P ROL OGUE



# Head Down into Darkness

Running out the anchor line, the pirates babbled to one another, and in the tangle of their barbaric language, Aspasia listened for one word—*Athens.* It lit up the darkness in her mind, like the single glint her eyes fixed on above the distant gray-green hills. That had to be the tip of Athena’s spear shining all the way from the Acropolis—her father had promised her they’d see it from the water. Or was it only some stray signal light?

“Athens.” She heard it again.

She took a deep breath and held on to it—practicing.

The captain would tie her up in the morning before heading in. He always did, and he planned on selling her here. Her and the book scrolls.

It would have to be tonight.

The line slackened abruptly. The men jerked back to set the anchor.

It was deep enough for a dive. And her family had a kinsman in Athens. Two things on her side.

Plus, another she clutched like a pearl from the discarded shells of someone else’s oyster bake: they had no idea she could swim or they would have tied her up each time they dropped anchor.

The watch swung his lantern to test it against the breeze. She flattened under the glaring eye. She could count on his falling asleep—they always did. Not like Greeks. She lizarded to the edge. The water far below was black in the shadow of the ship. A plank

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creaked. She froze. No noisy jump. It would have to be a dive. Head down into darkness. She’d never dived at night.

Fill your lungs and lock the gates and necessity will lift you to the surface, her father had instructed.

*Hold to the principles.*

But this deck was higher than Chin Rock.

And the hull bulged between the deck and the waterline.

She trembled, shaken again by the memory of the tremor of the boat when they threw her father over and his head cracked against that massive hull. It had been—she linked her fingers in sequence— four days. She had fallen asleep with her cheek pressed to a scroll. A sudden jolt. Had they hit a log? Where was Axiochus? Her father always sat near when she slept. In terror, she’d run to the side and saw him in the water, his head cracked open, his brains bobbing like brine scum. His back and feet, tied at the ankles, blurred beneath the waves. Weighted down and sucked in, his body left a small depression, like a navel, for the water to fill.

The captain had put his fat arm around her shoulders as if to comfort her. Then his hand reached to her breast. He squeezed her nipple, a hornet sting.

He must have felt the pounding of her heart—and heard it as she did. Her body inside was already too known to him.

The men were watching.

Her father’s head, heavy with all he had learned, had jarred the

ship.

She hated the swollen hull, feared cracking her skull. Far beneath, the waves flipped like minnows.

*Then do you want to be sold?*

With his shaved face and head, the captain was more naked

than any human being on earth. In instructing her in the pleasures of men, he explained in broken Greek that he was protecting her from the barbarous crew.

And raising the price he’d get for her.

Knowing a few words doesn’t make a man Greek—he was as barbarian as the rest of them.

*If only I could set up the dive standing to get past that hull. . .*

The watch’s snort startled her.

*Pericles and Aspasia*

Standing was too risky.

She’d wait for his snores to even themselves.

Although the moon was small and it was high time to start off.

Her eyes narrowed, searching for Athena’s spear where the dark sky met the darker land.

A snort, a cough.

Water looks thicker in the dark. *If only they’ d anchored closer in. Or if only I*. . .

She frowned to rein in her thoughts. All the *if-only*s had floated off with her father’s brains*.*

The watch had slept several breaths-worth.

She bid goodbye to the scrolls—not to her father. He after all. . . Curling her body over the edge, she hung there like a sucking

bug.

She breathed deeply, locked the gates. Closed her eyes. Opened them.

Took another deep breath. An interrupted snore.

No more starting over.

She fought the air—a bundle twisting out of itself, wrenching

free of flatness, and spiraling head down.

Keep the gates closed.

She hit. The blow, the noise and the cold conspired for her breath.

But she pruned her face.

Would her head meet a stone? She flattened her palms.

Her lungs insisted on air. Expanding her ribs, she fooled them. Not yet.

Going deeper, she pacified her lungs with imitated breaths. She slowed against the water.

Now. Her chest an iron door, she arched upward. Her being drew into the pocket of her lungs.

She crashed the surface—afraid. Was her snort louder than the waves?

She swung her head around. The ship was dark. She was landward. And beyond the ship’s shadow.

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She kept to small, quiet breaths, listening.

Still no light. Good—it was time the gods did her a favor. She surrendered to a long deep breath—silent within her ribs. Face up, she floated.

Her garment squeezed her limbs.

Her muscles refused to do what was necessary. She argued with them.

She shoved her chiton off her slippery shoulders easily but peeling off the linen clinging to her hips and legs was like working a knot. She circled her neck for a rest. Her hands moved under water switching tasks—buoying her and working at the wet, flat slices of the fabric.

They’d pull her in like a fish. Gagging.

She turned herself into the shape of an eye and spun under the water, making a complete turn—porpoises do it.

Part of the hem floated loose. She spun around again—the fabric tightened like wool on a spindle. She breathed in fear. The boat was farther away. She swung her head around—so was the shore.

*Swim*. My legs.

Free your legs.

Shoulders leading, she made a slow porpoise turn. An edge uncoiled—a tail. The shore was more distant. She shoved. The fabric drifted off, smaller.

Only the black ship interrupted the waves.

She kicked from the hips, as her father taught her.

Her breath was tight. She listened for his voice: “Open your mouth wide.”

*A girl must never open her. . .*

“Raise that shoulder.” Her arms grew heavy. “Forearm loose.”

The briefest rest and the shore grew distant. Forearm loose, mouth wide. . .

At dawn they’d see her missing. Faster.

But her arms were heavier.

*Pericles and Aspasia*

The waves were noisier. Higher against her face. The shore ahead was blurry.

Her fingers brushed stones. Stay low. She pulled herself in on her hands.

The water let go. Immediately Earth pulled her down—true everywhere, evidently.

Earth is flies and sharp, cracked shells with rotting creatures.

*Only at low tide.*

Earth ground her ribs, pelvis and knees into the stones.

They say that vagrant men, thieves, scapegoats roam the beaches. Naked and white, she was a beacon. She snaked toward the bushes.

The East was still dark. She twisted around on her hip—so was the ship dark, but how long could good luck hold? They’d drop the skiff. She’d seen how fast they rowed after a big fish.

Athena holding her spear was somewhere west, beyond the dark and bushes.

Her hands, elbows, knees and heels pushed against the stones and sand. *Worms move faster.* She tried to force the thicket. Her hands closed on thistles. There was the slim beginning of light, no more than a haze. . . Her heart sped like when they murdered her father. Each loud beat of her heart forced more unwelcome blood into her head like a dagger.

She lowered her forehead to the sand. Her teeth chattered. Her arms wrapped around her chest, her hands gripping her shoulder blades. Tears squeezed from her closed lids. *If only. . .*

A prick—a stab. Poisoned! She sat up fast, dizzy.

No snake. No bite mark.

*If only*. She shook her finger as her father did when he arrived at a philosophical point*. If-onlys not allowed.*

A fresh breeze crossed her face, a passenger on the rising tide.

She breathed it in deeply.

Less stink. Fewer flies.

Water flowing? If it was there before she hadn’t heard it.

Not the on-and-off, yes-and-no of lapping waves. Steady. A stream. She stood up and ran toward the sound.

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She took long steps over the slippery rocks, eyes down, her ankles stiff with guiding her feet, her toes clutching where they could. The woods hid the bright stain in the eastern sky but remembering it, she sped up, her arms tilting and shifting like birds’ wings. When the stream deepened, she took to the side, clinging to bushes to make a turn but was forced back into the pooled water. How long could her heart keep up that bird-like flutter?

She spotted something white at the base of a broad stone—a chiton. The wrong side of the stream but she breasted over and snatched it—why not? Hadn’t the girl who’d washed it left it out all night to get wet a second time?

Where was she going to get shoes and a head scarf?

Thin and distant, like copper pans beaten with wooden spoons, she heard men’s voices calling across the water.

The path in front of her would lead to whoever owned the chiton.

She waded against heavy water back to what she had come to think of as *her* side, holding the chiton above her head; she headed for a collapsed slope—no moss—pulled herself onto the bank, pulled on the damp garment, and stoop-ran along the deer path.

The sun was behind her: that meant that Athena’s spear was somewhere ahead.

At first, she skirted the habitations and out-buildings, but soon there were too many to evade. She stopped behind a copse and pinch shaped the drape of her chiton that had partly dried. She pulled her hair into a twisted hank and poked the end into the middle; it uncoiled. Should she use twigs for pins? What a way to enter a city. She divided the hank and yanked the two sections into a knot behind her ears. She had no head scarf and most odd—and most noticeable because the chiton was too short for her—no sandals. Her bony ankles and long feet stuck out. She was sunburned. Bruised. Dusty. She was hungrier than she’d ever felt—that probably showed, too. People would take her for a crude country girl, or a waif.

And which city was she approaching? By the depth and angle from which she’d glimpsed the spear point from the water, she’d gauged it was Athens. But what if it had just been a signal? Or a mirage? She could have been meandering like the curving river near

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her home in Miletus. Those city walls ahead might be Port Piraeus where the crew, by now, might be roaming the streets. And the Captain, angry as Ares because he lost his prize. *Or whoever his war god is.* Her mind’s eye saw his hairless face, grimacing.

She sat on a fallen tree trunk and, to avoid meeting the eyes of strangers, fit a stone to her palm and set about smoothing her fingernails. With her eyes focused on her hands, she could decide herself whose gaze to catch. And listen for a Milesian accent.

More people were passing in both directions. Some were returning to the city from their farms and some were returning to their farms after a day of buying and selling in the city. They had places to go. But she was no animal—to spend another night in the open.

A shadow, the edge of a skirt, and the aroma of sausage in a covered basket at the level of her nose—the last made Aspasia raise her eyes faster than she’d intended.

“I notice your sandals slipped off.” The girl’s accent wasn’t Milesian.

“Sometimes sandal straps break,” Aspasia replied. She was far taller than this girl, but the girl had yellow hair. “Are you heading for Piraeus?”

“No, Athens.” The girl nodded toward the city walls. “Why, are you going to Piraeus?”

“Athens. But unfortunately . . . ” Aspasia looked around, “I left my headscarf somewhere.” Her eyes came to rest on the basket.

Sitting next to Aspasia on the log, the girl unwound the cloth covering it. “I’ll need it back though.”

*Was this girl simple—lending what she might never see again?* Accepting the scarf, Aspasia spotted two large coins between the sausage and some figs. *And letting others see her drachmas.*

Though how simple could she be to get her hands on those coins?

“Are you on your way home from a visit,” Aspasia asked.

“Yes, and he gave me some other things, too.” Chewing, the girl handed a fig to Aspasia.

Aspasia bit off the tough end. Many people ate the whole thing but she didn’t.

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The girl stood up and tucked the coins in her cheek. No sausage for the moment.

“Rhodia’s expecting me.” The girl shook twigs from her chiton. “What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?” “Silky.”

*What kind of a name—*

“Do they just call you that.” Silky lowered her eyes.

Aspasia had never met a hetaira, but she knew one thing about them—they were the kind of women who made their living by pleasing men.

“If you need a place,” Silky continued, “I’m sure Rhodia would take you in. She always needs girls.”

And this Silky took her for one of them. How not, a girl alone, sitting beside a path?

“Silky, do you know anyone living in Athens from Miletus?” “The girls are from everywhere—I’m from Megara. I’m sure

someone—”

“Someone who really lives here, a man with a household.” “There’s a Hippodamus from Miletus—all the girls know him.

He had me to his symposium, but he doesn’t want a woman for his own.” Silky brought her mouth close to Aspasia’s ear. “Not even a wife.”

“Lead me to Hippodamus’ house, Silky.”

“I told you my name but you didn’t tell me yours.”

They say everyone bargains in Athens. “Aspasia.” *Be fair.* “From Miletus.”

“How did you get here, Aspasia?” “Let’s find Hippodamus’ house.”

Silky eyed her and shook her head. “You have a bruise on your cheek.” Aspasia’s hand went to her cheek. “And a cut above your eye. Your chiton doesn’t cover your knees. And you’re barefoot—you’d better stay close to me.”

The city wall looked sturdy and the stones were laid in even courses, like a good weave, at least along this stretch. And they

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kept the base clear of weeds. Perhaps Athens would live up to her reputation, or some of it.

“Silky, when you’re in Athens, can you see Athena’s spear point shining from wherever you are?”

“I’ve seen the whole Athena—she’s on the Acropolis.”

“I mean can you see it everywhere in the lower city? Can you see it from where Hippodamus lives?”

“I don’t remember. Here’s the gate—hold my basket handle tight so we don’t get separated.”

A mob—like Poseidon’s wave—came toward them. “The Assembly must have just let out,” Silky said. “We can wait until they’re all through the gate.”

“I’m already late and you want me to show you Hippodamus’ house.” Silky pushed to the side so they could follow a thin current entering the city.

“Grab it, Aspasia!”

A man had snatched Silky’s sausage. Aspasia lunged for it but drew back as she felt a pain across her toes. Someone’s boot had come down on her foot. The sausage was gone.

Silky wiped tears from her eyes.

Did this mean she wouldn’t show her the way to Hippodamus?

The current moving their way thrust them through the gate into the city. Silky, tugging with the basket, led them to an inset in the wall, out of the crowd. Aspasia bent down to check her foot, already turning blue—didn’t she have enough bruises already? She brushed off the mud. Memory forced itself through the pain. She straightened her back and turned from the wall. Locating the tall hill and searching with her eyes she found at its top the spark of light. Now she was certain—that shining point was Athena’s spear.