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To Luke, who met me when this story was first taking flight.

And to Ori, whose story is just beginning.



ONE



There was magic in the storm. Pippa's skin tingled. Rain beat down on the tile roof of the stables like the hooves of a hundred horses, and, through the window, she watched lightning bolts flash in the distance. Zeus, king of Mount Olympus, god of the sky, was saying something. But what?

The horse in the stall behind her, an old mare, pawed anxiously at the ground, interrupting Pippa's thoughts. The groom, Alcaeus, who was in charge of the horses, would probably appear any moment to tend to the mare, and the stables still weren't clean.

Pippa had been working there for over a year. The South Wall Stables, on the outskirts of Athens, were the largest she'd known, housing the horses of travelling merchants, as well as a few for the master of the house and his son.

I'd better get back to work, Pippa thought, but was interrupted again, this time by another flash. Not of lightning, but something else. A giant wing, feathery and silver, dipped from beneath the clouds like a sideways sail – there one moment and gone the next.

Pippa gasped.

Only one creature had a wing that size – a winged horse.

She couldn't help herself. She rushed out of the stables, into the storm, eager to get another look. Instantly she was drenched, but she barely noticed. All of her attention was focused upwards on the clouds, hoping for another glimpse.

Could it be? Had she seen Nikomedes, Zeus's steed? Zeus had had many horses since Pegasus retired to the skies long ago, to become



a constellation, and Pippa tried her best to keep track of them. She had heard tales of Nikomedes' silver wings and golden hooves, though of course she'd never seen him before now. No one had, as far as she knew.

Pippa raced on. Along the pathway that ran through the master's property, the *oikos*, and out on to the cobbled road that wound its way towards the *agora*, the marketplace at the heart of Athens.

Although the road usually bore merchants and carts, labourers and messengers (and even the rare bandit), now it was empty. Everyone had taken shelter.

Everyone except Pippa. The coarse cloth of her tunic clung to her skin, and her bare legs and feet were muddy. But on she went – past the mud-brick inn that housed travellers, past the olive trees soaking up the rain – chasing the retreating clouds . . . until her foot struck a stone and she tumbled forwards, landing in a puddle with a splash.

She rolled out of the puddle and sat, hugging her legs to her chest. One knee was scraped and both were covered in muck. Her big toe, which she'd stubbed, throbbed. *What was I thinking!* She was just a foundling, without parents or a home. Foundlings didn't glimpse the steeds of the gods. That was for the likes of the all-seeing Oracle and other priests and priestesses and—

Song-stitchers? A staff appeared in front of Pippa's face. Covered in intricate carvings, it was the staff of a *rhapsode* – a song-stitcher, reciter of myths and teller of tales. Pippa knew, for she had spent her earliest years in the care of one, an old woman named Zosime. Zosime had found her

when she was a baby and cared for her until she was old enough to look out for herself.

But whereas Zosime had been well-kept, this song-stitcher was the opposite. Her face was thin, her weathered skin stretched over bone, and her eyes were sunken and dark, like the pits of two olives. She wore a long woollen *himation*, which draped across her hunched shoulders and up over her head like a hood, shielding her from the rain. Across her back was slung a lyre, some of its strings broken and bobbing in the wind like unruly strands of hair. Even her staff was chipped, the symbols hard to make out.

The staff's symbols helped a song-stitcher remember her tales, as did tapping the staff on the ground. But Pippa hadn't heard *this* song-stitcher tapping.

Where had she come from?

'Hurt, child?' The woman extended her staff. 'Here.'

Pippa gripped it and rose to her feet, noticing one symbol in particular carved on the top.

Three feathers, woven together.

'What does it mean?' asked Pippa.

'Ah,' said the woman, eyebrows rising. 'There are more stories coming soon for that one.'

Pippa was puzzled. Weren't a song-stitcher's tales old ones, the stories of gods and goddesses? Unless this woman had seen something in the storm too. Had she seen Nikomedes?

The song-stitcher's dark eyes clouded over as she tapped her staff in time to her words. *'Aloft wings beat and feathers fly, hark the horses of the sky.'*

So she *had* seen something! Or was she speaking in riddles, as song-stitchers tended to do?

'What tale is that from?' asked Pippa. 'Tell me more.'

'I wish, I wish. But that one is not a tale for telling – not yet. I can tell you another, a tale of great intrigue.'

Although she was tempted, Pippa shook her head. 'I must go back,' she said. Really, she'd already been gone too long. The mare and her colt

didn't like storms, and she didn't want to leave them untended. Not to mention that Alcaeus would be furious. Although he rarely whipped the horses, he did not shy from whipping her.

The song-stitcher's hand shot out and gripped Pippa's arm, her fingers curling around Pippa's wrist like snakes.

'No!' Her voice crackled. 'There are so many tales I know. I know the truths of the gods. I've seen things no one should.'

Pippa had heard of song-stitchers like this – those who had gone mad from their stories. Often they rocked alone in corners of the market, muttering and murmuring to no one. Some said that the gods had disgraced them, or that their stories were too accurate for the gods' liking, and so they had been punished.

The song-stitcher went on. 'Share your food with me then? But you don't have any, do you? Only fate kept you alive, but for a purpose? We'll see . . .'

Pippa yanked her arm free and hurried away.

It was simply madness and luck that this woman had landed on some truths. She glanced back. The song-stitcher was still tapping her cane. *Poor woman.* But Pippa would be in trouble herself if she didn't make it back before the groom discovered she was gone.

Already the clouds were gathered far off in the distance and the rain was nearly a memory.

The magic was over.

TWO



When Pippa returned to the stables, Alcaeus was there, hunched yet imposing, in the mare's stall. 'You old nag,' the groom soothed. 'Stop your fussing. It's just a storm.'

The mare's colt, in the stall opposite, flicked his ears back. He, like his mother, was clearly agitated.

Pippa put a comforting hand on his neck. His ears relaxed; his tail swished. He had long lashes almost like a donkey and was one of her favourites. She stepped closer. Hay crunched under Pippa's feet, and the colt nickered. The groom turned and