LIES WE SING TO THE SEA

SARAH UNDERWOOD





First published in Great Britain in 2023
by Electric Monkey, part of Farshore

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

farshore.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8

Text copyright © 2023 Sarah Underwood

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

ISBN 978 0 0085 5854 3

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity at
CPI Group (UK) Ltd
1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library
Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Alcester, Warwickshire

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

Stay safe online. Any website addresses listed in this book are correct at the time of going to print. However, Farshore is not responsible for content hosted by third parties. Please be aware that online content can be subject to change and websites can contain content that is unsuitable for children. We advise that all children are supervised when using the internet.



This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green



for mum, for everything



CONTENT WARNING

Please be aware that *Lies We Sing to the Sea* includes content that may be distressing to some readers, including violence, death, graphic injury, non-graphic sexual assault and suicide.

"Death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall bless you. All that I have said will come true."

Homer, *The Odyssey*
Translated by Samuel Butler, 1900



ONE

ANOTHER FEAT OF GODS AND HEROES

Leto

A SILENT MAID BRAIDED LETO'S hair into an elaborate crown for her execution.

Her knees smarted as she knelt on the rough flagstone floor of the little room. Her arms, pale but for the bruises already blooming there, protested and cramped against the rope that bound them—wrist to wrist—behind her back.

The maid pulled Leto's head sideways and pushed in yet another pin, scraping the sharp metal against her scalp and drawing thick strands of dark hair taut. Leto gritted her teeth and blinked hard, furiously avoiding the gaze of the hulking guard standing watch at the only door. He was fully armoured, a sword strapped at his hip and his features obscured by a shining silver helmet.

Leto fixed her eyes instead on the flickering light of the fireplace. The scent of the burning incense hung in a choking fog and filled the room with a close, oppressive heat. Sweat ran in rivulets down her neck—over the terrible

black scales that had risen on the skin there, marking her for slaughter—and disappeared beneath the neckline of her gown. The carefully arranged curls about her face were already damp and frizzy.

Some sacrifice. It was a bitter thought. Perhaps Poseidon would be so disgusted that he would simply send her back.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the maid—her mouth full of pins, brow furrowed—empty a handful of tiny white flowers from a linen-lined basket. She checked each carefully for crushed petals, then began to weave them deftly through the plaits at Leto's brow.

It was the first time someone had done her hair in years.

There was little occasion for intricate hairstyles, anyway. Leto's mother had died when she was ten and, since her father had followed a few years later, Leto had been forced to make her own money. The work had not been hard to come by at first—Ithaca's common folk still flocked to the house of the last Royal Oracle—but she did not have her mother's talent for it, and the few, brief snatches of the future that Apollo granted her were infuriatingly ambiguous. Her remaining customers were those that could be satisfied by spectacle, by the theatrical slaughter of a rabbit or the wild rolling of eyes that Leto had soon perfected. There weren't many of them, but they paid enough silver to keep her from starving.

As for her hair, a ribbon to keep the longer strands from her face normally sufficed, though she supposed it would not stop it getting caught in a hangman's noose.

This braid, she reasoned, briefly surprised by her own practicality, *will do a much better job*.

A sharp knock on the door broke the near silence of the room. The maid started and snatched her hands away from Leto, glancing nervously towards the guard. He hadn't moved an inch.

"Quickly." The guard spoke for the first time since Leto's arrival. His voice was low, gravelly and strangely flat. "It is almost time."

The maid nodded and reached for another handful of flowers.

The hairs on Leto's arms prickled. Under the smooth material of the ceremonial gown they had dressed her in, her heart quickened and fluttered like a trapped bird. Something heavy and unpleasant settled itself like a great pressure on her chest, squeezing her lungs, hitching her breath.

Shuttered into this unfurnished room, it had been impossible to keep track of time. The sound of birdsong and the first rays of light streaming in through the tiny window had told Leto that the sun had risen, but, beyond that, nothing. It might have still been early morning.

Now, though— *It is almost time*. She knew exactly what it was almost time for. The sacrifices took place at noon, when the equinox sun had reached its peak in the sky.

It was not dying she was afraid of, for she had long steeled herself against the idea of it, but what lay beyond.

In her seventeen years, she had led a decidedly unremarkable life. Some of the more superstitious townsfolk still whispered of her mystical powers, it was true, but Leto had vanquished no monsters, thwarted no criminals, bested no cheats. She had only been kissed *twice*. The afterlife waiting for her would

not be an unkind one—for there was little to recommend her to damnation—but she would certainly not find herself in the company of brave heroes like Perseus, Heracles or Odysseus. She would not see her mother again.

Apollo had not even deigned to grant her a vision of her own demise—the night before the guards had arrived to claim her, she had dreamed of a girl with golden hair and eyes like the sea.

Her thoughts of greatness were vain and stupid, of course. Still, Leto had always hoped, in the way little girls do, listening open-mouthed to tales of heroic deeds, that she would one day be remembered as extraordinary.

She could still feel the prickle of scales round her throat, the mark that had appeared mere days ago and brought it all to a lurching halt. The truth was plain to see; Poseidon had chosen her. There was no escaping it. No one would remember her now.

For a moment, she wondered which of her neighbours had noticed the scales, had sold her to the royal guard. She didn't blame them—her fate was already sealed, and at least the bounty would give them a few more silvers for bread.

The knock came again, louder this time, as the maid forced in a final pin.

"For gods' sake," snapped the guard. "Are you finished?"

"One last thing," said the maid. This time, when she reached into the basket, she pulled out a leather cord knotted roughly into a loop. From its centre there dangled a tiny silver coin. The shape was instantly familiar. An obol. "For Charon," said the maid solemnly.

Leto had been expecting it, but still, the sight of the metal set her stomach rolling. The dead were customarily buried with money; this single obol would serve as payment to the ferryman to bear her soul across the Styx and the Acheron. Her *dead* soul.

The maid carefully eased the necklace over Leto's braids. She felt it fall underneath the gown, to rest in the hollow between her breasts. She bit her lip; the metal was cold, startlingly so, where it lay under the folds of pale fabric.

The guard scoffed as the maid straightened, fumbling with her basket of pins and battered petals. "Organise your things. I will escort you out." Perhaps he wasn't the superstitious type. He eyed the leather cord with disdain and, when he caught Leto watching him, flashed her a sly, mocking grin.

Leto shuddered. As she did so, her eyes caught on a sudden reflection of sunlight. A reflection, she realised, that stemmed from the flat of a shining blade. Obscured from the guard's view by the yellow fabric of the maid's chiton was a pot of dressmaking pins and a great pair of bronze shears.

Leto's pulse surged as she gazed at the shears, hardly daring to believe her luck. How the maid had missed them, she didn't know. But the blades looked new: sharp and shining and perfect for cutting through troublesome restraints. The gods had handed her a lifeline at the eleventh hour.

"Come on, then," grunted the guard to the maid. Leto's head snapped up again. "Is that everything?"

Leto's eyes darted between them. As soon as the maid stepped forward—or, gods forbid, turned back—either she

or the guard would notice the dropped shears.

Leto made a split-second decision.

She pitched herself forward on to the shears, concealing them beneath the masses of her skirts. "Don't leave me!" she cried out. "Don't let me die!"

The maid, with distress plastered over her huge, doll-like features, turned and flinched at the sight of Leto on the ground. "I—" she began, reaching towards Leto.

"Please!" shrieked Leto, thrashing her body side to side. If the maid got too close, she would almost certainly spot the forgotten shears. Leto willed wild tears into her eyes and bared her teeth like a cornered dog. "I don't want to die!"

The maid made a whimpering noise.

"All right. That's enough." The guard abandoned his post and covered the distance towards them in two massive strides. "You—" he slapped a heavy hand down on to the maid's shoulder— "out. Wait in the corridor. I'll deal with this."

She didn't need asking twice. Clasping the basket of flowers to her chest, she fled.

"And you." The guard regarded Leto dispassionately. "Pull yourself together," he snapped. "Have some dignity."

Leto made pointed eye contact and let out another melodramatic howl of sorrow.

The guard made a noise of disgust. "Very well, then," he said. "Stay like that." He turned, kicking up a cloud of dust from the half-swept floor, and marched from the room. The door snapped shut behind him, and Leto was left alone.

There had been a time earlier, while the maid had been meticulously tailoring the white ceremonial gown to Leto's hollow frame, when Leto had familiarised herself with her restraints. For some minutes she had occupied herself with rolling her bound elbows and wrists experimentally, searching for a position which didn't set them prickling painfully.

After this time—during which she had succeeded only in contorting herself further—she had resigned herself to discomfort. The ropes were simply too thick, the knots too tight and elaborate.

But now, apologising silently to the maid, who would doubtless be punished for her oversight, she exploded into action. Or, more accurately, though it wasn't quite the daring escape she would have preferred, she shuffled, rolled, and twisted herself painfully into action.

The hardest part was getting the shears into the right place. Her hands were sweaty and clammy. They slipped and fumbled on the handles, sending them clattering to the floor more than once. The slightest of sounds in the corridor beyond the door left her frozen in place, holding her breath and counting down until the footsteps faded or the scurry of mice quieted.

At long last, she managed to ease the blades into position against her bonds. She worked her hands carefully back and forth and felt the ties begin to loosen. The sound of each thread breaking was like music to her ears, the most beautiful she had ever heard.

At last, the thickest part of the rope was sawn through. With more strength than she knew she possessed, Leto tore

the last stray threads apart. The bindings broke with a snap and fell away. They had barely hit the ground before she had staggered upright, almost tripping over the too long gown as it pooled like spilt milk over her bare feet. Her legs, tired from kneeling for so long, shook and nearly buckled underneath her. Disorientated, and completely devoid of a real weapon or plan, she staggered towards the door, then came up short at the sound of footsteps on stone outside.

Right. She turned and lurched towards the window, the light filtering through it beckoning her forward.

It was not yet so far into spring that crops were sprouting and the goats were producing milk by the barrel. The winters always left Leto with a perpetual knot of hunger in her belly, but today she was grateful for it. Had her slight frame been any larger, she would have stuck fast in the narrow window. Instead—twisting and turning and scraping her hips so closely to the stone that blood bloomed on her skirts there—she managed to make it through, depositing herself on a patch of sparse grass and dry soil. She struggled to her feet and peered up at the great mass of stone that had been her prison.

When the Ithacan guard had first come for her, with splintering force on the door of her house in the early hours of the morning, it had been dark outside—and they'd blindfolded her for good measure—so her sleep-addled mind had been unable to follow the many twists and turns they had taken through her home village of Vathi, then out on to the sprawling hills that surrounded it. She had assumed she was being kept in some remote dungeon, some squalid cave

where the rest of Ithaca could forget all about her. But she recognised where she was immediately.

Blinking against the harsh sunlight, Leto looked grimly up at Vathi's northern guard tower. Then, her heart sinking unpleasantly into her stomach at the sound of a muffled clatter, she turned to look at the group of armoured soldiers loitering on the ground in front of her. The soldiers looked back with identical expressions of bewilderment plastered over their faces.

For a moment, they gazed at each other: the prisoner and her jailers. Most of the soldiers had their helmets off, their heavy sword belts discarded at their feet. They had clearly not been expecting company; some of them looked half asleep. Perhaps they *had* been asleep—that would explain why Leto had not heard them from her cell.

How foolish she had been to think that her only escape would not have been guarded. How naively hopeful.

At last, one of the soldiers very slowly retrieved his sword, clambered to his feet, and levelled the blade at Leto. He cleared his throat cautiously. "And where do you think you're going?"

Shit.

The tower stood atop a great hill. Leto could see the brown sloping rooftops of Vathi, so near she could almost have reached out to touch them. Freedom was tantalisingly close; she could not let it escape her. Not when the alternative was to die like an animal for a kingdom and its wretched royal family that deserved nothing from her. Not after they had failed her so badly. Not after they had failed her mother.

So, though she knew she was caught, that she couldn't outrun a soldier on a good day, let alone battered and bruised and dressed in a ridiculous ceremonial gown, Leto gave it a go. Praying to every god she could remember offhand, she spun on her heel, barefooted, and ran.

She had made it barely four paces before a hand caught her by the back of her gown and hurled her to the ground. Her leg twisted underneath her and she fell on it hard. Pain shot up from the impact; as if from a great distance, she heard herself cry out. She tried to pull herself to her feet and had made it on to all fours before something solid hit her across the back. She crumpled again.

"Get her on her feet," barked a familiar voice.

Hands under her armpits hauled Leto upright. Her leg buckled under her weight and she sagged like a rag doll. Dizzy with the pain that thrummed through her leg and ran down the full length of her spine, she squinted at the hazy figure in front of her.

The guard from Leto's room knelt down slowly. His helmet was off now, and he moved his exposed face very close to hers. With deliberate spite, he smiled. It pulled taut the great scar that ran from the middle of his cheek, down and over his chin and neck, and disappeared under the breastplate of his armour.

"Dear me," he purred. His eyes were the blue of a cloudless day and they flashed with malice. "Did you get lost?"

There were several things that Leto had never done in her life, nor dreamed of doing. But given that it seemed near certain that she would be dead by the evening, she

abandoned any sense of self-preservation she had ever had.

"Die," she snarled, and spat in his face.

His smile vanished. He drew his hand back, then brought it forward with a speed that sent the air whistling around it as he backhanded her across the face. Hard.

Were it not for the two guards flanking Leto, supporting her body between them, she would have gone reeling backwards into the dirt. Her cheek smarted and she tasted the metallic warmth of blood. She debated spitting *that* into his face too, but before she had evaluated whether the brief satisfaction would be worth another beating, the guard had straightened and turned away.

"Take her to the beach," he said. "I'll make sure I'm there to watch her die."



TWO

IN A FIELD OF FLOWERS

Mathias

PRINCE MATHIAS OF ITHACA DID not become aware of the most recent attempt on his life until nearly a week later, when his mother informed him over breakfast that the perpetrator —a fisherman by trade, apparently—was to be hanged.

"Wonderful," said Mathias, after a deliberate pause. He stabbed his fork into a grape and eyed it murderously. "Will that be before or after we execute his daughter?"

Such attempts always saw a sharp increase in the weeks before the vernal equinox, those weeks in which the first of the girls woke up to Poseidon's mark on their throats. Their desperate parents, husbands, siblings, lovers, would descend on the palace with all manner of blades and poisons and the occasional explosive, and make for the queen and her son. As if it would do them any good. As if Mathias had a say in any of it.

He mashed the grape into a pulp on his platter.

His mother pursed her lips and laid down her knife. It was one of the rare occasions that the hall wasn't bustling with courtiers, that they were as close to alone as they ever

were, with just two guards flanking the table. Even Olympia was not here, alternately adoring and irate. This lack of audience meant that the queen was a little less patient, her temper a little quicker to rise. "Really, Mathias," she said sharply. "You of all people should understand why we must do this. After Selene—"

Selene. The sound of her name was almost too awful to bear. It brought with it the sound of whistling wind, the churning of an ocean that had risen from its bed, the memory of what happened when Ithaca had failed to pay Poseidon's price. The air felt like salt water in his lungs; he fought down the sudden, violent urge to gasp for breath. His mother was right, of course, and he hated it. The marked girls had to die. If Mathias didn't do it, the sea would claim them itself, would ravage the land, destroying everything in its path, until it found each and every one of them.

He was on his feet before he realised it.

"*Mathias*." The same thing happened every year; somehow his mother was still surprised by it. "Are you even listening to me? I—"

"I need to make sure the preparations have been finalised," he said, refusing to look at her. He didn't need to see the disappointment in her face, not today. They had very different ideas of what it meant to be a prince—what it would mean, once he finally came of age and took the throne, to be a king. "They'll be taking the girls down to the beach soon. They'll be expecting me there."

The queen sighed and took a long drag from her cup. "Very well, then."

Mathias didn't wait for her to change her mind. He thrust his chair back into place and strode across the hall towards the great wooden doors that marked the only exit, holding on to the circlet of gold on his brow to stop it slipping.

"Make sure you practise the blessing," his mother called after him. "Not that it matters to me, darling, but perhaps there is an . . . *expectation* for a future king to speak clearly. Besides—" her voice softened— "I know you can't stand to stumble on the words. You were ever so upset last year; I hate to see you like that."

Mathias gritted his teeth and wrenched the doors open, slipping through the gap before his temper frayed too thin and he snapped back. What did it matter what was expected? It was not as if his people would be there to hear him; they were all barred from the hangings, and had been ever since a spate of failed rescue attempts some ten years previously.

But of course they were not the audience he cared for. The audience for whom he *must* get this right. Twelve girls were about to die for Ithaca, and he would be damned by every god there was before he let their sacrifices go unhonoured.

As she always did, the queen had arranged for a chariot. Mathias ignored it pointedly when he reached the stables, raising a hand to silence the harried-looking groom that had hurried over. "My horse," he said deliberately. "That's all."

To his credit, the groom did not argue, and returned a minute later leading a charcoal mare by her halter. Clearly, they had been expecting Mathias to refuse the chariot; she was brushed and a crimson saddlecloth had been draped

across her back. She sniffed at Mathias eagerly.

"Hello, Sthenios," said Mathias, taking the halter from the groom. "No honey for you today, I'm afraid."

Sthenios gave a disapproving snort, but she stood obediently and allowed Mathias to swing on to her back.

"Come on, then." He drove in his heels. "How fast can you go?"

Very fast, was the answer to that question—Sthenios had been a gift from Athens, the kingdom of his betrothed, and she was the finest horse in Ithaca's stables. Within minutes, they were up on the hilltop, taking gasping breaths of the thick hot wind. Mathias pulled Sthenios into a walk. A winding path stretched out before them, meandering aimlessly towards the sea before reaching its conclusion at a narrow strip of sand to the east. The hanging beach.

Its original name had been erased by hundreds of years of tradition. Mathias doubted anyone alive even knew what it was; twelve girls had been hanged there each year for centuries now. Thousands dead, sacrificed to appease—if only temporarily—the ever-rageful Poseidon.

There was no escape for any of the marked girls. The sea would find them wherever they fled on the island, and to try to leave was just as hopeless. Poseidon, always watchful, would blow over their boats and drag them to the depths. There were countless tales passed down through the years: of storms so sudden in their violence that they could only be the work of the earthshaker himself; of the wretched shell of a fishing village on the north side of the island, the houses smashed into pieces by raging tides;

of dead girls upon dead girls upon dead girls.

Mathias did not need reminding of the consequences of the sea god's wrath; they were laid out before him.

The hollowed-out bones of the landscape were achingly familiar. He knew every contour of the hills, every gleam of the sky as it danced on the ocean. Here was the patch where he had picked daisies with Selene, weaving them into child-sized crowns and balancing them atop her spray of black curls, until the sun burned low on the horizon. And there—hidden now by the twisting roots of some starved, wizened bush—was the spot they'd leave them, hoping that the wilting flowers would tempt nymphs out from their trees.

If he were ever afraid—if a bird startled too quickly from its perch, if a wolf howled in the near hills—Selene would hold him close, ruffle his hair, whisper in his ear. "*Do not be afraid, little brother. No one will hurt you. Not while I am here.*"

The daisies didn't grow here any more. Nothing did. The sea had razed it all to the ground, drowning, smashing, and salting the earth beneath its path as it fought to claim what it was owed. Even now, nothing but tough shrubbery grew there.

Mathias shut his eyes tightly and forced the memories of Selene away. It had been his fault, his mistake. But he would not make the same error again. He spurred Sthenios onward.

There was some part of him that hoped the hills would go on forever, but soon Sthenios' hooves met sand instead of soil and they were there.

The beach stretched out in front of him, flushed gold in

the early-morning sun. It might have been peaceful, were it not for the neat rows of armoured guards, their hands resting on the hilts of their blades. The damp sand almost glistened, beckoning him towards the sea and the rough wooden scaffold that had been erected on the shoreline so that the waves lapped against its posts. Easier, then, to cut the dead girls down into the water. Sensible. He swallowed hard.

Twelve identical nooses swung in the low wind. Twelve girls in simple white gowns stood beneath them, their backs to the water—water that Mathias could have sworn had begun to swirl in anticipation.

He slipped from Sthenios' back and walked slowly towards them. Someone had laid down a rich plum-coloured carpet for him to stand on lest he dirty his boots. He longed to kick it aside in a ridiculous display of temper, but such things were unbecoming of the future king, so he pushed the desire down and took his place in front of the gallows.

Alexios had offered, as he did every year, to take his place, to dress in Mathias' armour and wear his helmet to hide his face. As he did every year, the leader of the guards had looked almost disappointed when Mathias had turned him down. More than once, after Selene's death, Mathias had almost accepted. Poseidon did not care who conducted the sacrifices, only that they were made. But it was not Alexios' duty to bear, not his burden.

Besides, Alexios had sacrificed enough for Mathias; he had saved his life when he was just twelve years old, and taken a dagger to the face for his trouble. Now he stood to Mathias' left, his scarred features impassive and a meticulously

sharp blade clutched between his calloused hands, ready to slice through the ropes that held the platform up and send the girls swinging to their deaths.

"Your Grace," said Alexios quietly. "The first order?"

Mathias forced himself to look down the line of girls, to meet their frightened eyes and pray that they saw in his all the pain, the anger, the sorrow that echoed through his hollow chest. Not that his feelings would matter much to them when they were dead.

He nodded once. At the signal, a guard swiftly ascended the gallows and began to loop the nooses round the girls' black-flecked throats. The smallest, a trembling girl with wide black eyes, made a soft noise as the rope came to rest above her collarbone.

"Any issues?" Mathias murmured to Alexios, looking away.

The guard smiled grimly. "Nothing to be concerned by. We had to . . . *escort* one ridiculous boy home—his little sweetheart is here—but aside from that it's been a quiet year. They know they can't afford to anger the earthshaker."

Mathias nodded wordlessly. Yet another failed land harvest had left his people hungrier than usual, and they knew as well as he did that the sea was their salvation. Maybe that was why the betrayals of the marked girls had been faster this year, why all of them had been turned in well before today.

"Oh," Alexios added, his expression souring, "there was an incident earlier today—one of the sacrifices cut through her bonds and tried to run, stupid girl. But she didn't get far. She'll be hanged with the rest."

Some mad part of Mathias thrummed with disappointment. He lifted his head and looked again down the line; which girl had been selfish enough, *brave* enough to try? But then the guard positioning the nooses was jumping down on to the sand again, and it was *time*, and the girl that had made her madcap attempt, whichever one she was, was condemned to die alongside the others.

Mathias cleared his throat and began. "Blessed twelve. In Ithaca's name, I thank you for your sacrifice." Several of the girls were already crying, their frightened eyes shining and their lips trembling. Mathias swallowed. *It was necessary*, he told himself forcefully. And the alternative was far worse.

"In Zeus' name, I honour you. In Hades' name, I beg for you a soft welcoming to his kingdom."

Someone scoffed loudly.

He had been expecting the sobbing—it happened every year, and it appalled him the same every time—but this was new. He peered at the girls, searching their faces for some disdain, some derision, and found nothing but fear.

He opened his mouth to continue, just as his gaze fell on the last girl in the line. Half hidden behind her neighbour, such that he had not seen her clearly until now, she stood with her back perfectly straight, chin up, as she glared at him with a look of such revulsion and hatred that, for a moment—forgetting every word of the speech he'd been forced to recite since the age of fifteen—he could do nothing but stare back.

Her face was gaunt and pale, her cheekbones hollows that spoke of a hard winter. The ceremonial gown hung

straight down from her shoulders; her arms, pale and peppered with bruises, were bound behind her back. One of her eyes was swollen half shut, her hair was a frizzy, dusty mess, and someone had forced a gag between her teeth. Still, the eye that was fully open was clear-sighted and full of stubborn pride.

Cut through her bonds and tried to run, stupid girl . . . She'll be hanged with the rest.

So this was the would-be escapee.

"Your Grace," hissed Alexios. "The blessing."

Mathias could not look away from the girl, from that fierce determination in her eyes. It was the same look that Selene had given him on that fateful night, the last time he had ever looked up at his sister's face. If she were alive, she would be here in Mathias' place, and he would be safely back at the palace. A foolish younger brother, not the future king. Knowing nothing. Caring for nothing.

He cleared his throat and forced himself to speak again. "And in Poseidon's name, great lord of the seas, tamer of horses, shaker of the earth, I, Prince Mathias of Ithaca, sentence you to die, so that your brethren may live to prosper."

The girl's face twitched. That one tiny, vulnerable movement sent a vicious throb of guilt through Mathias' chest. A girl like that—proud, furious, *afraid*—did not deserve to die like this. Dishonourably, like an animal.

The guilt returned again, then, stronger. His mother would have scoffed to see him wavering: moved to weakness by a pitiful broken girl with fire in her eyes and a proud curve to her back. She did not deserve this; of course not.

Nor did any of the eleven others that stood alongside her. But Ithaca would drown if they were allowed to live, and a choice between them and every other soul on this wretched island was not a choice at all.



THREE

BY WORD OR DEED

Leto

LETO GLARED AT THE PRINCE, baring her teeth as best she could with the gag in her mouth, and prayed furiously that he could not see through her anger to the pain, the weakness that lay beneath. The long walk had not been kind to her injured leg. The guards had seemed to care little for her comfort—and, indeed, why would they? She would be dead within the hour.

The tears had threatened to come then, hot and fast. Leto had wiped them away furiously on her shoulders as she staggered and limped her way over the loose gravel and snapped twigs, pausing every few steps to roll her ankles and bite back low noises of pain until at last, after what felt like hours, they had arrived.

Now, she did her best to keep the weight off her injured leg as she stood atop the gallows. It must have been made new; the wood was rough and caught on the hem of her gown as she swayed in the humid wind. The smell of pine had been comforting at first; now it was suffocating, nauseating.

The platform swayed beneath her feet—it was held up by thick ropes looped over a high, horizontal beam, then knotted tightly round stakes that had been driven deep into the sand. Once those ropes were cut, the platform would fall, she would follow, and the rope round her throat would yank her back up. Perhaps her neck would break.

The prince cleared his throat yet again. His warm tanned skin was slick with sweat; it plastered his curls to his forehead and made him shine like bronze in the sun. His eyes flicked back and forth across Leto's face.

For a wretched coward who let his people starve in their beds, he was shamefully lovely, like a portrait, all hard lines and smooth skin with eyes and brows and lips in worshipful arcs of charcoal. His voice, despite the shaking, was soft and musical when he spoke. "As you leave this life, may your bodies be as the waves, may your bones be as the sand, may your souls fly free as the gulls and watch over us. Oh, great Lord Poseidon, accept this offering."

His voice cracked on the last word. Then, "I'm so sorry," he said. A hushed murmur from the guards told Leto that this was not part of the script. "If I could do anything—" He broke off. His eyes, still fixed on Leto, were wide and pleading.

She could almost have forgiven him. But at the last moment, as he dropped his chin in a reluctant nod, as his guard raised his sword and brought it down in a glittering arc towards the ropes holding the boards steady beneath her, the prince looked away.

Coward.

The platform gave way underneath Leto's feet and she

was suspended in the air for a dazzling, terrifying moment.

Then Leto fell and the rope caught her.

She had expected pain, but it was far fiercer than she could ever have imagined: instantaneous, incomparable. It caught her in a sensation partway between pressure, ripping, and an extraordinary burning. Had her breath not been trapped by the knot round her throat, it would have been torn from her in a shrill cry of shock and agony.

Though she had sworn to herself that she would not struggle, she felt—rather than willed—her legs spasming and kicking. Her feet danced a frantic pattern in the air and, even as white spots began to tremble at the edges of her vision, she tried desperately to call out through the wad of fabric between her teeth. For whom, she was not sure. Her mother, perhaps, long dead. Her father.

She tried to gasp but could not—the iron grip on her throat would not yield. With each moment it grew tighter, and the pain grew fiercer.

Leto felt consciousness slipping between her fingers like fine threads and allowed herself to welcome it. The pain dulled; her legs stilled.

The last thing Leto felt, before the waves rose up to swallow her whole, was the peculiar sensation of being watched. Not from the land—by the prince and the rows of his guards—but from the water. Then the pain reached a dazzling, shattering crescendo and—stopped.

Oh, she thought, *it is over*, and died. There were flowers in her hair and the ghost of a smile on her lips; her body fell limp like a snared bird.



On the shores of Ithaca, gentle waves lapped at the smooth stones. A distant gull cried out and another, closer, answered. The leaves of trees bristled in the breeze and the air hung in a haze thick with the scent of salt as a procession of soldiers cut the dead girls from their nooses and set them to rest—first floating, then dragged under by the weight of their gowns—in the receding tides.

As the current pulled her away from Ithaca, the little island she had spent her life always plotting, planning, *hoping* to leave, Leto sank quietly under the water, her eyes closed, her neck marked starkly by the rope and the scales beneath it.

And somewhere, beneath the surface, something—*someone*—stirred.