

Hera
Book One Of The Goddess Chronicles
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Dedication

For my beloved grandmother, Roz, who has blessed my life with her presence.
“She is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars; being compared with
light, she is found before it...”
The Book Of Wisdom, ca. 100 B.C.



O royal Hera of majestic mien
aerial-formed, divine, Zeus's blessed queen.

Thy throne in the bosom of cerulean air
the race of mortals is thy constant care.

Mother of the elements, from thee alone
birthing all things our mortal life is known.

Come blessed Goddess, famed almighty queen
with aspect kind, rejoicing and serene.

Orphic Hymn 16
Adapted from translation by Thomas Taylor

Hera Speaks

I have not always been immortal.

There was a time, before your own histories were born, that I was flesh and blood, able to grow old and even die.

There was a time when you knew me by name. In Greece, I came to you with my consorts and companions and you made me into a Goddess. In antiquity, I rose to fame, bringing you the ancient teachings and their wisdom.

But you did not love me for that.

It was Zeus you honored, the patriarch, who turned your world from its mystical design and pressed you to betray the night, the moon and the feminine divine. You lost sight of your true nature.

Ah, but who am I to say such things? I, who ran away from it all, hidden here, in my Minoan cave, for millennia, only watching your civilizations rise and fall as if in a dream. It is I, Hera, queen of the Greek Gods, who has betrayed my conscience and its call.

I am ready now to tell you my story. This is no fiction, so do not read these words with a careless heart, expecting entertainment alone. For in the telling, I will unearth myself, and the truth you have come to know as only a myth. My words will change you. There is no place to hide now, no island, or cave to disappear into.

The time has come.

PART ONE Waking The Dragon

Chapter One

In the spring of my seventeenth year, I went out to hunt the boar.

This was in the wet jungle of my childhood home, on the Eastern shore of Atlantis, and these were the last decades before the island was over-taken by the sea.

I awoke at dawn, and slipped quietly from my mat by the hearth, pulled my pack over my shoulder, and crept across the koa wood floors hoping I wouldn't wake my parents. As I pushed the *tapa* cloth away from the front door, a cool, colorless mist kissed my skin. I smiled and stepped barefoot onto the ground. The earth was cold and I moved quickly across it, over the small bridge that crossed the stream, to the path that would lead me down to the village, to my friend, Artemis, and the hunting party she'd gathered to initiate me. As I reached the head of the trail I heard Father's voice calling me. I stopped and looked back. He was already moving toward me through the grass.

A light flashed from within the house behind him and I knew Mother was stoking the morning fire inside. Our dwelling was long and thin, its roofline flared out like wings in the tradition of Father's people from across the sea. Even with the soft orange glow of the flame within, it seemed to me a lonely sight, and solitary, set back so far among the hills above the village. I was eager to be away from its tranquility. My legs quivered with the desire to step onto the familiar path and run to the hunt, but I held myself fast as Father approached. His pace was slow and mindful as if his steps were a prayer. He held something in his hand.

"Father," I said, bowing my head in respect as he crossed the bridge. "I'll be late—"

“I won’t keep you long, Hera,” he said and held out a thinly sheathed blade to me. “I want you to take this. Your mother has had a dream.”

I looked up sharply. Mother’s dreams were to be taken seriously.

“What sort of dream?” I asked. Father shook his head.

“Your destiny is written in your bones, my daughter,” he began, his voice so soft that I moved toward him to hear. “And it won’t be altered by a dream.”

He smiled at me and unsheathed the blade. “It’s very old. Passing on of such a blade is a tradition within our families. My mother gave me one like it when I took the ship that brought me to the shores of Atlantis. Your mother was given this one when she left her people and came away with me.” He paused and looked me in the eye. “She tells me you used it in the dream.”

I held the knife in my palm and moved my hand over it. Warmth passed through me. I looked up into Father’s black eyes and grinned.

“I never thought you’d give me a weapon—”

“Not a weapon,” he cut me off. “A blade for defense.”

I nodded and slid it into my pack. The sky was now dim with light. “I’ll be safe,” I said.

He lifted his brows slightly as if in assent. I knew how hard it was for him to let me go. He and Mother didn’t approve of hunting. They couldn’t understand why I did such a thing. Yet, they didn’t try to stop me.

We stood quietly for another moment until I leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you,” I whispered in his ear.

My words softened his reserve and when I stood back I was pleased to see a small smile pull on his lips. As quickly as it appeared his face became a cool mask again. He nodded sharply toward the trailhead and then turned to walk back to the house.

I slung my pack over my shoulder and headed down. Wet ferns brushed my ankles as I moved quickly around the familiar bends, over mossy rocks, and through the thick fragrances of waking flowers. I smelled the smoke of early morning fires as I reached the bottom of the hill.

The village sat in a long, thick crescent beneath the banyans that lined the beach. I made my way to the trail behind the huts, and the larger family compounds made of stone and mud, through banana leaves and sweet ginger, until I reached the fresh water pool where Artemis waited.

A small fire glowed inside a rough hewn stone and an open gourd sat on the ground beside it. The sky was filled with muted light and I could just make out her tall, familiar form. A spear was thrust into the ground beside her. I smiled and moved quickly toward her, but she put up her hand and stopped me as I reached the fire.

“Slowly, Hera,” she said, her voice soft. “Your initiation begins here, before the hunt. We have a ritual.”

I cringed as she said the word, taking a deep breath to still myself. A reserved demeanor was not natural to me, and I had always avoided rites and rituals whenever I could; such things bored me.

“But Artemis,” I said as she moved toward me, slowly, as if walking through a dream. “We’ll keep the hunters waiting!”

“The hunters won’t allow you to join them if your instinctive abilities haven’t been awakened through our rites, Hera,” she replied, stepping into the light of the fire before me.

I stared at her for a moment, surprised to see her bare arms colored with designs, in a style I’d seen on the healers and priestesses from neighboring villages. The clear imprint of a bow and arrow, Artemis’s symbol, was painted in coal upon her brow. Her eyes were rimmed with black as well, and her long, dark hair fell loose to her waist.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and dropped my pack at my feet as I realized the seriousness of her intent.

“Every profession has its rites,” she continued. “Your initiation as a huntress begins here, Hera, with me.”

I stood very still. Artemis’s tone was severe. While I had become used to her reserve long ago she’d never taken such a stance with me before. Even when she had taken me deep into the green, learning to track beasts and catch fowl, I had only encountered her gentle direction and constant love. I calmed myself, remembering that then I had been a girl; today I would become a woman.

Artemis moved her hand toward the fire and let loose some powder that made the flame crackle and leap, sending its warmth over my skin. She took another step toward me, very close. Reaching for my tunic, she loosened the pin at my shoulder and the cloth fell away from my collarbone. My hair was tied back in a long, thick braid, leaving my face exposed. I didn’t move. I held my breath as she dipped her hands into the large pot at her side and removed them covered with dark, thick clay—the red earth the hunters painted their bodies with before a ritual hunt.

“I am Artemis,” she began, her voice low but strong. She held her hands open before me. “I am daughter of Leto from the clan of Coeus the hunter, and I initiate you, Hera, into the art of the hunt.”

Her hands were cold on my skin, and the mud was damp as she pressed it first against my chest then streaked my cheeks with her thumbs. My heart raced. I’d never imagined a ritual like this.

She signaled me to kneel down beside her and ran her palms across the ground as if it were her own skin. Then, like a snake striking, she snapped toward me, thrusting her hands behind my neck, drawing me to her, hard and sharp. I shivered.

She whispered harshly, “You *belong* to the earth.”

The intensity of her voice moved through me. The strength of her hands seemed to pulse into my bones. For a moment I felt disoriented. Suddenly, Artemis was no longer my friend, my mentor or my idol, but a transformed figure with a brutal instinct. This was unfamiliar. She was older than I was, and there had always been a side of her that I couldn’t understand. She often disappeared into the jungle for days at a time to hunt and pray and be alone. I had tried to know this other side of her, but she hadn’t let me come that close. I was jealous when she was old enough to take a mate, knowing she would choose women, for she’d always made that clear. I feared she would let one of them into her mystery instead of me. Now, I understood that would never happen, for here, in the instinctual nature of her being, was the secret of her female power and she was sharing it with me. I smiled.

Artemis chanted long and slow. The tone drew all my senses toward it. I caught my breath and pulled back slightly when she finally looked into my eyes. The blackness of

her pupils responded to my movement. Her hands tightened on my shoulders. I sat perfectly still, watching, as her dark skin changed to the reddish color of the earth beneath us. Her carved features were transforming; for a moment she became the jungle cat, her large eyes slanting, filled with bodily desire. I could almost smell blood.

“I speak to the invisible force that gives you breath.”

The fire leapt.

“I call to your eternal nature,” she continued, as my body swayed slightly to some distant beat. “I call to your innate gifts. Awaken!”

I caught the scent of ancient clay on her skin and felt a deep, instinctual urge to lie down and roll upon the ground, to cover my body with another layer of skin. I shivered and my head felt light. I sensed Artemis’s power and determination to awaken something inside me, but I felt a conflict within myself. The far away sound that seemed to be moving my body grew louder; I wanted to lift my hands to my ears. Artemis didn’t notice it at all. She continued to chant, holding me fast.

Suddenly, I became aware of the strong pull from a force beside me, a steady, warm rush as if the flame in the fire pit was moving in my direction past the stone that encircled it. I turned and looked into the fire.

A riotous flash of light.

Burning in my bones.

A deep, unfamiliar force rose up through my torso as if it was claiming me.

These things overtook me.

For a moment I enjoyed the rush of power. As Artemis continued her ritual before me, I felt the distinct awakening of my senses. I’d heard other hunters speak of such things in their rites of passage, but they always described it as a sense of awe and humility in the face of a great, feminine force. What I felt was both feminine and masculine; a balanced, persuasive surging that did not come from outside myself. This power came from deep within.

My body trembled slightly, and I shut my eyes. Artemis’s voice filled the space around me.

“The huntress awakens!” she cried. “That which has been forgotten is remembered!”

My body shuddered hard. The heat expanded from the center of an unseen flame that sparked in my belly. It bellowed up and out, filling my limbs with a luxurious sense of authority.

“Artemis,” my voice was hushed, as if grasping for sound. I felt the new thrill of this imaginative vigor that filled me. “Artemis, the heat—” but I didn’t finish for the sensation rushed down my arms and filled my palms with such intensity I gasped.

Artemis paused in her recitation. She released her firm grip and slid her hands gently to my wrists, which I realized were shaking.

“We’re awakening the hunter’s intuition,” she said in a soothing voice. Despite her words, I knew the heat was something else, something much deeper that had been hidden inside me.

Warmth rose up my bones, something red and rough that wanted no part in banal things. I felt it call to something sacred in me, and an eternal voice seemed to answer it: *Hera, you are my daughter!* I heard the voice as clearly as if it was my own and my body trembled. *You have my gift. Hold the light!*

I clenched my fists.

“Hera, what is it?” Artemis’s voice was sharp.

I shook my head as the heat faded and the voice with it. My throat was hot and dry. I licked my lips instinctively. I struggled to get my body under control, to open my eyes at her direction. I forced a smile, trying to shake the unnerving sensations that lingered. I could see by the look on Artemis’s face that something had gone wrong and this was not the reaction she’d expected from me in the huntress’ initiation. I sat up straighter and commanded my body to stop its shaking, wary of the possibility that she would not take me with her on the hunt. I didn’t care whether I understood what had happened to me. All that mattered now was the overwhelming power that filled my limbs. I was not going to be left behind.

The sun had broken the horizon. Artemis stared into my eyes for a long time as if searching for some missing piece. I held her gaze until she seemed satisfied. She stood, reached out her hand, and pulled me to my feet, drawing me into an embrace. I could still feel the sweat from the inner heat, slick on my skin, even beneath the clay.

“Hera, are you alright?” Artemis finally asked as she drew me away and held me at arms length. “You’re very warm. I’ve never seen anyone awaken to the ritual so strongly.”

I nodded with assurance and again forced a smile. I looked toward the path that would take us to the mountain and the hunting party beyond, and felt the urge to set my feet upon it.

“The ritual has served its purpose. Something has been born in me,” I said with confidence, to appease her. I reached quickly for my pack and stepped out of her reach. “I’m ready, Artemis. Take me to the boar.”

**

Artemis and I walked in silence. The jungle was slow to wake. Her Macaws lulled in their nests and monkeys stayed silent in the trees, watching us as we passed. We pushed our way through ancient groves of wild mango, past anteaters and the prints of jungle cats until the mountain slope gave way to a long plateau of turquoise. Much higher up I could see it merge with the jagged mustard lip of the volcano.

The plateau was drier, and red-soiled with a fern-carpeted quiet, which led to the open woodlands and dried up streams. Here the wild pigs wallowed during the day, rooting amongst the leaf litter and damp soil for food. As we came over the first ridge we caught sight of the rest of the hunting party, their packs strewn along the base of a gentle hill. Most of the hunters were face down near the top, their spears at the ready. Coeus, Artemis’s grandfather, and Apollo, her twin brother, waited for us at the bottom.

When we reached them, Coeus smiled broadly and nodded in my direction. I grinned back to signal my readiness. I could still feel remnants of the ritual heat in my limbs and was eager to make my first real kill.

Coeus signaled us silently and pointed to the hill. Artemis nodded and pulled the top of her bow down hard with her right hand, her foot bracing the bottom as she laced the bowstring in one graceful movement. Apollo approached us then and handed me my spear. I took it from him and hoisted it to my shoulder. The weight in my palm felt good and the heat surged through me again. I struggled with a strange and powerful desire to thrust the spear.

I set down my pack and pulled out the blade my father had given me earlier and tied it to my ankle with pride. Apollo knelt down beside me, running his fingers over the carved handle.

“Dragons entwined,” he sounded surprised.

“My father gave it to me this morning; I want to wear it in his honor.”

Artemis stared down at us but was silent. Apollo was mesmerized by the design.

“I’ve seen this symbol before, Hera,” he said, “when I was studying at the great temple of the healers. Dragons are the symbol of healing, immortality and the priestesses of—”

“Apollo,” Artemis said sternly, putting her hand on his shoulder. “It’s time.”

We stood up and climbed the hill. I stayed close at Artemis’s side, eager and excited. We dropped to our knees and then our bellies as we neared the top of the ridge to take cover. We lay behind sparse brush, low to the ground. Down the slight incline I saw a large group of sows with their piglets just born in the early spring. We wouldn’t hunt mothers or the young. We sought the male yearlings, scattered on the outskirts of the party, their short, bristly coats and undefined tusks making them easier marks. The older boars—the wild fathers—would join the pack in the fall to mate and fight. Their skin would be thick and more difficult to pierce, their snouts short and tusks long. They lived on their own, growing as long as a man, weighing more than three. Only the most experienced hunters would track these beasts.

Artemis slid up to my right side and pointed across the field. There, a small group of young males, recognizable by their dark, black coats, mingled in the grass. I gripped my spear. Apollo slid up to my left side.

“Stay close to me,” he whispered. I turned, surprised. I was about to protest, but Artemis touched my hand lightly.

“I can’t stay with you,” she said. “I will be here on the hill, calling the boar close. Follow him, Hera.”

She didn’t wait for me to respond. Silently, she slid over the peak of the ridge on her belly, and came to rest in the thick shrub. She signaled to Coeus and then began a low, steady chant, soft and eerie, that floated up over our heads and mingled with the light mist. The sound moved down onto the plateau as if being pushed by an invisible draft. Abruptly, the animals looked up, until the sows grunted gently, and the piglets moved in close to their mothers’ bodies. The male yearlings didn’t run but lifted their heads and pricked their ears while standing rigid and alert.

I watched Artemis rise from the brush, her hands outstretched to them. She swayed gently. Still, her song was delicate and low. I was stirred by her beauty, the gentle curve of her hips as they moved, her strong legs reaching up as if they were part of the earth itself.

I felt Apollo move next to me and in a moment I was crouched at his side, my spear poised on my shoulder. As Artemis continued chanting, the herd of males moved, slowly at first, as if in a trance, and then with speed as they trotted toward us on the slope. The sows stirred as they passed, making for the trees. The piglets followed, scampering through the brush, raising a small cloud of red dust that rose above us in the breeze. For a moment, Artemis and the field below were obscured. Then the haze lifted and the boars charged toward us. Coeus’s voice rang out and the hunters ran in a long, sweeping line down the hill. I felt Apollo’s hand on my back, pushing me forward and then my legs

moved with a desire all their own. I lifted my spear and cried out as the others did, a long, shrill sound that joined with their voices, pulling the pigs up short. Suddenly, as if waking from a dream, they pricked their ears and grunted, most turning toward the trees to flee.

Apollo, who ran close at my side, lifted his hand and pointed to a small creature that lay straight ahead.

“Take aim and throw!” he cried, his spear held low in a defensive posture, protecting me.

A surge of defiance ran through me. I felt the strange, hot desire of the ritual fire burning in my belly as I waved my hand and shook him off, veering suddenly away to the right. I had spotted a much bigger and older beast, which had just dodged one of Coeus’s spears and was headed for the tall brush. Because I hadn’t stopped to make my kill, I was almost between the boar and the tree line. Pushing myself even harder, I ran ten paces and launched my spear. I was too young to be afraid.

Chapter Two

My spear flew straight and square through the air. For a moment, my body slowed. My breath froze in my chest as an unfamiliar quiet filled my ears. Then, a strange magic enfolded me.

I heard the tip of my spear pierce the animal’s pelt.

A shocking pain streamed through my skin. The boar screamed, slicing the silence, and I fell to my knees, clutching at my chest. I tasted blood in my mouth, and I gasped for breath as the beast spun around, flailing its head in my direction.

Only then did I realize the true size of the creature. This was no yearling. It was a full grown boar.

He sighted me.

I could feel the intensity of his gaze, the raw recognition of his death penetrating my body. I shook. My spear wagged between its shoulders but when he moved toward me it fell to the ground.

It came to me suddenly that this is what it meant to be mortal, to be vulnerable and beyond strength. I faced my death and I knew it.

As the creature bore down on me, head bent, his sharp, white tusks directed at my chest, I felt my body go still and numb.

And then the pain was gone.

In the moment the beast would have me, I heard a sharp whistle behind my ear and then another and another and all of a sudden the boar reared up before me and was pushed back by a fury of Artemis’s arrows. He spun around and grunted, the arrows breaking on the ground, and then he thundered past me in her direction. I turned in time to see Artemis throw down her bow and pull an arrow from the pouch on her pack. As the boar reached her, even as it tore into the flesh of her leg and pulled her to the ground, Artemis thrust the arrow into its skin. I wanted to cry out, but then I heard Father’s voice, clear and calm as if he were standing beside me, “You used the blade in the dream.”

In a moment I was on my feet moving toward Artemis, my hand gripped tight around the dragon hilt. On the ground, trapped beneath the boar she made a horrible, red scream. I leapt into the air and came down hard on the boar’s back, driving my blade in deep. I

rolled off the animal as it turned sharply with a long, final shriek and then fell to the ground at my feet, dead.

The moment held me in a web of terror, and a thick fog seemed to linger between my body and the action it should take next. I stood very still, breathing hard, my hands covered in blood. A chill swept over me as I stared at the boar and Artemis's limp form beside it.

In a moment Apollo was at her side. Then Coeus approached, throwing down his spears and kneeling to lift her. Apollo held up his hand to stop him. She was broken and losing too much blood.

A hunter came with Apollo's bag and a water skin. He pulled out strips of cloth and tied them around the top of her leg, just above the gash and then tried to press her torn flesh together. She shrieked. A wave of nausea rose in my stomach and I fought to push it down. There was a deep, sharp sound and I realized that Coeus was blowing the conch, signaling the other hunters to gather. Still, I stood, unable to move.

As the others approached, Coeus shouted directions.

"Andros, take the men to the tree line and get us some poles. We'll have to carry her out. Dameon, we'll need more water to clean the leg!"

Apollo pulled dried herbs from his bag and began to chew them. Then he bound the poultice into a cloth and tried to tie it around the wound. He turned to me.

"Hera," he said as if to direct me, but his voice seemed far away. "Hera, come help me."

I nodded, but still didn't move.

"Hera!" Apollo shouted, and then again, "Hera!"

Coeus was on his knees holding his granddaughter's hand. She lay there quiet now, as if dead.

I stood there numbly staring until Coeus got to his feet and took sharp hold of my arm.

"Wake up, girl!" he cried.

My body trembled with the force of his voice.

"It's my fault," I gasped, my voice breaking into tears.

"The boar was too big!" Coeus continued harshly.

"Yes," I said. "I should've run back toward Apollo and led the boar away. Apollo had a spear. He would've made the kill!"

I wrung my hands with the horrible certainty of my mistake. The sickening realization that I couldn't undo this thing took hold of my body and I shook. "I should've run, but I couldn't move," I said in a small voice.

Apollo pressed his hands to the wound, but they were covered in Artemis's blood.

"I can't stop the bleeding," he said desperately.

"But you have the gift of light and healing in your hands, Apollo!" Coeus cried again.

Apollo's voice choked. "I can't mend this wound."

I shook my head and wept. The heat that had spurred me on earlier was now a growing numbness.

"I couldn't move," I repeated to Artemis's limp form. My chest ached. I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I was shaking too hard. "I felt a sharp pain when my spear landed and then I couldn't move!"

Apollo looked up at me as I said this.

“What?” he said, “What did you say, Hera?”

“There was so much pain,” I went on frantically, “and I couldn’t move even when he charged me.”

“Hera,” Apollo said, but I was weeping and lost in the horror and my grief. “Hera!” I heard his voice, but I couldn’t respond.

Apollo turned to Coeus and said something in a low tone. The older man let out a breath. He turned to me and took hold of my shoulders, shaking me hard.

“Hera, child!” he said.

I only wept more. I heard my name again, but this time softer, and then in a short, abrupt movement he pulled me to his chest and wrapped me in his arms.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said, his voice filled with emotion. “Listen to me, Hera. Apollo needs your help now. Our Artemis may still live through this day.”

I heard his words and felt the strength in his body. He moved me gently toward Apollo who was covering Artemis with a long robe. Her face was pale, and she lay very still.

“We have to keep her warm,” Apollo said. “She’s still breathing and there are no other broken places. It’s the bleeding we have to control.”

I stopped crying and knelt at his side. He looked at me directly.

“Hera, I’ve heard your story before,” Apollo said hurriedly. “In the Temple of Healers, there was a group whose ability with the light was very strong, but this also made them sensitive. They could be overwhelmed and taken by disease, or the death they attended. They had to be trained to keep themselves whole in the face of another’s pain. But, Hera, their ability to heal is very powerful.”

He removed his hands from his sister’s wound and swiftly took my palms in his own. The heat in my belly leapt to life as when Artemis had sung her chant. I felt it surge through my arms as if racing toward the oil that would turn it to flame. Suddenly, my palms filled with warmth and Apollo let go.

“Yes,” he murmured. He pulled my hands toward his sister’s leg and I tried not to recoil from the blood as I let him press my palms to the wound. “Try to mend the flesh, Hera,” he begged. “Imagine the bleeding slowing to a stop.”

I tried to keep my palms on Artemis’s wound, but when I felt the fresh, warm blood I pulled them away despite myself.

I felt Coeus lean down beside me, his firm hands on my shoulders. The hunters had gathered around.

“Love,” Apollo said, his voice choked as Artemis’s blood ran fresh from the wound. “Just focus on your love for her, Hera. That is the only thing that ever really heals anyone.”

He looked down at his sister for a long moment. Tears filled his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. As I followed his gaze to Artemis’s familiar face tears rose in my eyes as well. I looked back to her leg and laid my hands on the wound. *I love you*, I thought. I shut my eyes and pictured her face, smiling at me. *I love you so*.

The heat in my hands seemed to soften and the blood slowed. I heard Apollo’s voice urging me on. I felt my heart beating hard and used the fervor to pull Artemis closer to me. *I love you*, I thought again and again, until my mind stilled. *I’ve always loved you*.

The sensation of warm water moved through my limbs and my hands felt like chalices of fluent love. In another moment my heart loosened itself in my breast and sang love songs through my veins. The deep, penetrating sound resonated through my palms and I rushed along with it. Into her flesh I went, drawn deep down into a stillness and peace that lived in her bones.

Around us I could hear the muted sounds of activity as Coeus directed the others to build a stretcher and gather their things. I felt the movement of her body as they lifted her gently onto the bed and wrapped us both in warm robes.

At some point Artemis twitched, letting out a delirious sound, but Apollo was quick to soothe her, his voice low and firm in her ear. Her body trembled, and I felt an invisible force push me away from the silence within her. It felt as if her body had detected that the boundary had been broached and that I lingered too intimately. A cold, damp chill moved over me and even as I realized it to be the hands of death welling up to push me away, I steeled myself against it.

Artemis's body shook harder despite Apollo's healing hands on her as well. Then, an unexpected instinct rose up inside of me and I pulled my heart's healing song back inside myself, bringing Artemis's heart with me. I imagined my arms around her, my voice soothing, and in a moment, she quieted and lay still.

"Good, Hera," Apollo said as he placed his hands gently over mine, lending me his strength.

For a moment I felt him pull me in as I had pulled in Artemis and the three of us were bathed in a warm peace.

Then, Coeus was washing away the blood, cleaning our hands and Artemis's wound. Fresh linen was laid over it but a thin red line had already appeared.

"Hera we'll have to keep our hands on her leg as we go," Apollo said. He glanced up at his grandfather, his brow furrowed. "It's a long way, and you'd better send ahead for a surgeon."

I nodded and placed my hands back in their position, but my legs felt weak. I reached out to Artemis again, with my whole heart, hoping my love could sustain us both.

We moved as quickly as we could, but the trail was narrow. Hunters pulled out their sickles and cut away parts of the path in front of me so I could walk beside the litter, but there were places that were just too narrow. When I let go the blood burst immediately from the wound and Artemis woke, screaming. I would return my touch as quickly as possible, but each time we broke it, I became weaker and fainter. Apollo chewed bitter herbs and then pressed them to my lips to keep me moving. Others wiped my forehead and neck with cool water as we descended through the canopy of trees into the humid groves of mango, and I pressed on. I grew tired and weak, my eyelids heavy. An unquenchable thirst stripped my throat. Apollo made me chant. He called out the simplest words and I repeated them to stay focused and awake. Still, several times I stumbled and fell, my knees and elbows bruised and cut. The wound on Artemis's leg sprang fresh with blood.

In the end, Coeus half carried me to the mouth of the trail and through the village. I was dimly aware of the crowd gathered around us, the surgeon's approach and then the sharp wail from Leto as we brought her daughter through the gates of their compound.

"Bring her here!" Leto commanded. She led us into the stone hall and closed the wooden doors behind us.

A bed was prepared on the long table and the room already smelled of boiling herbs and incense. Someone brought a chair for me. I almost collapsed in it. Apollo moved my hands away from Artemis's body and rubbed them. Another person pressed hot broth to my lips. The room was quiet except for the sound of Leto crying softly in Coeus's arms. Apollo spoke with the surgeon in a hushed voice.

I shut my eyes and rested as they moved me aside and examined Artemis's condition.

"I'm sorry," the surgeon said after a few minutes had passed.

I opened my eyes to see him shaking his head.

"It's too deep and there's too much damage inside. She's lost too much blood. I can't even take the leg—"

"No," cried Leto moving to her daughter's side. "What can't be sewn with thread can be bound with the light!"

She turned to Apollo, but he shook his head.

"No," Leto whispered, "She is not meant to die like this."

Leto turned to me then. She pointed her finger and swooped around the table.

"Hera has already been able to stop the bleeding a great deal!" she said as if the answer was obvious.

She took hold of my wrist and pulled me back to Artemis, pushing the surgeon aside. She was a big woman, and strong, and the man stumbled to the floor. I dutifully put my hands back in their place. Apollo moved to her side and reached out to her gently.

"No, Mother," he said weakly. "Hera doesn't know enough to do something like this. She can't knit together the broken parts, just as the surgeon can't sew them. Hera can only stop the bleeding as long as she touches the leg."

Leto shook her head firmly.

"Don't let go," she said to me. "Don't let go of my girl."

She took her daughter's hand and pressed it to her cheek, letting out a soft moan.

"Don't let go," she said again. "Don't let go."

Coeus moved to her side. I heard his voice through a growing haze of heat in my head.

"We must not fear death, Leto," he said in a choked voice. "This is only a body. Artemis is immortal, like the true self of the animals we hunt. Now, we must let her body go."

"No," Leto said firmly. "There's another way."

"Mother, Hera can't keep this up," Apollo said. "No one can—"

"You're wrong. There's one person!" Leto's voice was fierce.

Despite my fatigue my eyes flew open. Leto had pulled herself up. There was a command barely contained behind the flash of her eyes.

She turned to Coeus. "Send a boy to fetch Hera's mother!"

Chapter Three

I stared at Leto in disbelief.

I'd grown up on the hill above the village where my parents lived an isolated life. Mother was a private woman. She didn't mingle in the market, or buy fine things when the merchants passed through at festival time. Though she'd taught me the craft of herbs, I'd never seen her treat anyone other than Father and myself. I knew she had the gift of

sight but this wasn't something I'd ever told anyone—not even Artemis. Why Leto would call for Mother, I couldn't imagine.

A strong wave of anxiety overcame me. As it did, Artemis writhed on the table. Apollo looked up at me and shook his head sternly.

“You must stay calm, Hera,” he said. Then more gently, “Just a little while longer.”

My arms were heavy, and my head hurt. A sharp, jagged throbbing had seized my temples. I closed my eyes against it and became lightheaded. I felt my hands hot on Artemis's flesh, but the rest of my body seemed to be very far away.

Then Leto's big hands were on my forehead and a cool, wet cloth placed on my skin. She made me drink warm tea and pulled her shawl from around her shoulders and draped it over mine.

“You're doing well,” she said in a familiar, soothing tone. “Stay with us, Hera.”

Although my hands burned, a chill swept over my skin and my teeth chattered. I felt faint. People gathered outside the door. A drumbeat had begun, and a chorus of song rose dimly about us. They chanted the sounds the healers used to pull flesh back together, but their voices were low and full of dread.

Then, I felt Mother's approach. I sensed her strength before she entered the room like a wave, easing the pounding in my head and the fear that had gripped me.

The drumbeat quickened as the door swung wide, and she stepped through, her tall, thin frame shrouded in her black cloak. Father was at her side. She didn't look at Leto or Coeus, but fastened her eyes on mine as if she could hold me up with her gaze. I took in a sharp breath and felt the tears burning again on my cheeks. In a moment, she was across the room and I felt her hands, cool on my face. She pulled my head against her body and stroked my hair gently. Something calm and soft seemed to move from her hands across my skin.

There was movement in the room and I heard Leto's sharp cry as Father slid his arm around my waist and pulled me to my feet. My hands fell limp at my sides.

“No, no please!” Leto's voice was soft this time, pleading. “Hera stops the blood!”

Mother seemed not to hear her. She pulled deftly at the cord about her neck that was attached to a small vial of oil. Struggling to keep my eyes open, I watched as she opened the vial, pouring a few drops into her open hand. The aroma was pungent at first so that I blinked and shook my head. A tingling sensation rippled down my limbs. Leto stepped back quickly, wiping at her eyes. In a moment the scent changed and a warm, intoxicating fragrance filled the room. Coeus placed his hands on Leto's shoulders to hold her steady as Mother poured the oil into her hand and anointed my forehead with it.

My eyelids fluttered and I saw a flash of light followed by lovely warmth. For a moment I was weightless, without form and filled with peace. My breath came easier and I opened my eyes.

“Mother,” I whispered. “I don't understand.”

She shook her head. “You have opened too much, too fast,” she answered. “It's dangerous for you, Hera. The oil will help your body regain its balance.”

“What about Artemis,” I began, “Somehow I'm helping her...” I couldn't finish as the fatigue overcame me again. I leaned heavily on father's shoulder.

Mother stared down at my friend's limp form. She reached out and took Artemis's wrist in her palm and shut her eyes. No one moved.

“There’s nothing else you can do, Hera,” Mother said quietly, laying Artemis’s hand back down on the table. She looked around the room and her eyes fell on Leto. “You have to let her go.”

Suddenly, Artemis moaned and I shuddered. Leto moved back to her daughter’s side and took her hand. Artemis’s eyes opened and closed, and she groaned in confusion.

“No,” I said. “I was helping her, I could feel it, mother!” I tried to move toward Artemis, to raise my hands to her leg and take up my vigil, but Father held me fast.

“You’ve already done too much,” his voice was firm. “She could take you with her when she goes.”

Artemis cried out, low and bewildered as if reaching out when lost in the dark. My chest tightened.

“Then let her take me,” I said pulling away from Father’s grasp with my last bit of strength, laying my hands back upon her leg.

Apollo, who had stood silent in the shadows, stepped to my side, laying his hands over mine. A long, quiet moment passed. The steady chanting outside was the only sound.

Then, I felt Mother come stand beside me. She placed her hands gently on my shoulders and spoke to Father.

“There is only one way,” she said.

Father’s look was hard, but he nodded.

“Clear the room,” he said to Coeus. “Everyone but the healers must go.”

Coeus threw open the door and ordered everyone out. Leto looked up at Mother imploringly.

“Please let me stay. I’ll tell no one what passes here, I swear it!”

Mother nodded. “But you must not let your grief interfere, Leto,” she said.

When the room was empty of all the others, Mother poured the oil thickly into her hands and rubbed them together. Pulling away Artemis’s tunic she pressed the oil onto her chest. Thick pieces of the ritual red clay shimmered on her breast as if coming alive, and the effect rippled across Artemis’s skin and down her body. I watched, mesmerized, as Mother held her hands above Artemis’s form, palms face down, moving slowly from her head to her feet. When she came to the torn leg, she didn’t slow or stop, but the blood that had been seeping from the wound clotted.

Artemis lay in a deep, unconscious sleep. I looked down at her serene face, her cheeks filling again with color, and I let her go.

I shut my eyes then, letting my body finally collapse. There was a small commotion around me and my body was lifted. I was dimly aware of being carried, of the air outside being cool and moist. At some point, I looked up at the sky and saw the stars spreading before me like a blanket of light.

They took me home and laid me in my bed. Someone covered me. Another pressed something bitter to my lips and I drank it, letting its potent flavor lift me from my pain and exhaustion into a dream-like state.

Father whispered in my ear, “Let the herb take you, Hera. Have no fear of what you will see. You are initiated, my daughter, into the waking dream. When you return, your body will be restored.” His voice was warm and familiar, but it began to fade as if he were speaking to me from far away.

“Have no fear, Hera,” I heard him say. “Trust the waking dream.”

Suddenly, I was in utter darkness, rushing up toward the sky, my body light and weightless and thin like air. I was aware of my surroundings, but couldn't feel any physical sensations or control the scenes.

Then I could see. I was outside in the night, moving through the sky. I saw the outline of our house and Father's taro fields just beyond, their long, wet rows shimmering in the full light of the moon. I laughed at the wonder of my movement. Stretching out beyond our land I saw the silver sea and the village lit with dim fires below me as I continued to rise.

I heard the sound of waves rolling onto the sand in the distance, and my long, black hair was loose, blowing behind me. I moved as if through silken water. Up I rose, with a lightness of being, above my jungle home and over the side of the volcano. I had never been to the top, or to the other side of our island. There was a road leading there, but it took many days journey, and I'd never had a reason to go. The sea was the easiest way to move from one shore to another, but we lived so remotely that few ships ever came to our side. Now, as I rose above the land and sea I perceived for the first time the immensity of our territory. As I passed over the volcano I saw the sweeping expanse of Atlantis spread out before me, lit by the strong, white glow of the moon and stars. Across the long valley I could make out the forested mountains to the north and I could see the main city of Caledocean, luminous on the horizon. The tall pillars standing at its gates blazed with light even at this distance. I realized each pillar was crowned with a flame. I'd heard of this ritual—Caledocean's fires burning through the night—but I couldn't have imagined the grandeur of the site. I was dazzled and wanted to move toward them, but instead I was pulled down to the west, over vast pastures and trees.

My movement slowed as I reached the shore where a small strip of beach and black rock sat beneath a gently sloping plateau. A great, yawning mouth of a cave was set back into the side of the hill, and just beyond I could make out the silhouettes of trees. A small fire crackled outside.

I couldn't feel my feet as I set down at the mouth of the cave, and yet somehow I stood before it. There was movement within, and for the first time I felt anxiety move through my breast.

"Be calm, child," a woman's rough voice came from the cave.

I startled as an old woman walked forward from the darkness and into the light of the fire. She was slightly stooped, her skin black and coarse. Her hair hung in long, thick ringlets about her oval face. I tried to steady myself, but there was something peculiar about her form. Her tunic was simple, made of common wool worn through in places and badly patched. Her cape was no better, but the color was a vibrant scarlet that I'd never seen. She came and stood before me, her large, black eyes sharp as an owl's, looking me up and down.

I felt my breath become uneven and I tried to speak. "Who—"

"Be calm, girl," she said, her voice cracking as if it hadn't been used in a very long time. "So, you've finally found your power," she went on as if talking to herself. "And now you've come to me!"

Her eyes flashed in the firelight. I tried to step back, but my body wouldn't obey me. Again I felt afraid.

“You aren’t in your physical body, child.” Her voice was softer now. “But you’re safe. I am a friend.” She moved close to me then and reached out as if she would touch me. As she did I realized she wasn’t solid either. She laughed.

“Yes, Hera,” she said. “We dream this dream together! There is nothing to fear when you are with me. Come, I must show you something before your body calls you back.”

She seemed to touch my hand and to my delight we lifted again toward the night sky. I laughed out loud at the dreamy sensation of flying and she turned to me and smiled. Her face was a happy storm of creases.

I saw the city again, but we didn’t head toward it. Instead, we turned inland and through the deep green countryside, passing above large villages and towns with buildings and temples built in ways I’d never seen. Soon, we came to the edge of a wide lake. In the middle was an island, which looked as if it were floating in the mist and moonlight. I drew in my breath as I beheld it. “This is the Emerald Temple,” she said. Her voice pulled me across the water and through the mist until we came to the isle.

I looked down upon the buildings laid out around a large, circular structure capped by a massive dome. The roof was gilded and it glittered in the moonlight. A large tree flowered at the base of a long, marble staircase at its entrance. There was a wonderful and intoxicating scent that washed over me as we approached.

“Here, the priestesses gather to control their minds and hone their skills.”

I stared at the temple, rapt. There was something inside it, something alive that reached out to me and called my name. The night suddenly felt cool around me, as if my body were taking a more corporeal form.

The old woman made a sound of surprise.

“Remarkable,” she said suddenly as if she’d noticed the change in me. “We must not linger so close to the temple,” she finished.

We moved away from the holy place, over the gardens and outbuildings, to a very large and grand hall that sat on the top of a small incline overlooking the enclosure of buildings. We set down gently beneath the pillars of its portico, which stretched out for many lengths in both directions. The large wooden doors were thrown open to the warm, night air but the women that stood guard at the entrance didn’t notice us at all. Torches burned in the wall beside them and I saw short swords at their sides. I expected them to protest our presence, but the old woman only smiled and beckoned me to follow her inside.

We moved like ghosts through the inner hall, passing walls of frescoes, intricately carved statues and ornamented vases. The halls were well lit with oil lamps. Somewhere close by I heard the sounds of people stirring, the familiar early morning rustling inside a kitchen. We continued past a large hall with rows of finely set tables until we came upon a wide marble staircase that spiraled to the floor above us.

The old woman touched me lightly and we glided up it and then down a short corridor. I was enthralled by the scene, by how real everything appeared.

We came to a great wooden door with ornate dragons carved above it. Again, there was an armed woman stationed on either side. Neither seemed to see us, even when the old woman turned to me and whispered “We’re here.”

She turned to the door before us and with a sudden, sweeping movement, pulled me through it. I gasped at the impossibility of the act, but in a moment we were standing in the room on the other side.

Silence.

I blinked in the dim candle light that came from the alabaster altar in the center of the room. The flame shimmered off its surface as if it were dancing. Spices burned in a bowl at its center, and the room was filled with a potent scent of Frankincense and Myrrh that pulled me in.

Across from us stood a tall, heavyset woman looking out an arched window toward the lake. She stood very still, with a grave air about her. Her hair was unbound, like golden thread, and fell onto a rich green robe of silk. We stood still, watching her for a moment, but then she turned sharply as if she were suddenly aware that we were there.

“Who is it?” she demanded, her voice strong and exact.

I was startled by her tone and the powerful step she took toward me.

“Who are *you*?” I quipped defensively. My voice was clear and I was relieved to hear it.

“Who am I? Who am *I*?” A dark look crossed her face and she raised herself up. “I am Rhea, High Priestess of the Emerald Temple.”

She took another step toward me, narrowing her eyes. “You will tell me your name at once and you will kneel before me in respect, as is the custom here!”

Her voice was cold and I knew this was too real to be a dream. I wanted to take a step back, but I was frozen to the spot. Then I felt the old woman move out of the shadows and take a place beside me.

“It is *you* that shall kneel down, Rhea, before you will hear her name,” she said.

The High Priestess started, taking a step back toward the altar. Her face contorted in surprise and she inhaled sharply. She reached for a candle and held it high, her eyes growing wide as she recognized the old woman.

“Hecate?” she whispered.

The old woman laughed as the priestess took a step toward us, the light of the candle seeming to pass through my ethereal body. She stood a few feet away, her eyes large, blue pools of wonder.

“You travel in the dreamtime,” Rhea said, her voice low and with deference.

“Forgive me, Hecate, Priestess of the Night.”

She fell to her knees before us.

“The time has come,” the old woman said. “Rhea, look upon the girl’s face. Do you not recognize your own?”

Rhea stared up at me and her look softened.

“Is it my Sofia, then?” she said sadly, holding up the light. “But you look so young, it cannot be!”

“No, not Sofia,” the old woman answered. “Look closer and you will see the child’s father in her eyes.”

Rhea gasped. “Sofia had a... *daughter*?” Her hand shook, casting shadows in frightening waves across the wall. “A daughter, an heir—”

“A queen,” the old woman finished. Then she let out a wild cackle that pressed itself around my senses and suddenly I was being pulled in a furious rush back over the water and up the mountain. All the while the old woman’s laughing voice was loud in my head like a drum beating a warning. I cried out, as one does in the face of inevitable unconsciousness, and then, everything was black.