

THE
MOON
RIDERS

THERESA TOMLINSON

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Dedication

In memory of my great-grandmother Miriam Beer

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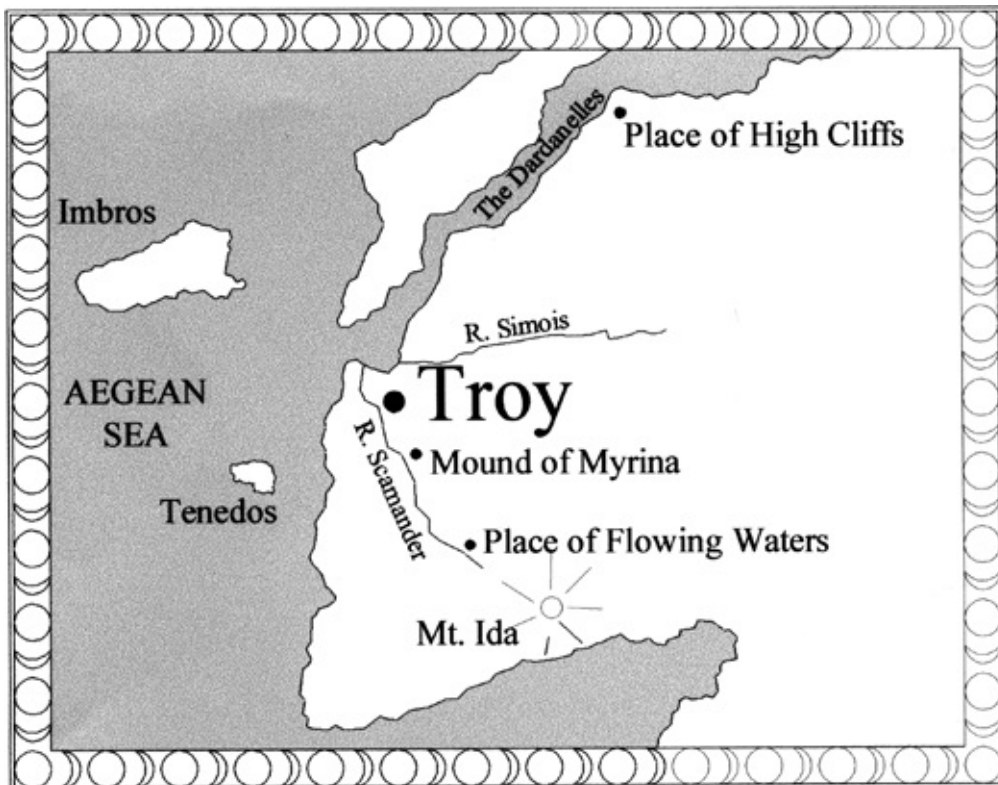
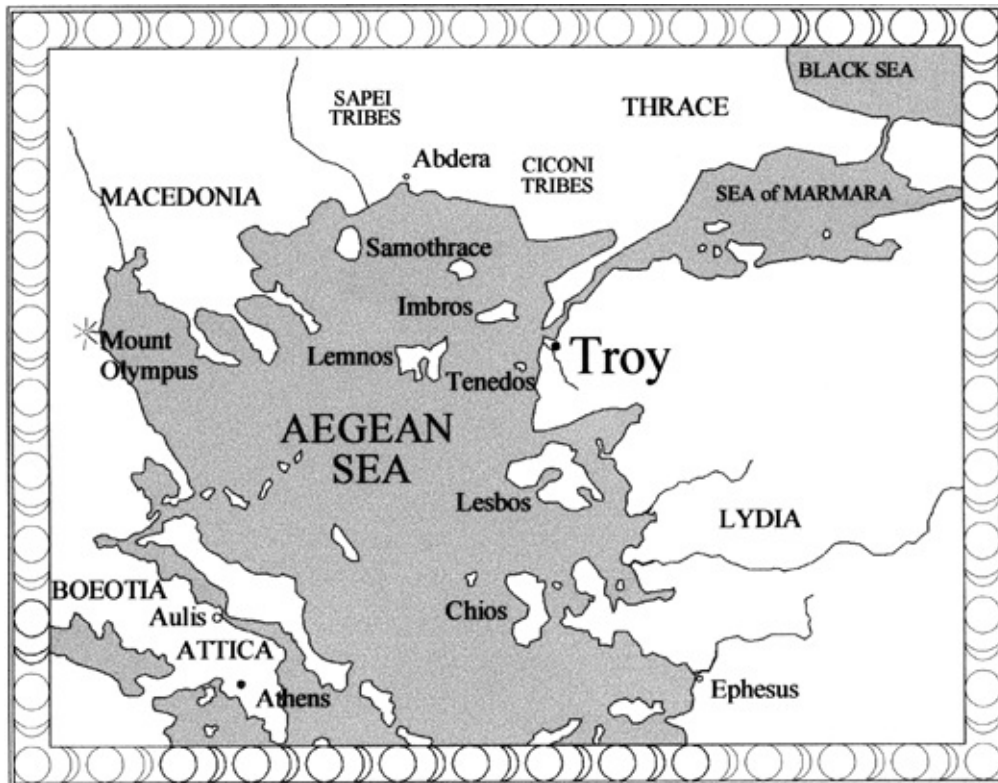
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Map



THE LITTLE SNAKE



CHAPTER ONE

The Dancer



THE NIGHT WAS cool beside the Lake of Kus. The mother and grandmother sat together outside their round tent, soft woven rugs fastened about their shoulders. They beat a steady rhythm on small drums and sang. Aben leaned close to the fire, the muscles in his cheeks taut, as he strummed a simple melody on his oud, the music thrumming over rocks and grassland.

Myrina, carefully dressed in bangles, beads, trousers, and layers of smocks, danced barefoot about the edge of the fire. She was warm, the dancing saw to that. Her hands and arms twisted, sinuous as snakes; her hips swung back and forth in time with the ancient music of her tribe. She took her final pose with a flourish.

Gul's voice dropped. "Is my daughter ready?" she whispered.

Grandmother Hati smiled broadly. "Aye. I'm sure of it." She turned to the young girl, her face suddenly solemn with the importance of her words. "Myrina, my daughter's daughter! When we go to the Spring Celebrations, I feel sure that Atisha the Old Woman shall take you with her!"

"Thank you, grandmother." Myrina spoke with quiet satisfaction.

Soon the tribes would meet at the place of Flowing Waters; the sacred place at the foot of Mount Ida, not far from the high-walled city of Troy. The joyful Spring Celebrations and shrewd horse dealing that took place there was always exciting, but this year would be better than ever. She, Myrina, who was named after one of the most famous dancers of the past, would leave her family and become one of the honored priestesses of Earth Mother Maa, known as the Moon Riders.

Myrina could not settle to sleep that night, so she slipped out to the roped horse corral. Isatis, the eight-year-old blue-black mare, picked up her scent and, leaving the other horses, she came at once to her mistress's side, whinnying gently.

"I'm to join the Moon Riders," Myrina whispered, stroking the smooth short hairs on the horse's neck. "And you will be my steed."

Myrina was both terrified and excited at the thought of leaving her parents' home tent. She would follow in the footsteps of her mother, grandmother, and Reseda, her older sister.

Reseda was now due to return home after spending seven years traveling from place to place with the Moon Riders, performing sacred dances and songs for those who honored the Great Mother, Maa. Myrina would take her sister's place.

She'd learned to ride, as did all the Mazagardi tribe, when she was just a baby, and traveled constantly from camp to camp, with their herd of goats, sheep, and horses. But she'd never before been away from her family and tribe; and that thought brought a touch of fear with it.

She would have to leave her friend Tomi, who'd ridden at her side since they were children learning to hunt together, sending sharp, light arrows straight and fast toward their prey. In the

evenings by the campfire they would lean together for warmth, but now that Tomi had seen fourteen winters he too must leave the tribe for months at a time, buying foals and selling horses with the other young men. Thank goodness at least Isatis would be going with her.

Isatis had been hers from the day that she was born. Myrina was only five when she'd wandered away from the tents and found her father crouched with concern over his favorite horse, Midnight. The pregnant mare had moved away from the rest of the herd to the far edge of the camp. She lay very still beneath an olive tree, her lolling tongue turned gray and her swollen stomach drenched with cold sweat.

Myrina's father had turned to his little daughter in desperation, for all the adults were out of calling distance. He made her help him with the difficult birth and at last a small, stick-legged creature was born into Myrina's arms, half covered in wet membrane.

"If this foal lives, she shall be yours," her father had promised.

Both Isatis and Midnight had lived and Myrina had loved the young blue-black mare ever since.

Seven days before they were to move on for the Spring Celebrations, Myrina sat outside the tent, trying to keep still while her grandmother pricked her skin with a sharp bone needle.

"Do not scratch!" Gul spoke sharply, slapping her daughter's hand away from the nose ring that had also been snapped, red hot and searing, into place.

"It itches like a scorpion's sting," Myrina complained, "and so does this."

"Keep still! Eyes shut!" Hati warned. "The more you wriggle the more it will hurt! Shut your eyes . . . think creature!"

Myrina squeezed her eyelids together, then slowly lowered her shoulders, trying to ease the clenched muscles and think creature. She must make herself believe that she was moving steadily through the grass on her belly, swaying from side to side, a warm wind blowing into her face. It was just possible, if she really relaxed, to lift her thoughts and send them far away from the sharp pricking of the needle.

Hati was skilled at making body pictures and she worked fast, rubbing soot mixed with herb juice and honey into the punctured skin, creating her marks. All young girls destined to become Moon Riders were decorated with body pictures; the work began on their eighth birthday. For the last five years, Hati had added a new picture each spring to Myrina's fast-growing collection. A leaping deer with curling antlers stood out clear blue-black on each foot, bestowing on her the suppleness and grace of the animal. Leaves and flowers rained down from her shoulders, sprinkling the tops of her arms, symbolizing the energy of plant growth. A sharp arrowhead was etched on each cheekbone, warning anyone who came close of hidden strength. Hati herself had scorpions patterning her cheeks and arms, though the dyes were faded now and hidden away between wrinkles. Gul bore the rose flowers of her name—a gentler symbol for a gentle nature.

Now on this special day, Myrina was being decorated with the last and most important body picture of all, her own chosen symbol, covering her right forearm.

"Almost done," Gul soothed, looking over her mother's shoulder. "I will fetch the milk. The picture is so right; it's you, Myrina."

At last Hati put down her needle and picked up the bowl of precious mare's milk mixed with honey that Gul had brought. She reverently poured a little of it onto the earth as an offering to Maa, then gave the rest to Myrina.

Eyes still closed, Myrina sipped the warm strong-tasting milk with relief. The sharp pains were

over and her body picture had taken shape.

~~They took the bowl away from her, and both Gul and Hati one after the other took Myrina's small~~ hand, kissed it gently and pressed it to their cheeks. "May your picture-magic give you the strength and grace of its images," they whispered. Then Hati sat back and stretched her spine. "Open your eyes," she ordered.

Myrina opened them nervously, glancing down. The skin was red and swollen, but she could see the picture clearly. An undulating snake rippled down her forearm, resting its patterned head on her thumb. Its curling tail just touched her elbow.

"Thank you, Grandmother," she said quietly. "I think it *is* me!"

Gul suddenly caught her breath and pointed beyond them to a pile of rocks.

"What is it?" Hati asked.

Gul still couldn't speak, but only point.

Myrina turned to look toward the rocks, then she saw it, too. A golden brown viper was weaving its snaky way out into the sunshine, heading toward her feet.

All three women froze for a moment, then in a flash Hati snatched up her stick, raising it above her head.

"Do not strike!" Myrina whispered. "It will not harm me."

The snake stopped and reared up, looking directly at Myrina, then it dipped its head gracefully and turned away. Hati laughed and lowered her stick. "No, I'm sure you are right, though it may not recognize us as friends of the young snake lady!"

The creature slunk smoothly away into the rock shadows once more.

Gul breathed freely again. "Is it a sign? It must be! What can it mean?"

"I don't know." Hati smiled with determination. "But it can only be good. I'm sure of that."

CHAPTER TWO

A Warrior for a Grandmother



OVER THE NEXT few days the swelling and soreness vanished from Myrina's arm, so that her snake-symbol looked very lifelike. Among the Mazagardi there was much talk of the coming Celebrations at the Place of Flowing Waters. All the nomadic tribes who honored Earth Mother, Maa, would gather to rejoice in the coming of Spring; also, they would be presenting their daughters to Atisha, the leader of the Moon Riders, and hoping that she would accept them as priestesses. The Mazagardi tribe had a reputation for providing the best dancers and the best warrior women, too.

"I hear that King Priam wants to buy horses," Gul told Aben. "They say he's richer than ever, now that he's taxing the trading boats that pass through the Hellespont. He makes Achaeans pay twice what he charges our tribes and his Hittite allies."

Aben smiled. "This wealth may help in our dealings with him, but I swear the man's hoarding trouble for himself!"

"What sort of trouble?" Myrina was curious.

Her father was thoughtful. "The Achaean kingdoms need tin to make their bronze weapons and the new metal they call iron. Their ships bring it from the north, passing through the Hellespont; there's no other way. I'm sure Agamemnon of Mycenae and Menelaus of Sparta will not tolerate Priam's soaring charges forever, and I fear for us all if those two brothers run out of patience."

Myrina nodded. They all feared the fierce Achaean raiding gangs that came north from time to time, plundering gold, murdering the men, and taking women as slaves. She came from many generations of brave warrior women who were always ready to take up arms to defend those they loved. "I'll fight Achaeans if they come raiding," she insisted.

Both parents smiled at her fierceness.

"Well . . . Grandmother turned warrior! She rode with the Moon Riders through Thrace to challenge Theseus, didn't she?"

Gul nodded. "Yes. Hippolyta led them to Athens to rescue Antiope whom Theseus had stolen away."

"So brave of them." Myrina sighed.

Gul's face was full of doubt. "Brave but maybe foolish. The fight cost Hippolyta her life, along with many others. And as Hati will tell you, when it came to it Antiope didn't wish to return home."

Myrina frowned. "She wanted to stay with the Achaeans?"

"Not *wanted*, exactly, but that was what she chose. She'd just given birth to Theseus's son."

"I can't believe it!" Myrina argued. "He forced her to be his slave! She can't have wanted to stay with him!"

Gul shrugged her shoulders.

“War brings strange situations.” Aben spoke with his usual tolerance. “We can’t know the terrible misery there must be for such as Antiope.”

But Myrina was enthralled by the boldness of the adventure. “When the Moon Riders rode to Athens, the Achaeans feared them and called them Amazons!” she recalled, her voice shaking with pride.

Gul could only whisper her doubts. “So many died.”

“If Grandmother turned warrior, then so can I!” Myrina insisted.

“What’s that?” Hati demanded, dipping her head as she came in through the open tent flaps.

“We are just remembering some of your wilder adventures, Mother,” Gul said, smiling again.

As the moon waned, the tribe began to pack up their goods, ready to move on to Mount Ida and the Place of Flowing Waters. Myrina’s sister would return to the Mazagardi there and choose herself a husband.

The night before their move, Myrina sat on a cushion in the tent, fingering her new traveling goods. Tomi came to sit with her.

“I can’t wait to use them,” Myrina whispered.

There was a carved-horn drinking cup in a felt holder and a strong leather bag containing a flat round of polished wood with three separate wooden legs that would screw into place to make a small camp table. Supple deerskin riding boots stood side by side next to her lightweight bow made of horn and horse sinews, its quiver full of sharp new arrows.

Tomi stroked the polished leather quiver. “Think of me when you hunt with the magical Moon-maidens,” he whispered.

Myrina looked up at him, feeling very sad that they would not hunt together again. “When I return you’ll maybe have a wife,” she said.

“Maybe not.” Tomi stared down at the arrows.

“If you wait,” she told him, suddenly shy, “if you wait and refuse all offers, then I’ll choose you for my husband when I return in seven years’ time.”

He smiled at that and bent close so that their lips touched gently. They both laughed nervously as they heard Tomi’s father calling him to feed and water the horses.

He got up obediently. “Father always had good timing.” He raised his eyebrows. “But I think I can manage to wait for seven years to marry an honored and magical Moon Rider.”

He bowed formally and went outside.

Myrina smiled to herself and reached for the delicately wrought silver mirror, patterned about the edges with twisting snakes, two fork-tongued heads crossing at the top. The mirror was the most precious symbol of those who rode with the Old Woman; so Aben had worked long and hard to produce a fine, magical mirror for his youngest daughter. She’d carry it always, swinging from her belt. When her years as a Moon-maiden were over, the mirror would be melted down and shaped into a marriage bangle.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured. “But I’ve never been one for sitting admiring myself!”

Gul came in through the tent flaps, overhearing her daughter’s words. “There’s more to a Moon Rider’s mirror than pouting your lips at it,” she said. “Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“Oh yes.” Hati followed her daughter into the tent, smiling at her words.

“What more?” Myrina demanded.

Hati and Gul chuckled secretively, but they wouldn’t reply.

“Atisha will tell, when the time is right,” said Gul.

~~And though Myrina begged again, they clamped their lips tight and would say no more. She~~ watched her mother rolling up the felt flooring, knowing somewhere deep down that a time would come for weeping, but the moment was not here yet: this moment contained nothing but burning eagerness.

“I wish I could see Reseda for longer,” she said, a touch of regret creeping into her voice.

“Seven days will have to be enough.”

“I want to dance at her wedding.”

Gul clicked her tongue. “An important woman like Atisha cannot be kept waiting while a girl makes up her mind which man she wants. Reseda must not be rushed in her choice, so you’ll go off with the Moon Riders, and you’ll be happy.”

“Yes I will.” Myrina was easily persuaded of that.

The Mazagardi were up before sunrise packing away their tents. All the tribe members performed their own tasks well, even the tiniest of children. They had done it so often that there were no arguments and little need to speak. The whole tribe mounted their steeds and moved off as they did a every new moon.

Myrina and Tomi rode in unusual silence side by side. The Mazagardi traveled fast, fording the River Scamander. The dreary days of the Snow Months were over and they were eager for the return the sun.

Both warm and cold springs issued from high rocks at the Place of Flowing Waters. Tall shady trees grew alongside the riverbanks and fresh shooting grass provided rich grazing for goats and horses.

“Why do we not stay here forever?” Myrina had once asked her grandmother, when she’d been very young.

Hati had laughed. “I wish we could, my honey-child. This place is perfect, but it wouldn’t stay perfect for long if we lived here. The waters would run dry, the grazing would be used up and the ground poisoned with our mess; we’d destroy what gives us so much pleasure.”

“So we’ve got to leave it alone to have a rest before we come back again!” Myrina had tried hard to understand.

Hati had smiled and touched her cheek. “You are learning fast, little one.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Place of Flowing Waters



THE SUN WAS sinking in the sky as they arrived at the meeting place. The setting up of the new camp was noisy, for a small city of tents had already established itself. Greetings were bellowed across the water, news gabbled of famines, wars, plagues, and fighting, good trading and bad deals.

“They say that Priam is coming here tonight; his tent is set up and waiting,” Aben told Gul, bustling in and out of the family’s tent flaps. His news made her pause as she unrolled the felt flooring in front of the hearth stone. “I’ve been thinking of offering him our yearling gray mares,” he continued.

Gul nodded. Aben enjoyed nothing better than a good bargaining session. His wife recognized the light of battle gleaming there in his eyes; his weapons would be determination and clever argument, and pride in the beautiful silver-colored horses that he’d been carefully breeding for the last five years.

“Priam?” Hati was a touch disapproving. “Those Trojans give scant respect to Maa; Apollo and the Owl Lady are more their style.”

“What folk say they believe can be very different to what they really believe.” Aben winked at her.

“Aye, I should know that,” Hati agreed, remembering her own days as a priestess. “Many sing praise to Zeus and Athene, but quietly send for the Moon Riders when rain is needed or a touch of sun for their crops.”

The following morning Aben was up early, combing the manes of his most valued mares. “Come with me, wife,” he coaxed. “Come with me to Priam’s tent. The sight of fine women riders might stir his enthusiasm for our horses.”

Gul shook her head. “Trojans disapprove of women riders, but maybe you will take Myrina; a skilled young girl should not give offense.”

“Aye, you’re right.” Aben sighed. “Trojans, like Achaeans, keep their women safe at home, though I for one can’t understand such foolishness; those whose women ride and fight have twice as many warriors.”

Dressed in her finest linen trousers and smock, Myrina rode for Priam and his attendants on one of the silver-gray mares. She trotted, cantered, and galloped, finishing with a spectacular display of bareback dancing, at which she’d been skilled from an early age. Priam was impressed and bought six mares, willingly paying the high prices that Aben asked. Afterward the King of Troy invited them into his huge tent to drink delicate rose-scented tea.

Myrina stared about her; she’d never been in so luxurious a place before. Silken cushions were piled high on long low seats carved with curling patterns and painted in gold leaf. The carpets were s

thick and soft that Myrina wanted to fling herself down and roll about. "If this is his tent, what must his palace be like?" she wondered.

A thin girl with dark hair, who seemed a little older than Myrina, poured tea from a silver jug. Myrina caught her breath for a moment as she looked at her. It was the young woman's eyes that made her feel so discomfited: one blue as the Aegean Sea, the other green as fresh grass, giving her a strange, unsettling look. A delicate golden-rayed sun adorned the circlet about her brow, pale and subtle beside the stunning saffron dye of her gown. Myrina found it difficult not to stare.

A younger girl of about eleven summers helped to serve the tea. She was just as beautifully clothed, but in silver, with a pearly crescent moon on her brow instead of the sun.

"I am Cassandra, daughter of Priam," the older girl said. "I have never seen anyone dance on a horse like you."

Myrina was pleased with such open admiration but still felt a little uncomfortable. She longed to stare directly into the mismatched eyes, though she knew that to do so would be a deep discourtesy. Priam was known to have many children, so Myrina assumed the younger girl must be another princess of Troy.

"I learned to ride when I was small," Myrina said, keeping her eyes lowered.

A moment of silence followed, but her curiosity grew so that she must glance up again.

"You may look at me, if I may look at you," Cassandra said, faintly amused. "I have never seen a girl with arrows etched on her cheeks!"

Myrina smiled. "We are both different," she acknowledged. "But you could learn horse skills, if you were willing to put in the work. You are not too old, I think!"

Suddenly tears spilled down Cassandra's cheeks. Myrina was horrified, fearing she'd given offense, but Cassandra quickly dashed the tears away. "I often cry. It means nothing," she said. "I would never be allowed to ride, though I long to try."

Myrina remembered what her father had told her about the way the Trojans protected their women. What were they afraid of? Might their women ride away and never come back if they learned horse skills?

The younger girl twined her arm around the princess. "Don't cry again," she begged.

Cassandra changed at once, smiling at the child, tolerant of the hero-worship that shone from her eyes. "This is my little friend Iphigenia, daughter of King Agamemnon. His queen Clytemnestra is visiting us and we girls look after each other while the queen goes shopping."

"Uncle Menelaus is here, too." Iphigenia yawned. "He talks of nothing but trade and ships."

Myrina was awed. "The great Queen Clytemnestra comes to Troy to do her shopping?" Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, was the powerful overlord of the Achaean lands to the southwest. All the smaller kingdoms bowed to his rule.

"Father must stay at home to keep his kingdom safe, but Mother buys her clothes in Troy." Iphigenia spoke with childlike honesty. "She buys mine, too."

She let go of Cassandra's hand for a moment and twirled around so that her beautiful silken skirt swung out, ringing the tiny bells with which it had been embroidered.

Cassandra explained. "Troy is full of textile slaves; spinners, weavers, and dyers. Many a wealthy visitor comes to Troy looking to adorn herself."

"Aunt Helen cannot come," Iphigenia said. "She must mind Sparta while Uncle Menelaus is away but she would like to visit. Nobody loves clothes like my aunt Helen."

Cassandra looked a little bored at the way the conversation was going and Myrina sensed that dresses and adornment were of little interest to the princess, though she herself was so beautifully

attired.

Meanwhile, Aben talked with Priam and was introduced to a handsome man, who kept glancing across at Myrina with open admiration.

“Who is he?” Myrina dared to ask at last.

Cassandra’s mouth took on an angry twist. “He is my long-lost brother Paris,” she said.

Myrina was surprised at the bitterness in her voice. “He is . . . good to look at,” she whispered politely.

“Oh yes,” the princess agreed. “Everyone thinks so. But . . . he was sent away at birth, for the omens foretold he’d bring destruction to Troy.”

Myrina was puzzled. The tribes knew little of omens; but to send a newborn babe away from his family seemed to her very sad.

“He lived on the slopes of Mount Ida, raised by shepherds,” Cassandra continued. “He was never supposed to return to Troy and I felt sorry for him then!”

“You are not sorry for him anymore?” she asked. Myrina couldn’t understand why the princess would hate her brother now.

Cassandra shook her head fiercely, her mouth still grim. “Four years ago he returned to Troy and beat our strongest men at the summer games. When he revealed his identity Father relented and swore that he could not live apart from such a strong and handsome son. Since then he is Father’s favorite and cannot put a foot wrong. He went to fight for the Hittite king and returned with gold and slaves for our weaving sheds; now, everyone adores him and the omens are forgotten.”

“But not by you?” Myrina spoke warily, thinking that she’d not like to fall into disfavor with this changeable princess.

Cassandra shrugged and suddenly her strange eyes seemed to lose focus, as though she were watching something far away in the distance. “His presence fills me with fear,” she whispered. “I can’t explain why. I know they think I am jealous; and as I’m only a girl, they take heed of nought that I say!”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Windy City



MYRINA LISTENED TO Cassandra with some sympathy. Both the Achaeans and the Trojans were known to give scant respect to their women's wishes and used them mainly as marriage pawns, selling them off as brides to the highest bidder. She could see that their pampered, restricted lives were not much to be envied.

It was clear that Iphigenia loved Cassandra. The young girl smiled up at the older one, clinging trustingly to her hand. Myrina was touched by the simple need for love that she saw in the child.

"Snaky Lady!" Iphigenia exclaimed in a hushed voice, pointing to the twisting body picture that adorned Myrina's right arm.

All at once the dashing Prince Paris strode across and bowed to the three girls. "You are as daring a rider as any lad I've seen," he flattered Myrina, his blue eyes regarding her boldly.

She nodded with dignity, but there was something in his praise and in his stare that made her feel uncomfortable. Paris turned to whisper in his father's ear.

Priam smiled tolerantly and spoke to Aben. "My son begs me take your skillful young rider back to Troy along with the horses."

Aben answered anxiously, "I do not wish to offend, but Myrina is promised to the Moon-maidens. If the Old Woman accepts her, she must leave with them after the full moon."

Priam looked surprised. "I would pay highly for such a child: she'd entertain my court and delight my wives. You may name your price."

Aben was clearly troubled. Myrina caught her breath for a moment; her father must fear he'd lose the excellent horse sale he'd just won if he did not accept Priam's offer! She needn't have worried, for Aben would not be moved. "Myrina is the delight of my life," he told them firmly. "I would dearly like to keep her with *me*, but she's promised to the Old Woman."

A flash of annoyance flickered in Priam's eyes but Cassandra intervened. "Father, we would not have her come unwillingly to Troy."

Myrina feared they'd seem ungracious. "Would you like me to come to Troy to give one performance there, before I go away?"

Cassandra was suddenly radiant. Priam nodded, honor satisfied by this concession, bowing courteously. "We would be honored," he said. Paris looked displeased, but said nothing.

Aben sighed with relief.

The next morning Myrina rode Isatis toward Troy, along with her family, following in the wake of Priam's royal procession. Even Hati came, staring about her with curiosity, despite her disapproval of the Trojans. She turned to point out a mound that they passed. "The tomb of Dancing Myrina," she told

them. "Ancient leader of the Moon-maidens."

"The one I'm named for?" Myrina asked.

"The very one," Hati agreed.

The golden limestone walls of Troy, built snugly into the sloping edge of the plateau, rose above them as they moved on at a steady pace.

"You'd think the Great Mother had built those walls," Hati acknowledged. She was impressed, though she tried to hide it.

Myrina had a moment of fear about the performance she'd promised, but then leaned forward to stroke her mare's glossy neck. On Isatis's back she could do anything.

They passed through the sprawling lower town, filled with small huts and noisy traders. A babble of different languages filled the air so that the only words that made sense were in the Luvvian tongue that Hati had taught her. Dyers bent over huge vats, their arms and faces spattered with the colors they produced. Two springs of water, one cold, one steaming hot, gushed into pools where women washed and scrubbed, wading knee deep in the water; long gowns hitched up and fastened at the back.

The procession moved on through the Southern Gate into the citadel, which was fronted by six statues depicting the Trojans' gods. First and foremost was the sun god, Apollo, with the strange beaked Owl Lady next to him.

"How can anyone worship a carved image when they've the moon and sun to honor?" asked Hati.

They passed low sheds where weaving women toiled, their heads bent over their work, ankles roped. Myrina frowned at the sight and remembered how Cassandra had told her that Paris had brought back slaves from the Hittite wars.

They rode onward up the paved slope to high terraces of wonderful buildings. Each one seemed a palace to Myrina. The higher they went the sharper the breeze blew, and Myrina soon understood why Troy was known as the Windy City.

Cassandra, who had been carried in a litter at the front of the procession, alighted and came pushing through the servants to find Myrina. Iphigenia trailed in her wake and now another young woman walked at her side.

"Father begs you perform for us tonight, before our feast," the princess said. "It is the last night of Lord Menelaus's stay, and Iphigenia and her mother must set sail with him tomorrow to the Achaean lands. Father is anxious to find an entertainment that will please him."

"I'm honored," Myrina agreed uncertainly.

"You are all invited to join us at the feast." Cassandra waved her hand to include all Myrina's family. "This is my dear friend Chryseis, daughter of our most respected priest of Apollo, Chryse. She will show you to the guesthouse. Please ask for anything you need. I must go to help Iphigenia pack her new clothes."

Myrina forgot her apprehension as she watched them go. Iphigenia still clung to Cassandra's skirts. How bitterly the child would miss the Trojan princess when she sailed back to Mycenae in the morning.

Chryseis had a calm and serious manner; her saffron-dyed gown was plain, her brow decorated with the golden-rayed sun. Her quiet confidence confirmed that she was a young woman of high status. She clapped her hands to call the grooms to take the horses, then led Myrina and her family through a finely carved doorway. They were shown into two rooms, with low beds covered with straw-stuffed mattresses and soft down cushions.

"One for the honored parents and another for the performer and her grandmother," Chryseis told them. "I shall have fruit and wine brought to you."

The walls were hung with brightly patterned rugs; none of them had ever been in such a room before.

“Where am I to perform?” Myrina asked.

“In the courtyard,” Chryseis told her. “I will come back when you’ve rested and take you there.” She glanced at Myrina’s trousers, covered by a short smock. “We have beautiful gowns; you may take your choice.”

Myrina shook her head. “If the king wishes me to dance on horseback, then I must wear my trousers!”

Chryseis’s face brightened, making her look suddenly younger. “Dance on horseback? I have heard of such a thing but never seen it. I look forward to this evening very much.” With that she bowed her head courteously and left them.

“Did you see the sun on her brow?” said Hati. “Chryseis is not destined for the marriage market; she’s a priestess of Apollo and following in her father’s tradition.”

“Cassandra has the same sun on her brow!” Myrina said. “Is she a priestess, too?”

Hati nodded. “Some of them escape marriage that way.”

“And what of little Iphigenia? She has a silver crescent on her brow.”

“That is the mark of Artemis,” Hati told her. “The huntress goddess who favors the moon.”

“That’s not so very different from us,” Myrina murmured. “We give honor to the moon.”

“We do indeed!” Hati shrugged.

“Are you going to have a rest, Grandmother?” Myrina asked.

“Certainly not!” Hati pulled a face. “I’m going outside to get a good look at this place while I’ve got the chance.”

Myrina nodded. “Then I’ll come with you,” she said.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Invitation to Sparta



MYRINA AND HATI wandered through the wide upper streets, down graceful staircases, past stately houses decorated with carvings and marble. They turned whichever way their fancy took them, until at last they passed through the Eastern Gate, where two huge wooden doors stood open, leading to the busy narrow streets of the outer town. Here they found themselves on high ground.

Hati examined the strong wooden doors and the thick sloping lower parts of the walls with approval. “You’d have a job to get in here if the Trojans didn’t want you.” She laughed. “These walls curl around the hill like a giant snail’s shell.”

They walked past stalls piled with mackerel, oysters, and sea urchins. Sea urchins’ eggs were offered to them as a delicacy, which Hati ate with relish. Gray pots stood row on row, alongside bales of wool and yarn and fine linen dyed in expensive Syrian purple. The scent of coriander and cumin filled the air and again they were surrounded by the confusing babble of different tongues. The shopkeepers held up strong vessels of copper and bronze, crying their wares. It was a very busy, noisy place, and at last Hati was satisfied with what she’d seen.

“I’ll go back to rest on that soft bed, after all,” she said.

After they’d rested, Gul came to help Myrina dress, braiding her hair and fastening patterned scarves and girdles across her chest and hips.

“She must look beautiful,” Hati insisted. “I’ll have nobody look down on my granddaughter.”

Isatis wasn’t awed, even though her mistress was. Luxurious scents of food, wine and perfume drifted into the courtyard, where a statue of Apollo stood in the center. Priam, his eldest son, Hector, and Prince Paris sat with Menelaus under a canopy, nibbling at fruit and sweetmeats. Clytemnestra sheltered beneath a separate awning with Hecuba, Priam’s chief wife, Iphigenia, and Cassandra at their side. Myrina was amazed at the richness of their clothes—even slaves and servants were beautifully dressed. She was used to getting better attention from her audience and felt disconcerted.

Hati helped her onto Isatis’s back. “Do they want to watch me ride?” Myrina complained. “Or do they simply want to talk and gobble food?”

“You will make them watch you!” Hati said. Then she picked up her drum and beat a sudden loud drum roll, which shocked and silenced the crowd. Myrina rode forward with an angry burst of determination. She threw herself into the performance trotting, galloping, twisting, and turning while Hati beat time on the drum. Waves of applause greeted her as she swung backward and sideways, so that girl and horse seemed to move as one. She finished with a handstand, causing her audience to gasp with admiration then burst into wild shouts and whoops of appreciation.

Priam and his court rose to their feet, cheering. The king turned to beckon Aben forward. “Come

and sit at my table,” he ordered, leading the way into the banqueting hall. “You must be descended from centaurs, to produce such a child.”

Seated at the women’s table, Gul kept turning her head, keeping a strict eye on what her husband was up to. “Stop it!” Hati told her. “Who wants to sit with the men anyway?”

Myrina was so relieved to have finished her performance that she felt drunk with joy, even though no wine had touched her lips. The walls of the hall gleamed with burnished metal shields and gentle music came from the flutes and lyres of slave girls. As the meal progressed, the slaves carefully mixed wine with water and served it to the guests.

Cassandra came to congratulate Myrina. “Menelaus was stunned,” she told her. “And even Queen Clytemnestra was impressed. My father is in such a good mood that I knew I could ask him for anything.”

“So what did you ask?”

“I begged that I might come to see your springtime dances at the full of the moon. And he has agreed! Chryseis will come with me.”

Myrina was pleased but surprised that a Trojan princess should so much desire to see the Celebrations of Mother Maa.

“Where is the princess Iphigenia?” Myrina asked, noticing that Cassandra’s devoted shadow was missing.

“Fast asleep, curled up on my couch,” she smiled.

Suddenly there were voices raised on the high table and chatter ceased.

“Oh no,” Cassandra whispered. “Has Paris upset Menelaus again?”

All eyes were turned to the smaller, middle-aged brother of Agamemnon. Menelaus, King of Sparta, was not quite as important as his elder brother, but still a powerful man to offend.

“No, no.” Paris was shaking his head and smiling, oozing charm. “I am sure that your wife is beautiful, very beautiful—as is her lovely elder sister.” He bowed to Clytemnestra, who was not impressed at being called the elder sister.

“No. That is not enough!” Menelaus thumped the table, still angry, his face rosy with wine. “She’s not just beautiful. My Helen is the most beautiful woman in the world. Ask her sister, ask Clytemnestra.”

Clytemnestra shook her head, weary of hearing Helen’s praise.

“How I long to see such beauty.” Paris was silvertongued again, not at all put off by the dispute, though his father was anxiously trying to catch his eye.

Menelaus leaned forward and grabbed Paris by the arm. “Then come,” he cried. “Be my guest and stay a while in Sparta. Then you may judge Helen’s beauty for yourself. No! No! I shall be offended if you refuse.”

Paris hesitated, looking at his father. Priam gave a brief nod. “I should be most honored to come with you,” Paris agreed.

The amicable solution brought relief and the sound of cheerful conversation was quickly restored, but Myrina glanced at Cassandra and saw that her cheeks had turned deathly white. “What is it, princess?” she asked.

Tears spilled down Cassandra’s cheeks. Myrina stared at her uncomfortably. This princess was truly quick to weep.

“The smell! So foul!” Cassandra clapped her hand over her mouth and nose in distress. “It stinks in here . . . smells like a slaughterhouse!”

Myrina was fearful that the princess might faint or vomit. All she could smell was the delicious

food and sweet perfumes.

Cassandra keeled forward, blood suddenly pouring from her nose, splashing down in great dark drips to stain her lovely gown.

“Let me help,” Myrina begged, ready to pinch the bridge of her nose as Hati had taught her.

But just then a tousle-haired Iphigenia came toward them, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “I wondered where you’d gone,” she cried, grabbing hold of Cassandra’s arm. “Ah . . . you are bleeding

At once Cassandra sat up, wiping the blood away. “It’s nothing,” she reassured the child. “Just a silly nosebleed. There . . . it’s gone!”

Myrina was amazed. The bleeding had stopped as soon as the words were spoken and Cassandra was smiling again. “Come here.” She made space for Iphigenia to sit beside her, putting her arm around the younger girl. “Now we must talk. You know that we must say good-bye in the morning, don’t you?”

Iphigenia nodded, her eyes full of sadness at the thought.

“Remember this,” Cassandra told her, solemnly taking hold of both her hands. “Though we are apart, I will always be your friend. I will always be thinking of you, so that you will never truly be alone. Do you understand that?”

Iphigenia nodded again. “Never alone,” she whispered.

Watching it, Myrina felt a great lump well in her throat. Cassandra was a peculiar young woman, but she was also full of kindness and seemed to sense others’ emotions and feel them deeply. For a moment Myrina regretted that she must leave to join the Moon Riders; a longer stay in Troy might have been interesting.

CHAPTER SIX

The Night of the Old Woman



IN THE MORNING a great procession set out through the Southern Gate, heading down to the Bay of Troy. Menelaus's ships had arrived from Besika Bay, a little to the south, where they'd been anchored. They were rowed into the shallow harbor, ready to take the Spartans aboard and set off home across the deep blue Aegean Sea. Paris rode beside Priam at the head of the procession. He'd travel in his own fine fleet of ships that his father had built for him. First he'd take Clytemnestra safely home to Mycenae; then travel on to Sparta as Menelaus's guest.

Myrina and her family rode at the back of the procession, but soon turned away to the east to head back to the Place of Flowing Waters.

As they reached the higher land, Myrina looked back and saw the high-prowed ships setting off. The sea was calm but beaten white by the precise lift and dip of each set of fifty oars moving in perfect time. As they watched, the oars were hauled in and sails set; the wind was blowing in Menelaus's favor.

They arrived back at the spring gathering before the sun went down, and found Tomi faithfully guarding their home tent.

Aben was still excited by the honor of sitting at Priam's table and full of knowing gossip. "That was no trading visit," he told Gul. "What an excuse, Menelaus bringing his sister-in-law to buy her clothes? I swear by Maa, there's more to it than that."

"What's the truth then?" Gul begged.

"He was sent by Agamemnon to cajole Priam into removing the heavy taxes on Achaean ships."

"And was he successful?"

Aben was thoughtful. "Hard to tell. Priam is all courtesy and concession, but underneath I sense a stubbornness, an iron will."

"What will come of it?"

Aben shook his head.

Though she saw her parents' concern at the doings in Troy, Myrina could think of nothing but the exciting new turn her life was taking. The next few days passed quickly and one afternoon, a few days before the full moon, Grandmother Hati came into the tent in a hurry. "They're coming," she whispered, her voice shaking with excitement. "The lookouts have seen the dust rising in the south. The Moon Riders come for you, Myrina!"

Sounds of distant clapping and hooting from outside told them that the Old Woman with her train of traveling dancers would soon arrive.

Myrina got up and her stomach lurched; suddenly she felt that she couldn't bear to leave her family. How would she manage without their care?

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