

FATES AND FURIES

Stories by Christine Lucas



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Editor: Athena Andreadis

For my high school composition-writing teacher, who said thirty years ago that one day I'd be a writer. If only I had listened earlier.

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Prologue: A Glimmering Tapestry

By Athena Andreadis

*“Sometimes I’m calmed by the strings of the lyre,
tied with thick ropes to the middle mast.
The blind Chiot bard, a hoarse prophet
chewing his mastic, praises Eleni...”*

—from “Χίλια Μύρια Κύματα” (“A Hundred Thousand Waves”, part of *Chronikó*)

Lyrics: K. X. Myris (Kóstas Georgousópoulos); music: Giánnis Markópoulos

First sung by another bard: Níkos Ksilouris, whom the Hunter took much too soon

The collection you hold in your hands is a mix of fantasy and science fiction—but it’s a seamless whole for two fundamental reasons: the bedrock it blooms from is the myths and history of a people who have gone through many dazzling flowerings, and equally many root-wrenching devastations, but still speak their original tongue and remember their stories, echoing down the eons; and all the stories in it ask the crucial question: how can we live well...and, equally importantly, how can we die well? This question was first asked on the Ionian coast, and we’re still asking it today as our horizons shift.

Several threads are entwined in this glimmering tapestry: Alexander the Unvanquished and

the Great Mistress, Pótnia Théron; Amazons and Akrites, equals in prowess and pride; mountain sanctuaries and holy wells; the swirling of clarinets and fiddles played by Pan and his entourage, Byzantine agyrtes, traveling Epirot musicians; the scent of thyme, geranium, pine resin; the taste of olives, goat cheese, charcoal-grilled octopus; the whiff of orange blossoms; the limpid light on the sea, the broken yet ever-potent statues; honor and glory—and, at the end, the remorseless Hunter whom we must meet looking our best, even when bravado is the only weapon left us.

So it was in Minoan Crete. So it was in Byzantine Anatolia. And so it may still be on the dusty valleys of far-future Mars.

Christine knows how to weave magic—even in a borrowed tongue, as is the case for many of us feral diasporan orphans who live with changed or mispronounced names. I wept repeatedly while putting this collection together. A voluntary exile from my culture and language, I hear its cadences and underdrones in these stories, the unbroken line of memory across millennia. And nostalgia grips me through my solar plexus for that sun-scoured land where my people dreamed, thought and invented, where they gave and lost unstintingly...and for the spirit that still makes them swagger into hopeless battles with a carnation behind their ear.

As a coda, I'll discuss The Personification of the Sea, the stunning mosaic that graces the collection's cover: it's in the Church of Apostles in Madaba, Jordan, a city in continuous existence since the Bronze Age. The Madaba mosaics date from the 5th to the 7th century, among the few to survive the successive iconoclast sweeps in that part of the world. The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, Mt. Nebo, and the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman (which promotes interdisciplinary research with emphasis on archaeology in the region) graciously gave me permission to use this image that distills the essence of *Fates and Furies*.

I. The Tree of Knowledge

What Now, Callisthenes?

Why would the king's sister venture through the slums of Babylon, oh fair Thessalonike? You slip out of the palace, clad in men's clothes, while Alexander, your brother and king, lies feverish in his bed. And I, less than a man but more than a shadow, float in your hurried wake through dark alleys to the witch's door.

A hag sits cross-legged upon the dirt, grey hair matted, face wrinkled and scarred. She doesn't look Persian, or Scythian, or even an expatriate Egyptian priestess. And she *certainly* doesn't look Greek. But, oh daughter and sister of great kings, if only you could see her as I do, my beloved, through sight not of flesh but of spirit, you'd know that she's none of these. She's *all* of them and more. The spectral host of her foremothers, back to the world's making, crowd up behind her. Her kind knows neither lord nor land.

You tiptoe through her filth: animal fur, bones, broken pottery, chunks of rotting fruits and vegetables, and sit carefully upon a creaking stool. Your gaze darts, doubts crease your brow. Have you made a mistake? Have those who sent you here played a cruel joke?

"You seek the Immortal Water," she says. A heavily-accented voice, a mix of Greek and Persian words. Your head snaps up. She cannot know this. You haven't spoken of your plans to anyone, not even Alexander.

“I was told in my youth,” you say, “that it drips from a crevice, a crack in the cliffs over a chasm where the waters of Styx puddle, dark and bottomless.” The waters of Styx, back in Olympias’ homeland. Thetis once dipped her son Achilles in it, to shield him from harm. She missed his heel. “It’s not there.”

“That spring has dried since the time of Achilles.” The witch’s features seem to shift under the light of the lone oil lamp. Now young, now old, silence and whispers, a glimpse of the Eternal stubbornly clinging onto the Old Ways.

“Dried?” You bite your lip. Your hands twist the hem of your tunic. “There must be another.”

“Oh, there is.”

Crooked hands stroke dirt, as if stroking a cat. It’s not felinity that stirs at her touch, but ancient, liquid divinity. *Tethys, Tiamat, Thalassa*, there slumbers the Lady of Deep Waters, ever-flowing upon the current between worlds, between what was and what is, connecting the many Ages of the world. The Nile, the Acheron, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Styx and the Aegean Sea are but droplets of the Eternal Ocean.

The hag speaks. “Follow the Tigris northwest, sister of the king.”

I flow closer, to whisper a warning to you. You cannot see the forked tongue that lashes between this witch’s teeth, her mark of kinship with the Mother Dragon of the Deep. Neither can you see the winged lilit flitting around her, nor hear the howl of the demon dogs outside. Your skin breaks in goosebumps, but my words remain the buzz of an insect. Your brother silenced my voice, lady. How am I to save you? Who will keep you from the twisted path to which your choice leads?

“Go thee to the ruins of Nineveh,” the witch says. “A stream branches off Tigris to the

northern hillside. Follow these waters, and you will hear the cry of the owl from a ravine. There you will find an ancient sycamore tree, older than Babylon, older than the pyramids. Its roots dig deep into soil moistened by Immortal Water. There you will find your spring.”

“And if I don’t hear the owl?”

“Then you are not meant to find the spring.”

You fumble with the strings of your pouch. You offer her coins. She makes no move to accept. You toss them onto the dirt, expecting her to scuttle after them. She does not.

You make your way to the door. “My gratitude,” you say, guilty about the coins. “I’m in your debt.”

The witch flashes a toothless, terrible grin. “Oh, in *our* debt you definitely are.” Her cackling haunts every step of our return to the palace.

* * *

At dawn, you ride northwest in a Babylonian merchant’s clothes, your smooth skin and soft hair wound within a scarf. I follow, as love-stricken in death as in life. Once I coveted Homer’s fate, to sing of Alexander’s glory as he sang of Achilles’. The Fates cut my life’s thread short. Now my body rots in a foreign land, my soul unable to reach Charon’s boat. And, so I cling to you, my fair Thessalonike, the one heart-warming memory of my youth before ambition and vanity led me to this empty place. You, the maiden ever beyond my reach.

Many years ago in Pella, I heard rumors of Amazons amidst your distant foremothers. I thought little of it. Every noble house in Greece claims divine or heroic ancestry, descendants of Zeus and Poseidon and Heracles aplenty. Now, watching you ride with a sword at your side and a bow on your back, I wonder...

And I dread.

This land is not Greece, noble Thessalonike. You will come against no centaurs or hydras or bronze-beaked birds. Unfamiliar demons block your path. Artemis will not guide your aim, Athena will not steel your sword. And me, doomed to watch you struggle, beloved, my impotent screams unheard, tickling warnings brushed away like soot. How can I continue into the labyrinthine mouth of this tragedy? Shall I compose an epic no one will ever know? My words will be forgotten the moment they drip from my quill.

Yet, I cannot retreat. I have bound myself to your cause, Thessalonike. I might have betrayed you from my body, but never from here.

Two days later, we reach the ruins of Nineveh, once a great city. Now, the wind laments through shrub-covered mounds, carrying the cry of the hawk and the wild dogs' howl. Acacia and juniper take root amid once splendid temples. Pigeons coo from Ishtar's headless statues.

You ride on, to what was once the great northern gate of the city's walls. Pillars litter the yard, a reminder of Nineveh's final defeat. A great beast suns his spread-out wings. A lamassu, the body of a lion and a man's head. His bearded chin rests upon one monstrous forepaw.

Your horse rears. The lamassu raises his head, and measures you with the bored wisdom of immortality. His tail twists.

"Go back. This path leads only to sorrow." The lamassu's voice is deep, and underlain with a rumbling purr.

Your palms clench to white-knuckled grips around the reins. In older times, these creatures defended kings. Your brother brought down the Persian King, and took his throne. Does this make the beast your friend or your foe?

"I seek the Immortal Water," you say.

"Of course you do." The lamassu stretches his forepaw with a fluid, languid motion. "If

common folk were meant to drink it, you wouldn't have to search. It is hidden for a reason."

"My brother is *not* common folk." Indignation edges your voice.

"Ah. It is not for you, then." A half-smile above the wavy beard, a glimmer of amusement in the deeply-set eyes. "How refreshing."

"Will you let me pass?" Your fingers seek the hilt of your sword.

A blink, then a chuckle. "Silly girl, I'm not blocking your path. There's plenty of space to ride around me."

"B-but you said..."

"Merely a warning, a courtesy to your maternal bloodline. Others guard the spring, servants of the Lady of Deep Waters." His mouth twists. "I have no kinship with those...creatures." He yawns, folds his wings, and rests his head upon his curled forepaw.

As you ride around the beast, trying to keep your horse calm, the lamassu fixes his eyes upon *me*. I am barely a swirl of dust upon the breeze, a few twigs and dried leaves my only substance. This sudden acknowledgment of existence is surprising. He whispers in a tongue that knows neither land nor time, the tongue of those who lurk betwixt and between.

"Your words will *not* be forgotten. Follow her, witness, remember."

Thank you, I want to say. I have no breath. I weep tears of gravel, and ride upon the wind in my lady's wake, the sister of the king.

* * *

After dusk, you hear the owl cry, and steer your horse away from the creek. A cluster of trees stands by a steep—almost vertical—rocky hillside. The breeze carries a hiss, a low susurrations amidst the bushes and the trees. Guardians?

You secure your horse at the turn of path, and crawl behind a boulder amidst thick thorn-

bushes. Ahead, darkness pools within a ravine wide enough for a rider to pass, or two men walking abreast. A blade glints, an arrowhead reflects moonlight. Inhuman claws slide over rock, whispers and murmurs make your skin crawl. You wait. As the waxing moon rises higher over the treetops, you get the first good view.

Scorpion men. Two of them are guarding the mouth of the ravine. To the waist, they look like ordinary warriors, wiry muscles, strong backs, longbows. Their faces sport dark, curly beards in the fashion of Babylonian noblemen. Below the waist, they possess the bodies of monstrous scorpions, six-legs, segmented tail. Their stingers drip venom that leaves trails of blackened soil.

You do not know they are the girtablilu, Tiamat's minions, spawned to launch war against the other gods of this region when Time was young. I saw carvings of their images in many temples. The priests told me their names and origins, but not how to fight them—how to *kill* them. As you draw a deep breath, I curse at my helplessness, my failure to aid you in this battle, my lady.

You leave down your sword, and reach for your bow. Controlled breath, your every move slow and cautious, you nock an arrow and take aim. There it is, at the stretch of the string, at the Amazonian arch of your spine, in your firm grip and steady gaze. Your foremothers have come to your aid: Penthesilia, who took arms against Achilles, at your left, Queen Myrine, who conquered Libya and Gorgon, at your right. Relief coalesces within me, a stilling of my breeze. You do not need *my* aid, not here.

Two arrows hiss, two bodies fall. Heartbeats go by as you wait hidden, until you pick up your sword, and approach the fallen. You poke them. They're dead. They look alike. Siblings? Brood-mates? Ichor oozes from their wounds. You reach down to remove your arrows. Careful, lady. If legends are true, their blood is deadlier than venom.

Without one hiss of warning, without one scraping of claw, a third girtablilu charges from the ravine. His tail misses your shoulder by a hair. You spin on your heel, an arrow loose in your grip. Your sword and bow are beyond reach. I try to grip them, but they will not move.

This foe is not armed. Grey streaks his beard. His mouth twists. His sting strikes again, splintering a tree. You duck. Again he strikes. Sparks jump from a rock beside your foot. Another strike. You dodge and spin. You fall between the bodies.

An inhuman wail. The tail hisses, and you roll. Not fast enough. The sting grazes your arm. Your cry cuts through my half-life as though I still have a heart to pierce. You're dead. There is no antidote for this venom. It will slither through your bloodstream and rot you from inside.

The girtablilu straddles his fallen enemy—you, my lady—even as I take my place between you and him. The stinger slaps through my useless shield of dust. His aim is off. You shove your arrow into the soft spot where he is neither man nor beast.

A screech ricochets through the night. He tries to pull away, but you push harder, rising up, shoving and twisting the arrow, pushing and turning, until the shaft breaks in your hand. The girtablilu upends, tail twisting and spurting venom, face frozen in silent rage.

You have won. And you're still dead.

You gather your weapons, and pour wine over your graze, as if it's a thorn bush scratch. Yet, I see by your furrowed brow that you're aware of your fate. Thought processes unwind upon that beautiful face. Your jaw sets. Perhaps the Immortal Water can heal you too. Three drops bestow immortality, or so the legend goes. Can one drop cure you?

With steady strides, you march into the ravine. There stands the sycamore tree, the owl perched upon a high branch, watching and waiting. Something slithers down its trunk, into grass. Another guardian? No, whatever that was, it's gone, vanished into thick vegetation. You stand,

tilting your head sideways, trying to listen.

Drip.

You glance about in the gloom.

Drip.

Somewhere to your left.

Drip.

A glint amidst the rocks. You stride over there, unstrapping the flask from your belt.

Drip.

There, dripping from a crevice in the ravine's rocky wall.

You uncork the flask with trembling fingers and hold it beneath the spring. And I tremble, too, for even a breath can tremble. Together, we wait in rigid agony for the drops to fall. One, two, three. You cork the flask, and secure it to your waist. Our eyes fix on the crevice, your open palm awaiting one final drop to save your life. Heartbeats pass. No more drops. No more. None.

Tears moisten the ground, tears you don't realize until you taste salt. You cry out, and pound the heartless rock. You lick the crevice, plead for one more drop. You fall on your knees and dig frantically at the ground. Perhaps that mud holds some of the divine essence.

But no blessing hides there, only a great serpent that springs forth, its head the size of a hound's. You push backwards, one hand protecting the flask, the other grabbing for your sword. Dirt sprinkles from its scales. Amber eyes reflect the moonlight twofold. Ancient knowledge hides in the cold way it measures you.

This is no snake, I want to tell you. This is the Mother Dragon of the Deep. She hisses a warning, and slithers back into the hidden abyss.

Your shoulders slump. Your eyes dry. You rub at your arm. From time to time, your jaw

tenses, your brow creases, the only signs of the tempest in your soul. I wish I had a body to hug you, my lady. I wish I had a voice to comfort you in this moment when you must decide.

You look down upon the flask. Your fingers reach, then slide aside, to your wounded arm. You rub. You jam the sword firmly into its sheath, and dust your pants. I follow you in silence as you mount your horse, and ride back to Babylon, to save the life of the man who sent me to prison and death.

Back to Alexander. And I cannot stop you. Would I, if I could? Would I make you drink the water, and condemn your brother and your king to certain death? Is that love, or is this?

* * *

He hasn't improved. Rumors abound, of too much wine, a wound that will not heal, poison, divine revenge. You think little of them as you clean yourself, and don a white chiton. You throw a peplum over your injured arm, so that he won't see the blackened flesh. The purplish vines have started their relentless, deadly climb. By tomorrow you'll be dead, but this night, you will go to your brother as a proper Greek lady, and bearing a priceless gift.

As you cross the halls, carrying the urn with the red Cretan wine, the flask hidden in the folds of your dress, you hear more recent gossip, how Alexander grows weaker by the heartbeat, how he has ordered the doors to his chamber opened so that his troops can pay their final respects.

No. You walk faster. Alexander will not die. Alexander will live and reign forever. You'll see to that.

I dread the moment I must gaze upon my hero-killer. Did he suspect my feelings for you? Did he notice his talkative, boastful poet and biographer, going silent around you? Fool that I was, I thought I had time, once my work was complete, once we were heading home. There was time, always time to tell you later of the love that etched my soul. But how to say it, and when,

and where? It was my poet's heart, my galloping heart that muted my tongue until your brother's ego cut me down.

Now, you'll never know. Yet that most wretched creature ever to dwell in Pandora's box, *Hope*, lingers in my soul. I hope that someday I'll claw through this veil, and you will know.

We enter Alexander's chambers, and you nearly drop the urn. This is not the man who tamed Bukephalas, the great war-horse. This is not the man that conquered Persia, and led his army to India. This man is broken, with bloodshot eyes, short of breath. He lies on a sweat-soaked bed. You force your face blank, and manage a weak smile.

"Thessalonike...you're back." His voice is weary but his face lights up. His gaze shifts past you. Can he see me? "Forgive me," he says. His eyes return to you. "Forgive me for not receiving you properly. This accursed fever robs me of strength."

I hover in your shadow, unsure how to feel. This is the man who cut my life short. And yet he's not. Something different—deeper—lingers in those eyes.

You hold the urn higher. "This will improve your spirits." You turn and find two cups. With your back to him, you slip the precious water into his, and fill them both with wine. Your peplum slips down. You pull it back across your shoulder.

Not fast enough. He saw. Alexander keeps his face blank, but I see it in every line around his eyes. He has not forgotten his mother's tales. He *knows*.

"Here." You give him the cup with Immortal Water, and sit beside him. "Shall we drink to your health?"

The moment stretches on. He studies your face. When he speaks again, his voice is soft, but steady—determined. "If that makes you happy...but first, please, fetch me one more pillow."

As you cross the room, he switches cups. His hand lingers in midair for a heartbeat, one

moment of doubt that quickly dissolves. Alexander has chosen a different kind of immortality. Now I understand what has changed in his eyes. He has finally found his way home, not back to Pella, but to the Elysian Fields, and the heroes of old.

You sit, and take the cup from him. Where is the vengeance I *should* feel? Alexander tortured me to save himself, Thessalonike. Should I not cheer this moment? Now, he spends his own life to spare you.

Death brings clarity, I guess. Olympias set you on this course. Alexander was your king and god since youth. Too deep for words, this kind of love makes us poets and fools. *She* knew it. Her voice wove a web of words around your love-stricken mind. A queen does not embark on dangerous, desperate quests. She has fools for that, and her web that mimics free will.

I loved Alexander once. You love him still. Perhaps I was wrong to chide. I feel an upward swirling at my core, a warm current that reminds me of my cold existence. I grieve the loss of my hero. Sleep well, my king.

* * *

At the crack of dawn, you hear an ululation from beyond the deserts, the mountains, and the seas. Olympias has sensed her son's death. You jump out of bed. Your arm has healed, no purple veins, no cut oozing green pus. Air hunger clenches your chest, blood throbs in your ears. Your vision blurs.

There she is, at the edge of your consciousness. Queen Olympias. Ghostly fingers probe you. She traces your heartbeat, licks at your blood, stretches the folds of your brain. Grief turns to rage. Her wail sends you breathless to your knees. Her son is dead. The Immortal Water runs in *your* veins now.

Guilt chokes you, terror chills your limbs at the countless empty eons stretched before you.

But *I* will be there, my lady, your servant and shadow, until there comes the time when the gods take pity and let me hold you. For now, I have no hands to throw dirt over my head, no nails to claw my face raw or palms to rip out my hair. I swirl upon the breeze, a thin cloud of dust attempting to shroud you in consolation.

Snap. Olympias has returned. Her fingers trace the line of your life, the ethereal umbilical cord that connects you to the Fates' spinning wheel. She has no means to sever it—not even Atropos can cut it now. But she can unravel these threads, one by one. There goes your skill at the sword and bow, there go the verses of Pindaros and Homer, there go your wits. I try to stop her, but her rage scatters me to every corner of the room.

I slowly will myself together—back to you—as she breaks apart your mind and soul. You don't scream. It doesn't hurt. You sob quietly, sucking your thumb. Your face calms. You gaze with the fixed fascination of the senile. Only one thread remains, the core thread, now imbued by immortality, and the guilt it brings. *Snap*, she is gone.

I howl in silence. People come. They inform you of Alexander's death. You do not hear. They leave you to your grief. Useless and desperate, I linger, brushing your arm with specks of dust. Deep into the night, you shiver suddenly, and turn your head, eyes fixed upon me.

On me. Your voice goes steady and calm. "What now, Callisthenes?"

I dare to hope. Then your head tilts, and tears wet your cheeks again. Sobbing quietly, you stand, and walk from the room, barefoot. Clad in your torn white chiton, you leave the palace like an inverted shadow.

Your feet take you through fire but the flames spit you out. They throw you before chariots, but the horses halt and rear. Drooling and filthy, your empty husk treads desolate roads, always onwards, always north-west, toward the sea.

I hear fluttering of wings. Has Hermes Psychopomp come to lead you—and me—to Hades at last? But no God appears. I follow, and witness, and grieve, and remember.

Most people look away. Some spit thrice to avert evil, others point and laugh. Children throw dirt. Heartless thugs shove you to the ground. You ignore them all, pull yourself up, and march on. Your lips move with incoherent mumbling. Every step becomes another verse of your ceaseless chant. I do not hear your words clearly until we've almost reached the sea.

“Alexander lives and conquers.”

I leave you to your delusion. I have no heart to tell you otherwise, even if I had the voice.

Something unexpected begins to happen. I watch fresh pathways weave through your heart and mind, restore pieces of your soul. New threads replace severed ones. They are abnormal, and slither into strange patterns anointed by the Immortal Water, but they make you stronger. Your eyes focus, your strides steady, your back straightens. I dare to hope once more. Somehow, this endless litany heals you.

You stop on a cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea. Home.

Under skies brewing heavy weather, with unkempt hair lashing at your face, you turn to look at me. You smile. In those haunted, sunken eyes, I see the maiden I met in Pella, unblemished by hardship.

“What now, Callisthenes?”

Stay with me, I want to cry, but I cannot. And yet you hear me, treading on that fine line between madness and wisdom. You're more than flesh now, and I'm still less than a man.

“I cannot,” you say. “I do not belong among people now.”

Stay with me. Words fail. There's no poetry in that plea. I release it, the self-criticism, the hesitancy of my life. *I will trade my memories of Homer and Aeschylus for a lifetime with you.*

Just...stay.

“I cannot,” you say. “My choices were torn from me, except for my last.” Your gaze measures the height of the cliff, and the far reaches of the deep blue sea. “I will not flee from my debt. I will return the Immortal Water to its source.”

No! No, my lady! Please.

“Oh, Callisthenes... I wish we could have followed another path, grew old together, herded goats and mended fishing nets in a village by the sea. But you have a poet’s soul, your uncle’s legacy, and I was born the sister and daughter of great kings.” Emaciated hands caress my maelstrom of sand and shells and dead leaves. I feel lily-scented fingertips against naked flesh. My spirit shivers.

“Think well of me, Callisthenes,” you whisper.

My cry becomes the howling wind. You choose not to hear me. Three steps back. Spread-out arms that envy the flight of the sea-hawk. A brilliant smile, a calm face, conviction.

You fall. I follow. The Goddess rises from the deep, and cuts your fall short. *Tethys, Tiamat, Thalassa*. From the waist up, she is a lady of divine beauty. Countless silver serpents slither through her dark hair. From the waist down, she has the scaly tail of a fish. Her right arm pulls you to her bosom. With her left—her crooked, blackened left arm—she wields the storm.

In a moment of serenity, I float in mid air, transfixed by the gentleness with which she holds you. The calm before the storm.

Her face twists. Her forked tongue darts. Her left hand claws into your flesh. I scream. I buffet at her face. It’s useless, less than the buzz of a fly. I can only watch her fingers peel away your skin, strip by quivering strip.

You weep and squirm, but you do not scream, as your blood dyes the sea red. Your legs fuse,

sewn by threads of sinew and torn skin. Fish scales spring from raw flesh. Cut by cut, your face changes, your humanity torn apart by her hands. Cut by cut, she molds you after her own image. Soon, she will loose you into her sea, storm-bringer, omen of death.

I howl as I have never howled, from the root of me, heedless of its rhythms and subtext. “Release her! Who are you to destroy what the gods have made?”

She hears me. She sees me. Her voice rings like thunder. “What are you, compared to my storm?” A whip of that great tail and I’m undone. I cannot reassemble the specs of my half-life. Countless flakes of consciousness float helpless on the wind, bound to scatter across the Aegean Sea. I’ve failed you, my lady. We are lost. Who now will recite your tale, your bravery and your valor?

Great wings flap. A beast plummets down. A lamassu, here? He gathers us upon his wings. We cling to every strand of leonine fur, to every feather, every curl of his dark beard.

The Goddess hisses and shrieks. She lashes her tail, curls her crooked hand into a black fist. But the lamassu is a creature of the sun, and protector of kings. It evades lash after lash, and soars above the storm. Sunlight warms us. Wind diminishes to breeze. He shakes. We become a cloud of golden dust between sun and sea.

“Go,” he says, as he did in Nineveh. “Remember.” His voice is soft, androgynous, the merged voices of Alexander, and Philip, and Achilles, and Queen Myrine, and Penthesilia, the voices of kings and queens and heroes since the world’s making. “Your words will not be lost, for you are many.”

Spec by spec, we bid farewell to the great beast. Spec by spec, we drizzle through the clouds, across our homeland. Days, weeks, years, centuries pass. The Mother Dragon has returned into the deep, and our lady the mermaid prowls beneath the waves. With her trident and the storm,

she brings death to those who answer her wrongly.

But we know. We remember. We seek the scribe's pen, guide the monk's quill. We whisper to wrinkled crones, to grey-haired fishermen mending their nets, children gathering seashells, the goatherds, the stone-cutters, women awaiting their menfolk at the docks. The sister of the king shall not be forgotten, nor her secret lost.

When she asks you about her brother, the king, tell her this: Alexander lives and conquers.