

Chapter One

Wind and Fire

Antiope's breath rasped like a distant wave scouring a rocky shore. *Too faint to sustain life.* Briseis squeezed her mother's hand, then balanced her mother's limp hand on her own, shifting each finger until the two matched up. When had her fingers grown as long as her mother's? It didn't mean she was ready to take on her mother's work alone. She rubbed gently, but Antiope's hand remained slack. Briseis shifted closer to her mother on the bed and adjusted the fleeces cushioning her mother's shoulders from the leather straps pulled across the bed's wooden frame. No response. *What should I do, Mama? Tell me how to save you. You've taught me to be a healer from birth, but I don't know this, the one thing I have to know. Tell me.*

Briseis leaned over to kiss her mother's forehead. Her lips pressed Antiope's skin—cool as bone—and Briseis's red-gold hair brushed against her mother's ashen cheeks. She shuddered at the contrast. The fever was gone. The single worry line had smoothed. These signs, reassuring at other times, tightened the knot in Briseis's chest—intimations of withdrawal, not healing. Her mother had let go.

Months ago she'd discovered her mother's secret illness. She'd begged her to fight it, tried every cure she could discover, even though her mother refused to offer advice, saying there was no point. Nothing Briseis did slowed her mother's decline. Now, Antiope would die if Briseis didn't strengthen that ragged breath.

Why hadn't her father and two oldest brothers stayed home today? The king had summoned them, but still All had seemed as usual in the morning, her mother no worse than any other day among the many she'd been ill. This sudden downturn had taken Briseis by surprise. *Wake up, Mama, you can't die now. I won't let you.*

Briseis glanced at the youngest of her brothers, Iatros, seated on a stool at the far side of her mother's bed. He twisted the hem of his tunic first in one direction and then in the other. Normally, she would have pulled him close and told him not to worry—she couldn't today. His fear was well founded. She turned toward her old nurse, Eurome, waiting for something useful to do, her soft, round figure sagging against the doorframe. *What else can I try?* Briseis felt the familiar tightening at her temples. She willed away the threatening headache. *Not now. I need to think.*

The storm that had blown in so suddenly threw wind and rain against the closed shutters of the clerestory windows. So late in the winter no one had expected such bad weather. Would it prevent her father and brothers from returning home? The pounding against the shutters sounded like some beast trying to break in—no ordinary storm. She imagined the squall building up force in some distant, dangerous place like Greece, blowing across the Aegean Sea and flinging itself against Mount Ida's flanks. The frenzy outside mocked her mother's stillness. Inside, the flickering light came from clay oil lamps, causing the geometric patterns frescoed on the mud-brick walls to lunge and recoil.

"She's barely breathing. What do we do?" Iatros said, leaning in to be closer to his mother.

Briseis shook her head. Though already sixteen and a year older than she was, he had a small, tense body and round cheeks, never yet shaved with a scraper. His gentle brown eyes and dark curls, startling against his worry-blانched face, deepened Briseis's dread of carrying on without their mother. Antiope had always sheltered Iatros in a manner unlike her treatment of his brothers. How would he fare without that guidance?

Briseis rubbed her eyes and blinked back the pain pressing behind them. Her hair, escaped as usual from its bronze butterfly clasp, annoyed her and she pushed it out of the way. *Can't you give me a sign, Mama? We always worked together.* Not anymore. Her mother's silence crushed down on her shoulders.

"What should we do?" Iatros said again.

Briseis looked at her mother's slack face. "We give her strength."

"If she doesn't breathe, how can she be strong?" Iatros walked around the bed and stood beside his sister, staring down at the still figure.

What have I missed all these months? Any moment, that small breath will stop. I have to do something. Briseis hunted in her mind for a way to make her mother strong again. She sifted through the teachings she learned from Antiope, rites and cures handed to generations of women in her family directly from the healing goddess Kamrusepa. She and her mother both served as priestesses to the goddess, and though Briseis herself had not yet grown comfortable with the temple rites, her mother always expressed closeness to the goddess, especially in the temple. Until the last year, Antiope's life vibrated with Kamrusepa's presence. This illness was inexplicable.

Briseis noticed a twitch at her mother's temple, then nothing. She pushed off the bed, straightening to her full height, taller than most men.

"We will have to help her breathe." She turned to the doorway and saw Eurome's eyes brighten. For as long as Briseis could remember, her nursemaid Eurome had been part of her life—pampering, scolding, teasing, teaching—constantly chattering, but always reassuringly there.

"Eurome, we'll light the brazier. Mama hates foul smells, so I haven't used this cure before, but I don't care now. We're going to make a plaster of wax and spices to strengthen her breath. That's what she would do."

Eurome rushed downstairs for a coal from the hearth, agile despite her weight.

Briseis reached for her mother's satchel, full of healing materials, and laid out supplies on a table beside the bed. She measured mustard seed and sulfur into a mortar and ground them. She glanced at her brother, his narrow shoulders hunched forward.

Briseis passed Iatros the satchel. "Find the ball of beeswax and soften it on the brazier."

Eurome returned with a coal in a long-handled bronze cup and lit the kindling in the brazier. She put an empty pot on to warm and then rubbed one of Antiope's hands, the smoothness of the sick woman's hand contrasting with the wrinkles of age and work. "Take my strength, Lady Antiope, all you need."

Iatros worked the wax in the pot and then used the edge of his tunic to pull it off the fire. "It's ready."

Briseis nodded. "Mix while I pour this in. Careful. It will sting your eyes, but that's why it will awaken Mama and strengthen the intake of her breath."

"Shouldn't I do that?" asked Eurome.

Iatros shook his head. "It's my job."

When they'd blended the yellow powder into the soft wax, Briseis undid the braided tie at the neck of her mother's sleeping tunic and exposed a small area. She touched the frail, ashen skin and Briseis's breath caught—her strong, proud mother so diminished now. Despite the powerful fumes that made their eyes water as Briseis spread the plaster on her mother's chest, Antiope's breathing did not deepen. Her eyes, however, fluttered open and she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Her mouth moved. Briseis bent close to hear the sighed fragments. “No more, daughter . . . The hardest lesson . . . is accepting death.” Antiope’s chest rose and fell softly as she caught her breath. “No more for me to do. Your training . . . as healing priestess . . . is complete.”

Antiope paused. “My need . . . to escape this pain is greater than your need . . . family’s need . . . for me. I served the goddess Now . . . you, Briseis.” She turned her head toward Iatros. “Son . . .” He took her hand in both of his and kissed it. “You and your sister help each other.” The bones along Antiope’s cheeks drew her skin to a fragile thinness, almost translucent.

“You’ve devoted yourself to Kamrusepa all your life,” Briseis said. “Why won’t she save you and take away the pain?” Briseis’s fingers knotted tightly into the curly fleece covering the bed frame.

Antiope closed her eyes a moment. Then she opened them and looked at her daughter. Her throat rattled with the effort to draw in more air. “Even goddesses . . . must accept the death of mortals dear to them . . . but she is here with me.”

Antiope raised her hand a little from the bed. “Your father? Brothers?”

“Father hasn’t returned, nor Adamas and Bienor. I sent a messenger after them as you asked.”

“Ah, well” Her mother’s eyes closed, and she seemed to sink further into the bed.

Briseis slipped out of the room and stood at the top of the stairs, wanting to hear the noise of her father and brothers coming through the gate. She’d sent one of the menservants to tell them to come right away. In good weather it only took part of an afternoon to get from the walled city of Lyrnessos back to the estate, but with this storm When they left that morning, the sky was clear enough and her mother hadn’t shown any alarming signs. They had no reason not to go, especially when the king needed her father’s advice because of the rumors of Greek raids. Reports had come in of attacks on the towns north of their powerful ally Troy. Her father was the king’s chief military advisor and he’d raised her two oldest brothers as warriors, so they had gone with him to the Council the king had called. But if they didn’t get home soon, it would be too late.

Hearing nothing, Briseis turned back to her mother’s room. When she held her fingers to her mother’s mouth, she could barely feel the movement of breath. The burn of rage Briseis had felt for months flared hotter. Her mother had concealed her illness until she couldn’t hide her pain any longer. They should have fought it together from the beginning. Her mother always said

illness treated early was illness cured. When Antiope insisted they could do nothing, Briseis hunted for months for a cure among the clay tablets in her mother's library. While her mother had written, "Thus says Antiope" at the bottom of some of them, the tablets from past healers also filled the library. Briseis decided her mother hadn't had the strength to search through the records as she would have for any other ill person. But of the various teas and poultices Briseis tried, along with the many rites, none had improved Antiope's health.

Briseis believed her mother had given in to this illness, accepted defeat from the beginning. Illness generally came from the gods as punishment for violations against the gods' laws. In case her mother had neglected a sacrifice or some similar affront—any more serious sin seemed unlikely—Briseis performed a snake divination at the temple to ask Kamrusepa directly how they had offended the gods. But the swimming snakes had given only a muddled answer as they touched the words inscribed in the great basin. The snakes failed to identify anything Briseis could correct. Even before she'd tried the divination it had seemed impossible to Briseis that her mother could have sinned so greatly that Kamrusepa sent the illness, but giving in to the disease felt like a sin to Briseis. Her mother had resigned herself to death too easily, and the gods abandoned her because she did not love life enough—their gift to all. She needed to be dragged back to life.

Briseis had an idea. "You two stay with Mama. I need some supplies."

She ran downstairs to the back storerooms, the sound of the storm growing muted as she went deeper into the house with its thick walls. Once inside the library, the comforting odor of clay soothed her. Her mother, Briseis thought, was a mixture of lavender and earthy clay. She pulled tablets from the wooden pigeonholes, scanning the words formed with a reed stylus that her brothers said looked like bird tracks. She found it, "The Breath of Life Incantation." It hadn't made sense to her when she'd been required to copy it for practice three years ago, but it did now. Her heart felt light. She committed the rite to memory and tucked the palm-sized tablet back in its place.

She hurried through the megaron hall, the main room of the house with its two-storied ceiling and circular hearth, out to the main courtyard and into the kitchen opposite the stables. The wind-driven rain splattered under the portico's shelter.

The cook, a middle-aged woman with a kinder heart than her boney, hard face indicated, looked up in surprise from sorting lentils when Briseis appeared at the door.

“For Mama, hurry. I need honey, mint and sweet wine.”

The cook quickly gathered everything on a tray, and Briseis carried it back upstairs. From the carved wooden chest next to the floor-to-ceiling loom in her mother’s sitting room, she grabbed a sachet of lavender and a clay incantation jar shaped like a fig.

Iatros and Eurome looked up when she entered the sleeping chamber. She set down the tray on the table and leaned in close over her mother. Antiope’s lips were parted, her eyes closed, their lids withered like fallen leaves in winter. The space between breaths felt impossibly long.

Iatros crouched by the bed, biting his upper lip, eyes fixed on his sister.

Briseis shifted her mother’s legs aside and sat down. She closed her eyes and waited while the fear she felt emptied out with each breath she exhaled. The power of the ritual’s words filled her mind. She called to Kamrusepa, praying for her to give power to this rite.

She opened her eyes and placed both hands on her mother’s chest, then her head.

“Antiope, wife of Glaukos, mother of Bienor, Adamas, Iatros, and Briseis, you have heard death whisper in your ear. You have mistaken that whisper for the nurturing breath that flows in and out of every human being. You have gone after death. Return now. Hear the breath of life.”

Briseis poured wine and honey into the fig jar, breathed into it, and then added the lavender and mint, crushing the leaves to release their scent as she held the jar close to her mother.

“Antiope, do you smell the spring? The time of new growth and blossoms? Remember the spring. Remember your children. Remember the sweetness of life. Remember that you love life. Take a strong breath.”

Silently Briseis added, *Come back, Mama, I need you. Remember how much I love you.* Antiope sighed and her eyelids fluttered for a moment. Iatros cried out.

Briseis’s heart leapt like a deer. “Mama!”

Daughter and son clung to their mother’s hands. They waited for Antiope to open her eyes and reassure them that she would live. They listened for the slow rattle to quicken. Instead it faded, caught once, tangled in a last wisp of life, then fell silent.

Tears ran down Briseis’s face, hot against her skin. Gradually her wet cheeks grew cold.

Later—how much later Briseis wasn’t sure—Eurome gently pulled Iatros and Briseis from their mother’s side. The old woman gathered them into her arms and held them tight against her

generous bosom. Iatros sobbed, but Briseis's tears had burned away in anger. She raged at her mother, Kamrusepa, and death itself. In spite of the storm, she needed to run outdoors into the fields and woods. Something vital would boil over inside her if she did not escape from this room with its stink of sulfur and the sight of her lifeless mother.

She broke free from her nurse, raced down the stairs and out into the courtyard. As soon as she left the protection of the portico, the rain and wind hit her full force. She ran across the courtyard toward the tall wooden gates that protected the house from raiders. The gatekeeper had thrown them open in the hope that Glaukos and his sons would soon return.

Briseis pushed against the rain, running fast along the path through the fields of her father's estate toward the creek. The storm surrounded her. The clouds lay so low they seemed to swallow the foothills of Mount Ida that fingered down into her father's land. Mist cloaked even the lowest terraces of orchards on the slopes, and the forests higher up had disappeared entirely. Soon her clothes clung to her in soggy, cold folds that she tugged out of her way. The wind pulled most of her coppery hair from its clasp, blowing it about her face and up like a wild crown. The icy spears of rain drove hard against her face, and she felt relief at focusing on her discomfort.

She wanted her mother. Antiope taught that the hardest lesson for a healer is accepting death, but Briseis had already lost patients. She had learned that lesson. Her mother's death wasn't a lesson. It was personal, a searing pain. She turned her palms and face into the hard-pounding rain.

The leather soles of her shoes slipped on the muddy path. She stumbled over a broken branch near the creek. Fallen limbs lay all about. She ignored the menace and headed for the place where a huge oak reached its branches over the creek. She had come here often as a small child with her nurse to look for watercress for the kitchen. Later she came alone on hot summer days to cool her feet, enjoying the sound of the creek and the tree's leafy shelter. Now she wanted to throw her arms around the trunk, an anchor against her loss.

As she peered through the rain, there, unmistakably, was the sharp bend in the creek, but instead of the tree she saw a strange emptiness. The gray sky glowered at her where once the oak's branches had offered shelter. The creek's bank looked like an angry god had ripped out a huge piece of it and flung down stone and mud in disgust. Uprturned roots reached helplessly

toward their old home. The tree sprawled across the creek, and the water boiled up behind it, creeping toward her as it overflowed its banks.

She retreated from the muddy surge. Her wet skirt tangled her legs, but she yanked it out of the way and climbed onto a boulder high on the creek's bank. Her tunic stuck to her back. Rain ran down her face. She shivered with cold, but she didn't want to leave the storm. Staring at the chaos around her, she felt a kindred soul in this violence. She wanted to break and tear until she rooted out the grief that filled her at the thought of her mother's lifeless body in the upstairs chamber.

She sat on the boulder above the churning creek and curled her arms around her knees into a tight ball, her head tucked. How would the days ahead feel without her mother's steady presence? She wanted her mother with her for one thing especially—her marriage to the king's son, Mynes. That day loomed close and filled her with dread. She feared Mynes. *Please let my fear be mistaken.*

Why hadn't Kamrusepa protected her mother? She wanted to demand an answer, but that might prove dangerous. She must not anger the goddess. As the city's only healing priestess—no longer in training, whatever she might wish—Briseis now held the well-being of Lyrnessos in her hands: the fertility of crops and women, their health. She would pray and sacrifice to Kamrusepa at the Spring Festival, and the goddess would either listen or not. She must do all she could to be beloved of the goddess the way her mother had been.

Her mother's whisper returned. "Even goddesses must accept the death of mortals dear to them." Briseis unfolded herself and stood. She gathered her sodden skirt and leapt from the boulder, throwing herself into the wind, feeling the strength of it course through her body. That strength could dash her against the stones and yet she felt it inside like blood flowing through her, sustaining her. Did her goddess understand her grief with equal pain and offer this strength? She ran with the wind's force along the edge of the swollen creek and saw the image of tears pouring down Kamrusepa's cheeks. Then from the stores of tales she had loved throughout her childhood came other grieving goddesses, bent in sorrow, flooding her imagination, providing her with strange comfort that they suffered as she did and yet endured.

Amongst these images, one goddess stood out. Thetis crouched over the body of her warrior son, clawing at her cheeks while she howled. From the bard's tale, Briseis recognized Achilles in the bloodied figure, the greatest of the Greeks, with his red-gold hair, piercing green

eyes, and fluidity born of the sea—except this hero still lived. Why this image of his death? Then she remembered that his divine mother had tried to burn away her infant son's mortality, to spare herself this eternal grief, each night laying him in the magic embers and searing away a little more frailty, creating the most invincible warrior of all. Her husband Peleus, a mere man, saw her rite and misunderstood the flames. He snatched the baby from the fire and through his mistake doomed him to die. His love-inspired ignorance would also doom Thetis to suffer eternal sorrow once that dread moment Briseis had imagined finally came. Even a goddess could not escape grief, no matter how hard she tried. Forever this searing pain, like Briseis's. Perhaps, Briseis allowed, Thetis's pain would be worse—a child lost, unbearable, unnatural. Perhaps the gods should not love any mortal too dearly.

Briseis turned toward home, letting the rain, cold and hard, obliterate her tears. She stumbled back to the house, her limbs spent, slow going amidst the maelstrom's power.