



THE SKY THRONE

CHRIS LEDBETTER



Month9Books

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The author makes no claims to, but instead acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the word marks mentioned in this work of fiction.

Copyright © 2017 by Chris Ledbetter

THE SKY THRONE by Chris Ledbetter

All rights reserved. Published in the United States of America by
Month9Books, LLC.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

ePub ISBN: 978-1-945107-91-7 Mobi ISBN: 978-1-945107-92-4

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-945107-87-0

Published by Month9Books, Raleigh, NC 27609

Cover design by Najla Qamber Designs



Month9Books

To my father who put my first book about Greek mythology in my hands when I was five years old.



CHAPTER ONE

Since the moment I started at Eastern Crete Lower Academy two years ago, I'd felt like such an outcast. The guys, mostly Potamoi and sons of Headmasters Okeanos and Tethys, never regarded me as an equal. I didn't even warrant bullying. It's like I never even existed. If only I'd known how visible I'd become in the coming days.

I always got picked last for swim team and crew in physical fitness class. I actually was the third best wrestler overall in school and peerless in javelin throwing due to superior training from my guardians, the Kouretes. When Eastern Crete competed in the Mediterranean Invitational Games against academies from Phoenicia, Egypt, and Libya, I placed first in the javelin event, beating Gurzil from Libya who was the reigning champion from years past. I even won my weight class, *the lightest class there was*, in wrestling by beating Melqart from Phoenicia. But none of that mattered.

I was still invisible.

I loved science class. The lessons where we studied energy and matter were like fresh spring water to a parched throat. But the rest

of my classes bored me to tears. We had language arts, music, and math in the mornings. Physical fitness, agriculture, and science took up our afternoons. I wouldn't say I was intellectually ahead of them, because, hey, that'd be conceited. But my mother prepared me well, with all the goat tending and such. And she always said when I came home from classes each night that they just didn't know how to teach me on my level.

So, I was forced to make my own fun. No one would probably notice anyway.

After the big Invitational Games win, I was posted up at the school's entry columns with my best friend, Anytos, watching the Oceanids as they arrived for classes one morning. Sisters to the Potamoi, the Oceanids were the sea nymph daughters of our headmasters. Okeanos and Tethys, aside from being our school administrators, were also Elder Deities of the vast ocean, which is why we at Eastern Crete dominated all water sports. Swimming. Cliff diving. Crew. We bested all comers. But not me. I dove and swam exactly the same ... like an anvil.

The Oceanids descended upon the campus from their barracks like a wave crashing against the shore. Telesto, the most beautiful sea nymph by several stadia, smiled at me for the first time since I'd been going to the school. Okay, it wasn't a full smile. The corner of her lip twitched upward as she flipped her wavy, aquamarine hair over her shoulder and glanced past me. But that counts, right?

I backhanded Anytos in the chest. "You saw that. That's my opening. If I don't make my move, she'll be gone to the upper school next year."

"Psst, she is *beyond the Mediterranean* beautiful. Completely unattainable."

"Did you see that come hither stare she flashed me?"

"Looked more like indigestion."

"You are as wrong as you are false. Cover my back. I'm moving in."

I crossed the courtyard in a flash and caught Telesto's arm as

she reached the weather-beaten front door to the main school hall. “Telesto, you look as if the sun radiates from you.”

She paused and leaned back against the doorframe. “You’re just saying that because I wore my yellow tunic today.”

“You shine with such brilliance; you should wear yellow every day.”

She folded a strand or two of stunning teal hair behind her ear and twirled the ends. “But what happens when I wear my purple tunic?”

“A tunic hasn’t been invented that could dampen your beauty.”

She giggled and turned away from me for a moment. “Zeus, is it?”

I nodded, surprised she even knew my name.

“You’re the one who pulled that massive prank on my mother, Headmaster Tethys, aren’t you?”

Oh, that’s how she knew me. Not invisible after all. I bowed. “I am him. He is me. One and the same.”

“Crazy. She was so mad.” She shook her head, stifling a smile. “As far as I can tell, language arts must be your favorite subject. Your tongue is spectacularly sharp-witted.”

“Not really. But I am feeling a little inspired right now.”

Several strands of her hair fell to cover half her face. “Are you going to the bonfire at the beach tomorrow night?”

“I wasn’t invite—”

Several of Telesto’s broad-shouldered, dark-haired brothers bumped into me from behind. “Those are uncharted waters, boy. Careful now,” One of them called over his shoulder. Those were the first words they’d ever spoken to me.

Telesto rolled her eyes. “Pay them no mind. They’re harmless. You were saying?”

“Those bonfires are an Oceanids and Potamoi thing? It’s kind of a secret club that you have to be born into, right? Being brothers and sisters, children of Headmasters Okeanos and Tethys... young water

deities in training... masters of rivers and streams..."

"I guess. But you should come out any way. It's all night, under the stars. Eating, drinking, stargazing... What's better than that?"

Gazing into her mesmerizing, iridescent eyes, my mouth fired before I could stop it. "Kissing you under the stars. That's better."

"Sprint much? You're a fast mover."

"I just go after what I want."

"Well ..." A pink tint rose on her high cheek bones. "We shall see. But first you have to show up." Her lips twitched gain. "I have to go to class. See you tomorrow?" She disappeared inside the school hall.

I turned to Tos with a pterodactyl-eating grin on my face. He shook his head and smiled.

The boring part of my daily routine was set to commence. School. Classes. Ugh. I wished the school day was already over so I could just go to games practice. As Tos and I walked to first period, I was struck by the overwhelming urge to liven my day up just a bit.

"Tos, I have a good one. You with me?"

"Oh heavens. Is it what I think it is?"

"I feel the need ... the need to prank!"

Tos shook his head. "My pranking days are over."

"Come on. Just one more. Promise it's the last one."

He glared at me.

I explained the entire idea to him. "It'll be after language arts, all right? It's going to be good."

After class, Tos and I waited until all other students had left. He took his position at the door to make sure no one came in. I approached Professor Ceto at the front of the room. Tablets and scrolls decorated the top of her desk.

"Professor, do you have strong hands?"

Her intelligent eyes narrowed. "Sure, I do. Why?"

"I bet you a homework pass that you can't balance a goblet on the back of your hand."

Her forehead wrinkled.

“Place your hand on the desk, palm down,” I said.

She complied.

I filled her water goblet and placed it on the back of her hand.

She smiled. “See. No problem at all.”

I picked up the goblet. “Now place your other hand on top of this one.”

She sighed. “Why? Is that supposed to be harder? So, if I fail, you get a homework pass, yes? If I complete the task, what do I get?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Go ahead, then,” she said, placing her left hand atop her right. “Get on with it.”

Barely able to contain my giddiness, I balanced the full water goblet on the top of her two hands.

“See,” she said with triumph in her voice. “I did it. Where’s my surprise?”

“All right then, I’ll see you next week. Have a good weekend.” I walked quickly to the door.

“What? Wait, I can’t move my hands without spilling water all over my scrolls.”

Tos opened the door and we both rounded the corner in a flash.

We were halfway to period two music when I heard an unholy roar across campus.

“ZEUS!”

Tos and I laughed our behinds off and slapped hands as we passed a solitary blueish post in the center of the courtyard. No one knew much about it or who designed it. But its presence was striking.

Upon reaching music class, Tos and I took our positions near the kithara and lyre. Our teacher, Professor Leucosia and several more students entered and we prepared for instruction. Leucosia had the most beautiful singing voice. Simply spellbinding. Sometimes, I felt light-headed when she’d sing along with our accompaniment.

Shortly after arriving in class, Headmasters Okeanos and Tethys

shadowed the doorway to our room. The expression on Tethys' face could have killed a wild boar at forty paces.

"Zeus, Anytos, we need you to step outside right now." Tethys said. Her eyes mirrored the Aegean during a storm.

I looked at Tos. My heart rate quickened to a pace I'd only felt after running sprints. Slowly, I rose to my feet. This couldn't have been good.

We walked over to Okeanos. I had to crane my neck just to see the Headmaster's eyes. His biceps were bigger than my head, despite silvery blue hair atop his head and an aged, wrinkly face.

His somber and deliberate voice rumbled. "You are hereby expelled from Eastern Crete Lower Academy. This infraction and expulsion will go on your master record. You may apply again next term."

"Why? What did I do to deserve this?"

Professor Tethys stepped forward to grab my arm. "Your little pranks have gotten you in deeper water than you can swim in, young man. You obviously need some time to think about how you can be a better contributor to the educational system."

"No. You can't expel me. Please!" I clasped my hands in front of my face. "My mother will kill me!"

"Not our concern." Okeanos folded his gigantic arms. His voice rumbled again. "You must learn to be a better student. A better citizen."

"But they were just pranks," I pleaded.

"Yes. And this is the seventh such prank we've endured at your hands. And since Anytos helped you, he shall accompany you home." Tethys pointed east toward Mount Ida, the highest peak on Crete. "You have until the sun chariot reaches its zenith to leave campus." She gazed upward. "By the looks of things, your time's nearly at an end."



CHAPTER TWO

I hung my head. Anytos glared at me. His gaze screamed all the words he didn't say. On our walk home, we passed the bobbing ships in the harbor port, and the dry dock where most of the Kouretes, my guardians, built seafaring vessels. Aristaeus headed the watercraft and open sea navigation program to post graduate students who didn't get invited to the upper academy. He also coached for some of the events at the games, mainly crew. But that was a thinly veiled recruiting push for rowers to eventually man the oars on his long distance, open water vessels that visited foreign lands.

My school, or rather the school I just got expelled from, was part of the Olympus Academic District, which included six other lower schools around the Mediterranean and Aegean. The Nereids, daughters of Elder Deities Nereus and Doris, went to schools on the islands Euboea, Samos, and Limnos. Eastern Crete Lower Academy, despite its name, actually sat at the central northern edge of the island, attached to a harbor. There used to be a Western Crete on the far northwest corner of the long crooked finger of our island. But

that school closed and the students were split between Eastern Crete and Kithira, which is an island off the bottom tip of the mainland to our north. Actually, all of the island lower schools and the mainland of Hellas were north from us.

All lower schools fed Mount Olympus Preparatory Academy and Othrys Hall Academy, yet only the most elite pupils who graduated with honors from a lower school were invited to attend the great mountain school, Mount Olympus Prep, on the mainland. I was sure Telesto was a lock to move on. Since my expulsion, however, my chances of making it that far had been reduced to somewhere between slim and none.

Anytos exhaled loudly through his nose every couple of steps during the entire walk back to our goat drawn chariot. He never spoke a word during the entire ride home, made even longer by the silence. And let's be real, goats just weren't that fast to begin with.

My mother, Amalthea, stood in a field near my cave home, tending our goats when we arrived. Her smile embraced me. "How was your day?"

Had I been alone, I would've told her nothing about what had happened at school. I mean, I might've mentioned it eventually. But having Tos standing next to me with this horrendously sad expression forced my hand. I sulked, hating that I had gotten my friend in trouble as well. I only wanted to have a little fun.

"I ... uh ... " I began and then sighed. "Well, we actually were ... uh ... sort of expelled from school today."

Mom's eyes flashed fire as she glared at me. "I don't have time for your antics, Zeus! I have a goat farm to run." Her hands flew skyward. "What do you mean ... expelled?"

Anytos eased away from us toward the cave that we both called home. He left me there to explain the entire ordeal to Mom. The disappointment on Amalthea's olive-toned face hurt the most. The dimple on her smile had been erased, replaced by a furrowed brow. She listened and then very calmly told me I was on punishment and

that I was to finish watching the goats for the remainder of the day and then shovel their dung. Tending goats was like watching the sun crawl across the sky. It made watching grass grow seem like a party. Shoveling goat patties was even worse. I nearly vomited numerous times.

Amalthea used to teach agriculture at Eastern Crete. When she retired, she became a prize-winning goat farmer, breeding goats to be shipped to every lower school in the Olympus Academic District for use in agriculture classes. The Kouretes lived nearby. When they weren't building ships, they provided security and protection for Amalthea's goat empire. Mom expected me to take over the goat farm. Anytos stood next in line to inherit the goat security operation. He could have had both, as far as I was concerned. He didn't have to worry about me fighting him for either dungtastic job, no offense. I had grander plans in mind.



The following day after goat tending chores from sunrise to sunset, I bathed and then collapsed, exhausted, into a deep sleep on my bed inside the cave. I woke in the middle of the night with a start that almost made my heart leap from my chest for beating so hard. I shook Tos' shoulder.

He finally opened his eyes. "What in the underworld do you want?" he whispered.

I put my finger to my lips and pointed to outside the cave. "I have to show you something."

"Wha—"

"Shhh!" I glanced around the semi-darkness. The torches at the cave entrance cast just enough light inside that I could see that no one was stirring. I tugged on Tos' tunic and then rose to my feet atop

sleep-weary legs. Tos followed. We snuck outside the cave, careful not to alert anyone.

I whispered again, "We have to get to the bonfire."

"The what?"

"Just before we were expelled, Telesto invited us to a bonfire at the beach tonight. It's an all-night affair."

"Are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere with you in the middle of the night."

"Please. I need this. You do too. This is the first invitation we've ever gotten to an Oceanids party. Trust me; there'll be enough girls and food for you too."

"That's not my concern." He sighed. "*You* just got *me* kicked out of school. *You* are on punishment. And now *you* want me to get in more trouble? No, thank you."

"It's not more trouble. Is the water goblet always half empty for you?"

Tos narrowed his eyes at me.

"Okay, bad joke." I glanced around to the cave entry to see if anyone had heard us. "Look, I'm going. You can stay here if you want." I rose to my feet.

"Telesto must've singed a few brain cells when you were flirting with her earlier. You have completely lost all logical thought."

"Who needs logical thought when sea nymphs beckon? So you're in?"

Tos shook his head. "I can't let you go by yourself. Who knows what trouble you'd get into without me."

"Great, we'll be back before sunrise and then act like we're getting ready for goat duty."

"Goat duty is your bag. When we return, I'm taking my hind parts back to bed."

I gripped his hand. "I'm glad you're talking to me again."

"Shut up before I change my mind."

We stole ... no, *borrowed* a chariot and one goat. Luckily the goat

was half-asleep. By the time it began bleating, we'd traveled several stadia away. We turned the chariot northward. The beachfront spread out before us at the base of the cliff that overlooked the harbor port near school.

When we arrived, crackling fire already stretched into the night sky. Flames leapt high above our heads. At least a hundred people dotted the beach, unless I didn't pay close enough attention in math class and my estimating skills were off. Some of the guys threw a circular disc back and forth. Others threw spears at a ringed target. Girls danced in groups while others played lyres and flutes. The waves provided percussion for their efforts.

After I asked several people if they'd seen Telesto, and received either blank stares or sneers, Tos pulled me aside.

"You look as desperate as a fish flopping around, struggling for air." He clapped me on the back. "I told you we shouldn't have come. It's just like school, only darker outside. It's not like we were winning any popularity contests."

"Confidence is everything. Act like you belong, and you will."

"Sure, because that's worked for the last two years at Eastern?" He sighed "I only came along to keep you from getting in more trouble. I have accepted my lot in life. Goat security is my future. That, and boat building. I'm a Kourete, and that's all we've ever done. I'm never getting called up to the big school. You at least had a chance. Until you blew it."

"Goat security and protection, huh? You calling me a goat, now?"

"If the hoof fits, brother ..."

I rolled my head and neck several times, finally realizing the near pointlessness of searching for Telesto, a drop of water in the sea of Oceanids and Potamoi. I took my sandals off and walked toward the water's edge. The drum and hiss of the waves on the shore soothed already frayed nerves.

I turned to Tos. "See? Isn't this nice?"

He looked at me as if I were talking a foreign language. "So you

mean to tell me I woke up from a deep sleep, snuck out of our home, stole a chariot *and* a goat, and traveled many stadia in the dark ... just to stick my toes in surf?"

I had to admit, he had a point.

A soft voice sailed up behind me like the sweetest musical note. "Zeus, I thought you were going to leave me hanging tonight."

I turned to see Telesto, an absolute vision of loveliness. Warmth flushed through me.

"I heard about your expulsion and figured the stars just weren't aligned for us," Telesto continued.

"I must admit ... " I began. "I was soundly wrapped in the comfort of sleep. It took every ounce of strength I had just to open my eyes. Tos here had to remind me about the party. Otherwise ... "

Telesto narrowed her eyes. "You're such a bad liar. I bet you dragged your friend here kicking and screaming."

"Yes and yes," Tos responded.

Telesto laughed, and then turned to slide her arm around another girl she'd brought. "Tos, I brought a friend of mine. Her name is Eos."

Anytos and Eos shook hands. The gleam in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. He was as struck as a harpooned whale. They walked off down the beach. My job there was done.

I returned my attention to Telesto. But, I tried to play it cool. Or at least cooler. Tos had been right. My skin had itched with the sense of helplessness when I couldn't find her. But all was right in the world after all.

"Something's different about you," I said waving my forefinger in front of her.

"It's the hair," she said without missing a beat. Her mass of aquamarine hair was pinned atop her head in a wild nest. Seashell earrings dangled from her ears. "Bonfire night isn't about being cute; it's about living life to the fullest."

"I couldn't agree more. That's exactly what I told Tos."

Telesto held my gaze. Her voice softened. “Thanks for coming out. And thank you for approaching me at school. I wondered if you would ever step up and talk to me. I don’t bite. At least not at first.” A wicked grin creased her cheeks.

I took a bold chance and slid my hand over hers. She didn’t move away. That was the moment I knew we’d get on fabulously. I relaxed on the beach beside pearl-skinned Telesto. We talked for what seemed like forever. Until what was once a sky full of stars, now featured a sole defiant sparkle. After a full night of getting to know each other, she rose from lying on her back to resting on her elbows.

“What’s next for you, Zeus? What will become of you?”

That was difficult, given my current status at school. So I deflected. “You first.”

She laughed and sat all the way up with her legs crossed. “I’m expected to graduate from upper academy. I’ll probably end up at Othrys Hall like most of my older siblings. I heard it’s near impossible to get into Mount Olympus Prep anymore.” She took a deep breath. “And then I want to come back and teach. Or maybe teach at the schools on Limnos or Samos out in the Aegean. Now stop fooling around. Where’s your life headed?”

I stared at the lonesome star in the sky as if it held the answers I sought. It didn’t. I sighed hard. “I hope to get *off* this island, truthfully. Maybe hunt dragons on the mainland. I could make good money, you know?”

“You sound just like some of my brothers, those crazy flapadoodles! They think there’s some mysterious beast at the bottom of the Aegean that they can kill and become instantly wealthy. Boys and their dreams.”

“Mom wants me to take over the goat empire she’s built. But the goat herding thing just isn’t my bag.”

“What about school?”

I drew out the next word into a two-syllable construction. “Yeah . . . That’s the thing. I first need to make it through lower school.”

In front of us, a gradually dying fire gave way to the pre-dawn glow in the sky as Anytos and Eos returned.

“You kids have fun?” I asked Tos.

He gave Eos a quick hug as the surf washed up around their ankles and then ambled over to stand next to me. A smile dimpled his cheeks, which he quickly stowed away. He kicked my feet. “Zeus, look at the sky. We need to go.”



CHAPTER THREE

I had to admit that he was right. We'd been out way longer than other times I'd dragged him out. In my defense, no matter how long we'd stayed out before, we always made it back on time. Except this time, we were both already on punishment.

"Wait ... " I held my finger in the air, and then turned back to Telesto.

She rifled her fingers through my hair. "Tonight was fun. We should do it again sometime."

I flashed a grin. "See you tomorrow?"

She purred, "Maybe—"

Tos jogged to the top of a dune. "Seriously, we don't have much time. Remember Amalthea's mantra: The Sun sees what the Moon disregards."

I pulled Telesto to her feet and stared into her iridescent eyes. We threaded fingers as our lips met. She tasted like the sea, salty and untamed. She turned and walked down the beach into the surf. She waded out and dove into a cresting wave. Her legs morphed into a

fishtail as soon as the seawater reached her hips. As I turned, I knew the surf was already washing her footprints away.

I sighed, trudging back up the darkened beach, digging my toes in the sand with each step. We definitely needed to get back to the cave before Mom and the Kouretes woke up.

“Don’t you ever get tired of goat herding?” I asked Tos once we reached the chariot.

“That’s what we do, Zeus.”

“It’s as dreary as watching the moon crawl across the sky; death by boredom.” I said. “They do nothing but graze and sleep.” I’d always felt like I could do more. *Be* more than a goat herder. Something inside of me clawed for the extraordinary. I couldn’t be a teacher without schooling. Teacher, farmer, or livestock herder . . . those were the only options on Crete. Telesto clearly wanted me to be more than I was. She was quite unimpressed with my dragon hunter idea. I had to face that I’d likely never leave Crete.

Tos turned to me and huffed. “The Kouretes are going to be volcanic if we don’t get back before they wake. Not to mention Amalthea,” he said. “I never should’ve let you talk me into going to that bonfire.”

I laughed. “Yeah, ‘cause you had *such* a terrible time.”

“That’s beside the point.” Tos straightened his tunic. “Are you ready?”

I waved my arm in front of my chest. “After you—”

I stepped onto the chariot after Tos. With a whip of the reins, we shot off, heading south down the trail back to Mount Ida, which sat almost perfectly in the middle of the island. I knew the mountain’s position because Amalthea made me map the entire thing before heading to Eastern lower school. Our chariot raced so fast, we took curves on one wheel.

“Faster, you blasted goat!” I yelled. “Yah!”

Ahead, Ida’s elevation beckoned. My mother’s dark silhouette emerged from the cave’s shadow. Damn! We hadn’t made it back in

time. Amalthea waved her staff in the air.

I glanced over my shoulder as we pulled into place. The sun's orb rose faster than usual, pushing through beautiful crimson and gold cloud bands. Darkness to light in a split-second.

Tos turned and almost pulled my arm almost from its socket. "That's not normal. Hurry!"

We sprinted the final stretch around several of the Kouretes, now awake. Aristeaus blew a horn to summon the remainder of them.

We drew closer to the cave. My mother stood and pivoted toward the sun. The sky brightened from blue to intense yellow in several heartbeats. Beginning as a golden disc, the sun grew in size and intensity until the entire sky filled with orange fire. I shielded my eyes against the searing heat, but dark spots swam in my vision like tadpoles.

"What's going on? I realize I was late coming home, but this is ridiculous."

"Hyperion is descending! Get in the cave. Now!"



CHAPTER FOUR

Amalthea yelled something else just as we ran through the cave's entrance, but I couldn't tell what. My breath caught in my throat. I headed back into the brightness and scorching heat. My face stung like being inches away from bonfire flames.

Tos' fingertips dug into my arms to pull me back. "Don't—"

"I'm not leaving my mother out there!" I jerked my arm from his grasp, and then grabbed my battle helmet from inside the cave, the one I owned but never used. I rushed into the clearing, gripping my spear and shield as well. Tos' footsteps—as I knew they would—followed closely behind me.

I searched the horizon for my mother, finally finding her scampering down the hill around trees that shriveled under the intense heat. Goats scattered in front of her, some falling motionless to the ground. I wondered why the temperature didn't affect me the same way. The Kouretes had already taken up battle stances in the wilting high grasses, shields folded across their chests, spears ready to throw. My mother tossed her walking stick aside and scurried back behind them.

“Get back in the cave!” she said. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of me, with Tos not too far behind. Her wrinkled and severe face resembled a fig left in the sun too long. She gazed over my shoulder. “Anytos, I thought I told yo—”

The ground quaked beneath our feet as a roaring explosion throbbed through my ears. A mountain of a man emerged from the gargantuan fireball. His soot black chariot pulled by four enormous stallions the color of sunset descended slowly to the ground. His onyx hued helmet, breastplate, greaves, and battle skirt swallowed light, not reflecting it.

Hyperion.

I stood slack-jawed, never having witnessed Elder Deity magic before. In fact, I wasn't sure it even existed until that moment. Teachers never exhibited it. Okeanos either. I thought it simply whispers that hissed around campfires. Stories told to maintain order.

My chest heaved like I was hyperventilating. Fighting for every breath, I gripped my shield and spear tighter. Perspiration trickled down my forehead and into my eyes.

Hyperion bellowed, “Where's the boy you're harboring?” Flames leapt off his muscular, dark brown arms and legs. The air around him refracted and shimmered like a mirage.

“What boy?” my mother answered, shielding her eyes.

“The Oracles foretold of a boy who is not of Potamoi blood on this island who shall meet an untimely death, unless he surrenders himself to me.” Hyperion stared at Amalthea and straightened his breastplate. “Where is he right now? Patience is not my strongest quality.”

Before I could form words, Tos pushed his way around the Kouretes. “I'm the only boy here who meets that description,” he said. “What business have you with me?”

“Surrender or be taken,” Hyperion roared.

“I've wronged no Elder Deities.” He drove his spear into the ground. “I am not the boy you're looking for.”

“The Oracles do not lie.” Hyperion nodded his head forward. “Take him.” Two young men with shoulder length blond hair jumped off the back of the chariot. Muscles rippled beneath their shiny, black armor.

My mother inhaled sharply through her teeth. Her head twitched sideways like she wanted to check over her shoulder at me, but she stopped.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Tos grabbed his spear and stood his ground.

“He must be the one!” Hyperion pointed at Tos. “If he won’t come willingly, then just kill him so I can return this chariot to the sky.”

My eyes bulged beneath my helmet. I gasped, wanting to call to Tos. Had we done something to anger the Elder Deities? All I did was a silly prank. Oh, and kiss Okeanos’ daughter. I edged closer to the Kouretes and blended in with them, ready for anything.

The Kouretes charged past Tos toward the chariot. Hyperion’s horses reared up and breathed fire on them, halting their progress. With shields raised, the tribe could draw no closer than twenty paces to the towering chargers or the young men.

Tos and I retreated to protect Amalthea. The Kouretes launched their javelins. Hyperion swept his hand in the air dismissively. All twelve spears flew off course. I gaped at the display of power.

One of Hyperion’s attendants stepped forward and threw a long, black spear toward us. It sailed over the heads of the Kouretes before they could block it. I barely had enough time to reach my mother. Scrambling to fold my shield in front of her, I knocked the spear off course. The spearhead groaned against the shield, diverted course, and then lodged into Tos’ chest with an immortal thud.

“Anytos! No!” All the air in my lungs expelled.

My best friend flew backward several feet from the force of the impact. A sharp pain sliced through me like I’d also been hit. I ran to him.

He wheezed, “I’m sorry I failed you, Zeus. Protect Amalthea—”

I stood just in time to see the second of Hyperion’s attendants release his spear. I pushed my mother aside but the weapon *veered* toward her. I watched helplessly as the javelin’s tip sank into her shoulder. The force spun her halfway around.

My mother belted out a skin-crawling yell before crumpling to the ground. Anger heated the blood surging through me. I grabbed the obsidian spear shaft that stood erect from Tos’ chest. It reflected no light, oddly. In fact, the shaft absorbed any available light. I yanked with all my strength to dislodge it.

I whipped around to return fire, cocking my arm back like the Kouretes had taught me. I set to deliver the most crippling blow I could. But the spear was forcefully torn away from my grip. Hyperion held out his hand and the spear flew straight to his palm.

Hyperion laughed from deep in his belly. “He clearly *wasn’t* the boy we’re looking for. He died far too easily.” The deity turned his attention back to me and the other Kouretes. “I *will* return to this island to continue my search. Or Kronos will. And you don’t want *him* to come down here.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared through the slits. My arms shook with fury as the young men mounted the chariot. With several whips of the fiery reins, Hyperion returned his chariot to the sky.

I rushed to back Tos’ side. “Come on man. Get up. Wake up. Say something. Anything.” I removed his helmet. He offered no response. Blood gushed from his horrific chest wound. I grabbed him and looked around frantically. “Somebody help me!”

I grasped his hand and pulled him close. A dull ache pulsed in my chest at the same location of his wound. His spirit embraced me as confirmation of what I feared. The Kouretes scrambled to help but it was too late. I pounded my fist on the ground, breathing in short bursts. My teeth hurt from clenching them so tightly.

One of the Kouretes pulled me off Anytos. “Let him go. He was gone as soon as the spear hit him,” he said. “Go tend to Amalthea.”

More Kouretes carried Anytos to the cave. I turned to my mother, who lay on her side, curled into a ball, but still breathing. Her tears dampened the soil, and blood pooled at her wound. But, at least I had hope for her.

“Please, Gaia, Earth Mother of all beings, please make my mother whole again.” I crouched close to the ground. Her back arched when I worked to remove the weapon. I set the spear on the ground, and then the strangest thing happened. The spear became a shaft of dark smoke, which drifted away on the wind, leaving a sulphuric odor behind.

I shook my head. “What the—?”

Aristaeus, leader of the Kouretes, brought me a towel and some water. He stood tall over me like a tree. His sinewy, muscular frame shaded me from the remains of the burning sun.

“Did you just see that?” I asked him. “The spear vanished into the air. What kind of weapon does that?”

“Deity magic is unparalleled.” His lips drew to a tight line. His gaze intensified. “But more importantly, look what *you* have done!”

I stared upward at his expressionless face. His skin was tight and stiff like goat’s leather.

“Why did you return home so late *this time*?” Aristaeus yelled. “You got kicked out of school. You dragged Anytos to who knows where. And now your carelessness got him killed!”

My voice cracked. “It was an accident. I swear. We just wanted to go to this bonfire with my school mates.”

I didn’t need his lecture. Shame wrapped around my shoulders like an iron cloak.

My mother groaned as I rolled her toward me. “Easy ... ” I whispered, pressing the towel against her wound and pouring water over her cracked lips. She opened her eyes slowly and coughed.

“You’re not safe here anymore,” she whispered. Then she fell unconscious.



CHAPTER FIVE

I snapped my head toward the sky. The sun was again where it should've been, like it had never descended. The distance between darkness and light was a split-second, my mother once told me. A sliver of space. The breadth of a strand of hair. However, I hadn't known what she'd meant until today.

I wished I didn't still.

While the Kouretes hauled Anytos into our home and searched for wayward spears, Aristaeus carried my mother inside. She lay motionless along a wall. I swept the wispy curtain of dark brown hair away from her eyes. Her shallow breaths gave me hope that she'd be all right. I clenched my jaw and rubbed my arms to curb the sudden shivers wracking my body.

My mother lay so peacefully. I dripped more water over her lips. A spring of new sadness welled up as I extended my hand toward her. My fingers trembled against her olive-toned skin, pressing her cheek where her dimple would've been.

My voice quaked. "Mother—"

Aristaeus called out to me, his skin drawn tightly over his boney face. “You *will* stay inside! You hear me?”

As if I would go anywhere after what just happened. I rolled my eyes, wanting to yell at them. *Anything* but having to face my responsibility in what had become the darkest day of my life.

I walked to Anytos and knelt beside him. I stared at his closed eyelids, my throat constricting, wishing he was simply asleep and would wake at any moment. “I’m sorry. I should’ve listened to yo—”

Aristaeus approached and I couldn’t hold back my anger. “Why didn’t you protect us?” I snapped, standing upright and bracing myself for retaliation.

“Protect you? You mean drag your ass back from wherever you went despite being on punishment? Is that what you mean?” He scoffed. The Kouretes moved in behind him at the sound of commotion. “*You* got Anytos killed.” He pointed his gnarled finger at me. “Your carelessness. Your disregard for rules. Your disregard for family. Your poor shieldsmanship—”

“My shield,” I yelled, “saved my mother’s life. More than you can say!”

“And killed Anytos.” Aristaeus paused. His eyes sliced through me. “You never think of anyone but yourself. Ever since the Elders dropped you off as an infant, you’ve burdened us, in one way or another.” After several breaths, he spoke evenly. Almost a whisper. “You’re leaving tonight.”

“Come again?” I stepped backward.

“Hyperion *will* return. And I can’t risk anymore lives.” Aristaeus sighed. “You’ve been here far too long as it is. You must find and reconnect with your *real* mother.”

His words stung. Disbelief clogged my throat. “*Wha—*”

“Amalthea is not your birth mother.”

I opened my mouth to speak, to protest, but words failed to form. My stomach wrenched.

“She raised you, yes. But another woman gave birth to you.

Perhaps you'll find her one day."

"Liar!" Brimming at the edge of my eyelid, a tear formed, trembled, and fell. Then another. I fought to contain them, but the day's events left me standing on shaky ground.

He shook his head. "If only I were ..."

Memories flashed through my brain, threaded together like a tapestry, threatening to unravel at any moment. What in my life had been real? Certainly my friendship with Tos had been. A person can't fake that kind of authenticity.

But Amalthea? She may not have always coddled me, but she was always there to encourage and teach me. I never felt unloved. And yet ... this entire portion of my life had been a lie. I walked over to her. Anger laced through me. I wanted to yell and ask her all the questions in the world. Every query began with a "why," with a few "hows" thrown in for good measure. I had no idea who my "mother" was anymore. I had even less of one as to who I was.

I clenched my teeth and turned to Aristaeus. "The Sun Deity descends upon us and two sheep-for-brains with deadly aim assault us. And, now ... *now* you tell me she's not my real mother!"

"It's deeper than either of us can fathom," Aristaeus said. "Rhea warned us this could happen, that Kronos might look for you one day."

"Who are these people and what do they have to do with Hyperion?"

"We sail tonight. You'd better get some rest." Aristaeus walked away, leaving me simmering in a pool of frustration. My glare turned to a scowl. I paced, wearing a path in the soil.

Despite all of the lies, perhaps my allegiance should still lie with Amalthea. After all, she did raise me. Which was more than my *real* mother ever did. Whomever she was ... she was definitely going to get an earful when I found her.

The Kouretes built a small pyre for Anytos outside the cave. They believed the ceremonial cremation of the body would allow Tos'

soul to rest. I couldn't even bring myself to look at it. I could barely breathe through my thick and swollen nostrils. My legs refused to walk in Tos' direction. Instead I walked to the underground spring to clean myself and put on a new tunic.

I hurled my bloodied tunic against the wall of the cave. But the memories of Tos and the time we spent together swept through me anyway, like a river whose dam had broken.

Aristaeus called me outside. My steps were uneven as I begrudgingly approached the pyre with my friend's body on top. I covered my mouth with my hand and closed my eyes.

"Take this," Aristaeus said.

He extended a torch toward me, urging me to grasp it. I couldn't. My hand refused to move.

"Take it!" he demanded. "This was all your fault. You're not killing him. He's already dead. You're simply releasing him. Send him to peace. You owe him that much."

Pressure built at the bridge of my nose. Each tear that gathered felt like salt in an open wound. The torch's light prised into a kaleidoscope of colors through my tears. I climbed onto the pyre, grabbed Tos, and held him close one last time. My heart weighed heavy like the mud bricks we used to build forts with. Guilt, self-doubt, regret, and sorrow kept slamming into my chest. What could I have done differently? That spear had my name on it. All I wanted was to start the whole day over.

My hand trembled when I took the torch. I turned away from the pyre as I let the torch drop from my hand onto the pyre. I returned to the cave and put my head between my knees.

"Here's the plan." Aristaeus approached again. "When night falls, we'll sail until you reach your new home, Mount Olympus. We'll be your personal escorts until you reach the shores beneath the big mountain. Then, hopefully someone from the Academy will greet you. If not, you'll be on your own."

"So, you're sending me to Mount Olympus Prep? But I haven't

finished lower school yet. I just got kicked ou—”

His voice reverbed in a deep solemn manner. “Yes. I know.”

“What about my mothe—, I mean Amalthea?” I asked. I stammered over the words as they clogged my throat. I pulled at the neck of my tunic and rubbed my sweaty palms on my legs. “I am not leaving her.”

“She’ll be all right. Time is all she needs. After all, they weren’t after her.”

“But—”

Suddenly, Amalthea whispered through the air, “Zeus.”

I rushed to her side. “You’re awake.” I embraced her, careful not to press the wound. Warmth filled my chest. Every question I had rushed my brain, competing to be voiced.

“Zeus ... y-you must get to Olympus,” she whispered.

“I can’t leave you. Not in this condition,” I said.

“You endanger us all now,” she whispered. “You have to—”

Aristaeus knelt beside her. “We’re steps ahead of you, Amalthea. Hyperion must retire his chariot at day’s end. We leave tonight.” He turned to me. “Once you get to Olympus, you’ll find the answers to all your questions. Hopefully.”

END OF SAMPLE