without the thick, glutinous coating, the straps would quickly snap under the strain of the massive oars pulling against them. Or so the lieutenant had explained in some exasperation when she gasped out a complaint. Even here, on the raised poop deck, there was no escaping the stench. Phaëdra turned her face to the breeze and tried not to breathe too deeply.

The sight of long banks of blades flashing out of the water, one above the other, to rise level with the horizon before slicing downward again in perfect unison, held no magic for Phaëdra. Nor did she see any beauty in the naked, glistening bodies of the men who braced and pulled and braced again in a rhythm as graceful as any dance. She closed her eyes and prayed for dusk, when the ships would beach for the night so that the crews could eat and rest. For a few hours, at least, her misery would abate.

In fact, her sickness began to ease by midafternoon.

Whether it was because of the calm seas and the way the ship cut through them in a smooth, steady rhythm, or because she had nothing left to cast up, Phaedra knew not. She struggled to sit, lifting her face to the breeze that tossed the ends of her hair, and gave thanks that her stomach stayed quiet for the first time in days. Gradually, like a timid dog slinking through a city's streets, her strength crept back.

"So you rejoin the living."

Phaedra cast a sour look over her shoulder at the golden-hued legs spread wide and braced behind her. Squinting, she ran her eyes up the long line of his torso, skimming over the bruises that marred his limbs. She bit back an involuntary gasp at the injuries to the captain's face. Although most of the swelling had receded, his nose was yet discolored and misshapen. To her consternation, the crooked line in his once-perfect profile made him seem more human, and even more attractive, if that was possible.

"Your face has lost some of its greenish tint," the captain remarked, squatting beside her.

"Yours has not," she retorted.

His laugh began with the low, rumbling chuckle she knew well by now, but ended on a wince.

"Your uncle packs a solid weight behind his fist."

"Aye," she replied, staring out at the sea.

His hand under her chin brought her face back to his. "You spared my life when you blocked his sword thrust, back there on the plaza. Why did you do so?"

Phaedra glared up at him. "Had I known you would repay my actions by abducting me once again, I would not have."

"But you did. Why, little Thedis...Lady Phaedra?"

Irritably she jerked her chin from his hold. "I don't know! Pity, I suppose. I mislike seeing helpless men struck down. Even a worthless Athenian deserves an honorable death."

She avoided his steady gaze. In truth, during those few

moments in the past two days when she had the strength to think at all, she'd wondered and worried over the same question. Why, by all that was holy? Why had she thrown herself between this man and death? Why had she spared him, and thus added to her own plight? Her eyes flashed with the return of her spirit.

"Do not think I don't regret my foolish impulse," she told him. "That one weak moment condemned me to the hell of this floating charnel house. And to the company of such as they!"

Following her scornful glance, Alexander saw that he and Phaedra were the object of intense interest. The ship's company of marines, sprawled about the decks built over the rowing benches, had paused in their various tasks of polishing armor or sharpening sword blades to gape. More than one set of avid male eyes lingered on the lady beside Alexander. In the opening between the decks, rowers cast considering glances upward with each backward sweep of the oars. Even the Scythian archers far aft, just below the curving prow, seemed more interested in the captain's discourse with his captive than in maintaining their watch for enemy ships.

Alexander flicked a casual, warning glance over the crew. They promptly returned their attention to their duties. But even then a few sent sidelong, considering looks at the slight figure with hair like tangled silk and a face slowly regaining its healthy color.

Suppressing the ignoble wish that the lady still sported her sickly, green-tinted pallor and made hourly use of the clay vessel Darien had thrust under her nose, Alexander rose. His instincts told him that this night ashore, the last before they reached Athens, would be a long one.

At dusk they made landing on the island that was a regular stopping point before the final dash across the Saronic Gulf. Hefting the long ships onto their shoulders, the men carried them ashore. Small cook fires soon dotted the curv-

ing shoreline as the crews prepared their evening meals in the lee of their ships. After settling the lady in the circle of his officers' campfire, Alexander went to meet with the other captains.

As he walked back through the camp some hours later, the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle. His crew's temperament had taken on an edge he recognized all too well. The night simmered with suppressed tension, as if summer storms hovered just over the horizon and lightning threatened at any moment.

Alexander knew every man in his crew, from the gray-bearded helmsman to the thin, wide-eyed boy whose task it was to carry water and buckets of grease to the rowers. He also knew how difficult they were to control. Unlike other cities that used foreigners to man their benches, Athens used only citizen crews on her ships. It was an honor to be chosen for the fleet, to sail under Athens' banner to the far-flung corners of the empire. But the very pride and fierce spirit that made two hundred men learn to pull as one also made them boisterous and independent. And rapacious, when it came to claiming the prizes they wrested from the seas with such skill and daring.

Alexander saw the way their eyes were fastened on the figure by the fire. He heard the whispers about Spartan women that drifted on the night air. And he knew that only illness had protected the Lady Phaedra so far. That, and the fact that he'd calmly rolled her in his cloak and slept beside her each night.

Alexander joined the group of senior officers who sat around a small fire with Phaedra in their midst. Her face had regained its ivory glow. And he noted that she'd regained her tongue, as well. He leaned against a rock, stretched his feet to the fire and bit back a smile at the heated conversation.

"I tell you the gods did not mean for men to take to the waters," she argued. "'Tis unnatural. They gave us feet to walk or run upon the land, not fins and gills!"

The commander of the hoplites scowled. Alexander could well imagine the man's reaction to this audacious female, who spoke out with unbecoming forwardness and dared challenge their right to roam the sea.

"They also gave us hands to fashion great temples and statuary from clay and marble and wood," the commander responded slowly, as if reluctant to be drawn into an argument with a mere woman. "A trireme is as much a masterpiece of art as any temple. It would be a sacrilege not to use such a god-given blend of beauty and killing power."

Phaedra brushed her hair aside with an impatient hand and eyed the marine suspiciously. "Do all you Athenians play with words so? The warriors of my tribe would consider it unmanly to spout such sophistry."

"We consider it unmanly not to," another officer said stiffly. "The Athenian ideal is to educate the mind, as well as the body."

Alexander listened with half an ear. For all his relaxed posture and the lazy way he held his drinking horn in one hand, he was keenly aware of the attention Phaedra attracted. Even with her hair tangled and matted from days of illness and her once-pristine robe much the worse for its contact with the ship's timbers, she was a sight to catch men's eyes.

She sat cross-legged on the ground, her robe tucked around her slender hips. Occasionally she'd make a point, lifting a shapely arm to chop the air for emphasis. When she leaned forward, the light from the fire outlined her small, impudent breasts clearly through the thin linen. But even more compelling than her slight form was the challenge in her wide, sea green eyes. Torn between relief that they'd lost their dull, lifeless stare and a sincere wish that they had not, Alexander glanced from the animated creature to the men lounging by their cookfires. More than one set of eyes were trained on the woman, and Alexander didn't like what he saw in them.



Darien eased down beside Alexander. As if reading his mind, the lieutenant shared his worries in a low voice.

"They want to avenge your injuries, and the way she jeopardized our mission," he murmured under cover of the lively argument. "They also don't understand why you won't share her."

"She's a hostage, not a joint of roasted meat," Alexander said mildly, taking a long pull from the horn.

"Hostages are but captives given over to the enemy. They more often suffer abuse and indignities than not. The men expect to share in the plunder." The younger man paused, assessing the faces turned toward the woman by the fire. "By Heracles, I told you that female would be trouble!"

Alexander smiled. "So you did, Darien, so you did." His gaze roamed the faces of his crew once more, then lingered thoughtfully on one.

"Therocles!"

"Aye, Captain!"

A huge man scrambled to his feet. Among the well-muscled rowers, this one stood out for his brawn and his ready temper. Through the sheer force of his strength and quick fists, he'd worked his way up from the lowest bank of oarsmen to leader of the senior rank, who pulled the upper oars.

"Provide escort for the Lady Phaedra. Take her down the shore so she may attend to her needs in private."

The man's eyes slid from Alexander to the woman. A slow smile twisted his lips, splitting the blackness of his short-trimmed beard.

"Aye, Captain."

Low, excited murmurs rippled through the crew.

"Alexander!" Darien hissed.

The captain silenced him with a wave of his hand. "The rest of you, douse your fires and get some sleep. I want to be ready to depart as soon as the dawn breaks. Darien, set the second watch."

The oarsman approached the circle of officers with the rolling gait peculiar to seamen. He, like the rest of the crew, had donned the short tunic they wore on land, but disdained sandals. He stood, legs spread, thumbs hooked in his leather belt, as the lady scrambled to her feet. Beside his towering bulk, she looked tiny, like a kitten set before a mastiff. A shaft of doubt speared Alexander, and he started to rise.

"Come, man," Phaedra ordered imperiously. "And bring water, that I may wash myself."

Alexander settled back against the rocks, a faint smile lifting his lips.

The tempest, when it hit, had every man leaping from his bed roll. The crack of flesh against flesh was followed by the thud of a large object hitting the rocks.

"You lop-eared, half-assed son of a diseased..."

The crew dashed along the shore to where Therocles lay flat on his back, the waves lapping at his toes, while Phaedra ranted over him.

"No!" she shouted, "I cannot even call you the son of a dog! No self-respecting bitch would allow such as you to suckle at her teat! You could only have been spawned of a pig!"

Her detailed description of the man's ancestry, or lack thereof, filled the night as Alexander pushed his way through the crowd. When he took in Therocles' stunned expression and Phaedra's furious one, a private smile danced in his eyes. He waited until she paused for air, then stepped forward.

"That's enough, lady. The stars themselves have heard your recounting of this man's parentage. What caused such furor?"

Fists planted on her hips, she glared at him across the fallen man. For the space of a few seconds, the only sounds were her angry, heaving pants and the wash of the waves.

"This...this swine appears to have mistaken me for one

who would welcome the feel of a sailor's hands. I showed him the error of his thinking."

Alexander arched one brow and slewed his glance to the sprawled Therocles. Deliberately he infused his expression with a mixture of silent command and wry amusement. The oarsman met the captain's look. After a long moment, a sheepish grin split the darkness of his beard. While the openmouthed crew watched, the oarsman's chest began to heave. Like molten lava rumbling up from the depths of a volcano, a deep, rolling laugh spilled from his lips.

The crew gaped in astonishment.

Phaedra stiffened in fury.

"Do not dare to laugh at me, you pig! I've tumbled better men than you on their backsides."

She would have kicked him had he not scrambled, crab-wise, back through the water.

"Nay, lady!" he gasped between long, slow belly laughs. "Nay! I do not mock you! I swear it!"

"Enough!" Alexander caught her around the waist when she would have plunged into the surf after Therocles. "He yields, lady. You may claim victory in this contest."

Phaedra ceased struggling against his hold and saw that the captain spoke the truth. The beefy oarsman lay helpless with mirth in the surf, while guffaws and catcalls rose from the crew. More than one sailor threw her a look of admiring camaraderie. The uneasiness she'd felt in their presence the past few days, which had added to the burden of her sickness, vanished. They were but men, after all.

"Harrumph." She sniffed, tugging free of the captain's hold. With the air of a cat slicking back her ruffled fur, she threw her hair over her shoulders, cast the fallen sailor a disdainful look and marched to the camp.

Alexander followed, his eyes on her swaying backside and his mind on her incredible spirit. The tension that had gripped him since she disappeared into the night beside Therocles drained slowly away.

She made no comment when he rolled his cloak out be-

side the fire, nor when he signaled her to take her place beside him. Stiffly, as if resenting his proximity but recognizing the necessity of it, she allowed him to wrap his arm about her waist and draw her into the heat of his body. When the flames had died to a low flicker and the sounds of men easing into sleep rose around them, her low voice drifted through the darkness.

"You sent me with that oaf apurpose, did you not?"

"Aye."

"To test me, or him?"

"To show the crew the manner of woman their eyes devoured."

She digested that in silence for a few moments. "And what if I'd not been able to fell him?"

Alexander rested his chin on the head tucked just beneath his own and smiled. "You brought me down."

"So I did," she murmured with savage satisfaction.

Her muscles lost some of their stiffness as she shifted to find a comfortable spot on the unyielding ground. With every movement she made, Alexander felt his own muscles harden. All of them. Including the one cradled against her bottom.

"Be still," he whispered, tightening his arm about her waist.

Phaedra's eyes widened. With a slow hiss, she twisted to face him.

"Ah, I understand your ploy now. You sent me with that clumsy oarsman so that I'd appreciate more and resist less the captain's base desires. So that I'd lie here unresisting while you finish what you tried unsuccessfully to accomplish before."

"Don't be ridiculous." The feel of her breasts pressing against his chest made Alexander less than diplomatic in his answer.

"Ridiculous? Ha! This, from the man whose need to rut all but branded me a whore before my uncle and half the Limerian army?"

"Will you cease that squirming?"

Alexander stilled her agitated limbs with a heavy leg across her thighs. His cloak twisted about them, wrapping them in a tight cocoon.

"Do not think you'll take me without a fight, Athenian."

"I've heard that threat so often these last days, it's lost its force," he muttered, disconcerted by the feel of her hips pressed into his.

"'Tis no mere threat. Even sick and wretched aboard your stinking ship, I would have fought you."

The gods give him patience!

"What manner of man do you think I am that I would lie with one whose face was the color of a fish's underbelly and whose moans drowned out even the piper's beat?"

"I don't know *what* manner of man you are, Athenian!" Her voice rose in a furious whisper. "You carry me off, not once, but twice! You leave me tied to the mast that first night, and send me like a sacrificial lamb with a hulking oaf this night!"

She paused to suck in a long breath. "Yet you padded my wrists when they were raw. And made the lieutenant see to my needs when I was ill. You confuse me, Athenian!"

When he made no response, Phaedra pounded on his chest with an impatient fist. "What manner of man *are* you? Why did you take me, there at Limera?"

Alexander slid one hand into her hair and tilted her face up to his. "Because you turned your uncle's sword," he said softly. "And because I liked not the lust in his eyes when he looked upon you. Nor did I like the fear in yours."

Phaedra gasped. "You saw that?"

"Aye, 'twas plain enough."

"You took me to...to save me from my uncle?"

"Oh, no," Alexander growled. "To save you for myself."

Her heart seemed to leap in her chest. "Then why, for the love of all the gods, do you not use what you have

taken? I don't understand this game you play! I don't understand you at all, Athenian!"

The absurdity of the situation almost overpowered Alexander. That he should lie here in the dark, his legs intertwined with those of a woman he desired so fiercely he hurt, defending his reasons for not assuaging that hurt, struck him as ludicrous. Yet he doubted that his prickly little sea sprite would understand if he gave in to the laughter welling in his throat. She would in all likelihood scratch out his eyes. He drew in a long breath and gentled his hold on her hair.

"Listen to me, Phaedra. I want you. I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you rising from the sea, shrouded in naught but mist and your glorious hair. I would have taken you that day in the ravine, driven by the fury of the chase, had we not been interrupted. I fully intend to finish what we started there."

Her eyes widened to huge, dark pools.

"But not furtively. Not wrapped in a cloak on a rocky shore, with half my crew feigning sleep while they watch us."

Her gaze skittered to the dim shapes scattered around dying campfires just paces from where they lay. The hand in her hair brought her face back to his.

"And not hastily, subduing your struggles while I take a quick release."

A swift indrawn breath pushed her chest out. Alexander closed his eyes for a moment. When he continued, his voice was strained and husky.

"When we mate, it will be slowly, delightfully. I want to see your eyes darken with pleasure and feel your breasts filling my hands. I want to taste the texture of your skin and hear my name on your lips."

He paused, his lips lifting in a crooked smile. "Say it. *Alexander*. Come, try it."

Phaedra lay beneath him, pressed against his body from knee to shoulder. His manhood dug into her hip, and the



hard, bunched muscles of his upper arms cradled her face. She had to fight the urge to reach up and touch her fingers lightly to his poor, battered nose.

"Alexander," he repeated, prompting her.

"Athenian swine," she managed on a shaky breath.

His soft laugh brushed her face.

She pushed against his chest.

Loosening his hold, he allowed her to twist and turn until she once more faced the darkness.

"Go to sleep," he murmured in her ear. "'Tis no game I play with you. We but dance to the tune the gods pluck on their lyre strings."

Phaedra lay wide-awake in the darkness, her heart thumping, her mind whirling. Out of the confusion of her thoughts, she knew only one thing with any certainty. She must not be swayed by the Athenian's slippery words and warm arms, or by the slow, moist heat generated by the feel of his strong body pressed to hers. Not if she wished to retain her pride and her honor.

Alexander lay sleepless, as well, kept in a state of aching awareness by the feel of her lithe form curled against him. In the welter of his contradictory emotions, he knew only that he desired above all else to hear his name on her lips, and that he must be wary of the fierceness of that very desire. If he were not careful, he'd find himself as much a captive—of his passions—as was his little sea sprite.

## *Chapter Six*



The sun's golden eye hovered above the ship as it sliced through the green waters of the gulf and made for port. For this last dash across open waters, the captain had ordered the broad, square sail brailed up. Phaedra clung to the low rail of the poop deck, the wind from the stern whipping her hair into her eyes. She tried to still the nervous fear fluttering in her stomach as the gray haze of the far shore gradually resolved into a sprawl of whitewashed buildings. Athens shimmered in the distance. The enemy stronghold. The seat of the tribe whose seafaring might ruled a vast empire, and threatened Sparta's freedom.

As they approached the vast harbor, the city's majestic skyline filled the horizon. Above a tumble of buildings enclosed within double walls rose the huge bulk of the Acropolis, a long, ship-shaped crag rimmed by massive fortified walls and topped with a cluster of painted buildings. The mighty Parthenon, the temple for which the Athenians had bled their allies of gold, dominated the sky. With its sweeping two-hundred-foot profile and rows of Doric columns, the temple was as awesome as Phaedra had heard. She wiped the wonder from her face as the captain joined her at the rail.

"Look, there, you can see Athena's helmet, and the tip

of her spear. The statue's not yet finished, but already she's become a symbol, a beacon welcoming home our ships."

Phaedra heard the quiet pride in his voice and followed the line of his outstretched arm. Determined not to be impressed, she squinted across the distance. Sure enough, the gilded sheen of a golden helmet and an upraised bronzed spear caught her eye. Despite herself, her breath drew in at the sight. No wonder the goddess seemed to protect the city named for her, if its populace erected such magnificent monuments in her honor. Hiding a reluctant admiration, Phaedra shrugged and turned her back on the sight.

"'Tis said your statesman Pericles builds the statue as a tribute to himself as much as to the goddess." Her voice held gruff scorn. "You bleed your allies for such adornment, and cause much dissension. You'd do better to look to your walls, Athenian."

The captain's eyes left the city's outline and drifted over her face. "Our walls are sound enough, little one."

"Their strength may well be tested, and soon," she warned.

"They will hold."

She ground her teeth at the confidence in his voice. "They'll not keep Sparta without if she attacks."

The laughter she knew all too well chased across his face. "My concern now is that they keep but one Spartan within."

Phaedra thought of the dark, dank underground cells where her uncle housed prisoners and political hostages, and forced back a shiver. Lifting her chin, she met the captain's gaze.

"What will they do with me?" she asked, wanting to know the worst.

"They? They will do nothing. I will see to your keeping."

Her heart leapt at the arrogant possession in his voice, and a quick surge of relief flooded her veins. For all her brave words, Phaedra had dreaded being given into the

hands of strangers in an unknown city. This captor, at least, she knew, for all that she couldn't understand him or his ways.

Some of her feelings must have shown in her eyes, because he lifted a hand to brush back the hair streaming across her face. His fingers lingered on her cheek before he cupped her chin.

"Don't fear, little one. You'll be safe enough at my home, cared for by the women of my household, until your fate is decided."

Phaedra's eyes widened, but before she could say anything, the bow officer shouted the sounding.

Alexander's head whipped around. "Take down the sails and prepare to row," he told the second officer.

The man nodded and ran forward to transmit the orders.

"Wait here until we dock."

With a quick nod, the captain was gone, caught up in the flurry of excitement that swept the decks as the men prepared for their final pull into port. Linen sails came tumbling down, and the rowers scrambled onto their benches, thrusting oars out the portholes.

Phaedra gripped the rail. *Cared for by the women of his household!* The captain's words echoed in her mind and added to the lingering queasiness in her stomach. His women would see to her! His wife, she thought, with a sinking feeling.

She'd known he was married, of course. All Hellas knew of the Athenian law that stated the three basic requirements for their trireme captains. They had to be under the age of fifty, possess land and a house, and have children born in wedlock. With their posterity thus assured, the captains need not fear death when they sailed their ships into combat. The law accounted for a good measure of the reckless daring for which the Athenian ship commanders were famed.

Still, knowing that the captain had a wife and meeting her face-to-face were different prospects altogether. Phae-

dra shrugged, telling herself it mattered not to her that he shared a home and a couch with another woman. No doubt he shared his bed with many women, she thought disdainfully. His smooth, facile tongue and handsome face would turn most females' heads. But not hers, Phaedra vowed. His glib words of the night before, when he'd set her blood pounding with his whispered promise of their joining, had lost their luster in the light of day. She was no weak, untried maid to flutter at a man's honeyed words. The captain would have no pleasure of her, she swore. And he would wait until his dying day before he heard his name on her lips.

Back stiff, stomach churning with a nervousness she refused to show, Phaedra watched as the marines guarding the moles let drop the chains, then snapped to attention and saluted the passing ships. She ran both palms down her travel-stained tunic and suppressed a shaft of dismay at her disheveled appearance. Reminding herself that she was still a daughter of the fiercest, bravest tribe in Hellas, she lifted her chin.

It stayed tilted through the clamor and bustle of docking, through the sacrifices offered at quayside for the ships' safe return, and throughout the four-mile journey from the harbor to the city proper. Disdaining the two-wheeled wooden cart the captain offered for her use, Phaedra strode beside him along the broad thoroughfare that was Athens' lifeline to the sea. Her keen eye assessed the famed Long Walls, massive stone ramparts some two hundred yards apart that stretched from the harbor itself all the way to the city gates. 'Twould be hard for a besieging army to wear down Athens' resistance as long as this umbilical to her harbors was unbreached.

As impressive as the Long Walls were, it was the foreigners traveling within them that made Phaedra's eyes widen in wonder. In Sparta's closed society, visits from outsiders were discouraged, and strangers were rarely seen. Here in cosmopolitan Athens, a thriving sea trade brought

people from across the far waters to the city's ports. Phaedra's fascinated gaze lit on swarthy, curly-bearded Phoenicians with rings in their ears, then flitted to smooth-shaven Egyptians in flowing white linen robes. Towering black-skinned Nubians with tattoos decorating their faces and shoulders strode beside carts laden with bales of animal hides.

Wrapped up in the strange sights, Phaedra barely noticed when the captain's small entourage entered the city itself. Passing through a set of double gates, they angled sharply left, beneath the prow of the Acropolis. The steep, narrow street led upward, past stuccoed flat-roofed houses and scattered temples. As they gained the heights, the streets widened. The houses here were bigger, and the air was fresher. Statuary stood at intervals, and huge public fountains gushed water from marble statues. Slaves and housewives who could not afford to send others to draw their water lingered at the fountains, filling jugs and gossiping.

Her eyes on a small temple at a crossing in the streets, Phaedra didn't see the captain halt before a set of tall wooden doors. She stumbled into his side, and he steadied her with one arm while he plied the bronzed door knocker with the other. Phaedra barely had time to note the statue of Apollo, guardian of the streets, set in a small niche in the wall beside the door. She heard the sound of a bolt being drawn back, and the doors flew open.

"Master! We had word that your ship was sighted! Welcome home!"

Alexander loosed Phaedra and stepped into the marble foyer. "I thank you, Peron," he said with a smile.

The gray-haired porter beamed while the captain bent to untie his sandals, fouled by the city streets. When Phaedra crossed the threshold, the old man's eyes widened.

Phaedra felt a flush creep up her neck that even a household slave should see her so travel-stained and windblown. Her discomfort intensified tenfold when an exquisitely coiffed, doe-eyed young woman peeped around the corner of



the porter's room, then threw herself into the captain's arms with a squeal of joy.

"Alexander! At last you return! I've missed you so!"

"And I you," he replied, enfolding the woman in a fierce embrace.

Stone-faced, Phaedra stood to one side and watched the joyous reunion. A faint scent of musk wafted across the narrow entryway as the plump, perfumed woman leaned back in his arms and laughed up at him.

"You took your merry time returning. And what in the world happened to your face? You look like the back end of an ass."

"Demetria! For shame! Such language! Allow Alexander to enter his home so that we may all greet him properly."

Phaedra knew instantly that the matron who appeared at the end of the entry hall had to be the captain's mother. Although she stood half a head shorter than her son and showed more gray than gold in her hair, she had the same bright blue eyes and patrician features. Her calm expression altered when she caught sight of her son's face.

"Great Hera!" she exclaimed, rushing forward to take his arm and pull him into the light of the open courtyard that formed the center of the house.

Phaedra found herself alone in the entryway as even the porter joined the crowd gathered around their master. She stood still, unused to being ignored, yet reluctant to join the circle hovering around the captain. Slipping her feet free of her sandals, she curled her toes against the cool marble and waited.

"Nay, lady mother, it pains me not," the captain protested after submitting to his mother's anxious scrutiny and gentle probing. "Truly, it looks much worse than it feels."

"It could not possibly feel as bad as it looks." The younger woman laughed, nestling against him. Her pale white face held an eager glow as she gazed up at him with adoring eyes.

"Minx," he responded, wrapping his arm about her waist.

A welter of emotions swept through Phaedra as she watched their bantering exchange. The fondness between them was obvious. Ignoring the strange twist it gave her heart, she concentrated instead on the disgust growing in her veins. That the captain would kiss and cuddle his wife even as he brought into her house a woman he'd vowed to seduce filled her with cold contempt.

The girl-woman snuggled closer against his side. "And what have you brought me this voyage, Alexander, besides a broken visage? The gold-and-ivory comb you promised?" "Demetria!"

The older woman's scolding tone told Phaedra that she was long used to curbing her son's spoiled spouse.

"Nay, don't chide her, Mother. In truth, I've brought her a most unusual treasure."

Alexander eased his arm from around the beauty's waist and headed toward the woman waiting in the shadows.

Phaedra stiffened with outrage. Of all the fates she'd envisioned for herself, being given as a gift to the captain's pampered, puff-haired wife was not one she'd contemplated! If he thought a daughter of Sparta's royal house would serve this slant-eyed bit of fluff, he'd best think again.

Some of her thoughts must have shone from her eyes, because he stopped abruptly before her and frowned.

"Forgive me for ignoring you," he began, obviously misreading the fire in her eyes.

Her jaw set as he took her arm and led her into the courtyard. Her hands curled into fists, and she buried them in the folds of her gown.

"Lady mother, Demetria, I would have you meet the Lady Phaedra. She is of Sparta."

Phaedra's eyes glittered dangerously as she faced the circle of astounded faces.

Demetria's brown eyes widened and she started toward

them. "A Spartan, Alexander? You brought me a Spartan woman as a slave?"

At Phaedra's murderous look, the younger woman stumbled to a halt. Her mouth rounded to a startled O.

Alexander's grip tightened on Phaedra's arm, whether in warning or in restraint, she knew not.

"Nay, not a slave," he said. "She came as hostage to ensure our safe passage. She'll be housed here during her stay in Athens."

The older woman stepped forward, her eyes sweeping over Phaedra as if she were some strange, loathsome creature.

"Do you think it wise, my son? A Spartan, here? If only half the tales told of them are true, do you truly wish her here with Demetria? And with Chloe?"

Phaedra folded her arms across her chest. "We don't eat human flesh for breakfast," she drawled. "Only dinner."

The older woman blanched and stepped back.

Alexander shook his head, hiding a smile. "She but jests, Mother. I would ask that you see to her needs and prepare the room next to mine for her."

The older woman's brow wrinkled in a delicate frown. "The room next to yours, Alexander? 'Tis not meet, even for a Spartan. She should sleep in the women's quarters."

"The lady is but a reluctant guest. I would have her where I can ensure she remains."

His mother looked as if she wished to say more, but evidently chose not to argue with the head of the household in front of this large, very interested audience. "As you wish, of course."

"Thank you, lady mother. I'll leave her in your good hands while I go greet my daughter. Then I must report to the Council. I'll return later, and tell you all."

Alexander bent and brushed his lips against his mother's cheek, then crossed the courtyard to a flight of wooden stairs. In a few long strides, he had gained the upper story

and disappeared into one of the rooms that overlooked the open yard.

An uneasy silence descended over those he left behind. Phaedra stood stiff and silent, surrounded by a circle of slaves and attendants. The matron eyed her warily for a moment, then offered a grudging welcome.

"I am Lady Elene, and this is my daughter, Demetria. Since my son wishes it, you will share our hearth and home while you're in Athens."

Phaedra didn't hear the rest of the cool speech. Her mind raced, assimilating the fact that the plump, wide-eyed young woman was not wife, but sister, to the captain. So where was his lady, she wondered? Why had she not come to greet her lord? As if in answer to her unspoken thoughts, Lady Elene ran a disdainful eye over Phaedra's ragged form.

"My son's wife was as small as you, though fuller of figure. I stored her robes upon her death some years ago. Mayhap they will fit you." She clapped her hands and sent the servants scurrying. "Heat water for the baths, and bring me the keys to the storeroom. Demetria, show the...the Lady Phaedra to the bathing chamber."

Her deliberate hesitation was not lost on Phaedra. Nor was the fact that she found her guest most disreputable. Phaedra's pride flared fierce and hot. But before she could form a coherent reply, the matriarch swept away, leaving her with only the captain's sister.

"If you'll come with me," the girl said in a hesitant voice much different from her earlier, merry tone.

Grim-faced, Phaedra followed Demetria to a small square room next to the kitchens. The bathing chamber held the usual urns of water and shallow basins for washing that Phaedra was familiar with, and a great marble tub, as well. She stared at it, recalling all the tales she'd heard of Athenian decadence. Not for them a quick dip in an icy stream or a wash in the ocean. No, they had private baths, as well as public ones, she'd heard. Now she knew the tales to be

true. She watched as slaves began to fill the tub, adding urns of hot water from the kitchens, as well as scented oils. A fierce longing rose in her to be rid of her dirt and the salt spray that caked her skin. She waited in growing impatience, ignoring Demetria's sidelong glances, while the tub slowly filled. When at last it was ready, she lifted her hands to untie the once-gold ribbons around her waist.

"By all the gods, how came you to be so bruised?" Demetria's eyes, as round as drinking saucers, were fixed on the green-and-purple weals at Phaedra's wrists.

"Your brother bound me."

"Alexander did that?" the girl gasped. "Never! I don't believe you!"

"Nor do I," Lady Elene said coldly, entering the room with a stack of folded linen in her arms. "My son would not use a woman so."

"Your son is but a man. And an Athenian," Phaedra added, as if that explained all.

"And you are of Sparta. We know better than to believe anything that comes from Spartan lips."

Lady Elene plunked the linens down and waved an impatient hand at the marble tub. "You'd best get in, girl, before the water cools."

Her jaw tightening, Phaedra let the robe fall to pool about her feet. She lifted a sardonic brow as two pairs of eyes fastened on the raw marks about her ankles. The older woman caught her look and flushed.

"If my son bound you so cruelly, you must have forced him to it. What did you do that caused him to restrain you so?"

"I? I did naught." Phaedra slid gingerly into the tub. "Naught except object when he abducted me."

"Abducted you! Do you say my son...took you?"

"Twice. And near ravished me when I escaped him the first time."

The last statement was not completely true, but it was close enough to give Phaedra a savage satisfaction when

the Lady Elene's face lost all color. She sat down heavily on a stool beside the tub.

"Ravished?" Demetria squeaked, her brown eyes wide with disbelief. "My brother would never ravish anyone."

Phaedra gave the girl a pitying glance. She must have spent her life wrapped in woollen threads if she thought that a man who sailed ships for plunder never tasted of his prizes.

"Be quiet, Demetria," her mother rapped out, recovering both her color and her voice. "It is not fitting for you to discuss your brother with this...this female."

"But, Mama, she says that Alexander carried her off against her will."

"Aye, he and his thrice-damned lieutenant," Phaedra offered, leaning back against the warm marble. She wasn't prepared for the stricken look Demetria turned on her.

"Darien?" the girl whispered. "Darien was part of this? My Darien?" Quick tears flooded the brown eyes staring at Phaedra's reclining form.

Phaedra's anger and resentment faded in the face of the girl's obvious dismay. She never backed down from any contest, but 'twas obvious this doe-eyed creature was not a worthy opponent. She swallowed the impulse to tell Demetria that "her" Darien had struck a woman down from behind and urged the captain to toss his captive into the sea on more than one occasion.

"Nay, the lieutenant was not part of these hurts," she said finally.

"Demetria, go and see that the slaves have prepared the room next to your brother's. Our...guest will want to retire as soon as she has cleansed herself and eaten."

Shaken, the girl nodded and left the room. Her mother waited until the door closed behind her, then turned a glacial look on Phaedra.

"I know not what's between you and my son, or why he's brought such a one as you into our home. If he lay with you, it had to be because you tempted him, although



I know not how." Her eyes raked Phaedra's slender, sun-darkened form scornfully. "But I'll not have you speak of such doings before my daughter. She's been gently reared, and is to wed in less than two weeks. You'll not frighten her, nor fill her ears with lies about her betrothed."

"If she's betrothed to the lieutenant, she'll find out soon enough what manner of man he is," Phaedra countered.

"You brazen creature, do you dare argue with me?"

Lady Elene drew herself up, her long aquiline nose quivering. A nose quite similar to the captain's, Phaedra noted, at least before Naxos' fist had reshaped it.

The thought of her uncle reminded Phaedra of the way he had thrown her at the Athenian. She realized anew that she was alone here, in the enemy's city, at their mercy until she could find a way back to Sparta, or until her uncle reclaimed her. With a sudden, bone-deep weariness, Phaedra ceded to Lady Elene. There was no honor, after all, in sparring with an older woman in her own home.

"Nay, my lady, I do not argue with you," she said quietly.

"Good," Lady Elene snapped. "Finish your bath and clothe yourself. I'll have fish and meats waiting for you when you're ready."

## *Chapter Seven*



“‘You’ve managed to spin dross into gold, Alexander. As usual.’”

Alexander smiled as Pericles clapped a hand on his shoulder. The elder statesman, renowned throughout Hellas for his three decades of wise counsel and for his passionate dedication to the erection of Athens’ magnificent public buildings, squeezed his shoulder with surprising strength.

“Not only did you bring us the information we sought, but a valuable hostage, as well.”

“Not all of the Council will agree that my mission was so successful. My orders were to keep our presence in enemy territory secret at all costs.”

Pericles loosed his hold and waved a negligent hand. “Orders are but guides. Good soldiers know when to follow them, and when to seize the chance that’s offered. Nay, you did well.”

“Now I have but to convince the archons of that,” Alexander said with a wry grin.

Pericles made a colorful comment having to do with grown men still sucking at their mother’s breasts, and began to pace.

“Those three old men! I don’t understand how the gods could have allowed the lottery to select such mice to lead us now, of all times.”

Alexander knew better than to take Pericles' disparaging comments at more than face value. The constant grumbling that resulted from the annual election of new leaders was part of the lifeblood of Athenian politics.

"The lot was fair," he said, shrugging. "Every member of the Council of Five Hundred had a chance to draw a stone from the box. That those three pulled out the white stones was meant to be. Or it was one of those tricks the gods seem prone to play on us mere mortals."

Pericles stroked his curling gray beard and heaved a long sigh. "Aye, I know all too well how capricious the gods can be at times."

Alexander sent his friend and mentor a sympathetic look. He knew the elder statesman referred to the predicament he had created for himself. During one of his own terms as archon, Pericles had formulated a law to restrict Athenian citizenship to those whose parents were themselves citizens. It had been intended to maintain the purity of the Athenian democracy during the rapidly expanding empire, when the vast influx of foreign citizens might have led to intermarriages and a lessening of the democratic ideal.

But Pericles had pushed through the law before he lost his heart to the brilliant, beautiful courtesan who now shared his couch and his passion. Much as he wished to, Pericles could not marry his love. She was of Ithaca, an outsider who could never claim Athens as her city. Any children she bore Pericles would be outcasts, citizens of no state, members of no tribe. The lawmaker was trapped by his own law.

Watching his friend's troubled eyes reinforced Alexander's private belief that the gods delighted in the tangled webs mortals wove for themselves. The great Zeus and his court surely lay on their couches in their palace high atop Mount Olympus and shook with laughter at the convoluted coils humans got themselves into. That one as brilliant as Pericles could find no solution to his dilemma did not bode well for the trials of lesser men.

The silvery call of a trumpet summoning the citizens to the assembly interrupted Alexander's musing. He rose and stood back respectfully for the older man to proceed him.

"Come, sir, 'tis time we take our seats. Now that you know the facts of my mission, you can at least prepare your words for after I make the report."

As they strolled into the brilliant midafternoon sunlight, Alexander sent the man beside him a quick glance. The statesman looked tired and older than his sixty and more years. His face showed lines of strain, almost hidden by his thick, perfumed beard, but clearly discernible to one who looked upon him as a second father. Alexander knew that this past year had heaped burdens upon Pericles' shoulders. The looming crisis with Sparta, the growing outcry over expenditures on the public buildings and the man's hopeless love for his mistress had all added to the stress that had etched deep grooves in his cheeks. Yet as they joined the stream of citizens pouring out of the agora's offices and shops, Pericles' gray head lifted, and a gleam entered his eyes. Alexander hid a smile, sure that the debate to follow would put the spark of life back in the orator as surely as the sun followed Apollo's chariot across the sky.

They waited patiently at the entrance to a shallow earthen amphitheater while officials checked their names against the citizen's roster, then joined the crowd milling atop the grassy verge. Alexander spotted Darien in the company of a group of ships' officers and sent him a reassuring nod. Some of the nervous tension on the young man's face eased. A herald mounted a low pedestal and shouted above the noise of the crowd.

"The Third Assembly of the Sixth Council is hereby convened."

As the herald stepped down, a priest walked out onto the small stage. After a brief prayer, the priest cut the throat of a piglet and carried it around in a circuit, designating a sacred circle.

"All citizens, come within and conduct the business of the city."

Alexander sauntered down the sloping hill with the rest of the crowd and took a place on one of the smooth wooden benches within the circle. During the prayers and routine announcements that followed, he glanced about to gauge the temper of the Assembly. At least the citizens seemed calm today. The Scythian archers, with their stout, unstrung bows that doubled as truncheons during some of the rowdier assemblies, leaned on their staves and watched the proceedings from outside the sacred circle with bored expressions.

At length the man elected president of the Assembly for that day mounted the plinth. "Who wishes to speak?" he cried.

Alexander drew in a deep breath and rose. He dipped his head for the president to place the speaker's wreath of myrtle on his brow, and mounted the marble platform.

"Athenians, I am come to report the results of the mission you gave me two weeks ago. As you directed, I took the ship *Nike* and a support squadron, and sailed around the Peloponnesus. Leaving the ships far offshore, I and my lieutenant, Darien, son of Agathuron, sailed under cover of darkness and beached our craft some distance from the major shipyards of Sparta and her allies."

He paused, having spoken enough in the Assembly to understand the value of drama in oratory. When the crowd stopped shifting and gave him their full attention, he continued.

"As you suspected, the allies are building ships at double their normal pace. We saw a total of fifty-two hulls newly launched or under construction."

A wave of startled gasps rose from the crowd. The number was far higher than anyone had anticipated, Alexander knew. He waited until the noise had died down before continuing once more.

"I must also report that all did not go as planned on our

mission. Despite your wish to preserve secrecy, I was taken at Limeria. The Spartans and their allies, the Limerians, wished to ensure I understood their displeasure at our interest in their ships.”

He touched his battered nose and grinned. The gesture drew a round of laughs and more than one irreverent comment about how his loss of beauty would affect his well-known reputation with the courtesans. Alexander's wide grin showed his relief at the crowd's reaction. He'd feared that his capture and Darien's bold action in leading the other captains to his rescue might bring the Council's wrath down upon them all. With the laughter of the capricious mob, he knew they would not punish Darien or the other captains for risking their ships to save his skin. That worry behind him, he leaned forward to address another, equally pressing concern.

“I must tell you, Athenians, that I was much disturbed by what I saw on this mission. Such numbers of new ships can only signal Sparta's intent to challenge our mastery of the seas. I urge you to consider launching our fleet now. We must destroy their vessels before they are fully outfitted and launched against us.”

A furious hubbub greeted his words. As he had known they would, the elected king and the other archons huddled together, their gray heads bobbing in heated discussion.

“But what of the hostage you brought back?” one of the men in the back row called out. “We hear she is of Sparta's royal household. Won't possession of such a prize deter even Naxos from his bold intent?”

A memory of the Spartan king's dark eyes as they stared down at his niece flashed into Alexander's mind. The king's intense look—and the fury with which he'd flung Phaedra away when she refused to give in to it—made Alexander question her value in deterring Naxos. But he hesitated to speak his doubts, knowing that to voice them would make Phaedra's fate even more uncertain.

“We must hold her,” the king cried, jumping up to wave



Alexander aside and claim the myrtle wreath himself. Jamming it atop his sparse hair, he turned to address the crowd.

“We must hold this hostage, but all the while send placating messages and bribes to the Spartans. Surely if we show our peaceful intent, if we don’t follow up on the knowledge they now know we have, we can keep the peace.”

Alexander sat back as the debate that had raged for months began once again. The younger men, secure in the invincibility of their youth, argued for war. The older men, those who still bore the scars of the brutal war with Persia that had all but destroyed Athens, shouted that peace must be preserved within the Greek tribes at any price.

Finally the much-abused myrtle wreath passed to Pericles. “Listen to me, citizens. You cannot trust the Spartans to keep the peace. Our treaty with them says that they must submit to arbitration if differences between us should arise, yet they ignore our ambassadors’ pleas to meet. Nor will they agree to the terms we offer. Their allies pour lies into their ears and incite them to arms.”

Alexander leaned forward as Pericles paused to draw in a deep breath. He knew the older man disagreed with the idea of a first strike, preferring instead to hunker down behind the massive Long Walls. Alexander had hoped to convince him during their private audience before the Assembly of the need to act, but he sensed now that he had failed. His fingers curled into tight fists as the orator gestured for silence and continued.

“If you will not meet their growing threat with war now, you must at least prepare your minds for it.” Pericles waved his arm in a wide circle, intensity lending grace to the dramatic movement. “Look about you, citizens. See the stout walls we have built since the Persians destroyed our city! See the fortifications, and the protected passage to the sea! Those walls are our protection, but the sea is our strength, our lifeline, our source of wealth and supplies. If war comes, our people must abandon their farms and with-

draw within the city's walls. From here we will sail out and attack behind Sparta's lines."

"But what of her new ships, and her allies?" an anxious voice called.

"Sparta's strength is in her armies, not in her navies. She may build ships, but her captains are untrained, her sailors unskilled. She cannot match the daring of captains such as Alexander, son of Porthos, even with all her numbers."

Alexander nodded in acknowledgement of Pericles' tribute, allowing his face to show nothing of his conflicting feelings. He fought a sense of betrayal, telling himself that Pericles but counseled the middle course. Although Alexander's every instinct said that they should attack now, his head told him that his mentor was right. The Assembly wasn't ready to commit itself, and there was nothing more disastrous for a state than to launch a war with a divided heart. He listened impassively while Pericles argued for a strategy that called for Athens to seal itself inside its impregnable walls if Sparta should dare attack by land, and to take on its unskilled fleet on the sea if and when the need arose.

The debate raged for hours, as it always did, and wound down slowly, with no vote being called for. At last the assembled citizens drew lots to determine the next day's president. The new leader, a red-faced farmer from an outlying district, dissolved the assembly.

Alexander weaved his way through the still-mumbling crowd. Friends hailed him, asking for more detail of his extraordinary mission and inviting him to join them for dinner. Although Alexander knew that more decisions were made while powerful men lounged on couches and drank wine with their friends than were ever made at the Assembly, he was in no mood for more politics. This night, after weeks at sea, he wanted to feel the familiar comfort of his own couch. This night he wanted to enjoy the company of

his family. And, above all else, he wanted to see to the settlement of his reluctant guest.

The moment he stepped across the threshold and knelt to remove his sandals, Alexander felt the changed atmosphere within his house. The elderly porter greeted him politely, but without the broad smile of a few hours before. Before he could question the old man, he'd retreated into the tiny room off the entryway that was his private domain.

Alexander shrugged and strolled into the courtyard, enjoying the way the slanting sun painted the small carved family altar with gilt and lit up the rows of graceful pillars supporting the upper story. Designed and built by his father, the house had always given Alexander a sense of balance and serenity. He had grown to manhood within these walls, and here he had seen to his mother and sister's welfare after his father's death. Here he had brought his bride, and here he provided what comfort he could for the child of their brief union. Thinking of his daughter, Alexander climbed the wooden stairs that led to the upper story. He gave the child's nurse an absent nod and stood for a moment, drinking in the diminutive figure with her soft, honey-brown curls and lively eyes.

"Hello, shrimp."

She glanced up, then dropped the doll she played with and clapped her hands in delight.

"Papa! You're back sooner than you thought!"

"Aye," he replied, strolling into the room. "I hurried home just to take you downstairs. There's someone I want you to meet. Climb aboard."

Stooping, he waited for her to slip her arms around his neck. He caught her beneath the knees and rose. As always, Alexander had to fight back a wave of helpless anger at the feel of her withered, useless left leg against his ribs. And, as always, her bright chatter dispelled his anger. Even lamed as she was, Chloe was the happiest child he'd ever seen. Her eager, piping voice sounded at his ear.

"Do you take me to see the new captive, Papa?"

"Who told you she was a captive?"

"Aunt Demetria. She was crying, too, when she spoke of this strange woman. Is she really of Sparta? Does she really go naked about the streets? Does she carry a spear, as Nurse says?"

Alexander dismissed the child's artless reference to Demetria's tears. Having had responsibility for his young sister almost since her infancy, he knew how the girl bubbled one moment and sobbed the next. Instead, he sought to dispel the stories of the fearsome Spartans with which Athenian nurses and tutors had kept their charges in line since time immemorial.

"The tales about Spartan women are much exaggerated, shrimp, as you'll see when you meet our guest."

"Does she eat people? Do her eyes glow red like—"

"Chloe, cease, child. You'll see soon enough that she's but a woman."

He reached the ground floor and crossed the courtyard to the spacious chamber set aside for dining. When Alexander entertained no male guests, the women of his household joined him for dinner. Yet now he entered the dining room to find the tables still nestled in their storage places beneath the couches and no braziers filling the air with the scent of sizzling meats. Puzzled, he sent a slave to inquire of his mother about the evening meal.

"I'm sorry, Alexander." Lady Elene tucked an errant strand under her hairband as she hurried into the room. "We didn't expect you to return this early."

He shifted Chloe's slight weight and smiled. "My apologies, lady mother. I should have sent a messenger with word that the Assembly was about to break up. But I know you too well to doubt that you'll contrive, despite my thoughtlessness. You sail this household closer by far to the wind that I sail my ships, and with more forethought as to its provisioning."

Lady Elene smiled, relaxing under his fond eye and sincere compliment. "Well, I suspect I can scrape together a

meal that will not totally disgust you. Sit you down, and let me send word for Demetria to join us."

"And the Lady Phaedra," Alexander added as he settled Chloe on a wide, padded couch.

"She has retired."

Alexander turned, one brow lifting in surprise at his mother's terse reply.

"Surely she will not object to being disturbed," he began. In truth, he suspected Phaedra would object to anything and everything during her enforced stay, but Alexander intended to start as he meant to go on. He wasn't sure how long he'd have his nymph in his possession, and he wanted her beside him.

Lady Elene lowered her voice and cast a look at Chloe. "I don't think it wise to include such a one at our family meals, my son. Not with Chloe present."

Alexander began to wonder what in Hades had happened in his absence. Hiding a frown, he relied lightly. "Chloe is most anxious to meet our guest. Aren't you, shrimp?"

"Yes, I am. Truly, Grandmother. Papa says she doesn't eat people, but I want to see for myself."

Lady Elene drew herself up and favored her son with the look she normally reserved for erring servants. "I don't wish that creature at my table."

Astounded, Alexander faced his mother. Never, in all the years since he'd assumed responsibility for his family upon his father's death, had she criticized him in public or contradicted his orders. In fact, rarely did he even give any orders. His mother saw to his every comfort with loving skill and quiet efficiency. Frowning, he came forward and took her hand.

"Has she insulted you, Mother? Or done you harm?"

"Nay," Lady Elene replied grudgingly. "But she insulted you, and told the most disgusting lies about you."

A smile tugged at Alexander's lips. By all the gods, he could imagine the tales Phaedra would tell of the last few days. "Did you believe them?" he asked gently.



Once more his mother astounded him. Instead of the flat denial he expected, she hesitated, then looked up at him with troubled eyes.

"I know that whatever was done, you had reason for it."

All inclination to smile left Alexander. He told himself that he was far too old to feel pain at his mother's doubt; he was no longer a child, to be guided by her notions of how he should conduct himself. She had no knowledge of the world outside this house and would not be able to sift through Phaedra's stories to understand his motives. Great Zeus, he hardly understood his motives himself with regard to that green-eyed little cat. Still, his mother's doubt stung. In a quiet voice, he asserted his authority as head of the household.

"I would have the Lady Phaedra and my sister join us, lady mother."

Although his tone was gentle and his words were courteous, Lady Elene flushed. She was as unused to being directed by her son as he was to being doubted. With a cool nod, she acquiesced.

"As you wish, of course."

Trying to shake off his discomfort, Alexander carried on a discussion with his daughter about her progress at the loom while Lady Elene saw to their dinner. Slaves scurried in to pull the three-legged tables from under the couches and place drinking bowls and plates upon them. The wine steward brought in a huge mixing bowl into which he poured the customary two parts wine and three parts water, which he then strained into serving jugs. Demetria joined them shortly, her eyes red-rimmed, and her face paler than ever.

"Is it true Darien aided you in taking this Spartan?" she asked before Alexander could even rise to greet her. "Did you share her with him?"

Alexander stifled an oath. What in the name of all the gods was wrong with his women this night? First his mother countered his orders, and now Demetria must act



out a tragedy in front of the child. He glanced down at Chloe's bright, inquisitive eyes and sent his sister a warning look.

"Calm yourself, Demetria. Naught occurred that affects either you or Darien."

"But I saw the marks, and the bruises! Did he—?"

"Demetria!"

The girl jumped at her brother's tone, and tears filled her eyes once more. Alexander bit off a muttered curse. He'd never before had to use with his sister a voice he rarely even laid on an erring sailor.

Alexander raked a hand through his hair. This night was not going at all as he'd envisioned when he hurried home after the Assembly. He'd planned a relaxing evening during which he'd share a civilized meal with Phaedra for the first time in all their days together. He'd thought to ease her into the bosom of his family and lessen the impact of her confinement in a strange city. He'd been sure his mother's grace and his sister's charm would soften her sharp edges and help her resign herself to her stay. Evidently her edges were yet intact, if Demetria's red eyes and his mother's unusual temper were any indication.

He had but one weapon left, Alexander thought as he seated a sniffing Demetria beside his daughter. He ruffled Chloe's soft hair in passing. She squealed in delight, and her happy laughter broke his own ready smile to the fore. No one, he was sure, could fail to be captivated by such a darling.

"I am informed you wish my presence."

Phaedra stood on the threshold, her slender figure stiff and her chin at an impossible angle. Alexander ran a quick, appreciative eye over her lithe form, which was freshly scrubbed and enticingly gowned. Her pale yellow robe fell about her body in soft folds, and the golden ropes that confined her wild masses of raven hair added a regal touch to her slight stature. His senses began a slow thrumming as he crossed the room to escort her to a couch.

Phaedra disdained his arm. She swept into the dining chamber and cast a quick glance at Demetria, who still sniffed into her robe. She halted halfway across the room, her gaze on the child.

Alexander stopped beside her. "This is my daughter, Chloe."

As he'd known it would, Chloe's shy, tentative smile and bright eyes took the stiffness from Phaedra's spine. With a slow half smile of her own, she greeted the little girl.

Emboldened, the child asked the question uppermost in her mind. "Do Spartans really eat people for breakfast?"

"Chloe!" Demetria squeaked, brushing the last of her tears from her eyes.

Phaedra bit down on her bottom lip. "Nay, child. I'm afraid we break our fast only with gruel and oatcakes."

Alexander watched his daughter's face pucker, as if she were unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed. She shifted on the couch, and the slight movement caused her robe to ride up, revealing her withered left leg. Demetria pulled the gown down with a gentle hand, while Alexander led Phaedra to another couch.

A frown furrowing her forehead, Phaedra turned perplexed green eyes up to his.

"The girl is deformed," she said in a low voice.

Alexander stiffened at the ugly word. Reminding himself that he should be used to his captive's blunt manner by now, he nodded.

"Was she always so?"

Alexander felt his jaw tightening. That his bright, shining child should be lame and often in pain touched a raw spot in his heart.

"Aye," he answered through tight lips. "She was born with one leg twisted."

Phaedra shook her head. "You must have deeply offended the gods to produce such a one."

Over her head, Alexander saw two faces turn in their

direction. Demetria's was stiff with outrage, Chloe's filled with childish confusion.

"We will not speak of it now," Alexander growled.

Unaware that she was overheard, Phaedra continued. There was no maliciousness in her eyes, Alexander saw, only a desire to understand.

"Why did you not propitiate them by offering the babe as sacrifice?"

"Lady..." he began, low in his throat.

"In Sparta, such children are thrown off Mount Taygetos at birth."

Demetria gave a startled shriek.

Chloe's eyes widened with fright.

And Phaedra's mouth dropped open in sheer surprise as Alexander swore under his breath, grabbed her arm in a viselike grip and hauled her from the dining chamber.

## Chapter Eight



“**W**hat ails you, Athenian?”

Phaedra dug in her heels, pulling against his hard hold. Her hair tumbled from its moorings, and she beat at his hand with her free fist. When he didn't respond, except to jerk her forward, her voice rose to a furious shout.

“Are you mad? Have you drunk too much wine? Loose me!”

Her angry yells brought servants running from the ground-floor rooms, while others hung over the upper-story railing, their mouths rounded and their eyes wide.

Lady Elene rushed out of the kitchens in time to see her son haul his now screeching captive toward an ornately carved, red-painted wooden door.

“Alexander! What's happened? What's the woman done?”

“I? I've done naught!” Phaedra shouted, furious at being manhandled before the entire household. “'Tis this benighted cur you call son. He's mad, or drunk, or—”

The red door slammed, cutting off Phaedra's tirade and shutting out the circle of astonished faces. Alexander released her as he turned to drop the bar across the door. She stumbled into the spacious chamber, her long yellow gown tangling in her feet and nearly tripping her. Pushing her hair out of her eyes, Phaedra whirled.

The look on the captain's face made her swallow the oaths trembling on her tongue. Never, in all their long days and nights together, had she seen such cold, deadly fury in his eyes. Only now, in this instant, did Phaedra realize how much she'd become accustomed to his teasing laughter and ready smiles. This man, this grim-faced, tight-jawed man, was one she knew not. When he started toward her, she took an uncertain step backward.

"Aye, you'd best back away," he told her, his voice menacing. "Were I to lay hands on you now, I'd likely beat you."

Immediately Phaedra halted and lifted her chin. "You could try, Athenian."

Her taunt deepened the blue ice in his eyes. When he took another step forward, Phaedra dropped instinctively into a wrestler's crouch.

The sight stopped Alexander in his tracks. Breathing heavily, he surveyed the woman before him. Her hair, shining almost blue-black in the glow of the lamps, fell in a haphazard tumble down her back. Her linen robe had slipped down one arm, and its skirt was tangled between her legs. She came barely to his shoulder, yet for all her slight stature, her eyes gleamed with the light of battle. She looked ridiculous. And indomitable.

The sharp edge of his fury eased. He drew in a deep breath and forced his muscles to relax.

Her eyes wary, Phaedra straightened, as well. For a few moments, silence reigned between them. Impatient, as always, she broke the stillness first.

"You will not treat me thus, if you wish any peace in your household, Athenian."

"And you will not, ever, frighten Chloe so again."

"The child?" Phaedra's eyes widened in surprise. "How did I frighten her?"

"Don't act the fool. You knew that tale of throwing babes off a cliff would scare her."

She shook her head in confusion. "I didn't mean for her to hear me. But in any case, 'tis no tale."

"Hah!"

"I swear! When a Spartan child is born, it's presented to the elders. If they decide it's healthy, it's kept and cherished. Otherwise, it's thrown over the precipice."

Alexander fought his disgust. He told himself that other tribes' customs had their basis in the hard struggle for survival. The Spartans etched a bleak existence in their rocky state and needed strong, healthy children to ensure their tribe's continuance. This woman was but a product of her culture. His deliberate reasoning had all but brought his temper under control when she sparked it once again.

"Besides, why should such a tale frighten her? Does her weak leg betoken a weak spirit, as well?"

Alexander grabbed Phaedra's arms and shook her, hard. "She's but five years in age, you unnatural woman! She should not hear such violent tales. Or is this how you Spartan women raise your babes, feeding them stories of death and sacrifice with your mother's milk?"

He stopped abruptly, his brows drawing together, an arrested expression in his eyes. His hands loosed their grip, but did not release her.

"Do you have babes?" he asked after a moment. "I know you are widow, and were to wed again. Did you have sons or daughters of your first husband?"

Phaedra's lips twisted in a sneer. "Is it not a little late to ask me that? You take me from my home, from my family and lands, without thought of what I may have left behind. Now, at last, you wonder what havoc you've wreaked in my life."

"Tell me," he ordered with another little shake.

"I will tell you naught while you hold me thus," she hissed.

With a low oath, he uncurled his fingers.

Phaedra backed away and glared up at him. "I have no babes," she muttered at last. "To my shame."



A tight knot of tension uncoiled in Alexander's stomach.

"Although 'twas not my lack," she continued, rubbing her arms. "My husband bought several slaves who had dropped babes yearly, yet he could get no children on them, either. We had decided he'd give another warrior use of my bed to plant more fertile seed in my womb."

Alexander's eyes widened in stunned disbelief as she turned away.

"But my lord took a spear in battle before he could select the warrior, and I was returned to my uncle's household."

"Your lord planned to give you to another man?"

The harshness in his voice made her turn back sharply. "'Tis our custom. We believe it better by far that a woman have children of her body than that she wither and die unfulfilled."

"Were you mine," he growled, "none would have use of you but me."

Phaedra gasped at the raw possession in his voice. She stared up at him, seeing the anger fade from his eyes, to be replaced by a look that made her heart slam against her ribs.

"I'm not yours, Athenian."

"Not yet."

Her pulse began to pound at the implacability of his words. Unconscious of the act, she wet her suddenly dry lips. Alexander followed the movement of her tongue with an intentness that sent a thrill racing through Phaedra's blood.

When he gave a low growl and reached for her again, she was expecting his touch. When his golden head bent over her, she was expecting the feel of his mouth on hers. But she certainly wasn't expecting the heat that arced between them, or the pure white flame that streaked into her belly and all but buckled her knees.

One of his fists buried in her hair and tugged back her head. His tongue rasped across her teeth, tasting her, claiming her. Demanding entrance. For a brief, stolen moment,

Phaedra gloried in his passion. She stood stiff and unmoving in his arms, refusing to soften her stance or return his embrace, yet her blood sang. She kept her lips closed against his assault, yet her nerves were afire from the feel of his hands on her.

When he slanted his head to deepen the kiss, she closed her eyes, blocking out the golden hair her fingers ached to touch and the shadowed planes of the face she longed to explore. Soft bristles scraped her chin, sending rippling sensations all the way down to her toes. As the kiss lengthened, his hands slid down to cup her rear cheeks and press her intimately into him. His manhood hardened against her hip.

Phaedra pulled her mouth from his. "Do not!" she gasped.

"What? Do not do this?" His tongue brushed the soft, moist flesh of her inner lip.

"Or this?" He dipped his head and trailed kisses down the line of her jaw, then nuzzled her neck.

Phaedra balled her hands into fists to keep from reaching up to cradle the head buried against her throat. His palms burned through the thin fabric of her gown, shaping her hips, stroking her flanks.

"Athenian, I would have you release me!"

She flushed as her words came out, not in the commanding voice she'd intended, but in a dry, husky whisper.

"Alexander," he murmured, nipping at the tendons of her neck. "My name is Alexander. Say it."

She bit down hard on her treacherous lips to keep them from mouthing the syllables.

"Say it."

His soft command was all but lost in the hard pounding that rocked the door panels.

"Alexander! Are you all right?"

Lady Elene's anxious voice pierced the sensual mist surrounding them both. The captain groaned, then straightened, dragging in slow, ragged breaths.

"Alexander! Answer me, my son!"

Phaedra met his eyes; she saw the desire in their blue depths and felt the confusion in her own. By the gods, what was wrong with her? How had she gone from fury at this arrogant man to an overwhelming wish to wrap her arms about his strong, tanned neck in the space of a few heartbeats? With a bewildered shake of her head, she pushed herself out of his hold.

"You'd best open the door before your lady mother has it broken down. No doubt she fears I've strangled you and started gnawing on your bones."

The laughter that leapt into his eyes caused a strange, painful pang in the vicinity of Phaedra's heart.

"Forget not where we were, little one."

He strode across the room and lifted the bar.

Lady Elene stood in the doorway. The elderly porter was beside her, clutching a stout wooden stave in his arthritic hands. Demetria peered around her mother's back with wide, apprehensive eyes. What appeared to be the entire rest of the household crowded behind them, craning to see into the chamber.

Lady Elene's anxious eyes raked her son. "Are you all right, Alexander? We heard shouting, then no sound at all, coming from this room."

Alexander hid a grin at her fierce, protective stance. "I'm fine, lady mother."

"This...this creature has not harmed you?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Alexander only nodded. That the entire household would rush to rescue him—seasoned captain of a ship of war and veteran of a score of battles—from the clutches of one small woman made his shoulders shake.

Satisfied that her son was not in imminent danger of losing life or limb, Lady Elene sent Phaedra a ferocious look.

"Demetria told me what this one said of Chloe. No wonder you were furious. Did you beat her?"

"Nay," Alexander replied, conveniently forgetting that

such had been his half-formed intent when he dragged Phaedra from the dining chamber.

His mother sniffed. "She deserves a thorough birching for frightening a helpless child so. No doubt a strong arm or a stout switch is all a Spartan understands."

Alexander's amusement faded. It was one thing for him to contemplate breaking the wild, untamed sprite that was Phaedra to his hand. It was another matter altogether for anyone else to speak of marking or hurting her. Before he could find a way to accomplish the uncomfortable task of chiding his mother, Phaedra edged past him.

Lady Elene paled and fell back a step.

The porter hefted his stave.

Alexander reached out a restraining hand, then let it drop. Phaedra looked determined, but not murderous.

She stopped a few paces from the older woman. "I ask your forgiveness for causing such consternation within your household. I meant not to frighten the child, nor to disrupt your evening meal."

Lady Elene's eyes narrowed. "Do you mock me, girl?"

Phaedra met her look with a steady one of her own. "Nay. Our ways are different, but I'm not so rude or rough that I would deliberately offer discourtesy to another woman in her own home. Nor did I intend to hurt the child."

That took the wind from his mother's sails, Alexander thought, hiding his own surprise.

Lady Elene glanced from Phaedra to her son, as if unsure how to handle the small, dignified woman who faced her. Taking pity on her confusion, Alexander stepped forward.

"'Tis late, lady mother, and we've traveled far this day. I find my fatigue now overrides my hunger. I bid you good-night."

Lady Elene frowned, obviously reluctant to leave them alone together.

"Good night, Mother."

Alexander kissed her cheek and eased her from the

chamber. Closing the door, he turned and leaned his back against its thick panels. His raging desire of just moments before, blunted only a fraction by his mother's interruption, had shifted. Where before he'd wanted this woman's body with a need so powerful it made him ache, now he felt an equally intense, if subtler, need to know her mind.

"You surprise me at times, little one," he said, his eyes on her face.

Phaedra gave an undignified snort. "You confound me at all times, Athenian. I never know what to expect of you. That you should show such rage, and over a child, astounds me."

A trace of red crept up Alexander's throat. "She is special to me."

Phaedra eyed the tide of color with great interest. By Hera, this man was a contradictory, confusing being. He laughed when she expected anger, held her gently when she expected ravishment, yet rose to a fearsome fury when he thought she disparaged his babe. Now his face told her more plainly than any words how much he loved his crippled little Chloe, a child any Spartan would be ashamed of producing.

With a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Phaedra realized that the gulf between them was far wider than she'd dreamed. Not only did they stand on opposite sides of a conflict that could consume one, if not both, of their cities, but their philosophies for life and living were so different she despaired of ever understanding him. Her shoulders slumped as she acknowledged that the man who had kissed her but moments before was as much a stranger to her now as when he'd snatched her from Sparta's shores. Her throat tightened with a fierce ache, and she felt suddenly, frighteningly alone.

"Tell me of your meeting with your elders," she asked in a gruff voice, striving to hide her whirling confusion. "How long must I stay in this strange city, away from my home?"

"For a while, at least. They hold you as assurance against attack by your uncle."

Phaedra's stomach clenched. Although she would not, could not, admit it, she feared her uncle would care little about her fate. If he decided to attack, the fact that she was hostage would not deter him. His cold eyes when he flung her at the Athenian had told her as much. There on that high, windswept plaza, she'd had her chance to win his favor, and she'd denied it. She doubted not Naxos would deny her, as well. Phaedra felt even more desolate than before.

Alexander saw a bleak expression cross her face. The last tentacles of desire dissipated, and in their place rose a fierce protectiveness. He could only sense the confusion she must feel, alone in a strange city. He shrugged aside his conscience's mocking reminder that he was the one who'd brought her to such a pass. Searching his mind, he sought words to ease her fears.

"The night offers all comfort  
To ye mortal men,  
Darkness, passion,  
And a sweet oblivion."

Her head lifted, and the hunted look faded from the swirling, sea green depths of her eyes. She shook her head in disgust.

"'Tis beyond my ken. A warrior who spouts poetry."

Ruthlessly suppressing the urge to take her in his arms once more, Alexander grinned.

"Aye, and these lines aren't half-bad, if I must say so myself. Come, little one," he said, walking toward her, "get you to bed. You're tired beyond words."

She stiffened. "Not too tired to toss you on your head. You'll not touch me again, Athenian."

"Alexander," he said, delighting in the return of her



spirit. "You'll not touch me, *Alexander*." He took another deliberate step toward her.

"Pig," she countered, backing away. "Benighted ass. May the gods curse you if you lay another hand upon me."

"I'll lay more than that upon you, my Lady Thedis. But not when you shake with fatigue and your eyes are dulled with the strains of this day."

"Do not call me by that name!"

His grin widened as he strolled past her to a wooden door set into the far wall. Holding it open, he gestured toward the dim interior of a small storeroom.

"Come, get you to bed. We'll discuss another day what we call each other."

Confusion filled her eyes as she glanced about the spacious chamber where she'd rested before being summoned to the dining room.

"Do I not sleep here?"

"You will, but not this night. This my chamber. We'll share it when I hear my name on your lips."

Chin up, she stalked past him into the dark room.

"Lump-nosed sailor!" she muttered under her breath.

Although the straw pallet prepared for her in the storeroom was a far cry from the thick, wool-stuffed mattress in the captain's room, it was as comfortable as her own hard bed at home, and far more giving than the rocky ground she'd slept upon these past nights. Phaedra stretched out on the thin pallet, her mind filled with thoughts of the man in the next room and her body filled with an ache she refused to acknowledge.

She woke to the reedy, distant sound of a flute, and a thin stream of light coming through the open storeroom door. Springing to her feet, she made use of a chamber vessel she found in the corner. That basic need attended to, she discovered a shallow bowl and clay water pitcher that

the servants must have left the night before. Splashing water into the bowl, she bathed her face and hands.

The yellow robe slid over her shoulders with the familiarity of an old friend. Bunching the fabric at her waist to shorten its length, Phaedra tied the woven gold ribbons around its folds. With no maid to assist her, she could only rake her fingers through her thick, unruly hair and braid it in a loose tail that hung down between her shoulder blades, nearly to her waist.

Even before she walked into the captain's chamber, Phaedra sensed that he had gone. This morning the room seemed larger and emptier than the night before. It was as if his very presence had shrunk its dimensions. Curious, she surveyed the room and its contents, seeking some clue as to the man who owned it.

By Spartan standards, it was well furnished, although not as luxurious as Phaedra would have imagined. The captain obviously kept the same neat order ashore that he demanded on board his ship. A wide bedstead stood against the far wall, its thick covers folded and neat. A clothes chest inlaid with ivory in a checkerboard design sat next to a simple table and straight chair. Above a tripod brazier, which would give warmth in colder months, a niche was cut into the wall. It held a small alabaster statue of Zeus, the guardian of all households.

Beside the ornate red door, Phaedra spotted another niche. In it sat the only piece of adornment in the room. The small, exquisitely detailed silver bowl, with twin handles on each side of its shallow dish, drew her fascinated gaze. Phaedra had seen only one other dish like this. It was the prized possession of the grizzled wrestler who had trained her, a gift from her tribe's elders to an Olympic champion. In it the wrestler kept the simple crown of olive leaves he'd brought home to Sparta with great honor and glory.

Her eyes narrowed on the wreath of dried leaves nesting in the captain's bowl. Great Zeus, was the Athenian an

Olympian? Was that why he'd overtaken her so readily in the chase when she'd tried to escape? She searched her memory, dredging up vague tales of a young, golden-haired runner who'd taken top honors in the pentathlon a decade and more ago. Stroking the fragile leaves with a light, reverent touch, Phaedra felt her confused impressions of the captain twist even further. An Olympian, and a poet! A warmongering sailor, and a father who cherished a deformed child! An Athenian!

She'd been reared to believe all Athenians dishonorable and decadent. Yet here, in the privacy of his chamber, Phaedra admitted to herself that this man—this enemy—filled her with a reluctant admiration. Not to mention an insidious, creeping desire for his touch! Here, in the solitude of her thoughts, she could even admit to her secret disappointment that he'd spared her his bed last night. The thought stunned her, and she turned her back on the silver bowl.

What manner of woman was she? she wondered with a touch of desperation. How could she lie in the dark, her legs pressed together to still the wanton ache at her core, her thoughts on an enemy of her state? With a sense that her world was shifting beneath her feet, Phaedra squared her shoulders and left the bedchamber.

Her appearance in the courtyard caused an immediate cessation of all activity. A slave seated on a low stool with a double flute at her lips glanced up. The lilting, liquid notes she had been pouring into the morning air died away. Four servants kneeling at a long grindstone stopped their rhythmic motions. Two others, pressing olives to extract oil, leaned back on their heels and regarded Phaedra with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

Feeling much like the two-headed calf that she'd once seen displayed in Sparta's agora, Phaedra crossed the tiled yard in search of something to break her night's fast. She met the Lady Elene emerging from the kitchens. In a sky-blue robe that matched her eyes and flattered her white

complexion, the older woman looked regal. And less than welcoming.

"My son said that you were not to be disturbed," Lady Elene said, her face rigid with disapproval. "I've set aside barley cakes and figs for you when you're ready."

Torn between a desire to refuse this less-than-gracious hospitality and the hollowness of her stomach, Phaedra hesitated. A loud grumbling from the region of her middle settled the issue.

"I thank you," she said stiffly, and followed the older woman into the kitchens.

Lady Elene gestured toward a plate set on a wooden worktable. "Take your fill. There's wine, as well."

Phaedra poured a small libation to the gods, then took a healthy swallow of the dark wine. Even watered as it was, the mixture was far more potent than the thin, sour wine from Sparta's rocky slopes that she was used to. Her eyes widened as the heady vintage slid down her throat and warmed her stomach.

"My son desires you to take your rest this day and recover from the discomfort of your journey. He's gone to the shipyards, and will return late."

"I am recovered," Phaedra said, while her mind whirled with the news that the captain had left her here, unattended except for his mother and a group of timid slaves. She bit into a dried fig and felt excitement worm its way into her veins.

"I'll leave you to your meal."

Lady Elene's tone said more clearly than words that she had better things to do than wait upon a Spartan. With a swish of her blue robe, she was gone.

Phaedra scarcely noticed her departure. She washed down a barley cake with another sip of wine, her spirits soaring. By the gods, the captain had misjudged her grievously if he thought she'd sit here like a well-trained puppy and await his return. Although the prospect of finding her way out of the sprawling metropolis and across miles of

unknown countryside was a little daunting, Phaedra refused to let that deter her. The sooner she was free of the captain and his growing hold over her, the sooner she'd regain her pride and the familiarity of her own world.

Her heart thumping with excitement, Phaedra glanced around the kitchen. The slaves who attended to the baking were bent over the earthen ovens, their backs to her. She rose and strolled to the door to survey the courtyard. Lady Elene was nowhere to be seen.

Ignoring the staring servants, Phaedra sauntered around the yard as if examining her new quarters. She flicked an interested glance at the marble altar in the center of the yard, then trailed a casual hand across the plinth, with its bronzed dial to measure the sun's rays. With deliberate nonchalance, she made her way toward the porter's room, which guarded the only entrance into, and out of, the house. The old man was no match for her, Phaedra knew.

She entered the narrow entrance hall. Ahead were the massive wooden doors that stood between her and escape. Between captivity and freedom. Between the laughing, confounding captain and the dark, humorless Spartan warrior who would be her husband. She took a deep breath and headed for the doors.

The slap of bare feet on the tiles told Phaedra that the porter had seen her and was coming from his room. She turned, her muscles tensed to take down the stooped, gray-haired slave. To her astonishment, she found herself face-to-face with a massive chest covered in dark, curling hair.

"The gods grant you good-morning, my lady. The captain left word you were to rest this day and not venture forth."

Phaedra glared up at the sailor she'd sent crashing into the waves.

"What do *you* here? Why aren't you at your ship?"

"We're released from duty when the voyage is done. I have no family or home close by, so the captain offered me a drachma a day to stay here and keep you safe."

“Keep me within, you mean!”

His grin showed wide gaps from missing teeth. “You’ll be safe if you stay within.”

Her eyes narrowed, Phaedra assessed his towering bulk.

He crossed arms that were the size of tree trunks over his chest. “You’ll not throw me so easily again, my lady. I’m twice your size, and know now what to expect.”



## Chapter Nine



Phaedra paced the courtyard and cursed the woodenheaded sailor whose unyielding bulk blocked her escape. When she'd called him every vile name she knew, she turned her anger on the captain. How could he have guessed her mind before she knew it herself?

Her skirts swirled about her ankles as she strode the length of the yard, then back again, seeking some outlet for her frustration. She ignored the gaping servants, ignored the grinning sailor, ignored all but the desperate feeling that the walls of the captain's home were closing in on her.

She was used to mornings filled with vigorous exercise and busy afternoons with her stewards, managing her estates and seeing to the needs of more than two hundred slaves and dependents. Even when she was the ward of her uncle and resided in his household, Phaedra had controlled her own fortune. Never, not since she was a child, could she remember having been without occupation or outlet for her prodigious energy.

At length her fury at her thwarted escape blunted and she realized the futility of pacing the yard. Squaring her shoulders, she sought the Lady Elene. She found her in the kitchens, wreathed in clouds of flour and surrounded by the sweet scent of baking bread.

"I am unused to idleness," Phaedra said in her blunt

way. "I would have you give me some task that lessens the burden of my presence on your household."

The matriarch folded her hands and looked down her thin, aristocratic nose at the intruder. "My son said you were neither slave nor servant."

"Nor am I guest," Phaedra countered. "I'm here not of my will, nor of yours. As long as I must spend days or weeks in Athens, I need some occupation to keep me busy."

"What would you do?"

"Whatever you wish of me."

"Well, I suppose you could assist with the baking."

When Phaedra hesitated, Lady Elene's gaze flickered over her slight figure.

"Is such a task too onerous for you? Are your arms not strong enough for kneading and rolling?"

Phaedra swallowed a smile. "They're strong enough, my lady, but I've no skill at the task. Slaves perform such menial chores in Sparta."

Phaedra knew immediately that she'd said the wrong thing. The older woman stiffened, and her eyes took on the chill of an early winter frost.

"I see. Then perhaps weaving is not beneath you. You may join Lady Demetria in the women's quarters. She will show you the looms."

Phaedra had no more skill at weaving than at baking, but she didn't say so. Why women the rank of Lady Elene and her daughter would occupy themselves with tasks any slave could perform was beyond her understanding. But the hours weighed heavily on her hands, and she needed something to do. Climbing the wooden stairs to the second story, she made her way around the balcony until she found a large, airy chamber filled with women's chatter and the clack of wooden looms.

Demetria jumped up from her low stool and eyed the intruder nervously. Phaedra guessed that Lady Elene had

filled the girl's ears with stern admonitions to mind her tongue and guard her person around the Spartan.

Stepping over the threshold, Phaedra let her gaze sweep the large baskets that held ropes of colored wool and the various implements used in making garments for the household. None of them was the least bit familiar to her.

"Lady Elene sent me to assist you."

"She did?"

"Aye."

Phaedra stepped into the room with a surge of confidence. How difficult could the task be, after all? If this Athenian girl could weave, a Spartan woman could surely do so—better and faster.

Not a half-hour later, the weights holding the perpendicular threads to the narrow hand-held frame snapped for the third time when she put too much pressure on them. The woof, woven horizontally with a thick wooden needle, tangled in the broken threads. Phaedra tossed down the frame with a muttered curse.

"Can...can I help you untangle the threads?"

Phaedra sent the captain's sister a wry glance. "Nay, they're past untangling."

Demetria smiled uncertainly and bent over her own loom.

Slumping in her chair, Phaedra let her gaze drift to the small, high window that framed the sun's morning rays.

"How can you stand to shut yourself up in here all day and pick at threads? Why don't you go out? Get some sun and some exercise to rid yourself of that unhealthy pallor."

Demetria glanced up, an offended expression in her wide brown eyes. The same spirit Phaedra had glimpsed in the girl yesterday, when she'd flung herself in her brother's arms, now stiffened her spine.

"A pale complexion is much prized among Athenian women. At least I don't have to resort to painting my face with white lead, as many do. Darien thinks me most beautiful," Demetria finished with a touch of belligerence.

“Darien? Oh, the lieutenant.”

“My betrothed.”

Phaedra sent the girl a pitying look. Her own experience with the dark-haired bow officer had given her a decided dislike of the rude, rough fellow.

Demetria caught her look and flushed. A touch of spite entered her voice. “You should use your time here to put some flesh on your bones, lady. You’re so thin and...and dark.”

A frown furrowed Phaedra’s brow as she compared herself to the women of the captain’s household. Where they were as plump as well-fed hens, she was spare. Where their skin was pale and white, hers held the tint of sun. They spent their hours on tasks more suited to slaves, tasks at which Phaedra herself had no skill. And tasks she had no interest in, she told herself with disgruntled, dissatisfied irritation. Pushing her discarded loom aside with one toe, she rose.

“I must stretch my legs,” she told the girl, striding out of the room.

Great Hera, mother of the gods, how was she to survive weeks in this household? How was she to occupy herself? When the captain returned, she’d set a few conditions for her stay, Phaedra decided militantly. Even if she had to have that hulking sailor as escort, she’d demand time at the training grounds. A good wrestling match or a hard race was what she needed. A savage smile lifted her lips as she thought of leaving a few Athenians in her dust. Throwing herself onto a bench in the courtyard, she propped her chin in one hand and ran a hard, relentless race in her mind.

“Would you...would you really throw me off a cliff?”

A child’s voice interrupted her imaginary triumphant dash across the finish line. Phaedra turned to find the captain’s daughter, Chloe, regarding her from the protective arms of her nurse. They must have come down the stairs just behind her. Mindful of the captain’s fury the night

before, when she had unintentionally upset this child, Phaedra hesitated.

Chloe regarded her with eyes that held curiosity and only the faintest hint of trepidation. Phaedra recalled how she had questioned the child's spirit, and saw now that she was wrong to have done so. This one would not let fear hold her back from the unknown.

"Don't you like little girls?" the child asked at length.

"Yes, I like little girls."

"But not ones with twisted legs?"

Phaedra rose, ignoring the nurse's instinctive step backward. "I know no little girls with twisted legs," she said with simple honesty.

The child nodded, as if that explained all. With a shy smile, she lifted a figurine with a painted face of fired clay.

"Do you want to see the doll Papa brought me?"

"You mustn't bother the lady," the nurse whispered, clutching at the child. Her sideways glances told Phaedra that she feared the Spartan demon as much as the rest of the household did.

"She doesn't mind. Do you?"

Chloe's bright eyes drew forth an answering smile from Phaedra. "Nay, I don't mind."

The girl gestured to the bench. "I'll play here, with you."

"Nay, child!" the maid gasped. "The Lady Elene would not wish you to...to disturb the..."

She stumbled to a halt, and Chloe patted her nurse's cheek with a little hand.

"Set me down here. Papa says she won't eat me. Papa says Spartans don't eat people. It's just a 'spression."

Phaedra watched with silent appreciation as the child's sweet smiles and gentle cajolery overcame the nurse's reluctance to leave her charge in such dangerous company. For all her frail and delicate appearance, Chloe obviously ruled the rest of the household as firmly as she ruled her father's heart. The nurse set her on the bench and scurried

off, no doubt to summon the Lady Elene to the child's rescue, Phaedra thought.

"Look," the girl commanded. "See what fine hair my dolly has. Papa says she's from Egypt. That's very far away."

Phaedra sat and dutifully fingered the flaxen strands, which were dyed a deep black. The girl chattered on about the doll's strange garments and pretty painted face, and Phaedra nodded at appropriate intervals. But while her ears listened to the child's piping voice, her eyes strayed to the outline of Chloe's legs. Though covered by a soft pink linen tunic, their shape was clearly visible. One was straight and long, the other thin and twisted.

"Does your leg pain you?" Phaedra asked during a pause in the girl's chatter. Soft honey-brown curls bobbed absently.

"Most times. But Papa rubs it. Or Grandmother or Nurse. Papa does it best, though. He says sailors know how to use their hands."

Aye, that they did, Phaedra thought. A swift stab of pure sensation rocked her as she remembered how the captain had used his hands the night before. How he'd molded her bottom and lifted her hips into his hardness and heat. With a wrench, she brought her treacherous thoughts back to the little girl who sat playing with her toy.

"I've trained in the arena and have some skill at massaging sore muscles and tendons. Would you like for me to rub your leg?"

Chloe shrugged, clearly more interested in the doll than in the pain that had been with her all her short life.

Phaedra swung around on the bench and positioned the girl so that her withered leg was within reach. Lifting the pink robe, she ran gentle, exploratory hands over the stiff muscles and twisted tendons. Chloe's cheerful prattle filled the morning air as Phaedra began a tentative kneading. Once or twice the girl's brown eyes clouded and her smile faltered, but she didn't voice the discomfort she must have



felt as her protesting muscles stretched, nor did she cease her chatter. The words *Papa says* fell from her lips with astonishing regularity. Once more Phaedra wondered at the bond between the captain and his child.

"Take your hands from her!"

Lady Elene rushed across the courtyard, fury in every line of her body.

Phaedra loosed the child's leg and gripped her hands together in her lap.

"No, Grandmother, don't make her stop. It feels good."

Chloe's piping voice halted the hot words hovering on the older woman's tongue. Lady Elene swallowed, obviously struggling to control herself in front of the child.

"'Tis not meet that...our guest be burdened with such a task as caring for you," she said through tight lips.

Phaedra stood and met the older woman's hard stare. "I don't mind. I have some skill with massage."

"Please, Grandmother, don't make her stop. Truly, her fingers eased the ache."

Lady Elene flicked the child a glance. "Nay, Chloe, your nurse can attend you."

"But I want the Lady Phaedra. Please," the girl pleaded with a pretty smile. "Papa says—"

"I won't hurt her," Phaedra said softly interrupting her. "And 'twill give me occupation for my hands."

Lady Elene gnawed on her lower lip. Phaedra could see clearly her resentment over the intrusion of a foreigner into her well-ordered household warring with her love for her only grandchild.

"Please, Grandmother. I promise to eat all my porridge this night if you let me stay here."

"Imp," Lady Elene said, her voice gruff with affection. "All right, but don't tax the Lady Phaedra beyond her patience."

In a low voice, for Phaedra's ears only, she warned, "And don't tax the child beyond her strength."

Lady Elene moved away only as far as the grindstone,

where the slaves still toiled at their tasks. With one eye on their efforts and one on the woman and child, she crossed her arms.

Phaedra soon forgot the Lady Elene's presence in the absorbing challenge of working the child's leg. Chloe's artless confidences made her smile. The flute girl's reedy notes once more drifted on the sunlit air. For the moment, at least, Phaedra felt some relief from the oppression of her enforced confinement.

Her relief was too soon over, unfortunately. The little girl had not the strength for prolonged massage. Phaedra summoned the nurse, reluctant to lose the child's bright company, but knowing better than to overwork the muscles. Chloe disappeared into her upstairs room with a cheerful wave.

Phaedra paced the courtyard, once more restless and constricted by her lack of activity. She shared a simple noon meal of bread and cheese and olives with the other women, but found neither relaxation nor interest in the household matters that absorbed their interest. The afternoon hours loomed long and empty. Desperate, she lured her personal guard into the courtyard with a demand that he teach her to tie knots. She never knew when she might have to work them loose again, she thought darkly.

Therocles complied with an eagerness that told her he was as bored as she. They sat cross-legged on the sun-warmed tiles and plied the lengths of rope he brought from the stables. A scandalized Lady Elene threw occasional disapproving glances their way, but didn't interfere. Most likely she'd heard from Demetria of Phaedra's sad lack of skill at weaving, and could think of no other, more suitable occupation for her strange guest.

Phaedra muttered a curse under her breath as the knots that had all but defied her frenzied efforts to win release defeated her once again. Therocles laughed and showed her how to work the loops. At length she grasped the simple arrangement that tightened to an unrelenting hold with the

lightest tug. Grinning with triumph, she untied the knot, then tied it once again.

"I think you've got it, my lady."

"Aye, I think so, too." She slipped the knot loose. "'Tis amazingly simple, once you know it."

"Aye."

Working the ropes, she glanced up at Therocles. "Have you been long on the sea?"

"Aye, ten years and more. The captain and I performed our first military service together. We rowed on the same bench."

"He rowed?"

"Oh, aye. His father wanted him to know the feel of the ships he would someday command." Laughter rumbled from Therocles' massive chest. "You learn a lot about ships—and about men—stuffed in the bottom of a narrow hull, with the next rank's bums but inches away, and salt water filling your eyes with every wave splashing through the oar sleeves."

Phaedra bit back her tart observation that any fool who chose of his own will to sail upon the seas deserved such discomforts. Clearly these Athenians didn't appreciate that mortal men were meant to walk or ride, not toss about on the waves. Shrugging, she listened while the sailor began to recount tales from his many voyages. In every adventure Therocles told her of, the captain figured large.

Like a dog scratching a fleabite, Phaedra probed for further detail. She wasn't so much interested in the Athenian, she told herself, as in learning the strengths and weaknesses of her enemy.

If Alexander, son of Porthos, had weaknesses, Therocles knew them not. From his lips, Phaedra learned of the captain's daring raids and boldness in facing enemy ships. She heard of his generosity in dividing plunder, and of his reputation among the women who specialized in seeing to sailors' needs. He was well-known and welcome in many ports, Therocles told her with a wink. And not just by cour-

tesans. More than one highborn lady had come to the docks to bid the captain a weeping, tearful farewell.

Aye, no doubt they had, Phaedra thought sourly. With his sun-kissed hair and his roving hands, she had no doubt that women wept copious tears when he left. Working the knots furiously, she refused to acknowledge the tide of jealousy swamping her.

At length, purple shadows darkened the courtyard, and Lady Elene sent a servant with a summons for the evening meal. Phaedra joined the women, irritated at the shaft of disappointment she felt when Lady Elene announced that her son dined with friends this night. Why should she care if the captain chose to eat abroad? The men of Sparta never dined at home, but always at their eating clubs.

'Twas only boredom that made her want his company, she thought resentfully. After this long, endless day, she had looked forward to his lively discourse, even to his confounded poetry, only as relief from boredom. She picked at the eels cooked with wild onions that constituted the main course, and crumbled a hard loaf dusted with caraway seeds beside her plate.

The women's talk of weaving and mixing herbs for a servant who was ill with a bilious stomach made her restless and edgy. She drank more wine than she was used to as the meal dragged on for what seemed like hours. When Lady Elene at last rose from her couch and signaled the maids to clear the tables, Phaedra breathed a sigh of relief. To her surprise, her legs wobbled under her when she rose.

"I bid you good-night," Phaedra told the women, anxious to be away from their unrelenting domesticity.

Lady Elene dipped her head in a regal nod. "May the gods keep you." She hesitated a moment. "And I thank you for your care of Chloe. Her nurse says she rests more easily than usual this night."

Surprised and absurdly pleased by the grudging thanks, Phaedra made her way across the courtyard to the red door of the master's chamber. She stepped inside and felt her

heart speed its pace as the wide platform bed filled her vision.

Her blood, already heated from the combination of little food and strong wine, flushed hot. She closed the door and leaned against it, studying the bed. The captain had said that she'd share it when he heard his name on her lips. In her mind she saw his long, lean body stretched out on its wide surface. Would he laugh, she wondered, when he took her there? Would he tease and play and whisper poetry, or would his hunger make him hard and hurried?

She swallowed, and her palms felt wet and slick against the door panels.

Would he kiss her as he had last night, making her senses swim? Would his hands work their rough magic on her skin?

All she had to do was say his name, Phaedra thought. Did she but utter one word, she'd taste a delight she'd never experienced before. And she'd lose what little pride she had left. With a dejected sigh, Phaedra pushed herself off the door. She crossed the room to trail a finger along the bed's wooden footrail. The sound of the captain's voice in the outer courtyard made her jump.

Her head told her to retreat immediately, to seek the sanctuary of her small room. But a stubborn, contrary restlessness held her rooted to the spot. She was safe, as long as she didn't speak his name.

The minutes seemed to crawl as the captain greeted his mother, then went abovestairs to check on his daughter. Phaedra heard his steady footfalls traverse the balcony, and her heart thundered in accompaniment. She wiped her wet palms on her skirts as he came back down the stairs. The red door swung open, and her breath caught in her throat.

By the gods, he was wonderful to look upon, even with his crooked nose. He stood tall and straight, his shoulders filling the door. His chiton gleamed white in the dim light and displayed to Phaedra's hungry eyes the long, lean length of his muscled thighs. When he saw her standing



immobile in his chamber, he stopped just over the threshold. Surprise lifted one tawny brow.

"My mother said you had retired."

"I have not, as you see."

His brow arched another notch.

Phaedra licked her lips and reached out one hand to steady herself on the footrail.

Closing the door, he slid the bar into place and turned to face her. "Do you await my return?" he asked softly.

"Hah! Don't flatter yourself, Athenian. I was but restless and not ready for sleep."

His gaze slid to where her fingers rested on the rail. "What *are* you ready for, little one?"

Phaedra snatched her hand away. Her lascivious thoughts of just moments before sent a wave of hot color up her neck.

"Not for that," she snapped.

"No?" A smile tugged at his lips as he closed the distance between them. "Are you sure?"

She backed away, until her shoulders pressed against the stuccoed wall. By all that was holy, why had she lingered here? Why hadn't she sought the safety of her small room?

Because she'd wanted this, her own mind told her mockingly. Because she'd wanted to see the smile in his eyes and hear his teasing voice at least once this day. Since the moment she'd awakened this morning to find him gone, she'd awaited his return. Waited, curse her soul, to feel his touch. Her knees trembled at the silent admission, and she gave thanks for the wall behind her, holding her up.

He braced a hand on either side of her head. Phaedra felt the heat of his body pressing into hers and breathed in the scent of his day at the shipyards.

"Are you sure you're not ready for this?" he murmured.

"I'm not, I tell you."

He bent to rest his forehead on the thick masses of her hair. "I am. Ready and aching, as I have been since first I saw you."



His words whispered in her ear, hot and moist. Phaedra shivered, then yelped and hunched a frantic shoulder as his tongue followed his words. She pushed against the chest pinning her to the wall.

"Stop, Athenian. You said you would not take me until I spoke your name."

"Say it," he urged, pressing his body against hers. "Say it, little one."

Phaedra felt him hard and hot against her belly. "Nay," she moaned. "I cannot."

"You can." He lifted her chin with one hand. His thumb rubbed the side of her jaw, his fingers spread to caress her throat.

With every fiber of her being, Phaedra longed to touch her mouth to the one hovering just inches away. Her eyes devoured his face, her fingernails dug into her palms to keep from reaching up to stroke his lean cheeks.

"I cannot," she managed to say through gritted teeth. "Don't make me surrender my pride, as well as my freedom, Athenian."

Through the turmoil of her conflicting emotions, Phaedra watched the captain struggle with himself. His jaw clenched, and a single drop of sweat trailed down the side of his brow. She could feel him tumescent against her hip, feel the raw power in the corded muscles that held her trapped against the wall. Would he win this awesome struggle with his inner demons, she wondered? She was shamed to realize that her treacherous soul prayed he would not.

"Take yourself to bed," he ordered, stepping back.

Phaedra slipped away from him and scurried for the safety of the small storeroom.

She spent endless hours tossing and turning on her hard pallet. In the darkness of the night, she cursed herself for her weak, spineless wanting. She cursed the Athenian who had brought her to such a pass, and reviled the gods who had put her in his hands. And when at last she slipped into an uneasy sleep, she dreamed of golden hair and broad, muscled shoulders.

## Chapter Ten



“Will you cease that pacing!” Lady Elene threw Phaedra an exasperated look and dropped her embroidery frame in her lap. “I cannot set an even stitch with you stamping about the room.”

“And I cannot bear to be shut within this house another hour! ’Tis nigh on a week since I’ve felt the wind in my hair or the sun on my face. I must get out and get some exercise.”

Phaedra stopped beside the small window that overlooked the busy street below. Her hungry eyes raked the scene; she absorbed the sight of citizens and slaves, merchants and politicians, all busy at something, anything, other than accursed household chores.

Behind her, Lady Elene heaved an irritated sigh. “I’ve told you time and again, my son has told you time and again, even that lump of brainless flesh who guards our door has told you, you cannot go without. ’Tis not seemly. Only poor women and whores walk the streets.”

Demetria gave a startled gasp.

“Look how you make me forget myself,” Lady Elene snapped at Phaedra’s back. “Before you came, I would never speak so in front of my daughter.”

Phaedra whirled, spoiling for a fight. These days she was so tense and edgy that even her inbred respect for an older

woman's years and dignity was stretched thin. As if sensing her rising temper, Lady Elene waved an impatient hand and rose.

"Nay, don't take out your distemper on me, child. I'll go get Chloe from her nap. She's the only one among us who can calm your restlessness these days."

She left with a swish of saffron-colored skirts.

Phaedra stared at the open door for a long moment, then turned to Demetria. "Did she just call me 'child'?"

Demetria nodded, lifting a hand to hide a smile.

After a moment, Phaedra's own lips twitched. "Well, I suppose that's better than 'creature.'"

A giggle slipped through Demetria's fingers.

"Or 'hussy.'"

"My mother's never called you a hussy."

"Nay, she only thinks it. Every time your brother takes me to his chamber."

Not that aught occurred within that accursed chamber to give rise to such an appellation, Phaedra thought sourly as she turned her unseeing gaze back to the window. Five nights now had the captain played his games with her. Five nights had he kissed and tormented her. Tormented them both! And five nights she had flirted with danger as she tested him and herself, wanting the pleasure that his hands and mouth gave her. Wanting the feel of his powerful arms around her. Yet his determination to have her come to him willingly was as strong as her determination not to. As a result, her body ached with what she now admitted was fierce, unrelenting frustration, and her temper was like kindling waiting for the spark.

Feeling as taut as a bow string, she whirled away from the window and flung herself into the chair vacated by the Lady Elene. Only then did she see the furious blush staining Demetria's cheeks. Great Hera, the girl was shocked by her comments about sharing the captain's chamber, Phaedra thought in disgust. For a moment she toyed with the idea of telling Demetria what occurred—and what did not oc-

cur!—behind that red-painted door. But she feared her growing pique over the fact that the captain refused to ravish her would come out in the telling. She doubted the girl would understand Phaedra's twisted desire to have her brother end his damnable game once and for all and give her the satisfaction that her body craved but her honor refused.

She sighed, knowing that she couldn't share her own dark desires with Demetria. In keeping with the Athenians' curious customs, the girl was yet an untried, ignorant virgin. She eyed the maiden with a gathering frown. It was beyond Phaedra's ken why anyone would be so cruel as to send a young girl from her home without allowing her to gain intimate knowledge of the man who would soon own her body. Although these Athenians scoffed at the way Spartan girls trained naked in the arena with men and boys, it made far more sense to Phaedra that a maid should see a man's body and understand the lust that made it hard and ripe.

Like the captain's, her traitorous mind taunted. Hard and ripe and rampant, each night this week. Each night she'd scorned him and her own desires. The unfortunate trend of her thoughts revived Phaedra's earlier irritation, and she scowled ferociously.

Demetria blinked, casting about in her mind for what she could have said to offend the prickly Spartan. In the days since this extraordinary female descended upon their house, Demetria had lost her fear of the Lady Phaedra, but not her fascination with her. She eyed the other woman's scowling countenance.

"How have I angered you?"

"You have not," Phaedra growled. "'Tis this damnable, irksome idleness."

"Idleness!" Demetria sat up straighter, trying not to be offended by Phaedra's casual dismissal of the tasks that kept her busy from early morn till dusk.

"I'm sorry you have no interest in the needle...." she began, somewhat huffily.

Phaedra interrupted with a wave of her hand. "No interest, and no skill. There are other tasks that better use a woman's mind and talents."

"Like what?" Demetria laid aside her embroidery frame as curiosity overcame her. 'Twas not often her mother left her alone with this strange guest, and less often still that Phaedra seemed disposed to talk to her.

"Like wrestling and running and tossing the javelin to build your body's strength."

Demetria's eyes rounded. "Did you do such?"

"Aye, and trained horses for the army's use. And managed my estates."

"Didn't your lord employ stewards for that?"

"I employed the stewards. They're my estates. I managed their revenues. I distributed their bounty."

"You did all that?" Demetria asked, awestruck and slightly disbelieving.

"Aye, and more. 'Twas my dowry that brought wealth to my husband, after all. Who better than I to manage it while he trained at arms and fought in wars?"

Demetria struggled with that for a moment, trying to understand a way of life so foreign to her restricted world that she couldn't quite comprehend it. "Do all Spartan women manage their dowries?"

Phaedra shrugged. "Most do. By law, we retain half of our inheritance for our own use. The other half goes to the one who wins us by contest of arms. But most warriors have no wish to bother with the administering of estates."

"How incredible," Demetria murmured. "I could never begin to run anything outside a household."

"Of course you could. It just takes training and persistence. Depending on the size of your dowry and your lord's estates, you would have many to assist you."

"Nay," she protested. "Nay, I don't even know what my dowry consists of."

“What!”

Phaedra sat up straight as a spear. What could the captain be thinking of, to send his sister into marriage having no knowledge of her worth? No doubt he'd spent too much time at sea to see to her training. Or the lieutenant, Darien, was too eager for a docile, ignorant wife to insist that the girl know her own value.

“Listen to me, Demetria. You must know exactly what you take into your marriage, and what you may take out of it if you divorce.”

“Divorce?” the girl squeaked. “I'm not yet married, and you speak of divorce!”

“Do not Athenians divorce?”

“Y-yes. No. I mean, men sometimes set aside their wives.”

“In Sparta a woman may seek a divorce, as well, if her husband gives her no child of his loins. Or she may lie with another man, with her husband's consent.”

Demetria's mouth dropped open.

“You must know your rights, and what you may expect in your joining with this lieutenant.” Privately Phaedra thought the girl should not expect much from the dark-haired bow officer.

“Darien will provide for me.”

“Nay, you know that not. He could be injured in the next battle. Or take some loathsome disease from all the whores those sailors—”

Phaedra broke off her intemperate speech as a stricken look entered the girl's eyes.

“Did...did he lie with you?”

Swallowing her indignation at being lumped in with the disease-ridden prostitutes who frequented the harbors, Phaedra replied evenly, “Nay, he did not. But you must know your recourse if he should lie with another and take an illness that denies you children.”

Relieved but shaken, the girl nodded. “I'll ask my mother.”



Phaedra's shrug implied that the Lady Elene was unlikely to impart the information Demetria sought.

"I'll...I'll ask Alexander."

"Aye, do so."

Phaedra rose, satisfied that she had at least planted the seed of doubt. No one, not even this doe-eyed, fluff-headed girl, should go into a marriage without knowing her rights.

With a careless wave, she left the room to find Chloe and begin their daily massage. The activity took but an hour each morning and another each afternoon, yet the little girl's lively chatter and the chance to feel useful at some task made Phaedra look forward to their daily sessions. Almost as much as she looked forward to her nightly sessions with the child's father, her heart said, mocking her.

For the first time in a long while, Alexander felt a measure of ease as he made his way over the uneven cobbles toward his home. A street guide with a lit lamp on a long pole led the way, shouting at intervals for the late-night crowd to make way for the captain.

'Twas just what he had needed, he thought, an evening with his fellow officers. Hearty male laughter, even heartier ale and a curvaceous flute dancer had helped him forget—for a few hours, at least—his frustration. The dancer had been most talented, Alexander thought with a wicked smile. He was damned if he could ever remember seeing anyone bend backward, plant her palms on the floor, then lift her legs straight up. She'd been as nimble on her hands as on her feet, not that anyone had really noticed aught but plump, pale thighs and generous hips.

Shaking his head, Alexander wondered why he hadn't taken the girl up on her offer of a private performance. And why his rod hadn't stiffened at her blatant, provocative dance—the way it stiffened whenever a certain stubborn Spartan female rustled on her pallet or sighed into the still, dark night. The way it stiffened now.

Cursing, Alexander felt his hard-won lethargy slip away

at the thought of Phaedra. His body tightened involuntarily, bringing a now-familiar discomfort. Alexander had never known such knife-edged hunger for a woman; nor had he ever gone so long without relieving it.

'Twas his own fault, he knew. He'd gotten himself into this accursed coil with his teasing insistence that Phaedra speak his name, that she yield to him willingly. He should have taken her that first night in the deserted cove, he thought savagely. He should have ended this damnable game between them the first or second night she stumbled to her pallet in the small room next to his. Yet every time he reached the point of taking her despite her protests—protests that grew less heated with each passing night—something stayed his hand.

He was familiar enough with women's ways to know that she desired him now with all the fierceness of her passionate soul. She would not fight for long, were he to take her. Yet he wanted not even the pretense of reluctance from her. He wanted her willing. He wanted her to sigh with pleasure, not stiffen with even token resistance, when he kissed her. By the shades of Hades, he wanted her to say his name!

In the deepest recesses of his mind, Alexander realized that he demanded much more of this woman who had come to dominate his life than he had any right to. He'd brought her here against her will. He'd kept her confined, adding daily to her obvious restlessness. And now he asked her to give herself to him and thus surrender her honor.

He muttered another curse as he followed the flickering light of the street guide's lantern. By the beard of Heracles, what a damnable coil! The gods must be rolling on their couches, clutching their sides in paroxysms of laughter at the way he'd tangled himself and Phaedra into knots even a sailor couldn't unravel. By the time Alexander reached his door, he was grim-faced and aching with a familiar need.

The lantern-bearer rapped importantly on the wood

panel, hoping to win another coin with the resonance of his voice as he announced the master's return to his residence. Both he and Alexander were surprised when the knock went unanswered. The street guide pounded on the door once more, again without response. Alexander stepped forward and jiggled the iron hasp that secured the door. To his surprise, it opened under his hand. Frowning, he passed the guide a few coins and entered.

He stopped abruptly at the scene that greeted his disbelieving eyes. The courtyard was a scene of utter chaos, like the stage of a great theater when the climax of a tragedy is enacted. Lanterns and torches flared, women wailed, the porter rocked back and forth on his heels, gesticulating with thin arms and repeating in a high, wavering voice that 'twas not his fault. The sailor, Therocles, stood in the midst of the crowd, his face dark as thunder as he shouted to be heard. Wide-eyed and frightened, Demetria hovered beside a clearly flustered Lady Elene.

"I've sent a message to the captain!" Therocles roared. "And men to search the streets! She can't have gone far!"

"She could be halfway to Thebes by now," Lady Elene snapped. "These silly maids should have informed me immediately when she didn't answer their knock." The angry glance she sent the weeping maids increased the volume of their wails.

Alexander pushed his way through the assembled crowd. His heart hammered with the import of his mother's words.

Palpable relief chased across Lady Elene's face as she saw him. "Alexander! She's gone! Phaedra's gone!"

"When? How?"

"I know not when. Therocles only discovered her missing when he made his rounds. He saw her tray untouched, and thought to inquire."

"What tray? Was she ill?"

Lady Elene pushed an errant strand of gray-blond hair out of her eyes. "Nay. She's...she's been most restless and irritable this day. She would not sit to eat the evening meal,

so I sent her a tray. 'Tis no wonder," she added, half under her breath, "when one such as she is so caged and used."

Alexander ignored his mother's barbed words, as he'd ignored the coolness in her blue eyes whenever she looked upon him of late. He'd felt the weight of her disapproval each time he took Phaedra to his chamber. Lady Elene thought he used the Spartan shamefully, and let him know it. Unused to his mother's censure, spurred by his own frustrated desire, Alexander had been as restless and irritable as his reluctant guest these past days. And yet, despite all, he'd not been able to let Phaedra retire to the women's quarters. Nor had he been able to end the mounting tension between them.

He'd end it this night, Alexander resolved, his jaw tight. Phaedra would not escape him. Before this night was through, she'd lie beneath him. Before the cocks crowed, he'd taste the silken sweetness that beckoned him like a siren's call. He was done with games, and with waiting.

"How did she leave?" he asked, his face grim.

"'Twas my fault, Captain." Therocles stepped forward, his shoulders squared and his face shamed. "I left my post this night for the space of a half hour. The lady must have slipped through the doors then."

"Why would you leave your post?"

Therocles flinched at the captain's deadly tone and cast a sideways glance at a weeping maid. The girl caught his look, and her wails reached a deafening crescendo.

"The little slut!" Lady Elene gasped. "That one has ever twitched her hips at anything and everything male!"

Since those particular well-padded hips had twitched more than once at, and under, Alexander, he could hardly fault Therocles for falling victim, as well. Some of the rigidity left his stance. He dismissed Therocles' indiscretion as something to be dealt with later, and turned his mind to the more urgent task of finding Phaedra.

"Tell me where you've sent the searchers."

\* \* \*

Alexander found her by sheerest chance. He was on his way out the door, his sword was buckled at his hip and a cloak was thrown over his shoulders in preparation for what he feared might be a long search of the roads out of Athens, when a panting servant came running up the street.

"Master, come at once. There's a ruckus in the Street of Three Sisters, by the temple of Apollo. 'Tis said some foreign woman holds off a rabble of drunks with curses and fists."

Alexander ran through the streets, Therocles at his heels. The way narrowed and darkened as it descended the hills behind the Parthenon. Twisting and turning, filled with the stench of rotting garbage and unwashed bodies, the dark alleys drew Alexander even deeper into the foul heart of the city that gleamed so white and pure when viewed from the sea on a sunlit day.

He heard the shouts long before he arrived on the scene.

"Take her, you gutless dog," a man's slurred voice exhorted. "Get behind and take her."

"You take her," another yelled. "The bitch all but bit off my ear."

Alexander rounded a corner and plowed into a milling crowd. At the head of the mob he saw a big, rawboned woman, with the bared breasts that proclaimed her calling, screeching and waving her arms excitedly.

"Get ahold of her, you fools," the woman cried. "Grab her arms, and let me pour my mixture down her throat. 'Twill take the fight from her quick enough."

"Aye, and put another kind of fire in her instead," a second bawd yelled. "Old Dora's potions would make a dead woman sit up and beg to be diddled."

"You filthy whore! Touch me and you'll lose the use of both hands and eyes!"

Alexander heard Phaedra's shrill voice, but couldn't see her. The shifting crowd hid her slight figure from his view.

"Anyone who touches her answers to me!" he roared.

Drawing his sword, he leapt into the fray. Therocles fol-



lowed with both huge fists swinging. The surprised men and women who surrounded Phaedra shrieked and scrambled to get out of their way. For a few moments, chaos reigned as the surging mass pushed and shoved. Bringing the pommel of his sword down in ruthless, head-knocking blows, Alexander fought his way through the roiling mob.

“Phaedra! Call to me! Guide me to you!”

“Alexander! Help me!” Her scream sounded desperate. “I’m here, by the wall! I can’t—”

Alexander’s heart stopped as her cry was cut off. Fury surged through his veins. He lifted a hapless prostitute from her feet and tossed her out of his way. She landed with a squeal atop a drunken sailor.

Therocles’ ferocious bellowing sounded in Alexander’s ear. Between them, they cleared a path through the mass. Alexander jumped over a drab who had stumbled before him and ran the last few feet to where Phaedra lay crumpled against a mud wall. He scooped her up in his arms, saw that she was but stunned, then tossed her over his shoulder.

Turning, he faced the mob. Whether it was the blood lust that blazed in his eyes or Therocles’ daunting presence that made the crowd edge away, he knew not. But whatever caused this dispersal, he wasn’t about to linger and risk their return.

He and Therocles had covered but a short distance back up the hill when Phaedra groaned and shifted on his shoulder. Her legs kicked against his hold.

“Let me down, Athenian,” she gasped, pounding feebly on his back. “My head is dizzy enough without you dangling me upside down.”

With one arm wrapped around her trim buttocks, he swung her from his shoulder and into his arms. She lay limp, blinking up at him.

“Are you all right?” he growled, not yet ready to forgive her for her attempt to escape, or for the fright she’d given him.

“I—I don’t know.” She lifted a shaky hand to push her



tumbled hair out of her eyes. "One of those men sat on me, while that horrible old woman poured the most noxious mixture down my throat." Her eyes widened in dismay. "Did she poison me?"

Alexander looked down at her, and a slow, rueful smile curved his lips. "You'll think so in a few minutes, little one. You'll think so."

'Twas just such a joke as the gods loved to play, Alexander thought as he strode through the streets with a moaning, writhing Phaedra in his arms. Just an hour ago, he'd vowed to have this woman panting with desire before the night was through. Now he prayed to every god he knew that she would rein in her frenzied passion, at least until they got off the city streets.

Therocles had dropped back, half amused and half embarrassed by the wanton way the lady tore at her gown and tried to rub her bare breasts against the captain's chest. Passersby stared, their mouths dropping open at the sight of Alexander and his gasping, sobbing burden.

"I burn!" she cried, squeezing her thighs spasmodically. "Alexander, I burn!"

"Aye, little one, I know."

One corner of Alexander's mind registered the fact that she had called his name, and that she had called it when she shouted for him when the mob had surrounded her. But the surge of satisfaction the knowledge gave him was lost in his mingled pity and wry helplessness at her predicament. His arms tightened around her.

"Your lady mother will attend to her," Therocles offered as they turned a corner and Phaedra's moans split the night air.

"No, she'll not," Alexander replied grimly. "None will attend her this night but me. Go and tell my mother we've recovered the lady. I'll be home anon."

He left Therocles standing in the street, and made a sharp

turn, then another. Within minutes, he was pounding on the entrance of a spacious two-story dwelling.

"Inform your mistress that Alexander, son of Porthos, desires her assistance," he told the astonished porter. The slave hurried off while Alexander tried to still Phaedra's frantic thrashing.

"Hush, sweeting, hush. 'Twill be over soon."

Aspasia, mistress to Pericles, renowned far and wide for her brilliance and beauty, came at once.

"Alexander! What brings you to my home so late?"

"I require your assistance," Alexander began, then broke off with a startled exclamation as Phaedra's hands groped beneath his belt. A flush washed over his cheeks as he pulled them away.

Aspasia's kohl-darkened eyes widened, and then a sardonic smile curved her lush, rouged lips. "It doesn't look to me as if you require the least assistance," she drawled.

Alexander held Phaedra's hands in a hard grip. "You don't understand. This lady is under my care."

"So I see."

"'Tis not what you think," he explained just before Phaedra stretched up on tiptoe and bit him on the neck. "Ouch! You little witch, cease!"

One of Aspasia's brows arched. "She's not to your usual tastes, Alexander. Did you bring her to me to, ah, refine her appetites? To train her in subtler pleasures?"

"No! This is the Lady Phaedra, who is in my keeping."

"Ahh... The little Spartan. Pericles told me you'd brought one home from your last voyage. Now I see why you've not been to visit my house these many nights."

She watched in amusement as Alexander twisted Phaedra and pinned her back to his front with an iron hold round her waist.

"She's been drugged, Aspasia. Some street bawd poured her potion down her throat. The old witch planned to sell her to all takers, I suppose."

Aspasia's smile faded, and she folded her arms across

her chest. "So you brought her here? Because I'm familiar with such potions?"

Alexander knew full well that this beautiful woman made use of aphrodisiacs to stimulate the responses of the graceful girls she procured for her guests' pleasures. Alexander had visited her home often when Pericles hosted his political gatherings, and had sampled more than one luscious woman trained by the famous courtesan.

He met Aspasia's eyes. "Aye, I brought her here. Is there aught that will ease her?"

Aspasia stared at Alexander for a moment. Then her lips parted in a husky laugh, the same laugh that had often reduced the erudite, sophisticated Pericles to a quivering mass.

"Oh, yes, Alexander. There is something that will ease her."

She clapped her hands, her eyes brimming with amusement as she watched Alexander struggle to contain his captive. A servant came scurrying in answer to her summons.

"This girl will show you to a chamber while I prepare a mixture I think might help."

Nodding in relief, Alexander scooped Phaedra into his arms. "I thank you, Aspasia. I'll see she drinks it all."

"Oh, no, my captain," the courtesan purred. "The brew is not for the lady. 'Tis for you. You'll need it to keep up your strength before this night is done."

Aspasia's husky laugh sounded in Phaedra's ears as if it came from the bottom of a deep well. She heard it, or thought she did, yet couldn't quite identify either the sound or the source. Her world tilted crazily as Alexander spun on one heel and carried her down dim hallways. She clung to him while shadows danced before her eyes and a new wave of heat rose in her loins. Arching against his restraining hold, she buried her face in the fold between his neck and shoulder, nipping and sucking and scoring his flesh with tongue and teeth.

"Ah, wait, my Phaedra. Wait."

She writhed out of his arms as soon as they were through the door to a large, airy chamber.

"Nay, no more waiting," she panted, tugging at the golden ropes that held her robe.

Alexander dismissed the goggle-eyed maid and slid the bolt home behind her. Calling on the gods to give him strength, he turned.

Naked and quivering with need, Phaedra launched herself at him. Alexander staggered back against the door, his eyes and his arms full. His hands slid over firm, sleek flesh, shaping themselves to her slender curves.

"Why do you wear so many clothes?" she muttered, tearing at his robe with frantic hands. When the fabric refused to give way to her determined assault, she abandoned it to fumble with his belt. The leather, weighted by sword and scabbard, fell to the floor with a dull thud. Phaedra gave a little grunt and attacked his robe once more. Pushing it aside, she bared his chest. With a sound halfway between a sigh and a sob, she rubbed her nose in the soft golden fleece.

Watching her dark head as it nuzzled his chest, Alexander told himself that he would only give her ease. That he would not take advantage of her drugged state to satisfy his own mounting need. He was not so dishonorable, not so base, as to take a woman who knew not—

"Holy Zeus!"

He jumped as a hot hand closed around his jutting manhood. When the hand began to squeeze and slide along its length, Alexander splayed both palms back against the door to keep from grabbing Phaedra and rushing with her to the bed. He would let her douse her fires as she would. If it killed him, he would let her find her own release.

"Holy, indeed," she concurred, a look of pure, feline satisfaction on her face as she surveyed the results of her efforts. Her hand increased its friction.

By the gods, his rod felt like smooth, tempered iron beneath her fingers. The flames consuming Phaedra roared

hotter, fiercer. Rubbing her aching nipples against his chest, she played with him. He groaned. She smiled. Leaning forward, she nipped at the flat, hard pebble of his nipple. His rod leapt in her hand.

A stab of need so strong that it rocked her back on her heels shot through Phaedra's belly. She sank to the floor, tugging him down with her by her fierce, unrelenting hold.

Alexander spared a last glance at the huge bed not ten feet away. Mounded with pillows and draped with gauzy curtains, it was a bed made for pleasure. His lips curved as he joined Phaedra on the hard tiles. He might have known his sea witch would chose her own time, her own place. Thinking to cushion her, he stretched out on the tiles, took hold of her waist and swung her over to straddle his hips.

Phaedra planted both hands on his shoulders and began a slow sawing movement, forward and back, forward and back. Alexander bit off a groan and reached up to bury both fists in her hair, her glorious, untamed mane of silky black hair.

"This is how I first saw you," he got out, his voice hoarse. "When you rose from the sea, your hair streaming down your back, you called to me, as the sirens called to Ulysses."

The green eyes above him narrowed. The mists clouding them cleared for the briefest instant.

"Alexander?" Her soft breath washed his face.

"Yes?"

"You know what happened to sailors who had not the foresight Ulysses had? To those who didn't bind themselves to the mast, or put wax in their ears so they'd not hear the sirens' call?"

He grinned. "Aye. Some jumped into the sea and drowned."

A slow, wicked smile curled her lips. "And when the rest washed ashore, the sirens devoured them."

Her eyes locked with his. Slowly, Phaedra lifted her hips. Her smile widened as she felt him rigid and upright beneath her. Then the fires took hold once more, and she pressed downward.



## *Chapter Eleven*



Phaedra woke to sunlight streaming across her face and the sound of doves cooing in a wicker cage. The birds' deep-throated warbles slammed into her head like the blows of a hammer on stone. Groaning, she sat up and lifted a hand to her aching brow. As if from a distance, she heard the faint patter of bare feet scurrying from the room. She closed her eyes against the pounding even that soft sound caused. Floating in a haze of gray, she slumped against high mounded pillows.

"So, you're awake at last."

With immense effort, Phaedra opened one eye. A tall, elegant woman with hennaed hair styled in intricate loops stood at the foot of her bed.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Aspasia."

Phaedra forced open her other eye. The light, airy chamber spun in front of her. "Where am I?" she mumbled after a long, heaving moment.

"You're in my home." The woman smiled, taking pity on her obvious confusion. "Alexander brought you here last night. You were suffering from...an indelicate irritation."

The fog swirling in Phaedra's head shifted. Tentacles of mist drifted across the seascape of her mind, revealing

vague, half-formed images. She frowned, concentrating harder, and the images sharpened. She remembered dark, winding city streets.

"I became lost," she began hesitantly.

Memories began crowding into her skull now. A shouting, threatening mob. A sour-breathed villain who pinned her to the cobbles. A harlot whose mouth twisted in a parody of a smile while she poured her vile brew down Phaedra's throat. A golden head gleaming in the night as he charged through the mob. That same golden head crushed to her breast as she writhed and sobbed and begged for release. A wide, soft bed, and a tangle of limbs.

Phaedra slithered out of bed, her horrified eyes taking in its twisted, stained sheets. She whirled to face Aspasia. Her head rocked at the violent movement, and she stumbled backward.

"Nay, don't tax your strength as yet, Lady Phaedra. It takes many hours for the aphrodisiac to work its way through your blood."

"Aphrodisiac!"

Phaedra moaned, knowing now that the half-formed images were real, not figments of her disordered mind.

"Aye. 'Twas a particularly potent one. The captain could hardly hold you when he brought you in."

Phaedra moaned again and covered her face with both hands. "The captain!"

Aspasia's husky laugh filled the chamber. "Come, lady, 'tis not so bad. If one must suffer the indignity of such a vile dosing, who better to work it out on than a man like Alexander."

Phaedra lifted her head and stared at the other woman. "Do you know him well?"

"Have I known his rod, do you mean?" Aspasia laughed again, hooking her arm through Phaedra's to lead her toward the baths in the next room. "Nay, to my regret, I've not had that pleasure. I am mistress to Pericles, Alexander's mentor, and entertain the captain often in my home. The

women of my house speak most highly of his endowments, however, and the manner in which he employs them.”

She signaled to the attendants waiting beside the bath to tend to Phaedra, then settled on a low couch to observe the proceedings.

Confused and a little daunted by this composed, sophisticated woman, Phaedra stood while the slaves softened her skin with warm cloths, then used stiff serrated wooden combs to scrape the sleep and sweat from her body.

“And do you share their opinion?” Aspasia asked with a half smile. “Was the captain as proficient as my women think him?”

“I...I don’t remember.”

Alexander returned to Aspasia’s house just after the sun reached its zenith. While Phaedra slept the sleep of the dead, he’d gone to answer his mother’s urgent summons and assure her of the lady’s well-being. That done, he was anxious to return to Phaedra’s side. And to her bed.

Although there was little reason for him to hurry, he supposed. She probably still lay unmoving, like a lump of waterlogged wood, her mouth slightly open and her breathing heavy with the remnants of the drug. Alexander grinned at the memory of his little Thedis as he’d left her, sprawled in naked, unconscious abandon across Aspasia’s white linen sheets. He wondered if she would recall the events of the night before when she finally woke. He knew he’d never forget them.

“The gods grant you good-day, Captain. My mistress bids you join her in her *solar*.”

Alexander slipped the porter a coin and made his way across the courtyard. When he stepped over the threshold of her main salon, his gracious words of greeting died on his lips.

Phaedra reclined full-length on a couch, clothed in a diaphanous gown that showed the luster of her sun-warmed skin through its transparent folds. Toes gilded with gold

paint and ringed with tinkling silver bells peeped out below the gown's hem. Silver and gold bangles decorated her wrists and upper arms. White lead paint masked her face, making her rouged lips stand out in stark contrast. Her ebony hair, gleaming with blue-black lights, was caught up with ropes of gold in an intricate, sophisticated coil.

"You were not gone long, Alexander," Aspasia observed.

With a wrench, he tore his eyes from the vision before him and looked to the courtesan who rose from her couch with languid grace.

"Long enough, it appears. I take it you're responsible for this remarkable transformation."

"Not entirely," Phaedra put in. "I took a hand in it myself."

She rose, also, although not quite as gracefully as Aspasia. Her feet tangled in the gossamer folds of the long gown, and the silver bells on the toe rings jingled as she sought her footing. With a little shake of the sheer material, she settled her skirts, then crossed the room to stand before him.

Alexander saw the angry glint in her eyes, and a smile tugged at his heart. Underneath that mask of paint and perfume, she was still his belligerent Phaedra. He had a good idea what must have put that furious glitter in her eyes. Deciding it would be wise to let her air her grievances in private, he took her arm and gave his hostess a small bow.

"If you'll excuse us, I would speak with the Lady Phaedra in the chamber you so graciously loaned her."

Phaedra tried to shrug out of his hold. "I'll speak with you here, Athenian. I don't wish to return to that chamber."

"Nevertheless, you will."

Her back rigid, she perforce accompanied him out of the *solar*. As soon as they reached the bedchamber, she jerked out of his hold.

"You'll manhandle me once too often and find yourself

without the use of your arm, you arrogant, pigheaded Athenian."

Alexander sent the maids from the bedchamber with a silent nod, then slid the iron bolt home. Folding both arms across his chest, he leaned back against the door.

"That wasn't what you called me last night."

She whirled, her face flushing under its paint. "I don't remember what I called you last night!"

"Yes, you do. 'Twas before the drug clouded your mind and heated your body. You called my name, and begged me to come to your aid."

"I did not!"

Alexander nodded gravely. "You did. I have Therocles as witness, if you don't believe me."

"Hah! That one would swear to whatever you say. He's no witness."

His face solemn, Alexander pondered her answer. "There's the crone—Dora, I think her name was. If I offered her the coins she planned to make by selling your body, I'm sure she'd relate how you called to me."

"If you offered her coins, she'd relate anything!"

Alexander couldn't hold back his smile any longer. He closed the distance between them, stopping but a heartbeat from her.

"And the drunken sailor, the one whose ear you bit. If I inquire within the fleet, I'd no doubt find one so wounded. He would swear you called my name."

Phaedra stared up at eyes that reminded her of sunlight sparkling on a summer sea and struggled to hold on to her ire. How did he do this? How did he look upon her with that teasing glint in his eyes and draw the anger and the hurt from her breast as a physician's lance drew the evil humors from the blood?

"Or the rogue who sat upon your chest," he continued with a grin. "I doubt not he carries lifelong scars of that brief encounter, and could easily be found. He'd speak for me."

Phaedra shook her head hopelessly. "By the gods, Athenian, I dress like a whore and paint my face to show you what you've made of me. Yet instead of displaying shame or the least hint of remorse for having brought me to this pass, you tease and sport with me."

His grin widened.

"'Tis not a matter for mirth!" she snapped. "I've lost my honor!"

He stepped forward and slid both arms around her waist, pulling her down against his chest. "Listen to me, Phaedra. You've lost neither your honor nor your dignity. We but sing the lines the gods have written for us, the song that began the first moment I saw you rising from the waves. We can cry out against our fate, or laugh at it."

"Oh, for the love of Zeus! I might have known you'd make some damned poetry out of the way I fell into your arms."

She felt the mirth rumbling in his chest.

"'Twas such a fall as odes are made of."

"It might have been," she muttered, admitting defeat, "if I could recall aught of it."

His shout of laughter filled the room, and he swung her up in his arms. "You'll remember this time, sweeting. I promise."

As he carried her across the room, Phaedra looked up into his eyes once more and knew herself to be lost. That accursed devilish gleam lit his eyes. It called to her to join him in their dance with fate. It challenged her. It beckoned her.

Against her will, against all that she'd tried to hold to through these turbulent, disquieting, frustrating days, she answered his call. A slow, reluctant smile curved her lips as he lowered her to the bed, then joined her there.

By the gods, it was sweet like this, Phaedra marveled. In the bright light of day, with doves cooing and a man's lighthearted laughter as he loosed the ropes that held her hair and whispered extravagant paeans to its lustrous



beauty. Not hurried, not frantic, not hurtful, but slow and sweet.

With a skill that she suspected was born of long practice, he removed her flimsy tunic, then his own. Within moments the morning air wafted over her, raising bumps where the breeze coming through the high windows kissed bare skin. Her nipples puckered, drawing Alexander's immediate attention. He leaned on one elbow, exploring them with a feather-light stroke.

Phaedra lay on her back and watched him through the screen of her lashes. The sun's rays glinted on the golden fuzz dusting his powerful arms and chest and added a sheen to his tanned, supple skin. Satisfying an urge long suppressed, she lifted a hand and let her fingertips glide along his collarbone, then over his shoulder and down his arm. His muscles quivered and bunched under her exploring touch, and she felt an answering tremor deep in her belly. She drew in a long, slow breath when he cupped her breast.

"Do you know how much I've ached to do this?" he murmured as he bent his head and took the turgid tip in his mouth.

"As much as I've ached for you to," she admitted on a small groan.

Sweetness gave way to sheer sensation. Needles of fire streaked to parts of her body she'd never realized were connected to her breast. Phaedra's languid pleasure tightened, sharpened. When his teeth closed on her nipple, she arched reflexively.

"Holy mother of the gods!" she gasped.

He half laughed, half groaned, and suckled at first one small, tender mound, then the other.

By the time he wrapped an arm about her waist and drew her up so that his mouth could reach hers, Phaedra burned. She felt the fire of his touch from her toes to her throat, and everywhere in between. Wrapping both arms around his neck, she met his hungry kiss with her own fierce need. All thoughts of sweetness, all sounds of doves cooing,

faded from her consciousness. There was only Alexander, his lips molding hers, his taste filling the recesses of her mouth. A hard, rough palm moved down her ribs, left its brand on her stomach, then tangled in the curls at the juncture of her thighs.

“Open for me, little one.”

Alexander felt her shift under him, felt her legs spread wide, and knew a primitive, elemental triumph. She offered herself to his touch. His fingers spread the folds of slick, hot flesh, and discovered the wetness that told him she was ready. Trembling with the strain of holding back, he forced himself to stroke and prime her further. Her head thrashed, and she writhed under his hand. Her breath came in hard, shallow pants. He slipped two fingers inside her channel, while his thumb pressed and rolled the tight nub of flesh at her core. She arched her neck and groaned far back in her throat.

Clenching her thighs against the spasms that rocked her, she called to him.

“Alexander!”

With a low growl, he mounted her. The poet and the warrior merged into one. He was all male, driven by the need to claim his woman, to lose himself in her tight, convulsing body. His hands anchored her head for his kiss, his knees pried her thighs wider apart.

It was a fiery joining, one that consumed them both. He positioned himself and thrust home. Limbs twisted with limbs, hips thrust against hips. Phaedra arched under him, spurring him to ride her harder, faster.

She screamed his name again—or Alexander thought she did. He couldn't be sure for the roaring in his ears as he drove to his own pounding, shattering climax.

“Do you think you'll remember this joining?” he asked later, much later. He lay flat on his back, one arm bent under his head, eyes closed, while he waited for the universe to right itself.

"Aye," Phaedra murmured in lazy satisfaction. "This one, and the one of an hour ago. And the one before that."

Alexander chuckled. "You spurred my pride when you remembered naught of last night."

"I certainly spurred something," she agreed, propping herself on his chest. "Last night, did we really—? Was I—?"

Alexander's chest rumbled with laughter. "Yes, you were."

"Athenian swine," she muttered, without much heat. "To take advantage of me like that."

"Nay, sweeting, 'twas you who took advantage of me. I'm surprised I had the strength to dip my oar in the water this day."

Her reluctant laughter joined his. "You dipped it quite competently, Athenian, and rowed hard."

Silence, rare and companionable, descended. For a few moments no sound disturbed their somnolent stillness except the faint, distant chatter of Aspasia's servants.

"Alexander."

"Hmm?"

"I would stay here." Phaedra traced a pattern in the sweat-dampened swirls of his golden chest hair. Traces of white lead face paint were clearly visible amid the wiry curls.

"I spoke with Aspasia while you were gone this morning. She doesn't mind."

"We can stay awhile," Alexander agreed.

Opening his eyes, he surveyed the tousled creature propped on his rib cage. Her red, swollen lips, rubbed clean of the scarlet rouge she'd used on them, sent a spear of satisfaction through him. This was how she should look, he thought, well kissed and thoroughly satiated. He lifted one hand and wiped a faint streak of white from her temple, listening with half an ear as she continued.

"Nay, I mean I would stay here permanently. Or at least as long as I must stay in Athens. You could leave Therocles

here with me, if it would make you feel better." She gave an inelegant little snort. "He'd certainly enjoy it."

Alexander frowned, his lazy contentment fading. "What are you talking about?"

Her fingers stopped their play, and she looked up at him impatiently.

"I'm speaking of taking up residence here, with Aspasia."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you won't stay here."

"What's ridiculous about it?"

"You know full well that Aspasia, for all her wit and beauty, is a courtesan."

Phaedra's eyes, so lambent just moments before, took on a hard glitter. "She's a whore, you mean."

Alexander measured his words carefully. "Aspasia is of the hetaerae. It is an honest and respected profession. You are not one of them, nor will you stay here."

He flinched as Phaedra gave his hair a vicious yank and scrambled off his chest.

"I'm not?" she demanded. "I'm not a whore, just like Aspasia, whatever polite title you choose to give her?"

"Great Zeus' beard!" Alexander struggled to a sitting position amid the tangled sheets and scattered pillows. "What ails you, woman? Mere moments ago you arched under me and mewled in delight, and now you spit like a scalded cat."

"'Tis the price you pay, Athenian. Whores may give you a moment of pleasure, but they need not lie still and mute afterward like obedient, well-trained wives."

"Will you cease this talk of whores?"

Alexander threw aside the twisted sheets and rose. Planting one fist on either hip, he surveyed the angry, mutinous woman with baffled eyes.

"Is this some ploy to escape me?" he demanded. "After your failure last night, do you think to try from here?"

"Nay!" she protested.

Alexander battled a growing irritation. Here he was, all

but drained of every ounce of energy he possessed, and she bristled with hostility. And after what they'd just shared! Well, he had not the strength, or the desire, to deal with her rebellious spirit now.

"Get dressed," he ordered shortly. "I'll take you home."

She sat cross-legged in the bed and folded her arms over her chest. "'Tis not my home. I've no wish to go back."

"Get dressed," he growled.

"Nay." Her chin lifted defiantly. "I would stay here. Aspasia rules her own establishment. She entertains when and who she will. She goes about the city as she wishes. She has freedoms your poor mother and sister have never dreamed of."

Alexander gaped at her. "My *poor* mother and sister? Their lives are full. They...they are honored and treasured."

"Pah! Their whole world revolves around you and your whims. They don't go out without your explicit approval, or speak their minds in your presence. They are docile, mannerly creatures. I am not."

"In that, at least, you're right."

Her jaw clenched. "I would stay here. You may come to me here, should you wish to use me. If I'm to live like a whore..."

"If you use that word one more time, I swear I'll beat you," Alexander warned in a low, dangerous tone. "And if you don't get some cloth on your back—now!—I'll carry you naked through the streets."

They made the short trip to his house in simmering silence. For once Alexander's easy humor had deserted him. He'd thought that once they joined, once Phaedra said his name and gave herself to him, she'd lose some of her sharp edges and become more like the women he was used to. More gentle, more...more docile. Phaedra's own word rose to mock him.

Was that what he wanted? he wondered irritably, glancing down at the dark head beside him. Did he wish her soft and pliant within his arms, meek and accommodating without? His brows drew together in a ferocious scowl.

Nay, he acknowledged, he didn't want her docile. But a shade less belligerence would as sure as Hades be welcome. He rapped on his front door, gave the porter a quick nod, then ushered Phaedra inside. After the strenuous, tumultuous night and day, he needed the peace and serenity of his house to restore his equilibrium—before he took this irritating, stubborn, contrary female to bed again.

Alexander stepped inside the courtyard and was met with the sounds of loud, heart-rending sobs. Holy Zeus, what now? He stalked across the yard, Phaedra a few steps behind.

"Well! 'Tis about time you returned!" Lady Elene's irate glance whipped to Phaedra. "And you, too, you tiresome creature. Demetria, cease your wailing and tell your brother what you've done."

Alexander blinked at his mother's sharp tone, then frowned as his sister lifted a blotched, tear-streaked face to his. She took one look at his forbidding glare, and sobbed even more heartily.

"What's wrong with her?" Alexander asked.

A third figure stalked forward. Darien's dark, handsome face wore a furious scowl. "It seems she doesn't desire to wed," he ground out.

"What?"

"At least, she doesn't desire to wed me," he amended angrily.

Astounded, Alexander eyed his lieutenant as if he'd imbibed too much unwatered wine. "What nonsense is this?"

Lady Elene shook her head in disgust. "The foolish, silly girl told Darien she wanted control of her dowry."

"Only part of it!" Demetria wailed.

Feeling as if he'd wandered into a play in which everyone knew the lines but him, Alexander searched Lady



Elene's harried face, then the lieutenant's tight, furious one, for some clue as to this madness.

While he floundered, Phaedra moved to stand beside his sister and patted her briskly on the shoulder.

"Cease your sobbing, Demetria. You've done naught but ask for what is due you."

Alexander's jaw tightened ominously. It needed only this to set a spark to the anger that had simmered in him since Phaedra had turned on him like a spitting cat in Aspasia's bed.

"Are you part of this?"

"If you mean have I spoken to her about marriage, yes."

Darien shot her a baleful look. "I guessed as much. Demetria was ever sweet and gentle until you came into this house."

Phaedra returned his glare. "She has a right to know what she takes into her marriage, and what she takes out if she divorces."

"Divorces!" Three voices thundered at her in unison.

Furious, Alexander stepped forward. "You had no right to speak to her of such matters."

Demetria lifted a watery but defiant face. "Do not chastise the Lady Phaedra for speaking to me about that which you should have, brother."

Alexander had had enough. In a hard, cold tone he rarely used aboard ship, and had never used in his home, he asserted his authority.

"Lady Phaedra, you will retire." His eyes warned her not to say a word, not to *dare* say a word.

"Lady mother, take Demetria abovestairs and restore her composure. I'll speak to her later."

Grim-faced, he turned to the lieutenant. "I suggest you go and cut yourself a stout tree branch. You'll need it if you decide to take my sister to wife."

## Chapter Twelve



“I tell you, Alexander, Demetria’s not the same these last weeks. Not since you took that Spartan into your household.”

Darien’s low voice barely carried over the noisy crowd spilling out of the flower-bedecked dining chamber into the courtyard.

Alexander sent his lieutenant a wry glance over the rim of a silver drinking bowl. “None of us is quite the same.”

“She’s not at all the girl I thought I was taking to wife.”

A ripple of feminine laughter drew both men’s gaze to a bright clutch of women at the far end of the room. As was proper, a bridal veil swathed most of Demetria’s face and covered her glossy brown hair. But nothing could disguise the sparkle in her eyes.

“Demetria goes into this marriage with more knowledge and assurances than most women,” Alexander admitted.

“Aye,” Darien agreed, his handsome face glum under his wreath of myrtle leaves.

Alexander laughed. “Take heart, man. At least you gain a woman for a wife. The timid maid I wed cried when she placed her toys on Artemis’ altar. She sobbed in embarrassment when the priests washed us in the sacred spring. And she damned near drowned me in her tears when at last I worked up the courage to approach her bed.”

“Hah! If your Spartan has any say in the matter, I won’t be allowed near Demetria’s bed. Not unless I agree to turn over the rents from the home farm, or timber rights, or some such extortion.”

Biting his lip to hold back a smile, Alexander nodded. In truth, he felt more sympathy for Darien than he allowed to show. Demetria had proven surprisingly recalcitrant when he tried to point out the error of her thinking. It had taken several stormy sessions, more bouts of tears, and irritated pleas to his mother to intervene before the girl was brought to understand what she could, and could not, control in her dowry. Alexander had found himself going over in minute detail the furnishings and jewels that constituted her trousseau, which was hers alone, to use as she saw fit. Then he’d had to explain the precise number of slaves and silver talents he’d pledged Darien to ensure her comfort and security in her life to come.

More than once Demetria had left his chamber in smiling agreement, only to return with another question after conferring with Phaedra. The sight of his sister’s brown curls bent close to Phaedra’s shining black mane as they sat on a bench in the courtyard, usually with Chloe between them, had both amused and exasperated Alexander.

His gaze strayed to Phaedra, standing quietly at the edge of the crowd of women, with Chloe perched on one hip. They were close enough to be part of the festivities, but far enough away that his daughter’s leg would not be accidentally jarred. Alexander felt a strange lurch in the pit of his stomach at the sight of these two females who dominated his life, so different and yet so close.

His mother had told him of Phaedra’s sessions with Chloe. That his captive would use her energies to ease his child’s pain made Alexander feel strangely humble. And thankful. But not thankful enough to let her go, as she regularly demanded. Nor thankful enough to spare her his lewd and lascivious attentions, as she termed them.

One corner of Alexander’s lips curled up in a wicked

grin. He intended to pay his little Thedis more lewd attention this very night, as he had each night in the weeks since he brought her home from Aspasia's house. And each morning, he recalled with a slow curl of desire. And as many afternoons as he was able to slip away from overseeing the construction of his new ship.

By the gods, she stirred his blood and kept him in a constant state of hard, aching need. Having once given herself to him, Phaedra now held nothing back. Despite her resentment of his hold on her, despite her oft-repeated argument that she should lodge with Aspasia, she was as passionate and ferocious in his arms as he'd known she would be. His grin widened, and he lifted his drinking bowl.

Across the room Demetria called some question to Phaedra, pulling both her and Chloe into the circle of lively women.

"Oh, no," Darien groaned. "She's probably going to inquire whether the Lady Phaedra knows a cure for the diseases that affect a man's performance in the marriage bed. Do you know, Alexander, Demetria actually had the audacity to ask me yesterday if I was clean?"

Alexander sputtered into his wine.

"And if I was not, what medicaments I took?"

"Mayhap one stout tree branch won't be enough, Darien."

The younger man snorted. "Were I to touch one hair on your sister's head, you'd break both my arms and leave my manhood for the gulls to pick at. And if you did not, that damned Spartan would. How long do you think she'll be here to plague us?"

Alexander's smile faded. "I don't know," he replied slowly. "I don't know if I can let her go."

Darien sent him a sharp look. "She is niece to the king of Sparta! You know the Council considers her a political hostage. If he demands her return, they'll give her to him to keep the peace."

His face grim, Alexander shook his head. "He doesn't want peace. He wants war. Every report coming from the south says he gathers more and more men and harangues his allies for more ships."

"I've heard that Pericles himself goes to Corinth," Darien said. "A last, desperate attempt to convince the Corinthians not to launch their fleet in support of the Spartans."

"He departs tomorrow."

"Well, I hope he succeeds. I'd not wish to leave on my wedding journey and come back to find the city at war."

Alexander rolled his shoulders impatiently, as if to disperse the dark clouds their words conjured up.

"Come, man, this is a marriage celebration. The slaves have finished clearing the banquet tables. 'Tis time for the ceremony. You'd best decide quickly if you really wish to claim the hoyden who is my sister."

Darien set aside his drinking bowl, and his eyes sought Demetria across the crowded room. The grim lines around his mouth softened into a smile.

"Aye, Captain, I'll have her."

While Darien took his place in the center of the chamber, Alexander moved to stand beside Phaedra. His strong arms lifted Chloe and settled her on his shoulders. The girl squealed with delight, grasping her father's hair with both hands to keep her balance.

An expectant hush settled over the crowd as servants brought out the wedding cakes—small, flat rounds made of flour, honey and sesame. When all present had partaken of this traditional symbol of abundance and fertility, Lady Elene led Demetria forward. Smiling, she placed her daughter's hand in Darien's.

The lieutenant's voice rang out. "In front of all who here bear witness, I claim thee as my wife."

'Twas done.

With those simple words, 'twas done.

As quickly as that, his sister passed from his care to that of her husband. Alexander told himself that he was well rid

of the baggage, that Darien would now have to deal with her tears and tantrums. But his heart told him that he'd miss her mischievous laughter and sweet cajolery, her eager welcomes when he returned from his voyages and her doleful faces whenever he left. He swallowed the lump lodged in his throat, and went forward to lead his sister, now Darien's wife, to the chariot that would carry her to her new home.

Guests with nuptial torches in hand escorted the chariot through the streets, while flutists and lyre players serenaded the procession along the way. Passersby showered the bride and groom with handfuls of grain and berries to ensure their fruitfulness. When the cortege reached Darien's home, his mother came out to greet the couple and lead them to a bridal chamber strewn with flowers. While two hefty shipmates took up guard positions outside the chamber door, the guests sang Sappho's song to Hymen.

Raise high the roof, O Hymenaios  
For a mighty bridegroom,  
As strong as Ares, as virile as Poseidon,  
Enters there, O Hymenaios

Alexander swallowed as the heavy wooden door slammed shut on his sister and her husband.

Phaedra was silent during the walk back to Alexander's house. Her feet dragged, and she lifted her face to the starry night. While those around her chattered about the lavishness of the wedding feast and the bride's veiled beauty, she heard only the owls hooting in temple rafters and the distant bark of dogs scavenging in the agora.

This was the first time she'd been outside the walls of Alexander's home since the night she'd lost herself so hopelessly in Athens' dark streets. The first time in weeks she'd felt the breeze on her face or breathed in the odor of the teeming city. Alexander had been adamant about her



confinement within his home, for both her safety's and her reputation's sake. Although she'd sneered that she had little reputation left to concern her, he would not relent. Nor would Lady Elene support her in her plea, stating that respectable Athenian women appeared in public only for a marriage, a birth or a funeral. And, strangely enough, to participate in the frenzied, orgiastic rites of Dionysus every second year.

Phaedra's ever-present frustration at her confinement rose within her breast. But instead of the sharp, restless near desperation that normally accompanied it, she felt only irritation. Frowning, she wondered what had lessened the burden of her captivity.

She knew the answer before her mind even formed the question. The captain, of course. Unbidden, her gaze flew to his tall form. He strode along with Chloe still atop his shoulders, his back straight, his hair silvered in the moonlight. Her heart began to thump at the sight of him.

Soon they would be home, she told herself. Soon Chloe would be abed. Lady Elene would be tired from the festivities, and no doubt weepy over Demetria's departure. She'd retire early, Phaedra guessed, her heart now racing. She wet suddenly dry lips with the tip of her tongue. Picking up her pace, she moved with the rest of the guests through the darkened streets.

By the time Alexander had settled Chloe for the night and joined her in the master's chamber, Phaedra was in a fever. Mayhap it was the wine she'd drunk at the wedding feast that made her ache so to couple with him. Or the sight of Darien leading his bride to their flower-covered bed. Or mayhap it was Alexander's broad shoulders when he stripped off his tunic and turned to her. Whatever it was, Phaedra knew a wantonness, a hunger for this man, that frightened her with its searing intensity. She walked into his embrace.

"What is it, little one?"

Alexander tilted up her chin, his thumbs stroking the line of her jaw.

"What clouds your eyes?"

She shook her head, shaken by her need for this man, stunned by its force.

"Tell me what disturbs you."

"Nay, I want no talk this night," she said, her voice husky with desire. "No words. No arguments or poetry between us."

His thumbs ceased their soft stroking. "What do you want, then?"

"This. Only this."

Rising up on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his mouth down to hers. If he was surprised by the fierceness of her kiss, he didn't show it. He fit his lips to hers and fed her hunger with his own.

It was Phaedra who tugged her robe over her head and threw it to the floor. When they tumbled to the bed, it was Phaedra whose hips straddled his. With hot, questing hands, she explored him, running her palms over the broad expanse of his chest, tracing the battle scars that marked his smooth flesh. When she'd brought herself and him to a fevered pitch, she leaned forward and rubbed the aching tips of her breasts against his chest. Leaning over farther, she claimed his lips. Her hand slid down between their sweat-dampened bodies to find his rigid shaft.

Glorying in its smooth satin feel, she stroked and teased and tormented him, as he'd done so often to her. A thrill of triumph raced through her heated veins when a dewy drop beaded the tip of his penis. He groaned her name, and the realization of her power over him was like a spark to her already smoldering embers. Slithering down his long, hard body, she took him in her mouth.

"Phaedra," he panted after a few moments. "Cease, sweeting, or I'll spill myself before you're ready."

"I'm ready," she gasped, realizing that her words were truer than he'd ever know. She was ready, more than ready,

to take him into her body, the way she'd already taken him into her heart.

Phaedra was still asleep when Alexander left the next morning. She awoke to his scent on the sheets and the prickly feel of his spill dried on her thighs. For a moment she lay unmoving, battling an uncharacteristic despair. 'Twas the wedding, she knew, that had made her so desperate to couple last night—and left her so despondent this morning. 'Twas seeing Demetria take her husband's hand and join her life to his. 'Twas knowing that such a ceremony would never be her lot in life.

No Spartan would have her now, not if it became known that she lay willingly with the enemy. All those weeks ago in Limera, she'd protested her innocence and caused her uncle sufficient doubt that he would have taken her home again. But she could make no such protest now. Not since she'd lost herself and her honor in the Athenian's arms.

Alexander might refuse to acknowledge that her life was changed. He might brush off her insistence that she go live with Aspasia. He might ignore his mother's censorious looks. But Phaedra knew that, whatever she had been before she met this sea captain, she was different now. Less the lady she had been. But more the woman. Much more. For all she'd lost when she'd given herself to Alexander, she knew in her heart she'd gained.

She rolled over, burying her face in pillows that still bore traces of his scent. And despite her creeping despair, despite her fear of what the future held, Phaedra knew that she would do no different, were she given the chance to live these last weeks over. When Alexander smiled at her, inviting her to join him in their private pleasures, she would tumble again into his arms as she had last night, and the nights before. In his arms, she'd take, and give, what pleasure she could before the gods rolled the dice and played chance with their fates once more.

\* \* \*

As it happened, the gods rolled the dice even sooner than Phaedra had feared. She was sitting with Chloe in the courtyard four days later, working the girl's muscles, when Alexander returned unexpectedly. She took one look at his face, then rose and went forward to meet him.

"Sparta marches on Athens," he told her, his voice low and tense. "All captains must report to the agora immediately to draw lots for their hulls. As soon as our crews assemble, we sail."

Phaedra felt the blood drain from her face. It had come. The moment she'd feared and dreaded. Her city and his were at war. A rush of pain swamped her. She would pay now for those stolen moments in the enemy's arms. She clenched her fists, feeling her nails bite into her palms.

"And I? What do I do?"

"You stay here," he said fiercely, as if to forestall argument. "I leave Therocles for your protection, and have sent word to Darien to return immediately from his wedding journey. He'll be unhappy at having missed the sailing, but will see to your care, and that of my mother and Chloe."

Phaedra drew in a deep breath. "And if my uncle marches to the gates of Athens and demands my release?"

"Do you think he will?" he asked slowly.

She swallowed. "Nay."

"Nor do I, or I would not leave you." Alexander took both her arms in a hard hold. "But if he should surprise us both and demand you as the price of peace, know that I will not allow it. Wherever I am, I will return to reclaim you and hold you fast. You are mine."

Phaedra's heart slammed against her ribs. The implacability in his face robbed her of speech. Whatever she would have said in answer, had she been able to speak at all, was lost as Lady Elene hurried out of the kitchens.

"What is it, Alexander? Why are you home so early?"

\* \* \*

As soon as his mother heard the news, the household erupted into a frenzy of activity. Alexander's personal servants packed the few possessions he would take with him, while he conferred with Lady Elene and his chief steward as to the disposition of the people and goods from his various farms and enterprises outside the city.

Phaedra sat stiff and silent in the courtyard, watching the proceedings with a heavy heart. A disgruntled Therocles, clearly unhappy at being left out of the action, joined her in her silent vigil.

"By the gods," he muttered, "I hate to miss this sailing."

"Because of the battles to come?" Pain and uncertainty lowered Phaedra's voice to a husky whisper.

"Nay," Therocles scoffed, "there won't be any battles, not real ones. Those pesky Corinthians and weak-kneed Limerians barely know how to row a ship. Our crews will sail circles around them."

When Phaedra sent him a skeptical look, his wide, gap-toothed grin broke out.

"'Tis the plunder I hate to miss out on, even if the captain did promise me a portion of his share. 'Twill be like taking honey cakes from babes!"

Phaedra stared up at him, astonished at his attitude. War was a grim business in Sparta. Young boys were trained to kill with every weapon in the arsenal, including their bare hands. In some military companies, a youth could not be admitted to warrior rank until he'd hunted down an errant slave or escaped prisoner and strangled him with his own hands. Phaedra had heard stories of prisoners released for just such purposes. Spartan men left for war, not with gleeful anticipation such as Therocles evinced, but with grim determination to slay the enemy or die with honor.

Would she ever understand these Athenians, she wondered? Even the captain, when he took leave of his daughter and mother, did so with a lighthearted laugh and promises to bring them sparkling diadems and golden earrings from his share of the tribute.

When Alexander approached her, Phaedra felt as if a fist had clenched about her heart and squeezed painfully. With his sword belt slung low on his hips and a leather band around his forehead to hold his tawny hair out of his eyes, he looked very much the rogue who had stolen her away. He pulled her to her feet, a devilish smile tugging at his mouth, and at her soul. Therocles edged away to give them as much privacy as a courtyard full of interested spectators would allow.

"May the gods keep you, little Thedis, until you welcome me home again."

Phaedra swallowed and answered the challenge in his eyes. "If you call me that disgusting name again, Athenian, your homecoming will be most uncomfortable."

The laughter that she'd come to crave rang in her ears as he swept her into his arms. His head bent to hers, his mouth hovered just above her lips.

"Will you miss me, my Phaedra?"

"As an ass misses a burr under his blanket."

"Ah, sweeting, I hope I've been more than just a burr under your blankets."

Conscious of the crowd gathered to see him off, Phaedra felt a tide of red wash her cheeks. "Athenian swine," she muttered.

"Nay, don't send me off with such epithets." His voice lowered until it was a private caress, for her alone. "Say it. Say my name."

Phaedra wet her lips.

"Say it, my love."

With a resigned sigh, she lifted her eyes to his. "May the gods keep you safe, Alexander."

His kiss was hard and long, a glorious taking, a blatant marking. 'Twas as if he wanted to put his brand on her for the benefit of all watching. When he finally lifted his head, her breath came in painful gasps.

"You are mine, my Phaedra. Now and for all time. Remember that."



Giving his mother and daughter a jaunty salute, he was gone.

If the days of Phaedra's confinement had seemed long before, after the captain's departure they stretched endlessly. Without Alexander's demanding presence in bed to relieve her frustration and drain her energies, Phaedra grew restless and irritable once more. And as refugees poured into the city with tales of the approaching Spartan army, she was wracked by conflicting loyalties. She wanted to pray for her city's victory, yet could not bring herself to wish harm on the captain's family.

Soon after Alexander's departure, the Council placed armed guards around and within the house, declaring the Spartan woman a hostage to her uncle's behavior. Distracted by the increasing demands of the refugees from Alexander's farms, Lady Elene ignored the soldiers' presence. But Phaedra felt their eyes on her back with each step she took.

To distract her from her growing fears, she stretched her sessions with Chloe for longer periods each day. A quiet corner was set aside for them in the courtyard, which was now crowded with makeshift shelters and roving livestock. Amid the noise and bustle, Phaedra listened to the little girl's chatter and worked her leg with intense concentration.

One afternoon a week or so after the captain's departure, Lady Elene joined them. The burden of caring for Alexander's dependents and slaves brought in from the countryside had put tired lines on the matriarch's face. Phaedra had wished to help her, but could not. Whatever aid she gave the Athenians was an act traitorous to the Spartan armies. Surprisingly, Lady Elene seemed to understand without a word having been spoken between them. She was content to let Phaedra care for Chloe, while she cared for the refugees.

"How does it go?" the older woman asked, giving the little girl a tired smile.

Chloe's brown eyes filled with excitement. "It doesn't hurt so much anymore, Grandmother. Phaedra says she's worked the muscles loose."

Lady Elene lifted an inquiring brow.

"I felt some movement yesterday," Phaedra admitted.

"Truly?" Lady Elene gasped.

"Truly."

"Truly," Chloe piped up. "And Phaedra says if I'm good and do all my exercises, mayhap I can stand to greet Papa when he comes home. Phaedra says she thinks my leg will bear me."

Over the child's head, Lady Elene's eyes begged for confirmation.

"Mayhap," Phaedra began cautiously.

"I'm going to wear my best pink tunic," Chloe interjected. "And stand right beside the door, so Papa will see me first when he comes in. Phaedra says he'll—"

She broke off in confusion as slow, rich laughter rolled out of Lady Elene. The sound was so unexpected and so unprecedented that both Chloe and Phaedra stared at the older woman in surprise.

"Ah, Chloe," Lady Elene said finally, wiping her eyes with a corner of her robe. "I don't laugh at your wonderful plans. I just remembered how once I prayed to Hestia for patience at every 'Papa says' that fell from your lips. Now, I find myself bracing for the next 'Phaedra says.'"

Phaedra stiffened, sending Lady Elene a wounded look. "'Twas not my intention to wean Chloe from any devotion to her father."

The older woman put a hand on her arm. "You could not do that, child, any more than you could come between me and my son. Although I'll admit that there have been times these last weeks I've wanted to box his ears, much as I did when he was but a cocky boy, for the way he's used you."

She smiled at Phaedra's openmouthed surprise. Giving Chloe a quick look, she chose her words carefully.

"We'll speak later, Lady Phaedra. Just remember, my son's but a man, after all. Smarter than most, but as stupid as only a man can be when it comes to women."

Lady Elene rose, dusting her hands down the front of her robe.

"Come, child, don't look so astounded. I have only to see his face when he takes your hand, and yours when you—"

She broke off as a hard pounding sounded on the front door. "Oh, no, not more refugees," she murmured. "I've filled our house to the rafters, and Darien's, and even bedded down those I could in the temple across the street. I know not where we'll put more."

It was not weary, frightened travelers that Therocles opened the door to, however. It was a heavily armed patrol, with a battle-scarred senior hoplite in command.

Even in these tense times, Lady Elene didn't forget her dignity. She drew her head covering across half her face to veil it before she stepped forward.

"My son is at sea, with the fleet."

The officer in charge stepped forward. "It's not the captain we seek, my lady. We've come for the Spartan woman."

"For Lady Phaedra? Why?"

"King Naxos laid waste to the village of Cylene this morning, killing all within its walls. In retaliation, the Council has declared the woman's life forfeit."

## Chapter Thirteen



“How will they kill me?”

Phaedra turned from the small, barred window that had been her only link to the outside world for the past four days to face the lieutenant.

“Tell me, Darien. I would rather know than worry and fear.”

A look of helpless rage suffused his features. One fist clenched and unclenched spasmodically at his side.

“They will take you to the agora and let the mob stone you. The cowardly pederasts have not the balls to do it themselves, cleanly and with dignity.”

Phaedra nodded, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat. “When?”

He raked a hand through his dark, curly hair, avoiding her eyes.

“When?” she repeated.

“Tomorrow, or the day after. It took a near fortune in bribes, but I’ve convinced them at least to wait until Pericles returns. Mayhap he can turn them from this course. He should be here tonight, tomorrow at the latest.”

“And Alexander?”

Darien shook his head. “We’ve had no word.”

At her stone-faced nod, the lieutenant stepped forward. One hand reached out, then dropped to his side. He was

uncomfortable still with this reversal of his role, Phaedra knew. After being suspicious and distrustful of her for so long, he was forced by circumstances to become her protector. Now he stood as the only obstacle between her and the Council's verdict. Awkwardly he tried to reassure her.

"Don't give up hope yet, Lady Phaedra. I sent Therocles aboard the swiftest ship I could hire. He'll find the fleet and bring the captain home. I'd have gone myself, had not Lady Elene convinced me I could be of more use here."

Forcing down the panic that clutched at her, Phaedra lifted her head. "I thank you for what you've done, Lieutenant. If...if they should come for me before Pericles returns, or Alexander, I want you to know I thank you."

"'Twas done for the captain," he replied gruffly. "He's my friend."

"Aye," Phaedra replied.

Darien hesitated, obviously ill at ease. Lacking Alexander's facility with words, he struggled to find some way to lessen her fears. In the midst of her own despair, Phaedra found the strength to try to ease his. Gripping his forearm, she essayed a small smile.

"You've done all that friendship and honor demand and more."

He covered her hand with his, holding it for a long, quiet moment. At length he forced a weak grin.

"I hope the captain appreciates my efforts when he comes home and discovers his money chests emptied for bribes to those old farts on the Council. You may not thank me then, when he demands repayment."

Phaedra stiffened, knowing he meant no insult, but hurt to the quick nonetheless.

"Ah, damn my clumsy tongue," he muttered. "I didn't mean that Alexander would expect payment with...that he would expect you to lie with him in return for..."

Phaedra withdrew her hand and fought to keep the bitterness from her voice. "You don't need to stumble and stammer. My own uncle called me whore when he refused

the Council's offer of my life in exchange for his immediate withdrawal. And he's right. I gave myself to the enemy, and must now pay the price."

"Alexander's not your enemy."

"He's the enemy of my city. 'Tis the same thing."

"Lady Phaedra, listen to me," Darien pleaded. "I'm not skilled in political debate. And I know little of the ways of women, as Demetria informs me thrice daily. But I do know how a man may feel, and I tell you Alexander holds you dear."

Phaedra glanced up, a painful hope piercing her heart. Mayhap her death would not be so vile if she could take with her the thought that Alexander felt something of what she did.

"I know he lusts for me," she said slowly. "And that he's loath to give up the prize he snatched from Sparta. But has he said aught of...of other feelings?"

"Nay," Darien admitted. "But he doesn't need to. I can see it in the way he looks on you."

Her hope withered, and she managed a bleak smile. "One as smooth with words as Alexander would find a way to speak what's in his heart."

When Darien would have argued further, Phaedra held up a hand. "Nay, it matters not. I chose the path I now tread. Tell me, how does Lady Elene fare, and Chloe?"

"They're fine. Lady Elene sends you more food and fresh robes."

He gestured toward the baskets on the floor of her cell, and Phaedra nodded her thanks. She'd not been mistreated during her incarceration. The guards had not abused her, and Lady Elene had sent mounds of food and warm clothes, along with stern messages via Darien to be brave and not lose hope. Chloe had sent her favorite doll, which Phaedra cradled to her breast each night.

She'd been brought before the Council twice in the past four days. Once to hear them read the formal proclamation they sent to her uncle, now encamped outside Athens'



walls, and once to hear his response. Even now his terse reply, that he cared not for the fate of one who whored with Athenians, made her spirit cringe. She'd expected him to deny her, but not do so in a way that stripped her of all dignity in front of the enemy.

"I must go."

Darien's brusque voice dragged her thoughts from her uncle. With his departure, she faced the prospect of another long, lonely day and night with only her fears and memories of Alexander to sustain her.

He must have seen her sudden tremors, because he came forward and took her hands.

"If there is aught that I can do, know you that I will do it. Not just for the captain's sake," he added. "My lady wife cries and tears her hair, worrying about you, and my mother-by-marriage is most distraught. And I...I would not see you harmed. You have a warrior's heart in your woman's body."

Phaedra's eyes lingered on the door of her cell long after Darien left. His words echoed in her mind and bolstered her faltering courage. How could she have become so weak, so spineless? How could she have let those doddering old men who constituted Athens' Council frighten her? She was of Sparta, as fiercely bred as any of the warriors camped outside Athens' walls. If she were to die, she'd do so in a way these Athenians would long remember.

Pacing the small cell, she began to formulate various plans. In quick succession she progressed from laying a curse upon the Council and their heirs that would ensure the end of their line for all eternity to snatching a guard's sword en route to the agora and taking as many Athenians with her to the underworld as she could.

With each scheme she considered and discarded, her spirit reasserted itself. As her energy returned, she paced the small cell furiously. When the door swung open later that evening, she spun around, her blood pounding and the light of battle in her eyes.

The man who entered blinked and took an involuntary step backward.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Phaedra demanded, running her eyes over his travel-stained figure in search of weapons. To her disgust, she saw he wore no sword under his rich robes. Not even a dagger. Her hands clenched in frustration.

A second figure brushed past him and entered the small cell. To her astonishment, Phaedra saw that it was Aspasia.

"This is Pericles," the courtesan said. "He's come to speak with you, as have I and Lady Elene." She turned and beckoned to the veiled woman standing just outside.

"Lady Elene?" Phaedra's jaw dropped in surprise. "How came you here?"

"I came with Aspasia," the older woman replied, thrusting aside her face covering. "Darien waits without."

Phaedra felt a lump form in her throat. Swallowing, she went forward to take Lady Elene's hands. "I'm glad that I could see you again before I die. I wanted to thank you for...for opening your home to a stranger. And for sharing Chloe with me."

"Do not speak to me of dying," Lady Elene snapped, her eyes lit with a blue fire that reminded Phaedra most forcefully of her son. "You will not die, not if I have aught to say in the matter."

"You have no say in this," Phaedra replied softly. "The sentence has been read, although the means of executing it may yet be a surprise to some."

Aspasia glided forward, her lush, rouged lips curved in a half smile.

"Do you think we women acquiesce so easily to men's misguided attempts to decide our fates? Nay, Phaedra."

Phaedra returned her smile. "Nor will any man decide my fate. At least not completely. I've but to steal a sword when they come for me, and I will make my own destiny. The man who's foolish enough to lay a hand on me will not live long to regret it."

"Mayhap such heroics will not be necessary." Aspasia waved toward the older woman. "Lady Elene came to me with a most ingenious plan."

Phaedra flashed Alexander's mother a grateful look. That one whose home she had invaded, whose daughter she had incited to rebellion, whose son she had lain with, would risk her reputation by going openly to the house of a courtesan both surprised and humbled Phaedra.

"Do not involve yourself in this," she urged both women. "'Tis too dangerous. I will handle these curs myself."

With a dry chuckle, Pericles stepped forward. "If you three have finished disparaging the weak, misguided creatures who are men, I suggest we discuss the matter at hand. We've not much time."

Phaedra eyed the elder statesman with mingled suspicion and awe. Even in Sparta, as isolated from the outside world as it was, the name of this renowned man generated respect. 'Twas his hand that had shaped Athens' far-flung empire, ruled by its sleek triremes. 'Twas his mind that had envisioned the beauteous public buildings that graced Athens, and his determination that had seen them built. Reminding herself that he was, after all, the enemy, Phaedra squared her shoulders.

"Why are you here?"

"I would not see you killed."

"Why not? Why should you concern yourself with the fate of a Spartan?"

His brows rose, as if he were unused to such blunt beligerence from anyone, much less a woman.

"I concern myself with my city," he replied tartly. "For all that your uncle says he cares not what happens to you, he'll use your death as a cause to spur his warriors and his wavering allies to fury."

He combed a weary hand through his curled gray beard and drew in a deep breath.

"Listen to me, woman. I was in Corinth when word

came that your uncle marched on Athens. Before I slipped out of the city, I saw the disordered way the Corinthians scrambled to launch their ships. They want this war, but aren't ready yet. They know the coming winter will catch them on the seas, ill-equipped and poorly supplied. They'll withdraw after a token effort, I'm sure. Unless something ignites their spirit."

He looked into her eyes. "Like the death of a helpless Spartan woman at the hands of the Athenians. Those fools on the Council have played right into your uncle's hand. Naxos knows full well that your death by stoning will raise his allies to fury."

The idea that her uncle would deliberately scheme at her death made Phaedra nauseous. Despair churned in her stomach, but she ignored it and lifted her chin. "I am far from helpless."

"Aye, I can see that...." he began dryly, then broke off at the sound of approaching footsteps. "Great Zeus, they come!" He gave her a fierce look. "Speak only when you're questioned, and follow our lead in whatever we say. Many lives, including yours, depend on the next few moments."

Phaedra stood rigid with tension as a clearly disgruntled trio crowded into the cell, the guards close behind them. The men peered at her with suspicious eyes, then suddenly grasped the presence of Aspasia and Lady Elene.

"What is this, Pericles?" a red-faced, round-bellied one managed after a moment of stuttering surprise. "Why have you summoned us? And what are these women doing here?"

"I've summoned you to ensure that you, who are sworn to uphold Athens' laws, don't violate them."

Phaedra stared as Pericles' stentorian tones rang out. No longer a tired, elderly man, he was become the legend she'd heard of. With his cloak draped over one arm and his shoulders thrown back, he dominated the small cell.

"These women are here to take the Lady Phaedra to her home, from which you had no right to remove her."

"No right? What nonsense is this?"

Phaedra recognized the man who challenged Pericles. He was the archon who had read her sentence, never once looking at her as he did so.

"She must die," he argued fiercely. "When her uncle broke the sworn truce between Athens and Sparta, he sealed her fate."

Pericles' curled beard jutted forward. "You cannot execute this woman. You have no authority over her."

"What? Of course we do! She's Spartan, and a hostage."

"She is Spartan, but not hostage. She is wife to Alexander, son of Porthos. By our laws, your authority is over him, not her."

"By the beard of—"

"How did this happen?"

"Why did no one tell us!"

Phaedra barely heard the archons' exclamations. Across the cell, her eyes met those of Lady Elene. She saw the fierce message in the older woman's glance, but did not acknowledge it by so much as a flicker of an eyelid.

The elder archon cut through the babble with a sharp wave of his arm.

"Why were we not told of this marriage? Why did Darien not mention it when he came to plead this woman's cause?"

Lady Elene stepped forward, patrician dignity radiating from every inch of her tall frame. "Because he did not know of it. He was away on his wedding journey when my son claimed this woman."

The archon's eyes narrowed. "Your pardon, Lady Elene, but I find it difficult to believe your son would marry this...this Spartan and not tell anyone of it."

One gray-blond brow arched in frigid disdain. "Do you doubt my word?"

An uncomfortable expression crossed the man's face,

and he threw his co-rulers a call for help. A plump, fatherly-looking figure stepped forward.

"Gracious lady, I've spent many evenings in your home, enjoying your renowned hospitality. Your husband was my friend, and I number your son among them, as well. Why would Alexander not invite me, and others, to celebrate his marriage?"

"Would you wish to celebrate if you'd been forced to take a foreigner to wife?" Bitterness dripped from every scathing word Lady Elene uttered. "Would you want to celebrate if the child she carries can never have your name, or claim citizenship of your city?"

The men swung toward Phaedra as one. As their eyes settled derisively on her stomach, the scorn she saw in them fired her fierce pride. She would not go to meet the gods of the underworld on the wings of such a lie. She might have forfeited her honor to Alexander, but she'd not trample it in the dust now before these craven, miserable excuses for men.

"I am not with child, nor did I take Alexander to husband."

Lady Elene rounded on her. "You shameless hussy! You lay with him. Every night! Didn't you?"

Phaedra's eyes narrowed.

"Didn't you? Answer me, girl!"

"Yes, I lay with him. But—"

"And when he departed, you clung to him! In full view of everyone in the courtyard! Didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"What could my son do? What would any man do, shamed so in front of his entire household? He kissed you and claimed you as his. Publicly! Did he not? Did he not!"

Phaedra reached out a desperate hand to Lady Elene. "I cannot do this! I cannot debase my honor by pretending there was any intent of marriage between Alexander and me that day."

Pericles stepped forward. "Whether there was intent or



not, Alexander wed with you. He claimed you before witnesses, before his own mother. Our laws are simple, but direct."

"Think what you do here!" Phaedra cried. "You yourself won't take Aspasia to wife because she's not of Athens. Yet you would bind Alexander to a foreigner, one who will deny his sons their birthright. And you tie me to my enemy."

"Don't you think it pains me to see one I've long regarded as a son make such a disastrous mistake?" Pericles thundered. "Don't you think his mother wrestled with her own reluctance to come forward these past days? Don't you think these honorable men will chastise Alexander for the unbridled lust that led him to such a rash act?"

He waved an imperious hand at the archons. Their heads bobbed in echo of his words, and Pericles sent Phaedra a private, triumphant smile. The wily orator had roped the archons into agreement, without their knowing quite how they'd come to it.

Phaedra said no more.

Pericles chuckled under his breath as he and Darien escorted the women up the stairs and out into the starry night. An armed escort awaited them, as well as two enclosed litters to carry the women to their separate houses. The lieutenant settled Lady Elene carefully in one litter, then waited for Phaedra as she bade farewell to the statesman and his courtesan.

Aspasia stood beside Pericles, her arm entwined in his, her face flawless and beautiful in the moonlight. Her low, husky laugh rippled across the night air.

"That was magnificently done, Lady Phaedra. I wasn't sure we could carry it off, even with Pericles' weight behind us. Your show of reluctance to acknowledge the marriage convinced those fools as nothing else could have."

Phaedra drew herself up. "'Twas not show. I don't ac-

knowledge any marriage, nor will Alexander when he returns."

"He will," Pericles replied. "He must. 'Twas legal and binding."

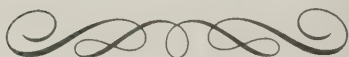
"By your laws, mayhap, not mine."

Pericles turned to his mistress, unstatesmanlike exasperation thinning his lips. "Is she always this stubborn and ill-spoken?"

At Aspasia's amused nod, he faced Phaedra once more.

"You are wed to him, woman, will you or nill you. You'd best use the time until he returns to resign yourself to that fact."

## Chapter Fourteen



Alexander propped one foot on the prow's curved neck, scanning the horizon. Overhead, linen sails, dyed green for camouflage, bellied and flapped with the capricious winds. Five sleek warships followed in a graceful line astern. Across a broad expanse of turquoise sea, the island of Lemnos lazed in the afternoon sun. There were no signs of enemy sails in the waters around the island, and no evidence of unusual activity in its main harbor of Myrina.

"Another goose chase, eh, Captain?"

Alexander nodded to the bow officer who stood beside him. "Aye, so it appears. But signal the other ships to stay at full alert, in case it should be a trap."

"Hah! We should be so fortunate. This is the third time we've come racing to the aid of our allies against a supposed attack, and not a damned enemy ship in sight!"

The burly, barrel-chested man spit over the side. "Of course, the whole Spartan fleet could have come and gone by the time we got here in this slug."

"I've sailed faster hulls," Alexander admitted with a wry smile, glancing down at the name device carved into the prow. Christened the *Dorkas* after the swift gazelles that leapt nimbly amid the mountain crags, the trireme certainly didn't live up to her name. 'Twas the ill luck of the draw that had given him this old, leaking hull. It should have

gone into the sheds for drying out and recaulking months ago. The wealthy citizen responsible for the *Dorkas'* upkeep would hear a few choice words about neglecting his duties when Alexander returned to Athens.

At the thought of pulling into home port, Alexander felt a sudden, painful tightening in his loins. The image of a small, piquant face with a stubborn chin and belligerent sea green eyes swam before him. His lips lifted in a private smile as he remembered that same face streaked with traces of Aspasia's white paint. And flushed with passion the night of Demetria's wedding. And...

The bow officer's gruff voice intruded in his private fantasies.

"If there's to be no battle this day, at least we can pull into port and get some fresh stores. And some fresh meat," the man added with a leer. "We've done naught but beat water and chase rumors these past weeks. I've a mind to stroke my oar to a different chant altogether this night."

Alexander straightened, slanting the officer a quick grin. "You'll keep your oar banked, man. We stay in port only long enough to take on water and put down a hearty meal. The admiral wants us back at base immediately if there's no action here."

Ignoring the man's muttering, Alexander made his way down the narrow aisle between the ship's raised decks. All sailors grumbled and complained; 'twas their nature, although Alexander admitted to himself that their complaints were justified these days. Since they'd sailed from Athens two weeks ago, they'd had poor hunting, with only one small attack on an unsuspecting Corinthian convoy to fire their blood.

Once more Alexander cursed his ill luck in the draw. Instead of sailing under an admiral he respected in waters rich with enemy ships, he'd been detailed to the oldest, most conservative senior officer in the navy. Their mission was to prowl the northernmost reaches of the empire, protecting the fat merchantmen with their precious cargoes of

silver and other goods from Thrace. 'Twas vital to keep open the shipping lanes that gave Athens its wealth and power, Alexander knew. Still, he longed to be on the other side of the peninsula, patrolling the Ionian Sea with Phormio, admiral of the Western Fleet. His instincts told him that when the enemy finally sailed out to fight, they'd choose to do so in waters close to their home port. There, Alexander was sure, the decisive battles would be fought. While the disciplined sailor in him acknowledged the vital importance of escort duty, the warrior in him wanted fiercely to be in the midst of battle when it was joined.

He let none of his feelings show during the docking at Myrina. A clutch of city fathers came to the quays to greet the squadron, joining in the libations poured into the waters as thanksgiving for their safe passage. Alexander gleaned what information he could from their scattered reports of enemy sightings, but declined all invitations to stay the rest of the day and night. They had five hours yet of good light, and a stiff breeze blowing. If the winds held, he could make it back across the Thracian Sea this day, and into port by noon tomorrow. With luck, word of real prey might await them at Potidea. He, as much as his men, needed some action to keep his fighting edge honed.

When they pulled back into their birth at Potidea, however, the pennants flying from the guard towers told them the base was in a state of minimal alert. Frustrated, Alexander offered the ritual libation, dismissed his crew and went to give his report.

"'Tis as well you met no enemy," the gray-bearded admiral offered. "With as few ships as the Council allotted us, I don't want to lose any in small, indecisive engagements."

"We've twice the number of hulls allotted to us than the Western Fleet has," Alexander replied with deliberate restraint.

The admiral flashed him an irate look.

"We've had this discussion twice before, Captain. I refuse to release you or any of my ships to augment that hothead Phormio. His task is to keep the Corinthians bottled up in the gulf. He can do that easily with the hulls assigned him, if he doesn't try any of his rash circus tactics."

Alexander bit back a sharp retort. Not for the first time in the past weeks he wished that the law requiring a captain to be under the age of fifty applied to admirals, as well. It was absurd to give overall control of the fleet to someone considered too old to sail a ship into battle.

"However," the admiral continued with a sour look, "it appears I've been overruled. A ship arrived with dispatches this afternoon. Pericles, with the consent of the Council, has ordered your recall. You're to sail for Athens immediately, pick up a new ship and report to Phormio as soon as possible."

Alexander couldn't keep the grin from his face. "Aye, sir!"

"Harrumph! May the gods watch over you in your new posting." The old man waved him away. "Oh, there was a letter for you included in the dispatch. It awaits you at your quarters."

In a greatly improved frame of mind, Alexander strode along the waterfront, with its rows of graceful, colonnaded ship sheds. He would go that evening to the temple of Poseidon, he decided, and sacrifice a fine ram in thanksgiving for his deliverance from this tame escort duty. And then he'd have to arrange a marine patrol to scour the waterfront brothels and taverns in search of his crew.

Throwing open the door to his quarters, he called for the steward who saw to his needs. Only after he'd sent the man scurrying with a list of immediate tasks did Alexander remember the dispatch. Frowning, he searched his private chamber and found the folded parchment on the small table that held his maps and writing implements. Sliding his



thumb under the wax seal, he unfolded the letter and quickly scanned its brief message.

Your wife is safe within your home. I'll explain all when you return to Athens.

Pericles

Alexander read and reread the words. Wife? Obviously Pericles referred to Phaedra, using some kind of a code. But why? And why had he felt compelled to say she was safe?

Turning the parchment over, Alexander deciphered the date stamped in the broken seal. His mind raced with a dozen possible explanations for the cryptic message, none of which made sense, and all of which made him uneasy. Although clearly intended to reassure, the message had just the opposite effect. A cold, tight weight settled in Alexander's chest, and suddenly the hours until his dawn sailing loomed endless.

He was still uneasy, still pondering the strange message, when he returned from the temple of Poseidon later that evening and met with his assembled officers. A fierce pounding on the door to his quarters interrupted their excited discussion.

Alexander's unease turned to sharp, unreasoned fear as the door opened and a bedraggled, exhausted Therocles stumbled across the threshold. He was beside the sailor in two long strides.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice low and urgent. "Why have you come?"

"'Tis the Lady Phaedra," Therocles gasped, confirming Alexander's unformed fears. "When Sparta attacked, the lady was taken by the Council. They've declared her life forfeit."

As Alexander fought to control his shock and gathering fury, Therocles eyes clouded with pain. "Damien, son of

Agathuron, sent me to summon you. But I fear I'm too late, Captain."

"Why too late?" Alexander snapped.

"The ship I was on hit a reef the first night out. I sailed its skiff to shore, stole a horse and rode two days to the nearest friendly port." He paused to suck in a quick breath.

"And?"

"I pledged a hefty pile of your silver to a merchantman to bring me here. The skipper kept the lash to the slaves who rowed his fat scow, but I fear we were too many days en route. I fear they may have killed her, Captain."

A muscle twitched in Alexander's cheek. "When did you leave Athens? What day?"

"I don't know," Therocles muttered, shaking his head in a combination of exhaustion and confusion. "Eight—no, nine days ago."

"Are you sure? Think, man!"

"Aye, nine days ago. 'Twas right before the feast of Artemis of the Wells."

Relief coursed through Alexander like water spilling down a mountain slope. He felt its cleansing wash in every corner of his soul.

"I received a message this day from Pericles. 'Twas written after you left Athens, and sent with the fleet dispatches. He says he has her safe."

Therocles drew in a huge, wracking breath. "Thanks be to the gods."

The two men gripped forearms for a moment, then pulled away with sheepish looks, as if embarrassed by the raw emotion that passed between them.

Therocles' dirty, matted beard split in a wide grin. "And to think I rubbed my backside raw on that accursed nag, all for naught! I swear, I don't know how landlubbers get from place to place without a constant case of boils."

"Come," Alexander said with an answering grin. "Ease your backside and your thirst with some wine. You've got

less than six hours to recover. We sail for home at first light."

Brisk winds, and Therocles' booming taunts at the crew to pull harder when the ship was under oar, coaxed a speed out of the *Dorcas* that surprised them all, Alexander included. Three days after leaving Potidea, they sighted the majestic Parthenon rising above Athens' sprawl. After a hurried docking ceremony, Alexander left the disposition of the crew and the ship to his second-in-command. With Therocles at his side, he headed for the five-mile stretch of thoroughfare protected by the Long Walls.

They made slow, frustrating progress from the harbor to the city gates. Crowds of refugees obstructed the way, their belongings piled around their makeshift camps, their livestock and their darting, laughing children adding to the noise and the confusion. Every inch of open space alongside the broad thoroughfare was filled with jumbled shelters and pitched tents. Scattered mounds of refuse, both human and animal, made the way odorous and the going slow.

"Great Zeus," Alexander muttered, "why has not the Council organized better shelter and sanitation for these peoples?"

"They came in waves, Captain, more than any expected. All the temples and public buildings are full. Every city square and playing field have tents pitched upon them. 'Tis said that men even sleep in the great clay pots that used to store grain and olive oil outside the agora."

Therocles sidestepped a pile of refuse and matched Alexander's fast stride. At length they passed through the city gates and began to climb the hill that led to the Parthenon. Alexander's heart raced faster with every step.

"Do you not go to call upon Pericles?" Therocles asked, huffing slightly.

"Nay, I would see my family first. And the Lady Phaedra."

'Twas strange, Alexander thought with a grim smile. All

the weeks that he'd held her and teased her and took his pleasures of her flesh, he'd thought of her as Thedis or his little sea nymph. It was only since he sailed away that he'd come to think of her as Phaedra. It was the woman who'd haunted his thoughts those long days at sea, not the sprite. It was Phaedra he ached to hold once more, to shelter and keep safe.

And it was Phaedra his eyes sought as soon as he stepped across the portal of his home. He didn't see her, or anyone else of his immediate household, in the throng of people filling the courtyard.

A thin, wavery voice hailed him. "Captain!"

Alexander greeted the old woman whose husband had tended one of his olive groves for many years. Although the man had died eons ago, Alexander had seen that the childless old dame was sheltered and well cared for.

"I'm blessed to be the first to welcome you home," she cried, hobbling forward. She took his hand and covered it with dry, scratchy kisses.

"I thank you, Grandmother," Alexander replied, according her the honorary title he'd used with her for years. He tried unsuccessfully to tug his hand loose from her clawlike grip.

"We were told you might arrive this day," she cackled. "Your lady said she'd had word from that painted Ithacan who warms Pericles' bed."

"Aye, well, I'm glad she had notice." Alexander tugged at his hand once more. "I'll go and greet her now."

The crone nodded, still holding fast. "She's there. Under the tree."

Alexander turned, expecting his lady mother. Instead he saw Phaedra sitting on a stone bench at the far corner of the courtyard. The sun slanted just enough to bathe that end of the yard, and her, in a wash of golden light. She was as still and as beautiful as a statue carved by a master sculptor. Her pale green robe, anchored at both shoulders by beaten-silver pins, fell in soft lines about her body. Her black hair

was piled high and held in place by a thin silver diadem. And her eyes—by all the gods, her eyes! Alexander thought he would drown in their emerald depths.

He started toward her, only to be brought up short by the old woman's deathlike grip.

"Wait! Wait!" she ordered. "Lady Elene must see this!"

Thinking that the crone was as strange and as cryptic as the note Pericles had sent, Alexander pried loose her fingers and set her aside. At that moment, his mother rushed out of the kitchens. Instead of coming to greet him, however, she stopped and raised both fists to her lips.

What in Hades went on here? he wondered. He swung to face Phaedra once more, and only then did he notice the small figure at her side.

"Papa! Watch me, Papa!"

Chloe pushed herself out of the crook of Phaedra's arm and wavered unsteadily. Alexander felt fear rip at his stomach as her thin arms thrashed the air.

He leapt forward, only to be brought up short by the fierce warning look in Phaedra's eyes.

"Watch, Papa! I can do it!"

With Phaedra standing close behind, the child took three small steps. They were awkward and ungainly. Her shoulder dipped and her hip twisted painfully as she dragged her left leg forward. But they were steps—the first steps he had ever seen her take.

Her leg collapsed. Phaedra caught her under the arms before she could crumple to the ground.

"Did you see, Papa? Did you see?"

Alexander stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to think. Over the excited murmurs of the crowd, he heard his mother's sobs. Swallowing once, then once more, he managed a gruff reply.

"Aye, shrimp. I saw."

Chloe's triumphant grin broke the spell that held him.

He closed the distance between them, his heart pounding with an emotion he couldn't begin to voice.

His daughter squealed with joy as Alexander swung her high in the air, her favorite pink robe billowing and her eyes sparkling with excitement. When he settled her against his chest, she wrapped both arms around his neck and gave him a wet kiss. Alexander's muscles quivered with the urge to crush her slight body to his chest. Instead, he contented himself with burying his face in her soft, fragrant curls, to her laughing delight.

"Phaedra says I will do better."

Over his child's head, Alexander met Phaedra's steady gaze.

"And Phaedra says I must practice each day."

Chloe's little hand patted his cheek to regain his attention. "She says..."

Lady Elene gave a strangled gasp, halfway between a sob and a laugh, as she moved to her son's side. "Oh, hush, Chloe. No more 'Phaedra says.' Here, come to me while your papa greets his—" she drew in a shaky breath "—while your papa greets his lady."

Although tears still streaked her white cheeks, his mother's eyes burned with an unmistakable message. Alexander put Chloe into her outstretched arms and turned to Phaedra. An expectant hush settled over the crowd behind them.

With an expression as serious and solemn as hers, Alexander took Phaedra's hand.

"I thank the gods that I find you well, my lady. And I thank you, from my heart, for the gift you've given me and Chloe."

Phaedra wet her lips nervously. "You are most welcome, my lord."

Silence stretched between them.

Phaedra searched frantically for something else to say. What *could* she say to the man who had left a mistress and come back to a wife? And what was he thinking behind



that still, solemn face? She didn't know this quiet, intense Alexander. The Alexander of her dreams had a grin that often enraged and always enchanted her. He had laughter bubbling in his blood, and passion. Not this cool, distant...reserve. Was this how he intended to treat her, now that she was bound to him in a union he could not but despise? With this show of respect and chilling restraint?

Well, he need not force himself to such measures, Phaedra thought with a lift of her chin. She would set his mind at ease. At once.

"I would speak with you privately, my lord," she stated with her characteristic directness.

He nodded. "And I with you."

He took her arm to lead her to their chamber. The crowd parted, disappointment written on their faces. 'Twas obvious they had expected more of a show, Phaedra thought. Like the one the captain had provided when he left. They'd thought he'd sweep her into his arms and kiss her today as hardily as he had the day he left. Well, he hadn't, Phaedra told herself, trying to ignore the pain and crushing disappointment lodged in her breast.

She waited, her hands clenched at her sides, while Alexander closed the door. When he turned to face her, he loomed large and strangely unfamiliar in the dim, windowless chamber. He made no move toward her, and she stiffened against the hurt that curled in her chest. All the secret hopes she'd had for this homecoming rose to mock her, like the chorus of some comedy. All the private prayers she'd sent the gods and goddesses, pleas that he would somehow forgive her for bringing him to this pass, echoed in her mind.

Wiping her palms on the sides of her robe, she drew in a long breath.

"You need not fear I will hold you to this marriage."

He folded both arms across his chest. "You won't?"

"Nay. I know it was not of your choosing. Nor was it of mine. 'Tis done, but can be undone."

His eyes narrowed. "It can?"

He wasn't going to make the way easy for her, she saw. "Aye, it can." Her chin lifted. "I'm not with child."

"You're not?"

Phaedra felt her back teeth grind one against the other. The shades take his black soul. He intended her complete debasement.

"No, I am not. My courses came last week. You can put me aside in good conscience. I was barren in my first marriage, as well, so no one will question you. Not that they would, anyway," she added bitterly.

"They would not?"

Phaedra's ready temper, smoldering from the hurt of his rejection, was fanned to flame by his deliberate, prodding manner.

"No, curse you! Don't act the dolt with me!" Her voice rose to a furious shout. "You know full well none would blame you for setting aside a Spartan woman. One whose uncle besieges your city! One whose children could not bear your name! Not that I would want to bear the children of such a lump-nosed, thickheaded—" she searched for a scathing epithet to hurl at him "—poet!"

He unfolded his arms and started toward her, a slow, crooked grin lifting his lips.

"Ah, sweeting, now I know that I am indeed home."

"Don't smile!" she screeched. "Do not dare smile at me like that! Not now! And don't touch me!"

Beside herself with hurt and rage, Phaedra slapped at his hands and tried to dance away. He caught both lethal fists in a firm hold and twisted them behind her back, bringing her hard against him.

"You benighted ass!" she shouted. "Do not think that you can just—"

A hard pounding on the door cut into her furious tirade.

"Alexander! What goes on?"

His eyes never left Phaedra's face. "Naught that need concern you, lady mother."

"But we can hear Phaedra's screaming clear across the courtyard!"

"Go away, lady mother."

Phaedra drew in great gasps of air, trying to still her pounding heart. She realized her mistake immediately. Each breath brought her breasts up hard against the solid wall of his chest. Through the layers of tunic and cloak separating them, the heat of his body arced through her with the force of a lightning bolt thrown with all the power of Zeus' arm.

Panic replaced her fury, and she prayed he could not tell the way her treacherous nipples responded to the contact. It would shame her utterly for him to know she desired him, when he obviously felt naught for her. He wouldn't, couldn't, be so cool and detached if he wanted her.

Her mind skittered to a confused halt as she felt his rising shaft probe her belly. Stunned, she raised her face to his.

"Alexander," she whispered. "What...what are you about?"

The laughter that fed her soul danced in his eyes. "I'm about to take you to bed, sweeting. I may have missed our wedding, but I'll be damned by all the shades if I'll miss the bedding."

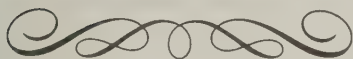
"But—"

His lips cut off her protest. They were all that she remembered, and more. Warm, hard, sweet. They shaped her mouth, covered it, possessed it. His arms tightened on her wrists, still clamped to the small of her back, and he pressed her hips into the juncture of his thighs.

Phaedra was lost in his taste, his touch, his scent. For the first time in her life, her strength deserted her. Her knees crumpled, and only his strong arms held her up.

"And later," he whispered, his breath rasping in her ear, "after we've done what husbands and wives do in their nuptial chambers, you will tell me how we came to be married. And I will tell you how we will *not* come to be divorced."

## *Chapter Fifteen*



Later, much later, after they had done several times what husbands and wives do in their nuptial chambers, they fell into an exhausted slumber. Phaedra woke to the sound of cocks crowing in the courtyard. Soon faint stirrings drifted through the red door as the close-quartered refugees began their day.

Phaedra nestled her head in the warmth of Alexander's shoulder, luxuriating in the weight of his arm on her waist. Sighing, she buried her nose against his throat.

He shifted lazily and drew her closer to his side.

Entwined against him, she sensed his slow awakening. With a sharp, piercing pang, she wished they never had to rise from where they lay. For this moment, she felt complete. Her world had narrowed to this man, to this small bite of time. This was all she wanted. All she needed. For this moment.

Phaedra ached to tell him what was in her heart, but feared the words would trip over her tongue. At length, driven by a need to share even a little of her feelings, she whispered his name.

“Alexander?”

“Hmm?”

“If this bed were my funeral bier, at this moment I would go happily to the underworld.”

She waited, lashes down-swept and breath suspended, for his reply. There was none, until the chest under her wide-spread fingers began to shake.

Hurt, she stiffened and pushed herself away. The arm that had rested casually around her waist tightened, holding her fast.

"Nay, sweeting," he said between small gasps. "Don't pull away. I don't laugh at you, I swear. It's just that..." He stopped, then continued unsteadily. "It's just that I've never loved a woman unto death before."

Phaedra's clenched fist swiped at his shoulder.

"Swine! And here I thought that I missed your oafish humor while you were gone. Never again will I try to say what's in my heart and leave myself open to your mockery."

Alexander's grin faded instantly. With a movement so fast it left her breathless, he rolled over, pinning her to the bed with his body. His fists buried in her tangled hair, anchoring her. There was no laughter in his eyes now, she saw, only a tenderness so deep it made her heart pound against her ribs.

"Phaedra, my love, I'm sorry."

When she wouldn't, couldn't reply, he brushed her lips.

"Please forgive me. 'Twas not my intent to mock you. I was but clumsy with my words."

"Hah! You? Clumsy with words? You're the most slippery-tongued devil I've ever met."

He shook his head. "Nay, I seem to have lost my powers of speech with you. I've not told you how the siren's song of your eyes called to me with every stroke of the oars these past weeks. How I saw your creamy breasts in every curl of the waves. How I heard your sweet voice above the cry of the gulls, as if carried on the sea breezes."

Wide-eyed, she stared up at him. She couldn't have found the strength to say a word at that moment, even if his weight were not crushing the breath from her lungs.

"And I've not told you how I felt that moment, there in

the courtyard, when I saw my child take her first steps from the shelter of your arms."

His thumbs brushed the sides of her forehead in gentle strokes.

"Phaedra... Phaedra, I..."

His hesitation told her more plainly than any words ever could have how he felt. That Alexander should stumble and stutter made Phaedra's eyes blur with sudden tears. Horrified at this unexpected, unprecedented weakness, she blinked furiously.

"Nay, Alexander." She gulped. "You need not say more. I'll take this moment, and what has *not* been said between us, with me wherever I go."

A slight frown notched his brows. "What do you mean, wherever you go?"

"Wherever I go. When I leave here."

"You do not leave here. I thought we settled that hours ago."

The urge to weep faded. Phaedra wedged her arms up against his chest to lever his weight and give her room to breathe.

"*You* made some sweeping proclamation when you carried me off to bed that there would be no divorce. *You* brushed aside my arguments. But *I* am determined in this."

With a muttered oath, he rolled off her and out of the bed. "By the gods, you can't be serious! Not still."

Phaedra pushed herself into a sitting position, the sheets clutched to her chest.

"I am. I will not tie you, or me, to a marriage that makes our children outcasts."

When he shook his head angrily, Phaedra leaned forward.

"Please, Alexander. Please hear what I say. No man has...has ever captured my heart as you have. 'Tis because of what I feel for you that I'll not deny you your chance at immortality. Only through your children will your line continue here in Athens. Only through your children will



your house keep its place within your government. And I can't give you those children. Your own laws deny citizenship to the offspring of a 'foreigner.'"

"Do you think I care about that?"

"You may not, at this moment. I may not, at this moment. But a week, or a month, or a year, from now, we will."

She lifted her chin, forestalling his rebuttal with a flash of fire in her eyes.

"All my life I've believed that a woman's purpose is that of childbearer. To supply citizens and warriors for the state. I am bred of a proud house, even if my uncle chooses not to acknowledge me now. It goes against all that I hold true to give you sons who will not be recognized, daughters who cannot marry honorably."

Alexander grasped both her arms and dragged her up until her face was but inches from his. "I'll not let you go."

"'Tis not your choice," she argued. "In Sparta a woman may divorce a man as she wishes."

"You're not in Sparta," he reminded her, his jaw tightening as his own anger rose.

Desperate now to make him see reason, Phaedra placed both hands on his chest. Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

"Alexander, I will stay with you until you tire of me. I have no choice in that, in any case. But not as your wife. As soon as it's safe and prudent to do so, we must divorce. You *must* take an Athenian wife. With war upon us, you could—" She choked. "You could be killed at any time. You must get legitimate heirs."

He gave her a hard shake.

"We will not divorce!"

The words, far more than the manhandling, sparked Phaedra's temper. And to think he called *her* stubborn!

"We will!" she shouted.

"We...will...*not*!"

He sent her tumbling to the bed.

Phaedra scrambled to her knees, pushing her hair out of her eyes with one hand. "Where are you going?" she screeched. "We must resolve this!"

"It is resolved!" His angry roar bounced off the ceiling beams.

"Where are you going? Come back here!"

"I'm going to my ship. And when I return, if you open your mouth—if you *dare* to open your mouth and speak one more word of divorce—I swear I'll...I'll..."

For the second time that morning, words failed Alexander. Furious, he grabbed a tunic from his clothes chest and threw it over his head. Snatching up his belt and sandals, he stalked to the door.

Phaedra's angry shouts followed him out into the dawn. And into a courtyard full of wide-eyed, openmouthed refugees.

By the time he'd paid a courtesy visit to Pericles and thanked him for his aid, Alexander's temper had cooled enough for him to speak coherently once more. After briefing the statesman on conditions in the Thracian Sea, he walked out into the sunshine, headed for the agora.

Despite the army camped outside the city's wall, or perhaps because of it, the shops were filled with goods. As Pericles had predicted, Athens' maritime might ensured a steady flow of food and trade goods into its protected harbor. The people jammed within the city walls might not have much comfort or space to breathe, but they were well fed during their stay.

Alexander purchased a pair of earrings set with rubies for Aspasia in gratitude for her aid to Phaedra. He also bought a precious copy of Homer's *Iliad*, hand-scribed on thick parchment, which he knew the brilliant courtesan would appreciate far more than any jewels. He found a toy horse with a flaxen mane and a tail that bobbed when pulled by a string for Chloe, and a diadem sparkling with sap-

phires for his mother. But nothing he looked at was right for Phaedra. What could be right for such a stubborn, irritating female, after all? He wandered through the goldsmith's shops, listening absently while the traders hawked their wares.

He'd all but given up his quest when a tray of bracelets caught his eye. Among the intricate hoops and bangles was a circlet of hollow gold, about the width of his little finger. Its lines were clean and uncluttered, reminding him instantly of Phaedra's lithe, slender frame. The circlet of gold widened toward the clasp and took the shape of two graceful dolphins, nose to nose.

Unbidden, the memory of his first night with Phaedra rose in his mind. In a small, dark cove, Alexander had held her stiff, resisting body against his while the night settled around them like a cloak and a dolphin arched out of a phosphorescent sea.

"'Twas crafted by my own hands," the goldsmith volunteered.

The bearded artisan rubbed his hands together. He sensed a sale by the way the proud man with the mane of a lion and the eyes of a hawk stroked the gold bracelet. Noting the expression on the tall one's face, the goldsmith upped the price he'd planned to ask by several drachmas. Any man so besotted would pay well for a bauble.

To his surprise and delight, the tall, golden-haired captain didn't even ask the price.

"I'll take it. But I would have you make a change for me, and have it ready by this afternoon."

Alexander spent the rest of the morning at the shipyards inspecting his new ship. With the master shipwright in charge of construction, he crawled over every inch of the hull, testing the cedar beams that formed the keel, examining the fir planking attached to ribs made of pine. After that he spent an hour with the men who wove long strands of hemp into the cordage that would outfit the sails. The

sailmakers claimed his attention next, then the pitchmen who would finish caulking the seams this very day. Finally, he met with the armorers and goldsmiths who would provide the finishing touches to the lethal bronze ram and the richly gilded figurehead that would ride above the ship's beak.

All about him the yards hummed with activity. Sounds of hammering filled the morning air, and the familiar smells of fresh-planed wood and bubbling tar spiced his nostrils. But the thrill that usually coursed through Alexander when he saw a new ship taking shape was lessened by an uncharacteristic impatience.

He listened politely while a string of chandlers assured him the supplies and stores would all be aboard within four days, then told them he would sail in three. Stilling their protests with a reminder that these were extraordinary times, he left to meet with the senior archon who held the title of general of the war. Although this man was nominally in charge of overall operations, Alexander knew Pericles' fine hand was behind the order for him to report to Phormio, admiral of the Western Fleet, as soon as the new ship was launched. They set the time for the christening ceremony. Then Alexander was given leave and encouraged to spend the next days getting his house in order.

And that was just what he intended to do, he thought, striding into the courtyard. He found Lady Elene kneeling beside a young farm wife whose child had stumbled and bruised his chin. He waited until she'd finished soothing both mother and child, then helped her to her feet.

"I would ask you to prepare what provisions you have at hand, lady mother. I'm sailing to Goat Island this afternoon, and will be gone two days."

Her mouth pursed. "Alexander! Never say you're going to hide away on that barren pile of rocks, as you did as a child! You cannot leave Phaedra like this!"

"Nay, I—"

"Listen to me, my son. I know it's not my place to speak

of matters between you and your wife. But since I helped bring you both to this marriage, I feel I have the right."

Lady Elene gripped her son's arm, her eyes fierce.

"I know Phaedra will not be a comfortable wife. She's restless and headstrong, and too outspoken to be believed, at times. But her heart is as brave and true as any I've ever seen. You cannot divorce her, nor can you leave her like this with things unsettled between you."

Alexander's mouth lifted in a rueful grin. "I do not leave her. I take her with me, where we'll have some blessed privacy to work out our differences. If I can't reconcile her to her fate in the next two days with words and kisses, I swear I'll beat acceptance into her. I take her away because I don't want her screams of outrage to alarm you and our multitude of guests."

Lady Elene laughed, knowing full well Alexander had never beaten a woman in his life.

"If that's what it takes, my son, may the gods give your arm strength."

She sent a servant scurrying to gather the provisions Alexander had requested, and another to mix fresh jugs of watered wine. With amused eyes and a quiet hope in her heart, she watched as her son brought his sullen and protesting wife from the upper chamber, where she'd been directing the women's weaving. Lady Elene could imagine the serving women's sighs of relief at Phaedra's departure.

"I tell you, I don't wish to go aboard any accursed boat!"

"'Tis only a short sail. Just a few leagues across the harbor mouth."

"I don't care. Neither men nor women were meant to take to the waters like damned fishes. 'Tis unnatural. 'Tis unsettling. 'Tis..."

"Phaedra, will you come willingly, or must I get Therocles to hold you down while I bind your arms and legs?"

Lady Elene bit down hard on her lower lip. As wooings went, this promised to be one that would shake the heavens.

\* \* \*

The crossing proved tranquil and quick, Phaedra grudgingly acknowledged to herself. She sat in the stern of the small sailboat, on the floor, since it had no seats, her back against Alexander's chest, her hips cradled by his. He had one arm looped over the tiller and the other around her shoulders as he worked the sheets with a light, easy touch.

Phaedra waited for the rolling, churning sensation that had made her previous sea journeys so miserable. This time, however, the nausea didn't come. Whether it was because of the calm seas or because of Alexander's solid warmth behind her, she knew not. For whatever reason, this time at least, she wasn't sick.

She refused to admit it even to herself, but she actually enjoyed the short trip. The clean, salty breeze lifted her hair and filled her lungs. As they left the bustle of the docks behind, a profound quiet enfolded them. The small craft skimmed across still green waters, with only the call of a lonely gull wheeling above and an occasional flap of sail to disturb the peace.

To her surprise, Phaedra felt a real regret when Alexander turned the boat's prow toward a small island just outside the harbor mouth. A few stunted cypress trees, their limbs twisted by winds and salt spray, grew atop the rocks, but no other living creatures appeared to inhabit the island.

"Why do we come here?" she asked as Alexander furled the single sail.

"'Tis my special island," he replied, sliding over the side to walk the boat toward shore.

"This?"

Phaedra cast a skeptical look at the inhospitable rocks and slipped into the thigh-high water to assist him. Grasping the gunwale with both hands, she heaved at the boat. When it skidded up on the pebbled shore, Alexander straightened and surveyed the small island with eager eyes.

"When I was young, younger than Chloe, even, my father gave me my first boat. He taught me to sail, then let me work the ropes by myself. For the first few years after



I took to the sea, however, this was as far as I was allowed to venture alone."

He glanced at Phaedra, a boyish smile on his face.

"This became my private place. My pirate's den. The secret lair where I brought all the maidens I captured in my imaginary raids, so that I could have my way with them."

"Well, do not think you'll have your way with me," Phaedra told him. Her tart tone hid the rush of emotion caused by the wicked gleam in his eyes. And by the way his wet tunic clung to his strong, finely muscled thighs and chest. She scrambled ashore, her bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet rocks.

Alexander reached out to steady her. She found her footing and tugged at her hand, but he would not release it.

"I mean what I say," she warned. "Do not think your easy ways and rogue's smile will soften my heart—or my determination. We must resolve the matter of this marriage between us."

"It is resolved," he said softly, pulling her closer.

"Alexander..."

"What's not resolved is your acceptance of that fact. I intend to spend the next two days discussing the matter with you."

"Stop!" She ducked her head to avoid his lips and slapped at his roving hands. "Is this what you consider discussion?"

"Aye, sweeting. The most learned, elegant kind of discussion." He cradled her head in two large, wet hands and brushed her lips in a quick kiss. "Pure sophistry, in fact."

"Alexander!"

His next kiss was slower, sweeter.

"Refined debate."

His tongue flicked against hers, teasing, tasting.

"Glorious oration," he whispered.

'Twas only Athenian demagoguery, Phaedra told herself, as she surrendered on a small sigh. 'Twas only a kiss. She

could stop his foolish words and busy hands whenever she wanted to.

The trouble was, she didn't want to.

Ah, wondrous heaven, she didn't want to.

"I brought you a gift."

His voice rumbled under Phaedra's ear.

"Indeed you did," she murmured, too drained to lift her head from where it rested on his chest. "I never dreamed a woman could receive a man that way. I'll wager my screams of pleasure were heard all the way to the harbor."

The broad expanse of muscled flesh under her cheek began to shake.

"By the gods, Athenian," she muttered, "I'm too tired to try to understand what amuses you now. Be still. Do not disturb me."

A big, callused palm came up to stroke her hair.

"I have another gift for you," he began.

"Oh, no!" Phaedra groaned. "I cannot. Truly. Not again."

She pushed off his chest and flopped over onto her back, ignoring his choking laughter.

They lay in the shelter of a small cave formed by tumbled rocks. The folded sail beneath them gave some comfort. A small driftwood fire spit and hissed at the night. Above them, the stars hung from a sky so dark and deep it seemed as if they two were alone in the universe. Phaedra sighed, more replete than she'd ever imagined she could be.

Still chuckling, Alexander sat up and filled a long-necked gourd with the sweet red wine his mother had provided.

"Here, drink this and restore your energies."

Phaedra struggled to sit up. Every muscle in her body protested, including a few she hadn't known she had. She took the gourd in a shaky hand and sipped.

While she drank, Alexander rummaged in the leather pouch attached to his discarded belt. He waited, cross-

legged and at ease, until she was done. Setting the gourd aside, he took her wrist. His fingers fumbled for a moment, and then Phaedra heard the click of metal against metal.

When his hands fell away, she lifted her wrist in surprise. A shining gold bangle banded it. By the light of the fire, she examined the graceful dolphins caught forever by the goldsmith's art in a leaping arc.

"Oh, Alexander, never have I seen such beauty!"

"Do you remember the night we saw the dolphin?" he asked softly.

"Aye," she replied, glancing up.

The flickering fire shadowed his eyes and lent a starkness to the planes of his face.

"'Twas the first night we were together," she recalled, her voice husky. "There, outside Limera. The dolphin leapt out of the waters. You said he was Poseidon's messenger."

"Sent to check upon the sea sprite the god gave to me."

"Alexander..."

"Poseidon gave you to me, Phaedra, and I'll not let you go. Not now, not ever. Not in this life, or the next."

"You must." She twisted the bracelet around and around on her wrist.

"Nay." Alexander's hand closed over hers and stilled her agitated movements. "The poets have oft described the feelings I have for you, but at this moment I can't think of a single line. All I know is that I love you. I want no other woman or wife but you."

"Alexander, think what you say."

"I do. I have. You fill my soul, my Phaedra, and make me complete. There's no room within me for any other. Promise me that you'll speak no more of divorce."

"I can't."

She struggled desperately to find the words for what her mind knew and her heart denied.

"What you now feel for me will change," she whispered. "I know it. Were I to hold you to this marriage, you'd come to resent me. You'd resent the fact that I cannot

give you sons to sail Athens' ships. That our daughters could not marry men who are worthy of them, and you.'"

His grip tightened painfully, pressing the golden dolphins into her wristbone. His eyes burned into hers.

"If you'll not believe what I tell you is in my heart, will you at least promise to stay with me as long as you wear this bracelet? Will you promise that you'll not try to leave or seek a divorce while it's around your wrist?"

She swallowed and drew in a long breath. "That, at least, I'll promise."

The fierceness on his face eased, and a slow, crooked grin showed the whiteness of his teeth. Phaedra shook her head, marveling at the change in his mood.

"You're a strange, confounding man. Why should such an easy promise reassure you? 'Tis a simple matter to wear, or not wear, this bracelet."

"Nay, sweeting, 'tis not."

A curious expression settled on his face. Phaedra thought she detected both apology and anticipation.

"I had the goldsmith insert a band of iron inside the golden circlet," he told her. "I also had him alter the clasp so that it will not open again. The only way you'll remove the bracelet is to cut off your hand."

"What!"

Her shriek split the night and sent startled gulls flapping from their nests among the rocks.

Laughing, Alexander threw up his arms to protect his head as she launched herself at him with all the force of her slight body.

## Chapter Sixteen



They returned to Athens late the following afternoon, windblown and burned by the sun. With a stiff, awkward gait, Phaedra walked to the bathing chamber to rinse the salt from her skin and hair while Alexander went down to the shipyards to finalize details for his ship's launching.

The day of his departure dawned cool and clear. Phaedra lay beside Alexander, naked except for the gold band around her left wrist. Chill morning air raised bumps on her flesh. With arms drained of all strength, she tugged the covers over her and the man beside her. She lay quiet for a moment, savoring the coolness after the searing heat they'd generated the night before.

The bite of autumn in the dawn air reminded Phaedra of Pericles' prediction that the siege of Athens would lift in the cold months. With the coming of winter, the Spartan army would have to retire due to lack of forage. And the Athenian fleets would have to return to port to sit out storms and foul weather. Phaedra sent a fervent, silent prayer for an early and most harsh winter.

She turned her head on the arm that cradled it and studied the face so close to her own. By the gods, he was wondrous to look upon, even with that crooked nose. Thick, gold-tipped lashes lay upon cheeks weathered to a satiny oak. Fine white lines radiated from the corners of his eyes and

mouth. Her gaze lingered on his lips. Lips that looked as though they'd been sculptured by a master. Lips that worked magic on her body, and whispered love songs in her ears.

He shifted, nuzzling into her warmth, and a lock of tawny hair fell across his forehead. Phaedra's fingers trembled as she reached out to brush the hair back, then trace the line of his cheek and jaw.

"May the gods keep you safe," she whispered.

*And bring you back to me.*

He stretched and mumbled, coming slowly awake. Phaedra waited, her heart pounding, her mind shaping the words she wanted to say. But whatever private moment they might have shared was lost as his body servant scratched timidly on the door and called out to the captain to make haste.

Alexander's entire household joined the procession that made its way down the five-mile thoroughfare enclosed within the Long Walls. Excitement hummed through the crowd, and pipers practiced lilting notes. The christening of a new ship was a matter of great social and religious significance, and the occasion of splendid feasts for all who could press their way into the yards. The omens this day had been particularly favorable, adding to the festive air. Word spread quickly that three owls had been seen at dawn, perched together on the outstretched arm of the statue of Hermes. That Athena's sacred birds should alight upon the figure of he who looked after travelers was surely a good portent for the men about to set sail.

On this great occasion, the rigid rules governing women's movements were relaxed to allow them to participate in the christening and launch. Lady Elene, carefully veiled, rode in a comfortable litter with Demetria and Chloe. Phaedra chose to walk to the harbor with Alexander. Here and there among the happy crowd, her keen eyes spotted women with silent tears upon their cheeks. Wives and mothers who sent husbands and sons to war. She felt much



kinship with these dolorous women, and her face was solemn as she kept pace with Alexander.

When they at last reached the harbor basin, however, the splendor of the scene submerged her doubts and fears. The white marble sheds ringing the waterfront gleamed in the sunlight, their graceful columns disguising the deadly war machines housed within. Only Alexander's ship rode the green waters of the bay, anchored by short ropes to the stone quay. Its festooned masts nodded with each swell, while its gilded beak glittered in the sun.

Alexander brought his family right out onto the quay to watch the christening ceremony. They took their place beside the archons in their purple robes and the other distinguished dignitaries, including the gray-bearded, smiling Pericles.

The captain's arrival was the signal for a long, clear trumpet call. The buzz of chatter slowly died away. Soon the only sounds disturbing the stillness were the rattle of the halyards against the masts, the slap of water against stone, and an occasional shuffling of feet.

A herald's deep voice intoned the time-honored prayer for a new warship—safe sailing for all aboard her, and destruction to all enemies she engaged.

Alexander then strode across the quay to stand beside his ship's prow. Phaedra felt her heart swell with pride at his tall figure, encased in a scarlet cloak trimmed with gold. Instead of the usual leather strip he tied around his forehead at sea to keep his hair from blowing in his eyes, he wore a bronzed and gilded helmet, its V-shaped visor raised above his brow. A ceremonial sword, its hilt glinting with chased-gold figures, hung from a belt worked with precious stones. Against a background of colorful pennants and bright banners, his resplendent figure drew all eyes.

Alexander waited until his crew had formed ranks alongside the ship. The entire complement of some two hundred officers, hoplites, sailors and archers stood at rigid attention. Once more the trumpet rang out, and then Alexander

raised aloft a libation cup of gold and silver. In a clear, strong voice, he led the ancient prayer.

"I dedicate this ship and all who sail upon her to the goddess Athena."

"To Athena," the crew and spectators shouted in response. Their voices boomed back from the marble sheds and rolled out across the waters.

"And to the gods who protect all seamen," Alexander continued.

"And to the gods who protect all seamen."

"I give this libation, as symbol of the blood spilled upon the waters."

While Alexander slowly poured the wine into the sea, the crowd roared in reply, "Blood spilled for the honor and glory of Athens."

"And I christen this ship, the newest in Athens' great fleet, the *Thedis*."

Phaedra's outraged gasp was lost in a thunder of applause as Alexander tugged away the purple cloth to expose the ship's name device. There, for all the world to see, was a naked, bronzed sea nymph with long, flowing hair and slender arms uplifted to the sky.

She watched, fuming, while the crew dispersed to make their final farewells. Alexander bid his family an affectionate goodbye, wiping the tears from his mother's cheeks. He promised Demetria he would keep a close eye on her husband, then swung Chloe into the air a final time and kissed her heartily. Finally, he approached his wife.

"I will slay you for this," Phaedra said through clenched teeth, forgetting completely the tender words she'd planned to send with him.

His blue eyes brimmed with laughter. "Aye, I thought perhaps you'd not be best pleased by the name."

"How could you do such a thing?"

He took her fisted hand in his. "I wanted something of you to take with me always. Just as you'll have something of me always with you."

He lifted her hand. Sunlight glinted on the gold dolphins banding her wrist.

Phaedra snatched her hand away, seething. To think she'd nearly wept at the thought of his leaving! *She*, who never shed tears! Weeping over *him*, who dared to mark her with his golden brand and put that wanton nymph upon his ship's prow! She glared up at him, incensed.

His grin deepened. "Ah, sweeting. This is how I wanted to leave you, with your eyes flashing green fire and your cheeks flushed by the heat of battle."

"You come close to not leaving at all," she hissed. "I could rattle your brains for this."

"Rattle away, my love."

He stepped toward her, and she drew back, her eyes narrowing.

"Do not dare touch me."

He took another step forward, she another back.

"If you retreat farther," he warned, "you'll end up in the sea."

Phaedra glanced behind her to see that she did indeed hover at the edge of the quay.

When he came forward once more, his arms outstretched, Phaedra was sorely tempted to sidestep, take hold of his arm, and use his own momentum to send him tumbling headlong into the harbor. 'Twould teach this arrogant, overbearing, grinning captain a badly needed lesson. But she found she couldn't do it. She couldn't shame him here, in front of his crew, in front of his mother. She couldn't bring herself to humble this proud man. Not that he'd be humbled, she thought sourly. The fool would probably go into the water laughing.

Instead, she allowed him to sweep her into his arms. When his mouth found hers, she tilted her head to allow him access. When his hands drew her against him, she allowed her body to shape itself to his. And then she was beyond allowing. She was lost in his scent and his taste and the feel of his lips and hands on her.

His whispered words of farewell stayed with her throughout the drama that followed. Once more the trumpet rang out. Before the last note had died away, the crew was aboard. Therocles waved to her as he took his seat on the topmost row of benches, his shaggy head just visible above the sides of the hull. Alexander stood beside the helmsman on the raised afterdeck, his helmet's plumes waving in the freshening breeze. At his signal, the ship was slowly warped away from the quay, and headed for the harbor's mouth. The crowd cheered and waved their cloaks.

A stiff off-shore breeze, precursor of the fierce Etesian winds that would blow in the winter months, rippled the sun-silvered waters of the gulf. The bronzed beak of the *Thedis* dipped, then rose, with deadly grace. Her great square sail was brailed up, bellying in the wind. The piper sounded a shrill note, and one hundred and seventy oars shot out of the thole openings. Another note, and one hundred and seventy blades creamed the water in perfect unison. The *Thedis* lunged forward, slicing through the waves with awesome speed, until she was beyond the harbor mouth and hull-down in the Saronic Gulf.

After the stirring pageantry of the departure ceremony and the feast that followed, life resumed a more mundane tenor. Once more time hung heavy on Phaedra's hands. With refugees filling every corner of the house and the courtyard, she had no privacy, and even fewer tasks to occupy her energies. For every simple chore that needed doing, Lady Elene had twenty eager pairs of hands. Uprooted from their own farms and households, left behind by their menfolk who sailed aboard Athens' reserve fleet, frightened by the ceaseless attacks of the besieging army, the women sought something to keep them busy and still their worries about what they'd find when they returned to their own homes.

At last, driven by sheer desperation, Phaedra organized some simple athletic games for the girls and boys trapped

within the compound. She commandeered a section of the yard, paced off varying distances and set up leather-covered targets. Dividing the children by age and size, she soon had them tossing roughly fashioned javelins and heaving a flat stone discus with all the energy and enthusiasm of Olympic contenders. An old sailor who'd lost an arm in a long-ago battle volunteered to supervise boxing matches for the smaller boys, while Phaedra demonstrated a few wrestling holds to both boys and girls that amazed them all. The yard was too small to allow any but the youngest children to race, but race they did. Every afternoon, to the accompaniment of barking dogs, flapping chickens and laughing, shouting mothers.

Soon everyone became involved in the games in some manner or another. The older children judged results and helped train the younger. Indulgent mothers wove wreaths of vines and myrtle leaves for the victors. The ancient crone cackled with glee as she awarded prizes. Even Chloe participated. Aided by the one-armed sailor, Phaedra constructed a wooden brace for Chloe to lean against while she tossed a child-size javelin with more enthusiasm than accuracy.

The daily training and regular games helped drain some of the children's excess energy during the day, but did little to alleviate the private fears that preyed upon their mothers' minds in the night. The women's anxiety grew with each assault on the city walls, each rumor of chance encounters on the sea.

Less than a week after Alexander's departure, word came of the first sea battle of the war, reportedly a great Athenian victory. Pericles himself brought them a detailed account. Phaedra hung at the edges of the eager crowd that encircled the statesman, uncomfortable with the Athenians' glee over the defeat of Sparta's allies, but desperate for word of Alexander.

"Admiral Phormio was sorely outnumbered," Pericles told Lady Elene. "The Corinthians laid canvas on forty-



seven ships and crept out of their base at dawn, thinking themselves safe from our small fleet. Phormio followed, however, with the twenty ships at his command, and caught up with them off Chalcis."

Lowering his voice, Pericles spun out the tale and built an unbearable suspense in his listeners, Phaedra included. Her impatience with the Athenian proclivity for drama grew with each telling pause, each theatrical wave of his hands. Phaedra wanted to scream at Pericles to get on with it.

"The Corinthians devised a brilliant countertactic," he intoned solemnly. "The dispatches describe how their admiral arranged his ships in a tight circle, prows pointing outward, his five fastest warships within. 'Twas a most unique and unconventional defense. If any of our ships attacked, they would be either impaled on the hedge of outward facing rams or, if they somehow slipped through, fall victim to the marauders within."

Her patience worn thin, Phaedra asked in her blunt manner, "And did they? Fall victim?"

Pericles threw her an offended look, clearly displeased at having his elegant discourse interrupted.

"Nay. Our men are too wily to be lured into the Corinthian's trap. Athenian ships surrounded the circle instead, their sides almost grazing the enemy's prows."

His gray beard split into a wide grin.

"As our ships edged closer and closer, our rowers beat the waters with their oars. The Corinthians drew ever tighter inward, until they began to knock up one against the other. Their oars tangled. Their sterns cracked against each other. The damned fools fouled themselves."

He shook with laughter.

"'Tis said that there was frantic confusion within their ranks. Their sailors tried to fend off collisions with long poles, shouting abuse at their own compatriots, until none could hear any commands or the coxswains' cries! And at that moment, Phormio chose to attack."



Lady Elene asked the question that trembled on Phaedra's lips. "Was Alexander among them?"

"Oh, aye. In the forefront. He and the other captains fell upon the disordered enemy like lions upon a fallen ox. The Corinthians put up no fight, and fled in wild disorder. Our ships pursued, taking twelve, crews and all."

Phaedra put a trembling hand to her lips, wracked by conflicting emotions. Relief that Alexander was unhurt warred with shame that her city's allies should prove so inept. More than ever before, she felt the burden of her uncertain state.

Pericles' broad grin faded slowly. "The Corinthians fled south to regroup. They have a new leader now. 'Tis said that the Spartan admiral Cnemus has brought his own squadron to augment their ranks and has taken command."

Phaedra's heart pounded painfully in her chest. Cnemus, son of Naxos and cousin of her blood. As cruel as his father, and even more feared. Cnemus had often bragged how he'd won admission to warrior rank by slaying five defenseless runaway slaves in the most gruesome, agonizing manner Phaedra had ever heard described. He was just as brutal with those who dared not try to escape him, indiscriminately abusing his little wife and the boys he preferred.

Twisted loyalties tore at Phaedra. She was of Sparta. One of her blood was camped without Athens' walls. Another would soon engage the Athenian fleet in what she knew would be a vicious battle. Yet she couldn't find it in her heart to pray for their victory. Not against Alexander. Feeling as though she'd lost her anchor to the only world she'd ever known, she left the happy Lady Elene and her guest to find what quiet she could within the crowded household.

As if the gods were eager to remind mere mortals that their fate was uncertain at best, the Athenians did not have long to celebrate their stunning sea victory. Five days after the frenzy of sacrifices and feasts held in honor of the battle

of Chalcis, a merchant ship limped into the harbor. Its sails hung listlessly from the mast, and only half its crew manned the benches. The rest lay weak and debilitated on the deck, a red rash covering their bodies and their lungs rattling with every gasping, painful breath. Later, Phaedra came to realize that the ship's arrival marked the day Athens began its descent into hell.

Aspasia, with her courtesan's freedom to move about the city, heard of the spreading illness first, and sent a servant to warn Lady Elene and her daughter-by-marriage. The frightened servant related how physicians from the great temple of Asclepius, the healing god, had attended the stricken crew members. Even Athens' most learned doctor, a disciple of the renowned physician, Hippocrates, had professed himself baffled by the strange ailment. Most of those stricken succumbed to the illness within days, the servant reported with wide, frightened eyes. And reports of new cases in the shops and brothels that ringed the waterfront cropped up every hour.

Lady Elene sniffed. "'Tis likely some new illness brought back from the strange lands these merchantmen travel to. They've passed it to the whores who see to their needs.'" She sent Phaedra a stern look. "Now you see why decent women do not go about outside their homes. We can rest secure, knowing that our high walls protect us from these diseased persons. Just as the city walls protect us from the enemy without."

It was with grim foreboding that Phaedra recalled Lady Elene's words a few days later. She was sitting in the courtyard, picking leaves from a huge basket of olives so that the servants could press them, when the ancient one beside her began to wheeze.

"What is it, Grandmother?" she asked, according the old woman the same honorary title Alexander had used.

Rheumy eyes looked up at Phaedra in some confusion. "I don't know. Most like 'tis this accursed heat."

The woman glanced up at the sun, then cringed and shielded her eyes with one hand, as if the light singed them.

Phaedra sat up slowly, feeling the cool breeze on her skin. If the ancient one felt heat, 'twas not from the weak autumn sun. It was then that she noticed the prickle of rash almost hidden in the wrinkled folds around the old woman's neck.

"Fetch Lady Elene," she instructed a servant quietly.

The ancient one died three days later. Her frail body was covered with red spots, and her rasping, gurgling breath grew more and more labored, until at last it ceased. The physician-priest Lady Elene had summoned closed his wooden box of instruments with a tired sigh. Three more women and two children awaited his attentions in the darkened room they'd converted into a sickroom.

Lady Elene herself washed the body, since the old woman had no kin of her own to see to this sacred task, and provided one of her own white tunics for the burial robe. While the other women lamented, Phaedra closed the sunken eyes and placed a coin within the blue, withered lips to pay the old woman's passage across the river Styx.

Weeping and wailing, the women set pitchers of wine and plates of food around the couch where the ancient one lay to sustain her on her journey. Their mournful dirges throughout the long afternoon and night held more than respect for a venerable old woman. They held a hint of fear and desperation. All knew now that they were enclosed within thick walls with death, even as death besieged them without.

Lady Elene led the mourning procession the following day, one of many that wound through Athens' streets to the sound of weeping and reedy flutes. She and Phaedra, as representatives of the family that claimed the old woman, were wrapped in black tunics and veils.

Since the army camped outside Athens' walls precluded use of the public burial grounds, Pericles had arranged for all victims to be cremated, a practice that normally only

the wealthy could afford. When the procession left the narrow streets and entered the plaza dedicated to cremations, Phaedra suppressed a stunned gasp. The huge square was thronged with mourners, while stacks of corpses awaited the priest's blessing and the fire that would set their spirits free. Not all the bodies were washed and bound, as was the old woman's. Some looked as though they had been dragged through the streets and dumped here—a hideous fate that condemned the families of these victims to Charon's eternal curse. Only desperation could have made friends and relatives abandon their loved ones so.

Smoke, thick and black, rose above the plaza, while the mourners waited and wailed. In the distance, even above the women's cries, was the sound of siege engines flinging huge boulders against the city walls. Drawing her veil tight across her nose to block the combined stench of smoke and bodies too long uncared-for, Phaedra waited with Lady Elene to perform the rituals. She swallowed desperately, forcing her roiling, rebellious stomach to subside by an act of sheer will.

They saw the old woman on her final journey at last, and returned to what should have been the funeral feast. Instead of honoring the ancient one with burnt offerings and libations, however, they found themselves preparing another, younger woman's body for burial. And then her child's.

With Phaedra assisting, Lady Elene completed the necessary cleansing. The older woman sat silent for a moment beside the child, who but a few days before had been a lively, mischievous little boy.

"I fear for Chloe," the matriarch murmured, her voice trembling. "She is so small and frail."

Phaedra glanced at her mother-by-marriage sharply, seeing how tiredness and fear made the older woman's shoulders sag.

"Chloe is stronger than she looks," she asserted. "Her exercises have strengthened her body."

Lady Elene reached over and gripped Phaedra's arm.

"Your exercises have strengthened her body. If she survives this plague, 'tis due to you. I thank you for that, with all my heart."

Surprised, Phaedra covered the older woman's hand with her own.

"I thank you also for what you've done for my son," Lady Elene continued, her blue eyes on Phaedra's face.

"What I've done? I've done naught but bring discord into his home and trap him in a marriage he must come to hate."

"If Alexander's trapped, 'tis a snaring he desires above all else," Lady Elene said slowly. "And as for this home, you've brought a freshness, a sense of life, into it that was lacking before."

"You are kind to say so," Phaedra murmured.

"Nay, 'tis not kindness that moves me to speak. 'Tis a need to tell you what's in my mind. We've traveled a twisted road to bring us to this point in time, and I fear there are dark turns yet ahead. But whatever comes, I want you to know that I'm honored to call you daughter."

Phaedra's fingers tightened on Lady Elene's. She nodded, too moved to speak.

"I'm proud also to call the babe you carry grandchild."

Clear green eyes met penetrating blue ones. Phaedra sat back, stunned.

"You know?"

"Aye, even in this house of sickness, 'tis hard to disguise your retching of a morning." Lady Elene's shoulders straightened, and her voice took on its customary tartness. "As often as you and my son retired to your bedchamber, I'm surprised you didn't quicken sooner."

"This...this is my first time," Phaedra admitted, a hint of wonder threading through her voice.

"Well, it won't be the last," the older woman responded dryly. "Not the way you and Alexander go about it. If the gods are willing, this house will ring with the sound of babies for many years to come."



For a moment, for one breathless moment, Phaedra allowed herself to share Lady Elene's vision of the future. With an absent, unthinking gesture, she twisted the gold dolphins around and around on her wrist. All too soon, the vision faded and reality intruded.

"Nay, I won't raise Alexander's sons and daughters here, as outcasts in his own city." Her gaze swung to Lady Elene, burning in its intensity. "I can't."

Just as fiercely, the older woman responded. "Don't try to decide what you will and won't do seven or eight months hence. Let us just survive this day, and the next."

Phaedra thought of Lady Elene's words often in the days that followed. Time became a blur of mounting grief and terror for all within Athens' walls. Sickness rampaged through the city, striking down young and old, weak and strong. Outside the walls, Naxos' armies stepped up their assault. Catapults flung a rain of burning pitch over the walls into the crowded city, causing little damage to the brick houses and marble buildings, but bringing pain and suffering to their inhabitants. Battering rams thundered against the gates at regular intervals. One concerted attack on the northern wall was repelled with great losses to both sides, and more smoke billowed from funeral pyres.

Twice Pericles himself addressed hysterical crowds, using all his powers of persuasion to keep them from throwing open the city gates and falling on the mercy of the besieging Spartans. He knew as well as Phaedra that the Spartans would show no mercy.

Phaedra worked beside Lady Elene each day, and was up most nights tending the sick. Her lean strength and tireless energy kept her beside the fevered, moaning, restless victims long after others had dropped onto pallets, exhausted.

Demetria sent a frantic call for help, having lost her mother-by-marriage in the first days of the plague. Accompanied by a frightened manservant, Phaedra hurried through



the streets to the lieutenant's house. The last time she had come this way was for Demetria's wedding, when singing and the scent of flowers had filled the night. Now, only cries and lamentations sounded from behind closed doors while corpses thrown out in the streets by families too stricken to dispose of them fouled the air. Phaedra pulled her veil tight across her face to block the odors, fighting the bile that rose in her throat.

Demetria met her at the door, her eyes red-rimmed with fatigue.

"Thank you for coming," she all but wept. "I've lost ten within my house in the last two days. My servants say they cannot buy wood to build biers."

"There is none to buy," Phaedra answered. "The poor have cut down every tree within the city walls to burn their dead, and the rich steal from each other's stores."

"Great mother of the gods!" Demetria gasped. "How will we perform burial rites for our people?"

"I've put guards on Alexander's warehouses. We have enough to fuel your pyres. Come, I'll help you bind the bodies in what cloth you have, so that you may transport them to the plaza."

'Twas late in the day before Phaedra left Demetria's house, having done what she could to help the young matron order her home. Halfway to Alexander's residence, she stopped in midstride, sickened by the sight of two dogs snarling over a shrouded bundle. Her stomach, uncertain these days from her pregnancy, betrayed her. She leaned against a wall, retching. The servant escorting her stooped down and grabbed a handful of loose cobbles. With a curse, he flung the stones at the dogs. They streaked away, yelping.

Phaedra stared at the savaged bundle for a moment, then turned on her heels.

"Mistress! Where are you going? That's not the way home."

"Tell the Lady Elene I have a task to attend to. I will return anon."

"My lady!" the servant gasped. "You cannot walk the streets alone! 'Tis not proper!"

Wondering that the man would cling to old customs while the world crashed down around his ears, Phaedra strode away. After a number of false turns, she found the door she sought and pounded on it with both fists.

"What? What brings you here?" Aspasia asked. Lines of strain and fatigue marked her face, and her once-bright hennaed hair hung in dull strands down her back. "Is Lady Elene taken? Or Alexander's daughter?"

"Nay, they were well when I left them."

Aspasia brushed a tired hand across her brow. "What, then?"

"I would speak with Pericles."

The courtesan's thin brows arched in surprise.

"Is he within?" Phaedra asked doggedly.

"Aye, he's here. But he departs immediately."

Aspasia waved Phaedra inside, eyeing her for a long moment, as if measuring what she would say.

"Word just came that Sparta and her allies have launched an armada to engage our Western Fleet. Pericles has an emergency meeting with the Council to force them to identify reinforcements for Admiral Phormio. Those fools have diddled and delayed reallocating ships until it may be too late."

Phaedra watched numbly as Aspasia went to summon Pericles. Her throat clogged with sudden fear. It was come. The battle she'd dreaded. Alexander, son of Porthos, would meet Cnemus, son of Naxos. The warrior of her heart and the warrior of her blood.

"What is it, Lady Phaedra?"

Pericles' deep voice brought her head whipping around.

"Why do you seek me?"

"I...I thought to... I sought your..." Her disjointed words trailed off. Raising stricken eyes to Pericles, she

asked what was in her heart. "When do you think battle will be joined?"

"Within a week." Pericles' clipped reply told her that he, too, was worried.

"How large is the Spartan fleet?"

"Some seventy ships or more. We have twenty to oppose them."

Phaedra swallowed painfully. "The same twenty that fought at Chalcis?"

"Aye. The same battered ships." He paused, and his sunken eyes raked her face. "'Tis time for you to choose your loyalties, lady. If you would see your husband again, you must pray—and pray hard—that the gods intervene to aid us."

"I don't know if I can pray anymore, even if I would," Phaedra replied, her voice bleak. "I've prayed so much these last weeks, for each child taken sick, for each young maid whose life rattled out through flaccid lips. I don't believe that the gods hear our prayers, or deign to answer them."

Pericles met her eyes, and some of the stiffness went out of his stance. He placed a comforting hand on her arm. "You must not give up hope, not now. Now is the time to pray even harder."

Shrugging off the light grip, Phaedra began to pace. "I'm tired of praying. I'm tired of being torn between my loyalty to Sparta and this Athenian who holds my heart. I won't sit and wait helplessly for word of his fate when all around me are succumbing to theirs."

"What would you do?"

She whirled to face the older man, her chin lifting. "I won't betray my city. Nor will I aid yours in this war. But I've decided that there is something *I will do.*"

## Chapter Seventeen



“Do you think they come out to fight at last?” Darien’s quiet question hung on the night.

Alexander murmured an assent, his eyes and his mind focused on the dark waters of the bay.

Across those waters, not six miles away, was the Spartan fleet. For a week now the opponents had lain along their respective shores, watching, waiting. The Spartans and their allies had used the time to ensure that they were fully prepared for the battle to come, while the Athenians had waited desperately for promised reinforcements.

Now, however, it appeared that the Spartans had decided to wait no longer. Just an hour ago a two-man skiff had come skimming across the dark waters with word that the enemy embarked. Telltale sounds had carried clearly to the lurking spies. They reported hearing greaves clink against greaves and the rattle of spears as a vast number of soldiers boarded warships.

Alexander’s gaze slid to the shadowy shapes of the sailors and marines busy stowing the mainmast of the *Thedis* and clearing her decks for battle. They were good men all, and this day they would fight the battle of their lives. He turned to the officers clustered beside him on the high deck. A slow, predatory grin was sketched across his lips.

"Aye," he confirmed, "I think the Spartans finally come out to fight. It looks like we'll have good hunting this day."

The huge, heavily muscled helmsman rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Our twenty battle-scarred ships against their seventy or more fresh-caulked boats and rested crews." He paused, then grunted in satisfaction. "If we can't row circles around those heavy-handed, thick-skulled Spartans, I'll eat my best cloak!"

Another officer snorted. "If we can't row circles around them, most likely you'll be buried in it."

Alexander listened to their badinage, knowing well that their words disguised a proven bravery tempered by sober recognition of the odds against them. At length he intervened with a quiet command.

"Take your positions and make sure the men are ready. I'll pour the libation and exhort the crew when Admiral Phormio gives the signal. Darien, a word with you."

With murmured wishes for good fortune, the other officers dispersed to their duties. For a few moments, the two men stood alone on the deck.

"I'm glad that I go into battle with you as my bow officer," Alexander told him.

"Not as glad as I that you're once again my captain."

Alexander smiled in response. "It cost me my best dagger to get you transferred to the *Thedis*, but 'twas worth it. This looks to be a good fight."

"Aye."

Their eyes met in the slowly gathering dawn. The two men, bound by marriage and by a brotherhood that only warriors who had fought side by side in battle could ever understand, gripped forearms.

"May the gods watch over you, Darien."

"And you, Alexander."

After a long, charged moment, the lieutenant cleared his throat. "If I should not return, take care of Demetria. The last word I had, she was still well."

The ever-present specter that had hovered over the fleet

since it first received word of the plague ravaging Athens raised its death-head once more.

"I'll care for Demetria if you fall," Alexander said fiercely, "and you will do the same for my daughter and mother, if they survive this scourge."

"I will."

"And I would ask a boon of you, brother to brother."

"'Tis yours."

"Should I not return, take Phaedra from Athens to any place she chooses."

"What? After what your mother went through to secure her safety and wed her to you, you would send her away?"

Alexander's lips curved. "I would free the panther I have caged."

"Harrumph!" The younger man shook his head. "'Tis more likely the woman will cosh me over the head and take herself off. But I will do what I can."

Alexander stood alone on the afterdeck while Darien went to take his position in the prow. Wrapped in the cloak of early dawn, he took a moment for his personal prayers and fears. His hands clenched the rail as he pondered the winding road that had brought him to this point in his life's journey. Never, ever, could he remember having been so torn between duty and personal desire. As a warrior, he looked forward to the coming battle with a fierce determination to do honor to himself and his city. But as a son, a father, a husband, he wanted to raise the sails this instant and beat back to Athens with all speed.

The need to protect the women in his care, to shield them from harm, formed the essence of his manhood. Yet his duty to his city held him here, far away. He could not go to his family's aid; nor had he been able to arrange passage for them on a ship out of Athens. Pericles had commandeered all private vessels to resupply the besieged city, and ordered all able-bodied men to the walls to repel the increasingly savage attacks by Naxos' armies. The few dispatches that had reached the Western Fleet indicated that



foreigners and even slaves now manned the city walls, flinging down stones and burning pitch on leather-shielded battering rams and siege engines.

While the enemy stormed Athens' outside walls, death stalked within. Being here, so far away, while his womenfolk battled an even fiercer foe than the Spartans was ripping Alexander apart. Most of the men in the fleet suffered similarly, tortured by their inability to ensure their families' safety, and by the sporadic reports of the city's travails.

Alexander had received one stained, folded parchment nearly a week ago, hastily scribbled by his household scribe at Phaedra's direction. She had assured him that Chloe was yet well, as was his mother, although Lady Elene wore herself to the bone caring for the stricken. She briefly recounted the losses within his household and ended with a terse, cryptic message. She was hale and strong, Phaedra said, and had decided she would no longer meekly acquiesce to the whims of the gods.

That last sentence had kept Alexander awake during the long watches of the night. Had she decided to return to Naxos? With Athens in such disorder, one with her redoubtable courage and determination could easily find the means to slip through the walls and make her way to the enemy lines. Had she already repudiated their marriage, as she'd threatened to do? That possibility—nay, probability—made Alexander grip the rail so hard his blunt fingernails gouged the wood. Although he'd asked Darien to help Phaedra regain her freedom should he himself not survive the battle to come, the thought that she might already be gone from his house left an aching void in his heart.

Yet here, in the last hours before battle, mayhap in the last hours of his life, he acknowledged that he had no right to hold her against her will. He'd snatched her from all she held dear, confined her to a restricted way of life that left no outlet for her vital energy, and, in doing so, had put her at the mercy of a deadly scourge. As the dark sky above

the bay took on the red glow of dawn, Alexander made a silent pledge to whatever gods listened. If he survived this battle, if Phaedra survived the death that stalked her, he would himself cut the gold band from her wrist and set her free.

“The mainmast and mainsail are ashore, Captain, with all their rigging.”

Alexander turned. The time for private thoughts and fears and promises was done.

“Have you dumped all water casks and storage chests?”

“Aye, sir. The *Thedis* is as light as a gull’s feather, and will fly just as swiftly.”

Alexander returned the second officer’s salute with one of his own and wished him good hunting. Summoning his aide, he donned his crested helmet, with its raised, pointed visor, then checked the leather belt that held together the two pieces of his plain, unadorned cuirass. Unlike his ceremonial gear, this armor lacked elaborate ornamentation. Officers were prime targets for enemy archers as it was. Those who were seasoned by battle saw no reason to further place themselves at risk by advertising their rank and drawing the archers’ attention with polished gold or bronze decorations. Satisfied that the cuirass was strapped tight and that his sword slid easily from its oiled scabbard, Alexander knelt to check the buckles of the greaves that protected his shins. When he leapt across the grappling hooks to board an enemy ship, he sure as Hades didn’t want to trip over his own loose armour.

Fully armed, he made his way down the long opening between the decks, checking the disposition and readiness of the crew. With the coming of dawn and of battle, the frustration and fears that plagued them these last interminable weeks had slipped away. The men joked quietly with each other, bragging of kills to come and bolstering their own spirits. In such a way, each sought to overcome the gut-wrenching fear that this might be his last time at the oars except to travel across the river Styx.

A fierce pride rose in Alexander at the men's bravado and slowly gathering bloodlust. They might face four times their number, but, by the gods, they'd give as good as they received, and more, much more. A low signal light flared briefly from the admiral's flagship. Alexander mounted the deck at the prow and called his crew to attention in a ringing voice.

"Listen to me, men of the *Thedis*. In a few moments, Admiral Phormio will address the fleet. He'll tell you that we are but few against the Spartan many. He'll tell you also that the Spartans learned a lesson from their allies' defeat at Chalcis. They'll not again draw into a circle and wait for us to prey upon them. This time they'll attack. Whether they come straight at us or seek to draw us into the enclosed waters of the gulf, where our speed and tactics will be hampered, I know not."

His voice rose, echoed by the shouts of other captains exhorting their crews along the line of twenty ships.

"But I do know that however or wherever they come at us, we'll take them on! For every arrow their archers loose, ours will loose five. For every marine that tries to leap aboard our ships, we'll board five. And for every ship they try to sink, we'll sink five. That's my charge to you, men of the *Thedis*. Five trophies! Five kills!"

His crew roared, chanting the magic number *five* as if it were a talisman.

The rim of the sun broke above the hills, and Phormio took his place on his flatship's raised deck. Gradually the crews quieted.

As Alexander had predicted, the admiral made no effort to downplay the overwhelming numbers they faced. Instead, Phormio extolled the Athenians' skill and asked the men to pray for winds and rough seas to hinder the enemy. The experienced Athenian crews could handle whatever seas the gods chose to whip up. The less skilled Spartans could not.

Alexander poured the libation into the waters. The pipers

sounded a slow beat. One by one the ships slipped their moorings and were warped out, away from shore. They formed a long line of sleek, deadly predators, their gilded beaks catching the sun's first rays.

It was soon apparent that the Athenians' prayers would not be answered. The winds stayed calm as the sky lightened from deep purple to a rosy pink. Word came that the enemy fleet had weighed anchor just as dawn painted the gulf a liquid gold. In a long column of four abreast, the Spartans and their allies were bearing down on the straights that led to the Gulf of Corinth, and the Athenian base of Naupactus, just beyond.

Phormio ordered his ships to beat along the northern coast in a single line, urging greater and greater speed. If they couldn't lure the enemy into an attack here, in open waters, then they had to slip past them into the gulf and protect Naupactus. Heavily armed soldiers double-timed along the shore, trying desperately to keep up with the Athenian ships.

Every man aboard strained to see across the narrowing waters as they rounded the promontories that formed the straits. And there, not fifteen hundred yards away, was the Spartan-led fleet. As if they had been waiting for the first Athenian ship to appear, the awesome line of enemy ships turned. The column of ships four abreast became a solid phalanx of curved prows and deadly beaks, four deep, all bearing down at full speed on the exposed sides of the strung-out Athenian vessels.

Alexander sucked in a sharp breath. He would never have believed the Spartans capable of such daring. That they would attack here, in the narrow neck of the straits, was a bold, unanticipated move. There was no room for the Athenians to turn and sail around them. They could only try to escape being trapped against the crowding cliffs by the oncoming Spartans.

"Double the beat," Alexander shouted.

He held his breath as the timing officer, accompanied by

the shrill notes of the piper, chanted a faster, ever faster, beat. Halfway down the length of the ship, Alexander met Therocles' grim look. An unspoken message passed between them. Therocles' massive muscles strained, sweat rolled down his brow and glistened on his shoulders. Behind and below him, the other rowers followed his smooth stroke. The *Thedis* surged forward and dashed through the straits, the last of the Athenian line to escape the Spartans.

Alexander watched with savage helplessness as the nine ships behind the *Thedis* were driven against the rocky shore. Red-cloaked Spartan warriors jumped aboard the victims and engaged their crews. Overwhelmed by the enemy's numbers, many crewmen leapt over the side to swim to shore and fight as best they could on land.

The crew on the *Thedis* watched over their shoulders in helpless rage as whooping Spartans tied ropes to the abandoned hulls and began to tow them off. The crew's growls turned to shouts of savage encouragement as Athenian infantrymen waded into the shallows, clambering aboard the encumbered ships. Screams and the whack of metal against leather carried across the waters as vicious hand-to-hand fighting ensued.

Offering up a fervent prayer for the infantry, Alexander fixed his attention on the Spartan ships now dashing through the straits. Every man aboard the *Thedis* could hear the war paean the Spartan rowers sang as they pulled at top speed in pursuit of their remaining prey.

One quick survey of the gulf showed Alexander the Athenians' desperate position. They had no time and no room to maneuver. The ten ships ahead of Alexander's were rowing furiously for the harbor base of Naupactus. They would bank and turn, prows facing outward, to defend the vital base at all costs.

Eyes narrowed against the glare of the morning sun on the waters, Alexander spotted a solitary merchantman anchored just outside the harbor mouth. Within the space of a heartbeat, he made his decision. If he could lure the Spar-



tans into chasing him, make them break their line, mayhap the other Athenian ships could take advantage of the disorder.

"There!" he shouted to the helmsman over the noise of the chant. "Steer for that merchant ship."

The officer frowned for a moment, his shoulders heaving with the strain of holding steady both huge tillers. Then a wide grin split his sweat-drenched face.

"Aye, Captain!" he yelled, slewing his entire body to one side.

"Left bank, raise oars," Alexander shouted.

The second officer relayed the command, and the three starboard banks of oars, silvered by the wash of the sea, rose high in the air. With a spirited swish of her tail, the *Thedis* spun in the water, then headed straight for the moored merchantman.

"Captain! Their flagship is in pursuit."

At the second officer's exultant shout, Alexander glanced back. The gilded beak of an enemy warship bore down on them, followed by a line of ships. The flagship was so close, not fifty yards behind, that Alexander could see the face of the Spartan commander leaning forward in the prow. He was young and handsome in his savage darkness. An admiral's red crest plumed his bronzed helmet. With a surge of fierce energy, Alexander knew he faced Cnemus, son of Naxos, cousin to Phaedra. And he knew also that only one of them would emerge alive from the coming fight.

"Row, men!" he roared. "Row now, with everything you have in you."

Responding to his command, the crew leaned into the oars, grunting and straining with effort. The *Thedis* flew across the waves. The merchantman's massive bulk loomed in front of them. Oars banked. Water flashed. The decks tilted. The *Thedis* slewed around the moored ship at an impossible angle and a reckless speed. Every man on board held his breath as water cascaded over the gunwales and



splashed through the thole holes. After long, heart-stopping seconds, the *Thedis* righted herself, made a full circle of the merchantman and came at the Spartan flagship just as it approached.

At Alexander's shout, the rowers gave one last, mighty heave, then shipped their oars. The *Thedis* bore down on the enemy at full speed. Her deadly bronzed ram sliced into the Spartan amidships. To the screech of shattered timbers and the screams of sailors crushed where they sat, battle was joined.

Phaedra straightened, putting both hands to the small of her back to ease its ache. The haggard merchant whose shoulder she'd been peering over continued to work his abacus. At length the sound of ivory beads clicking against one another died away, and the merchant lifted his head.

"The count is less than yesterday," he said slowly.

Phaedra nodded. The small group behind her let out a collective breath.

"'Tis the fourth day in a row the count is down," the merchant offered.

"Aye."

A bent old man whose humped spine belied the strength of his spirit stepped forward. "What was the precise number?"

"Fewer than fifty bodies this day. Forty-three, to be exact."

Phaedra saw the desperate hope that sprang into the eyes of the men around her, and felt the same emotion swell in her veins. Sternly she repressed it. 'Twas too soon to hope. There were still mounds of dead to be honored, hundreds of stricken to be tended, weeping mothers and frightened children to be comforted. With all that faced them, 'twas too soon to believe their travail was coming to an end.

But her heart wouldn't listen to her head. A stubborn tendril of hope sprouted roots as she surveyed her faithful lieutenants and saw them fighting their own emotions.

They were a disparate lot, this band that had come together to help her. A stooped old orator, whose once-plump flesh now hung in graying folds about his neck and arms; a white-faced, sad-eyed merchant whose coffers of gold hadn't been sufficient to buy life for his two sons and six grandchildren, all now dead; and the one-armed old sailor who had helped her organize the children's games so many weeks ago. A disparate lot, but an effective one.

"My patrol found three more children today," the merchant was saying. "Locked in an upper room with their dead mother, and nearly starved. I recorded the father's name and placed them with a family whose children are gone."

"Well done, Agamethon."

Phaedra knew nothing could ever heal the man's scars from the loss of his family, but helping terrified orphans find solace in the arms of grieving mothers seemed to ease his pain a bit more each day.

"And my men scoured the waterfront," the old sailor reported. "They found more bodies, but signs of hope, also. A few of the brothels have reopened for business."

He managed a tired laugh and a crude jest that brought grins to the men's lips.

"Any word of the fleet?" the old orator asked.

Phaedra held her breath. The last official dispatch from the Western Fleet received in Athens had warned that the Spartans were ready to attack and called desperately for reinforcements. The Council had sent them at last, but whether they had arrived in time for the imminent battle, none knew.

"Nay," the sailor replied.

Phaedra's shoulders sagged. She didn't know whether to pray that battle was not joined, or pray that it was over. Her heart was yet torn between her city and her husband.

"You'll hear soon," the statesman murmured, patting her hand.

Phaedra smiled at him, then caught the looks of concern

in the others' eyes. In the midst of their own grief and weariness, they shared her personal dilemma. She felt a swell of pride and love for her small band. And for the incredible job that they had done.

As tired and infirm as they were, they had risen spectacularly to the occasion. Each of them headed between five and eight patrols, composed of those male adults too aged or otherwise infirm to man the walls, but still capable of limited labor. The patrols in turn were assigned sectors of the city to scour each day, where they exhorted, harassed and otherwise organized the residents into relief efforts. These patrols helped collect bodies for transport to the pyres, identified victims who were too weak to care for themselves or without family, and children who needed placement. The patrols reported to the lieutenants, who in turn reported to Phaedra.

In the rare moments when she had time to think about it, Phaedra was astounded by the scope of her informal organization. When she informed Pericles that she would *do* something, she'd intended only to collect the dead lying in the streets around Alexander's home. Having secured the orator's reluctant authorization, she'd begun with one cart and a half-dozen frightened slaves, grimly retrieving abandoned corpses and taking them to the plaza for the priests to honor.

Almost as if they needed release from the grief and terror that held them in thrall, other survivors had emerged cautiously from their houses to help or send workers in their names. Soon the rotting bodies littering the streets above the Acropolis had been cleared away, and then the effort had spread to the lower sections of the city.

Early on, the archons sent a harried senior hoplite to oversee the swelling ranks of volunteers. The man had spent a half hour with Phaedra reviewing her organization, then left. She had things well in hand, he'd told her with a bow. His services would be of better use on the walls. Grimly she'd continued her gruesome task, aided first by

the one-armed sailor, then the old, hump-backed statesman, then the grieving merchant. Soon she'd built a network that scoured the entire city each day and brought order to chaos, relief to the stricken, hope to the hopeless.

In the darkness of the night, alone in Alexander's big bed, Phaedra often debated what she did. Her honor would not allow her to aid the Athenians in any way in their battle against Sparta. But she could care for the dead and see that they were sent on their journey to the underworld with all due respect. That was every person's moral obligation, regardless of city, regardless of tribe. Wars were often halted and truces negotiated to allow soldiers on each side to retrieve their dead. Those bodies so mutilated in battle that they couldn't be identified were honored by whichever side found them. Thus, Phaedra rationalized, she did not betray her city by honoring those who would not ever fight against Sparta again. That her initial effort had expanded beyond what she'd envisioned, was due to the desperate determination of this small, dedicated band of lieutenants.

The group broke up a few moments later to make their weary way home. Phaedra wound her way through the deserted streets, the one-armed sailor at her side. With the coming of dusk, the city had quieted; the Spartan attacks had ceased. No sounds of rocks slamming against walls filled the air, no wailing or keening filtered through shuttered windows. It was as if the city itself paused in its spiral toward night and toward death, to breathe in a moment of peace.

She entered Alexander's home with a feeling of relief and bid the sailor a fond good-night. Crossing the courtyard, Phaedra made her way to the darkened room where she knew she would find the Lady Elene. Early on, they had discovered that the victims found a measure of relief in darkness, and had hung black cloths in the big dining chamber to block all but the barest light. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Phaedra spotted the matriarch kneeling

beside a stricken farmer's wife and washing the woman's neck and arms. She glanced up as Phaedra entered.

"You were gone long this day, daughter," Lady Elene commented mildly.

Phaedra dropped onto a small, three-legged stool beside the older woman.

"Aye."

She paused, not wanting to raise false hope, but needing desperately to share her news. "We counted the tally, then recounted it twice more."

Lady Elene's thin, pale face and sunken eyes begged for some surcease from the unrelenting cycle of death that had gripped them all these past weeks.

"There were fewer than fifty dead collected this day," Phaedra told her.

Gripping her hands together in her lap, Lady Elene sat back on her heels. "Is it over, then?"

"I think so," Phaedra said cautiously. "There are still new cases reported every day. But fewer and fewer."

"Can you not rest now?"

Phaedra shook her head. "No more than you can, my lady. You work harder and even longer than I do. The only difference is, you do it within these walls."

Their eyes met, and both women smiled, remembering Lady Elene's many strictures against any decent woman going outside her home. Such concerns now seemed to belong to another lifetime, another age.

"Still, you should rest," the matriarch urged. "The babe you carry saps your strength, although you don't realize it. You're far, far too thin."

Phaedra crossed her forearms over her belly, which was still nearly flat. "I have trouble yet keeping down any food. 'Tis only the exercise I get walking in the streets that allows me to eat at all."

"'Tis a miracle, is it not?" Lady Elene asked softly. "New life amid all this death?"

"Aye," Phaedra breathed. Her arms tightened protec-

tively over her stomach. At that moment she cared not that her child was of mixed blood, that it would be an outcast in both Sparta and Athens. All she cared was that she bore life within her, a babe of Alexander's. If he never came home to her, she would have this child, at least. This proof that, even in the most desperate of time, there was joy.

"Any news of the fleet?" Lady Elene asked, as if reading her mind.

"Nay, none."

At Phaedra's flat tone, the older woman essayed a tired smile. "Don't despair, daughter. My son is too hard-headed to die before what's between you is resolved."

"It cannot be resolved," Phaedra said quietly. "He is of Athens. I am of Sparta. We cannot deny our heritage."

"One's heritage matters less and less in times like these," Lady Elene replied. "'Tis the future that counts, not the past."

Phaedra nodded, not wishing to argue with this woman who had become her friend and companion. She sat back, willing herself to relax while Lady Elene finished washing the stricken woman. Idly Phaedra fingered the gold dolphins banding her left wrist. The bracelet moved easily, loosely, on her thin bones. Its golden glow was warm and comforting in the darkened room, reminding Phaedra painfully of the man who had given it to her. By the gods, she missed Alexander. She ached to run her fingers through his tawny hair, to see his eyes crinkle at the corners when he laughed. She longed to hear his deep voice spouting irreverent humor and soft poetry. She craved his touch, his scent, his comfort.

"Well, that's done."

Lady Elene rested her hands in her lap, watching as the woman she tended slipped into an uneasy sleep. Her head bent with weariness, and the veil covering her hair slipped to one side.

Phaedra's hand stilled on the bracelet.

Agonizing pain seeped into her heart, drop by drop, until



she couldn't breathe, couldn't force air through her constricted throat.

She stared at the red spots on the back of Lady Elene's neck.

Furiously she blinked back the hot, scalding tears that pooled in her eyes. Wanting to scream a denial to the heavens, she bit her lower lip so hard that her mouth filled with the coppery taste of blood.

Lady Elene sighed and started to rise.

With an unsteady hand, Phaedra reached down to aid her. The gold dolphins slid off her emaciated wrist and clattered on the floor tiles. Scooping up the bracelet, she tucked it away in a fold of her chiton.

"Come, Mother," she said gently, "let me help you."

Lady Elene grasped Phaedra's hand and rose wearily to her feet. A warm, loving light filled her blue eyes, so like her son's that Phaedra's heart all but shattered.

"'Tis the first time you've called me 'Mother.'"

"Aye, I know."

Her hand cupped Phaedra's cheek. "'Tis most welcome, daughter."

"'Tis my honor, lady mother."

## Chapter Eighteen



His heart torn by fierce exultation and a rising fear for his family, Alexander battled the elements to bring word of the great sea victory to Athens.

Phormio himself had chosen him as messenger. The admiral had alternately cursed Alexander's foolhardy, irresponsible recklessness in breaking for the merchantman and praised his daring in distracting the Spartans long enough to allow a mad, totally unexpected attack on their line. In the bloody, chaotic battle that ensued, the Athenians had rowed and rammed and fought with desperate courage and brilliant maneuvering, throwing the enemy into total confusion. When darkness finally descended on shores washed by mangled bodies and torn ships, when hoarse victory shouts finally carried over the screams of the dying, when the Athenian captains finally gathered to report their losses,, they had recovered every one of their original twenty ships and captured almost that number of the enemy's. Their exhaustion forgotten in the savage thrill of victory against all odds, the crew of the *Thedis* left immediately for Athens with word of the battle of Naupactus.

The voyage proved almost as toilsome as the battle. They rowed through what remained of the night, buoyed by their surging, pumping blood lust. With the dawn, however, thick, blanketing fog descended. Unable to make much

headway in the swirling mists, the *Thedis* was forced to hug the shore. Contrary winds finally cleared the fog, but prevented any use of the sails.

The crew rowed in shifts through the day and all that night, grabbing hurried meals at their benches to sustain their strength. They put into the friendly port of Pagae, on the eastern end of the Gulf of Corinth, then portaged across the narrow isthmus. Toting the oars, they raced across the rocky ground with the stripped-down hull on their shoulders, then launched it once more in the gray, wind-tossed waters of the Saronic Gulf.

Not two hours out into the gulf, a violent storm arose so quickly even the nimble *Thedis* couldn't escape it. It drove her against the reefs off the island of Salamis and ripped a long tear in her hull. Pacing the shore, Alexander fought to restrain his impatience as the ship's carpenter worked by torchlight to lay fresh-planed planking to the keel.

When at last he sailed into Athens' harbor at noon on the third day, Alexander's initial view of the city gave no indication of the horror he knew it had suffered. The Parthenon rose in all its majesty, high on the Acropolis. Below it, winding streets glistened silver from recent rains. Only after he'd hurried through the docking ceremony and set out for the city proper with Darien and Therocles at his side did Alexander begin to see ominous signs.

Not a single tree still stood along the broad thoroughfare between the Long Walls. They'd been cut, Alexander realized grimly, to provide fuel for the great pyres spaced at regular intervals along the way. Beside each pyre, waiting for the wood to dry and send their spirits on the journey to the underworld, were stacks of bundled corpses. Hollow-eyed and numb, mourners huddled beside the dead.

The cold knot of fear in Alexander's stomach tightened as he and his companions entered the city gates and began to wind their way through the steep streets. No stranger to violent death, Alexander was unnerved by Athens' eerie quiet. Instead of the wails and lamentations he'd expected,

the city seemed to have embraced its fate. The few citizens they passed walked with shoulders slumped and faces pinched with fatigue and a dull fear. No children raced or cried, no street hawkers called their wares. Even the animals rooting in the gutters slunk away, as if unused to a man's vigorous stride. The only sound was the dull boom of siege engines that signaled Sparta's presence outside the northern walls. From the dispatches sent to the fleet, Alexander knew that the massive walls had held the Spartan forces without these last weeks. But now he saw that they also held death within.

The knot in his stomach pulled taut when a thin, bobbing servant opened the door to his home. A quick query confirmed that the old porter was dead, an early victim of the plague. Heart pounding, Alexander stepped into the courtyard. Darien and Therocles followed.

He guessed that fewer than half the refugees he'd left there just weeks before still remained. They turned, one by one, at his entrance. With controlled desperation, Alexander searched their faces. None had his wife's brilliant green eyes or his mother's aquiline features. No soft brown curls like Chloe's showed among the few children present.

"Where is my lady?" he asked one of the silent watchers.

The gaunt woman shook her head.

When no one stepped forward with any offer of information or welcome, Alexander strode across the courtyard to the kitchens. No smell of baking bread greeted him, no chatter of busy slaves. A suffocating tension closed his throat.

Turning on one heel, he left the kitchens and headed for the red door to his chamber. The massive portal slammed against the wall as he threw it open. There was only emptiness within.

Knowing it was a futile hope, Alexander crossed to the small storeroom that opened onto his chamber. He prayed for some sign, any sign, that the room was inhabited. There

was none. His chests stood stacked neatly against the wall, and the floor was bare of any pallet. He stood for a moment, hands braced against the door frame, dragging in slow, harsh breaths.

At length, he turned, thinking to search the women's quarters. As he recrossed his chamber, a gleam of metal caught his eye. There, in the niche that held the silver bowl containing his Olympic wreath, was a circlet of gold. His mind absorbed the fact that the bracelet was whole, uncut by any jeweler's saw, while his heart pounded in a slow, aching denial. He knew there was only one way that band of gold could rest here, and that was if it had been taken from Phaedra's lifeless body.

Alexander made no move to touch the graceful dolphins. He stood frozen while a pain such as he'd never known, such as he'd never thought to know, clawed at his heart. His jaw clenched, a muscle twitching uncontrollably in one cheek. With every ounce of discipline he possessed, with every vestige of his formidable strength, he held back the cry that tore at his throat.

The gold dolphins blurred, swimming in the sea of his pain. He closed his eyes as visions of Phaedra filled his mind. The exotic nymph who'd risen from the waves, washed by the glow of dawn and silvery morning mists. The moaning, green-faced woman who'd disdained help even in her wretched seasickness. The wild, panting wife he'd joined with on a rocky island under a blanket of stars.

Alexander had no idea how long he stood rooted to that spot, unable to move, unable to feel anything except the anguish that slowly, bit by agonizing bit, turned his soul to ice and his heart to ashes. A few seconds. An eternity. The sound of a woman's cry finally made him open his eyes to a world gone bleak and gray.

"Darien!"

Fighting for control, Alexander turned slowly and saw his sister push through the crowded courtyard to throw herself into her husband's arms.

"Demetria!" the lieutenant choked out. "Demetria, my love!" Darien kissed her with bruising force, then buried his face in her brown hair while she sobbed against his chest.

The iron band around Alexander's chest all but crushed him as he stared at the sight of his sister wrapped in Darien's arms. Clenching his jaw so fiercely it ached, he crossed the yard and waited until at last Demetria raised her tear-streaked face and saw him. She swallowed great, gulping sobs, then eased herself out of her husband's hold.

As she stepped toward him, both hands outstretched, Alexander realized with a stab of fresh pain that he would not have recognized his sister if he passed her on the street. The plump young matron, brimming with life and visions of her happy future, was gone. This thin, hollow-cheeked woman stared at him with eyes that looked as though they believed there was no future.

"Alexander, I thank the gods for your safe return."

After two tries, he finally managed to speak. "And I thank them for your deliverance, my sister." He swallowed. "Tell me, how fare the others?"

"Chloe's fine," Demetria said, her fingers twined with his. "She's abovestairs, with the other children who weren't afflicted."

She paused at Alexander's choked cry of relief. Taking a deep breath, she met his eyes squarely. "Our lady mother died five days ago."

For a long moment, brother and sister stood silent, their knuckles white as they clung to each other. The crowd fell back, leaving them alone in their grief.

"And Phaedra?" The words were like a knife slicing at Alexander's throat. He forced them out, syllable by aching syllable. Later, he would allow himself to mourn. Later, he would share his pain. At this moment, he wanted only to hear her name.

"She was with our mother until the last. They became close, brother, closer than I would ever have believed pos-



sible. I think our mother's passing was made easier by knowing Phaedra was beside her."

The thought that he had missed her by just days, mayhap just hours, pierced Alexander's soul.

"When did Phaedra...succumb?"

Blank confusion darkened Demetria's eyes for a moment, then she gasped. "No, no! She's not dead!"

He stared at her, hearing the words but not understanding their meaning.

"Wh-what say you?"

"I swear, Alexander, Phaedra's not dead. *Aieeee!* Don't break my bones!"

Tugging frantically, Demetria tried to free her hands.

Alexander loosed his crushing hold, but didn't release her. "She's not dead? You swear?"

"Aye, I swear!"

"The bracelet," he muttered. "I saw the bracelet and thought... I thought..."

"She yet lives," Demetria insisted, pulling at her mangled fingers.

"Where is she, then?"

"She's gone from the house. Alexander, loose me."

Marveling that he could yet feel more hurt, Alexander straightened slowly. She was not dead. His Phaedra was not dead. But she was gone from him. He released Demetria's hands, dropping his own to his sides.

"When did she leave?"

Demetria raised a bruised knuckle to her mouth. "This morning."

His eyes bleak, Alexander nodded. "So be it."

His sister paused in the act of sucking on an abused joint. "Aren't you going to go after her?"

"Nay."

"Alexander, you must. She didn't know, none of us knew, that you would arrive this day. She would've waited here, had she known, I'm sure."

"Nay, 'tis best this way."

“Well, at least let me send a message. She’ll want to know you’re home.”

Alexander shook his head. “’Tis best to make the break cleanly. She’s gone, and I swore I wouldn’t keep her any longer against her will.”

Her eyes wide, Demetria clutched his arm. “What are you speaking of? Never say you plan to cast Phaedra off! Not now. Not after all we’ve been through. Alexander, you cannot do this!”

“I’m not casting her off. I took a solemn vow that I would set her free, and I will.”

“You can’t do this,” Demetria cried.

Darien stepped forward and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Shaking it off, she gripped her brother’s arm frantically.

“Please, Alexander,” she pleaded. “Please don’t send Phaedra away. We need her here. You don’t know what she’s done for us, for all of us. Please, please, reconsider this vow of yours.”

“Demetria, cease your tears. I’m not sending her away. She’s gone of her own will. She swore that she would stay as long as she wore the band.”

“The band?”

“The golden band. The bracelet. She’s removed it somehow and left it here to show that she’s no longer bound to me. I’ll not follow or chase her down again. This time, although it tears at my soul, I’ll let her go.”

Alexander didn’t know whether it was his words or the raw pain in his voice that pierced his sister’s distress. But she halted in midcry and stared up at him. Confusion chased across her face once more, then a dawning relief.

“Alexander,” she half laughed, half sobbed, “you must listen to me.”

After a hurried reunion with Chloe, Alexander raced through the city streets. Following Demetria’s disjointed directions, he found his wife in the square graced by the

Fountain of Athena, surrounded by a group of gesticulating, arguing men. He stopped at the edge of the plaza, sucking in great drafts of air, drinking in the sight.

She was thin, so thin his heart slammed against his chest out of fear that she was ill, despite all of Demetria's assurances. Her green-dyed chiton hung loosely about her frame, held up by gold ropes crossed between her breasts and around her waist. A light cloak draped her arms, but the fold of cloth that should have covered her head had slipped back to lie unnoticed on her shoulders. 'Twas only after he'd swallowed the panic gripping his chest that he noticed the golden hue of her skin and the blue-black tumble of her dark hair.

If even half of the remarkable tales Demetria had told him were true, his wife had spent the past weeks engaged in a task too gruesome for him to contemplate. Yet the sun and the wind she'd missed so much during her confinement to his house had painted her skin with a healthy glow and once more disordered her thick, unruly mane. Even as Alexander watched, she shook her head impatiently to clear the heavy strands from her eyes and toss them over her shoulder. She faced a stooped old man and planted two fists on her hips.

"And I tell you, Andros, the Council will give us ships' stores to fuel the pyres, if I must knock their heads together myself. These are the last unclaimed bodies. We must honor them and put this horror behind us once and for all."

"You won't have to knock their heads," the old man told her, chuckling. "They start to quake whene'er they hear your name mentioned, as it is."

Phaedra nodded, as if unconcerned with the Council's fears. At that moment a merchant in a striped robe tugged at her sleeve and pointed to where Alexander stood. Her glance slid sideways, then fastened on him. Slowly, as if disbelieving the evidence of her eyes, Phaedra turned to face him.

Alexander stood unmoving. Although his every muscle,

every sinew, trembled with the urge to go to her and sweep her into his arms, he would hold to his vow. He'd not overpower her again, or brush aside her protests with laughing kisses. He'd not still her doubts and fears with blithe assurances, or try to keep possession of her with a false promise sworn on a golden band. These past days, as he'd battled the contrary winds and lashing storm to reach her side, he'd accepted that she was not his to possess. Phaedra belonged to herself, and herself alone. No longer would he bind her to him against her will.

But, by all the gods, he longed to hold her in his arms just one more time. He ached to feel her body pressed to his, to breathe in her scent, her essence. Just one more time. His throat tasted of chalk as he curled both hands into fists at his sides.

Phaedra took one hesitant step toward him. Then another. Then she was running across the square.

"Alexander!"

Despite his resolve, he met her halfway.

Despite his determination not to hold her to him, he opened his arms to her.

She crashed into them, sobbing with joy.

They rocked back and forth, wrapped in each other's hold. Oblivious of the small band of onlookers. Unaware of anything except the fierce emotions sweeping through them. After a moment, she raised her arms, locked them about his neck and dragged his face down to hers. Her kiss brought the fire of life to a soul washed by the icy stream of death.

When at last he lifted his head, her hands came up to cradle his face.

"Have you been home yet?" she asked hesitantly.

"Aye."

Her green eyes reflected the pain he knew was pooled in his. "Then you know...you know about your lady mother?"

"Aye."

Tears beaded her black lashes. "We tried to save her, Alexander. Demetria and I were with her every moment."

"I know, my love."

His soft words brushed her face. As if in a daze, she studied the grim line of his mouth. In a low, strained murmur, she shared her own grief. "She was good to me, Alexander. With all the distrust that was between us at first, she was so good to me. I would have given my life to save hers, had I been able."

In the face of such stark pain, Alexander could only nod. Her hands left his face to slide over his shoulders, down the arms that still held her. She looked up at him through a shimmer of tears.

"I dreamed of you coming back to us. I dreamed of how you would laugh and swing Chloe up in your arms. Of how you'd smile at your lady mother, and drive me to fury with your teasing words."

The tears spilled over as she looked up at him.

"Will you ever smile again, Alexander? Or laugh?"

Swallowing, he crushed her to his chest. "Aye, my love. In time."

Unwilling to let Phaedra out of his sight, Alexander took her with him to Aspasia's house. He knew he would find Pericles there, and he could no longer delay delivering his vital news. If ever a city or its people needed bracing word of victory, Athens did.

Pericles' appearance shocked him. The statesman had cut off his gray beard in mourning for his family's losses to the plague, leaving his face thin and pale. His eyes were red with fatigue and sunk in their sockets. Aspasia stood at his side, her paint not quite disguising the ravages these weeks had left on her face.

The older man gripped Alexander's shoulder for a long moment, as if seeking to draw strength from his very presence. Alexander related the news of the sea battle swiftly, downplaying his own role.

"You must tell the Council at once," Pericles ordered, with a surge of his old vitality. "I'll call an emergency session. They'll want to hear of this from your own lips. Be at the Assembly in an hour."

"In two hours," Alexander countered.

Pericles waved a hand. "Nay, nay, I can get them all together sooner. Come, Aspasia, help me draft a victory speech."

He would have whirled away, but Alexander stopped him with a firm hand.

"In two hours."

"It won't take me that long to get my words together," Pericles protested.

"But it will take me that long to greet my wife properly."

Pericles' mouth dropped open.

"You put diddling with your wife above your civic duty?" he sputtered.

"Aye, well above."

Taking Phaedra's arm in a firm grasp, Alexander walked out of the house.

"That was not well done," Phaedra gasped, stumbling to keep up with his long stride. "Truly, Alexander, you shocked him."

"He'll survive."

"What?"

Phaedra threw him a quick look. Her proper soul, schooled to put civic responsibilities before all personal considerations, struggled with a sudden, burning desire to make the most of every second of the next two hours.

"Alexander, should you not do your duty first?"

He shrugged, never breaking stride.

"Is this right?" she panted.

He made no comment.

"Is this the way for a hero of Athens to act?"

Blue eyes slanted down at her.

"Is this—?"



He stopped abruptly. Wrapping a strong arm around her waist, he hauled her up against his chest. One hand tunneled into her mass of hair and dragged back her head.

"This is a husband who will expire on the instant if he doesn't taste his wife's honeyed sweetness."

Phaedra all but toppled over with the force of his kiss. Only the rigid band of bone and sinew about her waist held her upright.

His lips claimed her, seared her, anchored her. She closed her eyes and let his strength envelop her. The pain that had encased her heart during these dark weeks eased with the feel of his warm, hard flesh under her fingers. They were here, alive, together. They had both survived their own battles, and had come together once again.

The world that had shifted and trembled beneath her feet since the moment she was snatched from the sacred cove slowly righted itself. As his lips moved over hers and her heart drummed against his, Phaedra realized that this was all the firmament she needed. This man. This husband. This love.

Her eyes were dazed and her breath was labored when at last Alexander raised his head. His were dark and stormy as a wind-tossed sea.

"Ah, my sweeting, if you don't wish to be taken here in the streets, in broad daylight, you'd best let me get you home. Quickly."

Her heart slammed against her ribs. A life force surged through her, so powerful that it rocked her back on her heels. After months of death and dying, she wanted only Alexander. In her arms. In her body.

"Quickly," she begged, dragging at his arm.

They ran through the streets in a rising haze of sensual anticipation. With every step, Phaedra felt her need flare hotter, higher. With every step, her belly clenched and her thighs tightened in secret sexual spasms. When they reached Alexander's house, she was panting, not from exertion but from sheer arousal.

Dashing past the astonished crowd in the courtyard, they slammed the red door of the master's chamber and tumbled to the bed. His hands tore at the silken ropes around her waist, her fingers worked with frantic, fumbling haste at his belt. His robe tangled around his legs, hers twisted around her flailing ankles. Not taking the time to kick his clothing free, Alexander pushed her into the thick covers. Phaedra spread her legs in a woman's welcome older than time itself.

With a low groan, he thrust into her. She arched against him, glorying in his possession. Her nails raked his back. Her hot, wet sheath gripped him. She wrapped her legs around his thighs, urging him to a greater depth, a faster speed.

Her fingers splayed through his sun-washed hair and brought his mouth to hers. His muscles bunched and strained, his hips pushed against her with a force that drove her halfway up the bed. She dragged her mouth away to suck in a great gulp of air. He buried his face in her neck. Holding her immobile with an iron arm around her waist, he filled her again and again.

With every fiber of her passionate soul, Phaedra gloried in their mating. At that moment they were joined, in every sense of the word. Whatever else was to come, or not to come, they were joined.

Phaedra felt herself shudder, then tighten, then begin to convulse.

"Alexander!" Her voice rasped from far back in her throat.

"Aye," he growled in her ear. "Aye, sweeting! Ride the waves."

"Ride them with me!" she cried.

"Aye."

He drove into her one more time, then stiffened. She felt his spend pour into her, hot and thick. The gift of life. The seeds of a new beginning.

Later, they lay entwined, their bodies filmed with the

scents and stains of love. In the still aftermath of their joining, Alexander shared his own fears and pain. In a slow, hesitant voice, he told of his helplessness while waiting for the battle that was to come, of his anger at the gods for sending him so far away when his family needed him, of hearing of his mother's death from Demetria. Phaedra held him in her arms as his grief for his mother wracked him.

Never had she felt closer to Alexander, or loved him more, than in that moment. She, who had once believed a warrior should show no weakness. She, who had thought all Athenians soft. She, who never cried. Holding him tight in her arms, she wept with him, shared his sorrow, and grew stronger for it.

When the storm had passed, there was a new bond between them, one Phaedra couldn't have defined if asked to try, yet solid and real. She lay with her head on his shoulder, her hand on his broad chest. Her fingers curled and uncurled in his pelt of tawny hair. His arm cradled her shoulder, enfolding her in warmth. The rough pads of his fingertips raised a trail of goose bumps as he stroked her arm.

At length, awareness of the passing minutes intruded into Phaedra's half-conscious state. Unsure how long they had lain together, or how much longer she would have him to herself, she propped herself up on one elbow and took a deep breath.

"I am with child, Alexander."

The fingers brushing up and down her arm stilled. His thick, gold-tipped lashes lifted, and she stared down into eyes as blue and as unfathomable as the sea. Phaedra felt her heart still in her chest.

She waited for a response, any response. She didn't look for joy, or pride. That would be unreasonable to expect from a man whose sons would be outcasts. But neither had she thought his eyes would cloud or his lips thin to a tight line. Shrugging out of his hold, she sought to rise.

He brought her back down beside him, his hand cupping

her chin to raise her face to his. "Can you bear the burden of a child now?"

She stiffened. "'Tis no burden."

"Phaedra, think of all you've been through these weeks and months. Can you bear more?"

She'd thought she could feel no more anguish, but his rejection of the child they'd created lanced through her. Masking the hurt, she met his eyes steadily.

"Aye, Alexander, I can."

His gaze left her face to travel down her body, lingering for long moments on her belly.

"Are you sure, my love? We can summon a physician priest. Or Aspasia. She would know how to rid you of the babe, if you wish it."

Phaedra gasped and shoved his hand away. Scrambling up on her knees, she wrapped both arms across her stomach.

"Nay, I do not wish it! How can you say such a thing? It is you who doesn't want the burden of this child!"

He sat up, frowning. "Me?"

"Oh, Alexander, I know how you must feel. I understand. I do. But I want this babe."

Confusion wiped the frown from his face. "How do you think I must feel?"

"I know it sits heavy within your heart that our children will be outcasts. It tears at mine, as well."

"Phaedra..."

"No, no, you don't need to speak of it. I understand. But this babe, this life..."

"Phaedra..."

She leaned forward and grabbed one of his hands with both of hers. "Alexander, don't speak now. Not now. Later, we'll talk about—"

"Phaedra!"

His bellow rocked her back on her heels. Wide-eyed, she watched him rise up on his knees. Taking both her arms in

a hard hold, he pulled her up until her breasts were crushed against his chest.

"Listen to me, wife," he all but shouted. "I want nothing else in this world but you and Chloe and the children that will spring from our joining."

She wanted desperately to believe his words, but could not bring herself to be convinced. Lifting her chin, she challenged him.

"If what you say is true, then what was this talk of physician-priests and Aspasia?"

"I was but worried about your strength to carry the babe, you little fool. You're so thin, so small."

The anger blazing in his eyes convinced her as nothing else could have. His voice lowered to a rasping growl. "I...I feared I would lose you, too."

Phaedra's hurt melted in a rush of love. "Oh, Alexander, I may be so thin that your band slipped from my wrist, but I'm strong. You, of all people, should know how strong I am."

She paused, then slanted him a taunting look. "I'm the woman who tossed you on your head, remember?"

"Aye," he replied, his own lips lifting in a slow, crooked grin. "I remember."

Phaedra felt the pain and horror that had banded her heart these past weeks ease another notch. Alexander was here, and he was smiling at her. Her eyes softened.

"I want this babe, my husband. With all my soul. 'Tis the bit of life I held on to during all these days of death. 'Tis part of you, part of me. Even if the child is scorned by all Athens, it is ours."

His tentative smile faded. "None shall scorn our child."

"I understand the laws of your city," Phaedra said quietly. "I accept them. I know no son of mine can ever hold your name, no daughter can wed a citizen of Athens. Yet still I would have our babe. I...I would be your wife."

For a long moment, he didn't move. When he did, it was to release her so abruptly that Phaedra all but tumbled back

onto the bed. Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she watched him stalk across the chamber.

He stopped at the niche beside the door, snatched up the gold bracelet, then strode back to her. Reaching for her hand, he pushed the bangle over it. His palm closed on the dolphins, as if to weld them to her wrist.

"You *are* my wife. For all time, wherever we may go."

"Go?"

"Aye. Ready your things, and Chloe's. We depart on the morrow."

"Depart?"

So fierce was his hold on her wrist that Phaedra thought she'd bear the mark of the dolphins on her skin forever.

"Aye," he replied, his voice low and intense. "Before the battle, when I knew not whether I'd ever see your face again, I swore a solemn oath."

Phaedra felt the breath leave her lungs. "What oath?"

"That I would not hold you here, constrained by laws that are not your laws, constricted by ways that are not your ways. I will take you where you may be free once again."

"I don't want to be free," she murmured, totally bewildered by this unexpected turn of events.

"Yes, you do. Right now you're too drained by all that has happened to know it, but you do." His hand fell away from her wrist. "As I want it for you."

Phaedra watched helplessly as he turned away. "Alexander, where do we go? Where do *you* go?" she screeched as he threw on his tunic.

"To give my report to the Council. We'll depart on the morrow," he repeated, striding from the chamber. "Be ready."



## *Chapter Nineteen*



“When the admiral gave the order to attack, all oars smote the water instantaneously. Our ships leapt across the bay and closed on the confused and leaderless Spartans.”

Alexander's voice reverberated through the earthen amphitheater. Council members leaned forward in their seats, as they had throughout his report, hanging on every word.

“The Spartans backed and rowed in circles, their oars entangling one with another,” he continued. “Our men shouted paeans to the gods as rams sliced through wood and bone, and ships cut through tangled rigging and twisted flesh.”

His voice rose to dramatic heights.

“One after another, our ships attacked. One after another, the enemy sank, or fled.”

A low rumble started among the crowd.

“When 'twas done,” Alexander shouted, “we'd recovered every Athenian ship, and sunk or captured half the Spartan fleet!”

A great roar burst from the audience. Cheering and waving their arms wildly, the white-robed men jumped from their seats. Their glad cries sent startled owls and doves flapping from the marble buildings around the theater. Even Pericles, dignified statesman that he was, whooped and thumped the white-haired archon beside him on the back.

His neighbor stumbled forward, recovered, then joined in the unrestrained celebration.

Alexander stood still on the low plinth while his fellow citizens danced and shouted in jubilation. Pride coursed through him, for Athens' great victory and for the incredible, valiant bravery of his companions-at-arms. He savored the moment and the fierce emotion shared by all citizens, knowing he would never experience either again.

At length, elation over yesterday's victory turned to consideration of tomorrow's consequences. Shouts and glad cries became an excited babble of voices, all postulating what should happen next.

An elder finally shouted down the crowd. "We must send emissaries to King Naxos immediately! When he hears this news, he'll have to lift the siege."

"Aye," another shouted. "Winter's almost upon him, and his fleet's destroyed. He has no means of resupply now."

Gesturing for Alexander to step down, Pericles rose and started forward, prepared to give his wise counsel. The older man's eyes widened in surprise when Alexander shook his head. Turning back to the crowd, Alexander raised his hands and signaled for quiet.

"I'll take word of the battle to King Naxos myself, this very day."

"'Tis only fitting that he hear it from one who was there," a man in the back row called out.

"Aye," another shouted. "'Tis right the honor should go to Alexander."

"Aye, send the son of Porthos."

Alexander took a deep breath.

"I wish you to know that this will be my last act as a citizen of Athens. Tomorrow, I take my wife and family and leave this city. We shall not return."

The shouts and glad cries died, leaving a stunned silence in their wake.

"Alexander!" Pericles hissed, tugging at his tunic. "Are you mad?"

"Nay, I've never been more certain of my course."

"Don't say any more until we talk."

Alexander stepped down and met the statesman's eyes. "There's naught to talk about, old friend. I take my wife to where we may raise our children as proud citizens of their state."

"You cannot leave. This is your home. Athens is in your blood."

"Athens may be in my blood, but the Lady Phaedra is in my heart."

Pericles drew in a sharp breath. His eyes searched Alexander's for a long moment. A defeated sigh hissed through his thin lips. "Where will you go?"

"I know not. I've the urge to sail through the Pillars of Heracles and see what lies beyond, though I doubt my wife would enjoy such a journey. Mayhap we'll go to Massilia, at the mouth of the river Rhône. I hear the land above the river abounds with high, soaring mountains and rich game."

Alexander paused and reached out a hand.

Pericles stared at it, then clasped his forearm in a strong grip.

"Wherever I go," Alexander told him, "know you that I will pray the gods protect you, and this city."

"I can't sway you from this course?"

"Nay."

Pericles' grip tightened. "Then may the gods bring you peace."

Alexander's laugh eased the tension between them. "I'll have my lady wife beside me. I doubt I'll enjoy much peace. Farewell, my friend. I'll send you word of Naxos' response to the news."

He left Pericles standing beside the plinth, his thick gray brows drawn together.

\* \* \*

Alexander stood on the massive stone ramparts and surveyed the scene. To the west, the sun dropped down over the Athenian plain, painting the distant waters of the gulf a liquid gold. To the east, the coming dusk bathed Mount Hymettus in purple shadows. To the north, as far as his eye could see, stretched the armies of Sparta and her allies.

A razed, uneven field stood between the city and its besiegers. Littered with overturned chariots and the rotting carcasses of slain chargers, the field was sown with the seeds of death. Huge boulders fallen short of their mark dotted the area. In the distance, just out of range of pitch-soaked, flaming arrows, was a formidable barrier of catapults and rams. The deadly machines were still now, their dark shapes menacing in the twilight. Behind the siege engines camped the army. Long rows of hide tents marched toward the far horizon. Gray tendrils of smoke from a thousand cook fires curled into the evening sky. An occasional gruff voice drifted across the field, a snatch of male laughter, a squeal from an animal dispatched for the cooking pots. Eyes narrowed, Alexander saw distant figures in dull armor going about the task of feeding themselves.

As the flaming ball of the sun sank toward the gulf, he gave the signal. The loud clarion call of a trumpet sounded.

Activity behind the enemy lines ceased. The faint sound of guttural voices died away. Slowly, drawn by the signal, a group of officers converged at the edge of camp, their chariots pulling into a solid line facing Athens' walls. The Spartan leaders, distinctive even from this distance in their red cloaks, occupied the place of honor in the middle of the line.

Alexander waited, wondering whether they would acknowledge the signal announcing a herald. Finally an answering trumpet call rang across the littered plain.

He descended the stairs and strode to a waiting chariot. A nervous trooper stood at the horses' heads, dragging on the reins to still the restive beasts. The horses arched their necks, fighting the iron bits, their embossed harnesses jin-

gling on the night air. Alexander mounted the chariot, which was gilded with bronze and traces of precious metals, and wrapped the reins around one fist.

Darien stepped forward, his hand grasping the gold-decorated whip holder. "Don't do this, Alexander. Don't go alone. Take me with you."

"Demetria would not forgive me were I to plunge you into peril again after just bringing you home."

"Oh, aye. And I suppose you think she'll forgive me for letting you go out there alone."

Alexander smiled and nodded toward the herald's staff stuck in the whip holder. "I go under a sacred sign of truce, Darien."

"When Naxos hears what you have to say, do you think that staff will stay his rage? He's Spartan, Alexander. You can't trust a Spartan."

Alexander lifted one brow.

The lieutenant flushed. "I meant no insult to your lady wife. She...is brave and honorable."

"As is her uncle," Alexander replied coolly.

"He's sworn to kill you."

"And I him. But we both know this is not the time, or the place. The man is a king, Darien, head of all his armies and those of his allies. He can't violate a sacred sign of truce without losing their allegiance, and mayhap his crown. Much as I wish he would draw his sword and give me cause to draw mine, he will not. He cannot."

When Darien would have protested further, Alexander raised an impatient hand.

"I've little respect for Naxos as a man, but I trust his instincts as a warrior. Stand aside and let me discharge this, my last duty to my state."

With obvious reluctance, the lieutenant backed away.

Alexander snapped down his helmet's pointed visor and nodded to the guards at the gate. Six men heaved and strained to lift the timbers. At last the barrier yawned open. Within seconds, the chariot was through, the horses at full

gallop. Over the thunder of their hooves, Alexander heard the gates groan shut behind him.

Controlling the plunging grays took most of his strength and all of his concentration. Bracing far back on his heels, he guided the chariot around each looming obstacle. Another man might have been more cautious, considering the slow-falling dusk and the war-strewn plain. But not one used to command of a fast, deadly trireme. Maneuvering two beasts and a light chariot was child's play compared to directing two hundred men and one hundred and twenty feet of warship in close combat.

Still, by the time he drew the horses to a plunging halt fifty yards from an array of heavy gold-embossed Spartan war chariots, Alexander's arms ached with strain and a heavy sweat covered his neck and shoulders. He waited until the horses' pawing stilled, then addressed the enemy line.

"I would speak with King Naxos."

"Who are you, and why do you come?"

"I am Alexander, son of Porthos. I come on my city's business, and on my own."

"What is this business? Speak, and I will—"

The intermediary's shout was cut off at an abrupt signal from a helmeted, red-cloaked figure. A huge wooden war chariot, drawn by two black horses in tandem, pulled out of the Spartan line. It moved at a slow, deliberate pace across the darkening plain, stopping some ten yards from Alexander.

Alexander lifted his arm and pushed the visor back from his face.

Naxos did the same. His face was half hidden by his curling black beard and the shadow of his helmet. Alexander recognized him readily, however, by the sneer twisting his lip.

"So, Athenian. Are you come to deliver your city's surrender? Does your Council think to soften my vengeance



against them by delivering up the one who defiled a woman of my blood?"

"Nay, Naxos. I am come to tell you that I've just returned from the Gulf of Corinth, where we met your fleet in battle."

The black horses started and shifted backward as Naxos' hand tightened involuntarily on the reins.

Alexander knew the king had grasped at once the significance of his presence on this dark plain. He would not be here if Spartan ships had won the naval battle.

"Aye," Alexander said softly. "Your fleet is scattered to the winds—what remains of it."

He waited, feeling the raw hatred that emanated from the dark man opposite him. That hatred would intensify ten times over before this night was through. Knowing no way to soften what was to come, Alexander delivered the next blow.

"Your son is dead, King of Sparta. His body was recovered from the sea and will be delivered to your city with all honor. Admiral Phormio bade me tell you that he will see to it personally."

Naxos straightened slowly, each muscle of his body stiffening until he stood as straight as a javelin. A brief, violent pain flickered in his eyes before they hardened to dark agate. When he spoke, his voice was cold and flat.

"Did you see him die?"

Alexander felt an unwilling spark of respect for the man he'd sworn to kill. The king controlled his emotions as rigidly as he controlled his armies.

"Aye," he responded. "I saw him go down with his ship. He died honorably, in the midst of battle."

"Did you send him to a watery death, Athenian? Was it your ship that rammed his?"

"Aye."

Silence descended, heavy and brooding. Naxos broke it in a low, deadly voice. "You've taken two of my blood from me now, Athenian."

"Aye."

"Do you come to offer the Lady Phaedra in atonement for the loss of my son?"

Alexander shook his head, his eyes steady on the dark face before him. "Nay, I come to tell you that she is my wife, and that she carries my child."

Naxos sucked in a long, ragged breath. Any sympathy Alexander might have felt for him in the loss of his son was destroyed by the undisguised lust that twisted his features.

"You'd best send her back to me, Athenian. You're too proud to see your get raised as second-class citizen. I'll at least make a warrior out of the whelp."

"She is my wife, Spartan. She sails with me in the morning. We will raise our children in another place, another land."

Naxos' lip lifted in a sneer. "Do you expect me to believe that you will give up your city for a woman, a Spartan woman?"

"She's no longer of Sparta, any more than I am of Athens."

"By the gods, I believe this not! No man would desert the city that reared him for a mere woman."

"Believe what you will."

Naxos gripped the chariot rail with both hands. "Great Zeus, are you man or boy? Warrior or child, still sucking at a woman's teat? Do you run and hide from your fate behind a woman's skirts?"

"I do not hide from you. I am here, am I not?"

The soft words hung on the air.

"You know I cannot kill you now," Naxos ground out. "Not when you come out under the sign of truce."

"No," Alexander replied, fighting to control the almost overwhelming urge to pull his sword and close the short distance between the two chariots. All that was raw and masculine in him wanted to finish what was between them, cleanly and decisively. Yet he owed his city this one last

duty. And he owed Phaedra the freedom he'd sworn to give her.

"No," he repeated. "You cannot kill me, any more than I can drive my sword through your heart, as I ache to do. I know that time will come, however, or I could not leave. We'll meet again, in some future battle, on some distant plain."

"You're naught but a rat scurrying off a rotten, sinking hull, Athenian. You leave because you don't want to watch your city burn around your ears."

Alexander's jaw tightened. "Athens will not fall, nor will she burn. Our walls will hold. You have not the forage to continue the siege, nor will you be resupplied. You must withdraw, Spartan. The Council bids me tell you we will not attack if you retreat immediately."

Naxos spit out a venomous curse, but Alexander knew the Spartan had to have been thinking of retreat, even before word of the sea battle. This scarred, burned plain couldn't support the army that ravaged it any longer.

Gathering the reins in his hand, Naxos wheeled his chariot. "I may retreat, but I'll be back!" he shouted. "Tell your precious Council that. I'll be back as soon as the snows melt in the mountain passes next spring. I'll be back the spring after that, if necessary. And the one to follow. I'll be back until Athens lies in rubble."

He yanked on the reins, setting the black horses to pawing.

"But you won't be here to see it, will you?" he snarled. "You and the bitch you call wife. You'll be wandering homeless, stateless, while your city struggles for its life. Think on that, Athenian-who-was. Think how your manhood will shrivel with each reported tail of your city's dire straights. Think of the disgust Phaedra will feel for one who deserted his state."

Alexander's jaws clenched so tight they ached. The king's laughter raised the hairs on his neck.

"She'll come to hate you. She at least has honor, if you do not."

Naxos laid his whip across the horses' flanks.

"And when I'm through with Athens," he shouted as the steeds pounded away, "I'll come and take Phaedra from the gutless, spineless piece of carrion who thinks to hold her."

Naxos' words lashed at Alexander's pride long after the Spartan had thundered away. His jaw tight, he wheeled his own vehicle around. Holding the restless horses in check with a clenched fist, he stared at the vista before him.

The jewel that was Athens rose above the plain, silhouetted against a velvet sky. Above massive outer walls, the city clung to its high hills and plateaus. Word of the great sea victory had obviously spread, as was evidenced by the bonfires flaring and torches sputtering from every rooftop. The dancing lights clearly illuminated the sprawl of dwellings and multitude of white temples. Above them all, the mighty Parthenon rose in majestic splendor, its columned length lit from within as priests prepared for the great thanksgiving celebrations to come.

Athens shimmered like a jeweled crown. She was a cluster of glittering golden stones set against the blackness of the night.

Alone on the war-strewn plain, isolated between the enemy to his rear and the dark splendor before him, Alexander came to terms with his fate.

Phaedra awaited Alexander's return in the courtyard, Chloe in her lap. The yard rang with the sound of rejoicing. As if two great burdens, each too weighty for any man to bear, had been lifted from their shoulders, the refugees laughed and cried and sang their thanks to the gods for their delivery from the plague and from the Spartans. Winter, the season of death for the earth itself, had brought life to the citizens of Athens. Already women spoke longingly

of their own hearths and children danced at the thought of open countryside to run in.

"Will we go on a ship, Phaedra?"

Phaedra glanced down as Chloe tugged on a fold of her robe, demanding her attention.

"Or will Papa take us in a chariot? A blue one, like Demetria had for her wedding?"

Phaedra smiled at the little girl and gave the same response she'd given twenty times since they settled down to wait. "I know not, child."

"Where will we go?"

"I know not."

Chloe's eyes rounded as a thought occurred to her. "I went to one of Papa's farms once. Will we go to a farm?"

Phaedra wrapped both arms around the girl's tiny waist and rocked back and forth on the bench.

"I know not where we'll go."

Too excited to sit still, Chloe wriggled free. Sliding her feet to the ground, she steadied herself with both hands on Phaedra's arm. "Will we ride a horse?"

Phaedra swallowed a sigh. Her patient response was cut off abruptly as the door to the street opened. With Chloe clinging to her like a limpet, she eased around on the bench.

"There," she said softly. "You may go and ask your papa all these questions."

Alexander made his way through the crowd, nodding in response to their cries of greetings. More than one woman threw herself into his arms, weeping with joy and begging for word of her husband serving with the fleet. He shared what news he had, responding to each and every excited, sobbing query with grave courtesy.

Halfway across the yard, he spotted Phaedra and his daughter. Chloe loosed her hold on Phaedra's arm. Moving at her awkward, halting pace, she crossed the short space to where he stood. Alexander knelt and opened his arms, and his daughter stumbled into them. Her happy giggles filled the night as he scooped her up.

The child's laughter banished the last of the shadows lingering at the edges of the yard. As if from a distance, Phaedra heard again Lady Elene's words. 'Twas not the past that counted now. 'Twas the future.

The doubts that had wracked her these last interminable hours faded. Her fears that Alexander would come to hate her for forcing him to leave his state disappeared. If he was ready to leave all he knew, all he believed in and had fought for, so could she. He was her state. He was her future.

She rose and went to stand beside him.

"Papa, Phaedra says we leave Athens tomorrow."

Alexander shifted his daughter into one arm. Reaching out, he caught Phaedra's hand and drew her to his side. Chloe reclaimed her father's attention with a pat on his tanned cheek.

"Aye, shrimp, we leave tomorrow."

"Phaedra says we'll go at first light."

"Aye, at first light. If you're ready?"

His words were directed to the child, but Phaedra knew the question was for her.

Her hand tightened on his. Smiling, she nodded.

Chloe's curls bobbed in vigorous agreement.

"Phaedra says we're ready."



## *Chapter Twenty*



“By the beard of Zeus! What is this?”

Darien’s harsh mutter cut the early-morning mist. Alexander stepped around him, surveying the small, cobbled square ahead through narrowed eyes.

Fog swirled about the plaza and draped the graceful fountain in its center with a shimmering gray cloak. A damp chill added an edge to the dawn air seeping through Alexander’s woolen cloak.

The crowd gathered in the square didn’t seem to notice either the haze or the cold, however. They stood still and silent, their gazes fixed on the small cavalcade that had left Alexander’s house but moments ago en route to the harbor.

His first thought was that these spectral figures were exhausted revelers, just making their way home after the all-night victory celebrations. But there were no drunken smiles on these faces, no slurred calls of greeting. Like wraiths, made ghostly by the fog, more dim shapes floated out of the mist and joined the edges of the silent throng.

The hairs on the back of Alexander’s neck began to prickle. He’d been a commander for too long not to recognize the potential for danger in the growing mass. Any time people gathered like this, they had some end in mind. His thoughts whirled with the possible reasons for their gathering, none of which reassured him.

"Darien," he ordered quietly, "fall back and alert the men to prepare for trouble. If aught happens, take Phaedra and Chloe back to your house. I'll cover your retreat and join you when I may."

Grim-faced, the lieutenant nodded and melted into the mists enveloping the horse-drawn litter and escort behind them.

For a moment, no sound disturbed the eerie silence except the bubbling of the fountain. Then, after a long, tense moment, a low voice called across the square.

"We heard that you leave Athens, Captain. And that the Spartan woman goes with you."

With an infinitesimal shrug, Alexander eased the flap of his cloak from his left shoulder. It fell away, allowing him free access to his sword.

"Aye, I leave," he replied. "And my wife goes with me, though I know not what business it may be of yours. What do you here?"

A thin, emaciated woman took a half step forward. Her eyes burned with fevered intensity.

"We've been waiting for you. They said this would be your route. They said that you would travel through this square to the harbor."

The woman's voice trailed off as Phaedra's slight form materialized at his side.

"What's happening?"

Never taking his eyes from the crowd, Alexander hissed a terse order. "Get back in the litter with Chloe."

She shook her head—whether in defiance of his command or to clear the swirling fog from her eyes, he knew not. The woolen cloak draped decorously over her hair slipped off.

A low murmur rose from the watching crowd and quickly swelled into a chorus of murmured exclamations.

"'Tis the Spartan."

"'Tis her."

"That's the one."

Alexander muttered a low curse. "Get back in the litter. Damnation, Phaedra, do as I say."

When she shook her head once more, his jaw clamped tight in frustration. Keeping one eye and one ear on the growing mob, he turned to her.

"I like not the temper of this crowd. Get back in the litter, where Darien and I can protect you if it comes to a fight."

"I don't want to be protected," she replied steadily. "I chose to stand at your side, and there I shall stand."

He sucked in a quick breath, wondering if he had time to knock her senseless, throw her into the horse-drawn litter and send it charging back up street before the crowd surged forward. His every instinct told him time was running out. The mob shifted and stirred restlessly, and he heard Phaedra's name repeated on their lips. Alexander took a protective step toward his wife.

"Give me your dagger," she said.

The request stopped him in his tracks.

"Phaedra..."

A green fire leapt in her eyes as she swept off her enveloping cloak and threw it aside. Tossing her mass of shining hair back over her shoulder, she lifted her chin.

"Aye, Captain?"

For a moment, a timeless moment, Alexander was swept back to another place, another dawn. He saw again a nymph rising from the sea, with the same silken black mane tumbling down her back. A slender, delicate sprite who had proceeded to shove her elbow into his stomach and tumble him to the rocks. That sea creature had been so fierce and proud, so wild and free. But the light in her eyes then couldn't compare to the emerald glow in this Phaedra's eyes.

Then, she'd bristled with the anticipation of well-joined combat, of an adversary meeting head-on with her foe.

Now, the look in her eyes made Alexander's pulses

pound. They held a love so deep, so fearless, that his breath stopped.

Seeing his hesitation, she grinned up at him. "You once told me that we but dance to the tune the gods play for us. And so we do, my husband. So we do. Give me your dagger."

A slow, answering grin etched its way across his face. "So we do, little one."

Slipping the heavy, utilitarian blade from its sheath, he handed it to her hilt first. Their fingers met for a moment as she took it, then she dropped her hand to her side, the lethal weapon held tight in her fist. Side by side, they turned to face the shifting, murmuring crowd.

"Make way, make way!"

A breathless shout sounded from the opposite side of the square. All eyes swung toward the narrow street that emptied into the plaza as a white-robed figure pushed and shoved his way through the crowd.

The stooped old man stumbled to the fore. The gold ornament on his robe bespoke a man of wealth, and his thin features looked vaguely familiar, although Alexander couldn't place him. He was still puzzling over the old man's sudden appearance when Phaedra stepped forward. Startled, he reached out a hand to pull her back. She pushed it away impatiently and strode toward the elder.

"Andros! What do you here?"

"Lady Phaedra," the old man panted. "I feared I would miss you. The crowd blocked my litter."

Alexander moved up behind them. "You know this man, lady wife?"

Phaedra glanced over her shoulder. "Aye, of course. 'Tis Andros, son of Pythian."

"Priest Archon of the Fourth Council," the old man said proudly, drawing himself up as much as his bent frame would allow.

Great Zeus, Alexander thought, this man had served Athens in the time of his father's father. Thoroughly bewil-

dered, he listened to the swift exchange between his wife and the elder.

"Have you come to help us find a way through those who would stop us?" Phaedra asked in a low voice.

"Nay, nay..."

"'Tis well meant of you, and we give you our thanks, but you must take yourself to safety. My husband and I go to our fate together."

"Nay, my lady, you don't understand."

Phaedra cut off his sputtering protests. "Aye, I do, my friend, and I thank you. But you must go."

"Nay, my lady," the elder said, all but sobbing. "If you would but listen..."

Alexander placed a restraining hand on Phaedra's arm. She whirled, the deadly knife coming in an instinctive movement. "What!"

Calmly Alexander plucked the blade from her upraised fist.

"Let the poor man speak, lady wife." Ignoring her indignant glare, he nodded politely to the elder. "Please, Lord Andros, tell us why you have come, and why these people are here."

The old man waved a distracted hand at the crowd. "I know not why they're here. I myself have come from a special meeting of the Council, called by Pericles."

Alexander's brows rose. "Pericles?"

The elder's head bobbed on his thin, corded neck. "Aye. The great man himself asked me to address the Council, then sent me ahead to warn you while they took their vote. But you'd already left your house when I arrived there."

He stopped to gulp in deep breaths.

Alexander glanced from the wheezing elder to Phaedra, a question in his eyes. She met his look with a perplexed one of her own, shaking her head in total confusion.

While they waited for the elder to regain his breath, the emaciated woman who had spoken out earlier inched her way forward. Over the veil drawn across the lower portion

of her face, her eyes burned with an intensity that had Alexander's hand easing toward his sword. He started to step in front of Phaedra.

To his astonishment, the woman fell to her knees on the cobbles. She bent, took the hem of Phaedra's gown in her hands and lifted it to her lips.

"I thank you, my lady, from the bottom of my heart."

Phaedra flashed Alexander a startled, helpless look, then bent to lift the woman to her feet. The thin woman grabbed her hand and would have kissed it had Phaedra not stopped her. Instead, the now-sobbing woman held on to it with both of hers.

"You saw that my husband was buried with all honors when I was too ill to even raise my head from my pallet. His body would have been left to rot in the street, his soul condemned to wander for all eternity, had you not cared for him. I thank you, my lady."

"As do I."

A bearded hoplite edged past Alexander and the still-wheezing elder. The soldier stopped before Phaedra, then went down on one knee.

"I thank you, my lady, for seeing that my infant son was housed and fed after my wife died. Had your lieutenants not discovered him when they did, he would have perished with his mother. I returned but two days ago to find my son suckling at another mother's breast."

Alexander found himself pushed back as another man came forward, and then another. Soon Phaedra was surrounded by a mass of people, all showering her with their heartfelt thanks. She stood in their midst, accepting their gratitude with gruff embarrassment.

Her slight figure was almost engulfed by the throng, but Alexander could see her dark head nodding. Once, when she glanced up to find him, he thought he caught the shimmer of tears in her eyes.

"Your lady wife is a woman among women. She has a truly brave heart."



The one-armed sailor who had been part of Alexander's household stood at his elbow.

"Aye," Alexander said softly, "she has."

He moved back to where Darien stood beside the litter, a wide-eyed Chloe in his arms. Before he could reach for his daughter, more white-robed figures rushed into the square.

Pericles slowed his undignified run, smoothed his gray hair with both hands and proceeded at a stately pace past the bubbling fountain. At his heels were the three archons, and behind them what appeared to be half the Council.

The crowd around Phaedra fell back as Pericles approached. Signaling Darien to remain where he was, Alexander moved quietly to stand behind his wife.

A hush fell over the square, broken only by the gushing of water from the fountain and the cooing of doves in the eaves of the surrounding houses. In his best dramatic voice, Pericles called all men here present to witness what was to come.

"The Council has met in special session to consider an extraordinary petition put forward by Andros, son of Pythian."

"Written by Pericles himself," the elder contributed.

"Harrumph, yes, well..."

The statesman sputtered for a moment, then regained his stride. His voice gained in volume, reaching to the far corners of the square.

"During the time of our city's distress, when brave men feared to walk the streets and women shut themselves inside to weep and lament, one person dared defy the shades.

"One person had the courage to come forth. One person, one brave person, took on the task of collecting the dead who were not honored. One person, one determined person, went from street to street."

He paused dramatically, then his words poured like liquid gold into the square.

"That one person became two, and then three, and then

a hundred. That one person brought courage back to men who were frightened, hope back to women who had lost it. That person brought honor to our dead, and life to our children."

He stepped forward and took Phaedra's hand.

"That person is this woman. This Spartan woman."

At the title, Phaedra's chin rose to a stiff, regal angle.

Seeing her standing there, as straight as a spear, Alexander thought his heart would burst with pride. Wherever they went, whatever was to come, they would treasure this moment when Athens honored the woman who was his wife.

"If she consents, the Spartan woman will bear another title," Pericles thundered. "One she has earned with the strength of her heart and the courage of her actions."

He turned to face Phaedra.

"If you consent, my lady, henceforth you shall be known as a woman of Athens."

Excited murmurs broke out among the crowd, accompanied by a smattering of applause and scattered shouts.

Phaedra frowned.

Somewhat daunted by her stiff reaction, Pericles plowed ahead. "In recognition of your heroic actions, the Council has voted you full citizenship. This scroll..."

Phaedra's gruff voice interrupted. "I thank you, my lord."

"Yes, well..."

"I'm more grateful for this honor than I can ever say. But I am of Sparta. I cannot give up what I am."

"Nor do we ask you to," Pericles replied, lifting a heavy scroll. "This decree confers upon you special citizenship status, without requiring you to renounce the city of your birth."

He held out the scroll with a flourish.

Phaedra eyed it suspiciously.

"Does this mean that I must conform to all laws of Athens?"

The statesman blinked, confounded and not a little irritated at her continuing reluctance to accept the honor he'd spent the night and much of his political might arranging.

"If you are a citizen, I would think you'd wish to conform to our laws," he replied, somewhat tersely.

Phaedra folded her arms across her chest. "Then I cannot accept. I thank you, and the Council, from the bottom of my heart, but I will not live my life shut within four walls."

Pericles' mouth sagged open. He looked from Phaedra to Alexander, then to Phaedra once more. When no help was forthcoming from either of them, he swung around to face the archons. Their blank faces gave him no help. Once more he turned to Alexander.

Biting back the laughter that threatened with every breath he took, Alexander stepped forward. His eyes danced as he took the scroll from Pericles' weak grasp. Unrolling the parchment, he scanned the contents, then let the document roll back up with a snap.

Bowing, he presented the decree to his belligerent, suspicious, fiercely independent Phaedra.

"The Council has indeed awarded you *special* citizenship. There are no precedents for such status, lady wife."

Her black brows arched. "None?"

"None."

"There are no written restrictions that accompany this status?"

"None."

She reached out tentatively and tapped the parchment with one finger.

"There are no laws cited here, no conditions I must accept?"

"None. I suspect the omission was an oversight on the Council's part. One they'll no doubt live to regret."

Her lashes lowered as she studied the rolled document. Alexander held his breath.

With agonizing slowness, she closed her fingers around the scroll. Her lids fluttered up, and she stared at him, her eyes searching his.

"If I accept, do we stay here?"

"If you wish it."

With the air of one acceding to what the gods have decreed, she drew in a deep breath. "As long as there are no conditions in this document to restrict my movements, I wish it."

She grasped the parchment firmly and tugged.

Alexander held on to his end.

Surprised, she flashed him a startled look.

"Oh, no, my love," he whispered on a husky laugh. "There are no conditions written here. But I have a few of my own."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Such as?"

"If we stay, I'll not have my wife training naked in the arena."

After a moment, she gave a cautious nod. "I can agree to that."

"Nor will I have you wrestling with any man but me."

A slow smile tugged at her lips. "Then you'd best practice, Athenian, if you would give me a match worthy of my skills."

"And as for walking the streets alone, you must agree to stay out of certain areas."

Her smile faded. "Why?"

"I want you free, my Thedis, but not so free that you run into your old friend Dora. I fear my manhood could not survive another dosing such as she gave you last time."

Wild color flooded Phaedra's cheeks.

"Lump-nosed sailor! How dare you speak of that in front of all these people! And *do not* call me that disgusting name!"

Incensed, she threw the parchment at his head.

Alexander's shout of laughter reverberated through the square as he swept her up in his arms and stilled her angry tirade with a kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Author's Note*



I first read a detailed history of the war between Athens and Sparta while taking a course from the Naval War College. To complete the course, I had to write a paper on international strategies for maritime states—no small task for a young Air Force captain and a personnel weenie at that! As I struggled with this paper, I found myself concentrating less and less on strategy and more on the dashing Athenian sea captains and their superbly conditioned citizen crews. To me, they epitomized the concept of statesman/philosopher/warrior and gave a whole new meaning to the term ‘serious hunks’!

Years later, when my husband and I had dinner at an open-air restaurant across from the Acropolis, the history I’d read in such excruciating detail came suddenly, vividly alive. There above us, bathed in brilliant moonlight, was the Parthenon. Like Phaedra, I could only stare open-mouthed at this awesome symbol of Athens’ might. Unlike Phaedra, however, I’m not the least reluctant to admit I fell completely under the spell of the glory that was Athens. From that magical night and that long-ago research paper, this novel was born.

There probably aren’t a lot of students of the Naval War College who have turned their study of strategy and tactics into a love story. I’m tickled to be able to send the college



a copy of *Siren's Call* for their archives—just as a reminder that captains of all ages and eras have a touch of romance in their souls!

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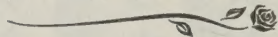
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