



ENEMY
AT THE
GATE

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Chapter 1

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LARISSA, GREECE - 5 AM

I loved the sound of rain on the roof, jumping in puddles, and the smell of the grass after the rain had stopped. It was clean and felt like the dawn of something better. My name is Zoe Lambros, and I was nearly thirteen years old before everything changed. If you believe in the Fates, you could say that they sealed our futures in the early hours of that soggy first day of March when our long nightmare began. I didn't take any notice of the Fates or anything else for that matter.

It had been raining for most of the week; it was cold, wet, and windy, but no one minded. It had been a brutal winter, mired by the weather and the war against the Italians in the Albanian mountains. We all thought Spring would bring a welcome change; we hadn't had a lot to celebrate since that fateful day in October 1940. We had been plunged into war against the Italians, but our boys were heroically fighting against the invaders, and we were winning. We were confident that they were coming home soon, so convinced that the war was nearly over that we decided it was an excellent time to get baby Arestia christened. She had waited long enough, and if they waited even longer, they would have to have her christening just before her wedding!

It had been quite a party that lasted long into the night. By the time I went to bed, it was around two in the morning.

"Polyxeni wants out! Polyxeni wants out!"

I had barely been asleep for an hour or so when that high-pitched voice penetrated my sleep-deprived brain. I groaned and pulled the blanket over my head in the vain hope the parrot would shut up.

"Polyxeni wants out! Polyxeni wants out!"

"I'm going to kill you, Polyxeni!" I screamed and threw my pillow across the room. Only when it left my hand did it dawn on me that it was a stupid thing to do. Now I had no pillow, and the parrot was still squawking.

"That's not going to shut her up."

"I know something that will..."

"No, don't!"

For a moment, I contemplated ignoring the lump next to me and reaching for my shoes, which were under my bed. My cousin didn't say anything else, so I took it that she had fallen asleep. I should never assume anything, because as I moved to pick up one of the shoes, Arty swiftly rolled on top of me.

"Have you gone deaf?"

I stared up at her and tried my fiercest look. "Get off me before I pull the blanket and you die from the cold!"

As threats went, it was a pathetic one, and my cousin knew it. Arty's green eyes crinkled now that she had finally got the better of me. Arty wasn't her real name—her real name was the glorious-sounding Artemis. Named after our great grandmother, but I would like to believe she was named after the Greek Goddess of the Hunt, of the Amazons, and of the home and women—Goddess Artemis of Mount Olympus, the same Mount Olympus that we could see from Larissa and the tallest mountain in all of Greece.

Her eldest sister was named Maria after our maternal grandmother. Unfortunately, Maria couldn't make it for the christening because she lived on the island of Rhodes with her in-laws. Panos, her husband, was fighting on the Albanian front.

I have five cousins of the same name. The only way we know which Maria we are talking about is when we insert their father's name into the conversation. Greeks are so unimaginative when it comes to names. My parents broke with tradition and called me Zoe. No one else in the family had that name, but to my parents, the name was significant.

I was the last child born to Helena and Nicholas Lambros, and the only daughter after three sons. The story was that my mother nearly lost me before I was born, and there was a great deal of praying to Saint Gregory Palamas to protect me. All that praying worked because my mother carried me to term. I was thrilled they didn't name me Gregoria, in honor of the Saint. They called me Zoe because it means 'life.' There was a great deal of tut-tutting by the family, but they quickly got over it once another Maria was born.

Arty's middle sister was named Elisavet, which is also a regal name. My three cousins were like the sisters I never had; I had three burly brothers and loved them, but they didn't understand me. Arty was six months older than me, and we looked alike—curly red hair, green eyes, and a tendency to speak our minds (not a trait that's appreciated). Elisavet (we called her Ellie), also had the same Mavrakis look; it was like God had decided he didn't want to invent a new look for anyone born of the Mavrakis stock. Our grandmother, Maria, was the source of the red hair and green eyes.

I had a lot of cousins, but only three of them I wanted to spend time with. The rest bored me and made me want to throw something at them. I'm quite sure they didn't think highly of me either. I wasn't interested in their preoccupation with attracting the eye of the boys, their frilly dresses, or their constant gossiping and sticking their noses where they didn't belong. My papa always said that gossip was a sign of unintelligent women. There were a lot of dumb women in this family.

My attention refocused on my predicament. Arty had the good grace to roll off me once the idea of killing the bird had diminished. She settled on her side and smiled. I tried to ignore her superior looking smirk for as long as I could, which wasn't very long.

"Don't kill Polyxeni. Yiayia Maria will be so upset she will die from grief. You want to kill our grandmother?"

"Pappou wanted that bird dead many times!"

"No, he didn't. He was teasing Yiayia..."

"I think your memory is a little faulty. Pappou Stavros asked me for my slippers so he could throw them at the bird!"

Arty stared at me for a moment before she burst out laughing and tried to smother me with a pillow. "You are the craziest girl alive, Zoe Lambros!"

The sound of the rain hitting the roof got louder. My desire to get out of bed evaporated the stronger the rain fell. The parrot was going to live for another day. Polyxeni decided she didn't want to get out of her cage. I think the pillow may have shocked her into silence. Or I may have killed her. I had a quick look and saw the bird was indeed still alive. Next time I wasn't going to miss.

Arty and I dissolved into hysterical giggles when I attempted to steal her pillow from her. We fought for it in a tug-of-war that ended with me falling off the bed and onto the bare wooden floor with a loud thump. That set Polyxeni off again, and we laughed uproariously at the silliness of it all. I got back into bed and snuggled up to Arty so we could share pillow space. It wasn't hard to figure out what she was thinking about now that we had quietened down.

"Uncle Yiannis is an idiot."

Arty didn't say anything, and I thought she wasn't going to discuss my uncle, who had made a spectacle of himself at the party. I can't abide stupid people, especially those I'm related to.

"Idiots can be redeemed, but he's not an idiot; he wanted to wound Mama, and that's all there is to it. He's a vindictive *malarka* who would sell his children if he could. He called her

a traitor to her faith, Zoe! I wished someone would take him out in the fields and punch some sense into him."

"You know he doesn't speak for the rest of the family. Ellie will always be Ellie to us, and nothing has changed because she married a Jew and changed her faith."

"It doesn't change how you see Ellie because your parents raised you to believe in family, respect, and honoring others. Yiannis has become a fanatic about the church, and I fear where his fanaticism will lead."

"Yiannis is a coward, and cowards don't act on their hollow words. He's never been the same since he fell off the roof, and there's also his crazy wife. She should have stayed a nun and not marry."

"Falling off a roof doesn't make you a zealot. I'm glad Ellie wasn't here to hear his disrespectful words."

"I think you forget that Ellie can stand up for herself, and she would have put him in his place. I wish that she was with us; I miss her. Hopefully, she can come up next month for your mama's birthday?"

Arty smiled and nodded. "We're planning something huge for Mama, and the whole town will be there."

I smiled inside, knowing I had just changed the subject away from our vile uncle and onto something that was far more enjoyable. I mentally patted myself on the head.

"I know what you're trying to do, Zoe."

Well, that victory was short-lived. I feigned innocence, but that made Arty laugh even more.

"We need another party, and by next month, our boys will be back home as well. We won't invite Yiannis. We have enough village idiots in this family, so we can do without him. Speaking of village idiots, I hope Uncle Kyriakos stays in America, and we don't see his ugly face. Traitorous—"

"He's not a traitor, Zo. He's just scared."

"We're all scared, but you're not going to see our fathers run like that mad dog. I'm not sure if he is a real Mavrakis. I'm surprised Yiannis has not fled yet. Our families fought together in the Liberation War, and if we go back further in time, I'm quite sure they were Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae."

"Oh, no, don't start about Thermopylae! Please, I beg you, God, make her stop!" Arty put her hand over my mouth and giggled. "You're the only one who talks so much about Thermopylae."

"You mean I'm the only one who knows history?"

"No, just the only one who's obsessed with it."

"I'm not obsessed. I am the family historian. Uncle Kyriakos is not a Spartan. He was born in Grevena. That says everything that needs to be said. Yiannis was also born in Grevena."

"I don't think they are despicable because they were born in Grevena. You weren't born in Sparta either."

"Mama said I was created in Sparta."

Arty's eyes widened before she dissolved into giggles. "Zoe!"

"What? That's what Mama said when I asked her."

"You asked your mother where you were created?"

"No, silly! That would be disgusting. I asked her whether I'm still a Spartan even if I was born in Farsala."

Arty shook her head in apparent disbelief. "Eew! I'm surprised your mother told you about all of that! My mother would have thrown her slipper at me for daring to ask!"

I had to admit the idea of my parents 'making me' almost made me want to vomit. I was used to seeing my parents kiss, but no, I didn't want to think about all the other stuff. I shook my head to try to clear those mental images. "I think we're going to make ourselves sick if we think about it. Let's not talk about that, or about our stupid uncles. I know something we can talk about..."

"Oh, don't start!" Arty pulled the pillow away from me and hid underneath her blanket.

"He was so sweet, and it was so nice of your mama to invite him! Every time I see him, his hair looks like someone has dunked him in ash, and those crazy black eyes..."

"They're not 'crazy black.'"

"Oh, sorry, I should have said 'eyes like the color of black granite.'" I feigned a swoon and put my hand over my heart, which only made Arty laugh.

"Have you seen how beautiful those eyes are?"

"Yes, he has beautiful eyes. I'm going to be your maid of honor, right?" I wiggled my eyebrows at Arty, which only made her laugh harder.

"You are such a crazy girl, ZoZo."

"He didn't say a word to me for the longest time; I thought he was born mute."

"He's shy, but you eventually got him talking to you. The tall, silent type. I think it's going to be a long courtship."

"I have a book..."

"Oh God, not your romance novels! Whoever gave you those books deserves to be locked

in a room with Polyxeni."

"You can take that up with our grandmother! Would you like to be the one to tell her about those terrible books?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"Ha! I thought so. The book is a great idea, cousin. You can learn how to flirt and how to court your young man."

"It's too bad you're not doing that with your boy."

I growled in frustration and pulled the blanket over my head. I was sick of hearing yet another person tell me that a certain boy was sweet on me. "He's not 'my boy.' I don't want to get married."

"He's a good man. You have to get serious about this."

"How did this conversation become about me? You're the one with the boy."

"At least I'm doing something about it."

"I'm thirteen!"

"Grandmother got married at fifteen! My mama got married at sixteen. Yours married at eighteen, and that's old. The war is nearly over, and you have to think about what will happen..."

"He's Athenian."

I was expecting Arty to laugh at me like she usually did when I mentioned my dislike for Athenians. Both the Lambros and the Mavrakis clans were Spartan, hence the question to my mother about my ancestry. I took pride in the knowledge that I don't come from Athenian blood. I wouldn't ever marry an Athenian.

"You really must stop disliking Athenians. They are Greek, just like us."

"They have a funny accent."

"Zoe! Think of all the beautiful babies you will have. His thick black hair and electric blue eyes..."

"Unnatural blue eyes. And how do you get 'electric' blue eyes? Have you seen them up close? Horrible." Yes, I was silly, but I didn't want to be promised in marriage to him. I had different plans for my life. I planned to follow in my mother's footsteps and learn at the best art academy in Athens (even if I didn't like the Athenians, that's where the best schools were). I didn't want to settle down and marry.

"So, you've seen his eyes up close? They are beautiful, and you will be protected against evil spirits as well."

Arty must have been still drunk since she was saying the silliest things. "How will the

blue-eyed Athenian protect me?"

"His blue eyes will protect you both from the evil eye, ZoZo!" Arty howled at her joke and almost fell off the bed. That was funny, but I tried not to laugh. The howling was infectious, and we both ended up giggling.

We were still laughing when the door opened, and my mother appeared. I hoped she didn't want me to get out of bed because the last place I wanted to be was outside.

"Polyxeni wants out! Polyxeni wants out!"

"Zoe wants Polyxeni dead! Zoe wants Polyxeni dead!" I mimicked the bird and countered her words every time she asked to fly away. My mother just shook her head at my silliness.

"Mama wants Zoe to get out of bed! Mama wants Zoe to get out of bed!"

Arty and I giggled at my mother's playfulness. "You're so funny, Mama."

"I'm glad you think so. I want you to get up and get dressed. We have mouths to feed. You need to go to the bakery, and you should take your crossbow in case you find a rabbit along the way, and also stop by Aunty Kaliope's house and see if her hens have laid some eggs."

I wasn't thrilled with the idea of getting up and trudging through the rain. "Mama, we have eggs."

"Don't argue with me, Zoe. Your grandmother's girls haven't laid any this morning, and you know Papa likes to have eggs in the morning. Don't make a face. Come on, get up. Arty, there is work for you too. Up you get!"

How on earth did my mother know I was making a face when I had the blanket over my head? The woman had extraordinary powers. As much as I wanted to stay in bed, I pulled the blanket off me and got up. I looked back at Arty and smiled.

"If you like his thick black hair and protective blue eyes, you marry him."

"I've already got my man."

"Just my luck," I muttered and proceeded to get dressed. I went down on my knees to get my crossbow from under the bed.

"Are you going to catch a rabbit?"

"I am. Mama wasn't kidding. We could do with some rabbit for dinner."

Despite her name, Arty was not a hunter; she hated everything about it, and that included skinning and cleaning the rabbits we caught. "You're not going to make Markos a happy wife if you don't make his favorite food."

"Does that mean you know what his favorite meal is?"

"Arty, my darling cousin, your boy just got around to talking to me without hiding from me. I don't know what his favorite meal is, but I can accurately mimic him..." I exaggerated a

surly look and doffed my imaginary hat. Arty fell back onto her pillow and laughed.

"You have to learn how to skin a rabbit for Markos, and I'll teach you how when I get back." I chuckled and left the room to peals of laughter that followed me down the corridor and out of the house.

Chapter 2

The bakery was a pleasant long walk away from the house, and I usually enjoyed the trail, but this wasn't one of those days. At least the rain had been replaced by a misty drizzle. That didn't improve my mood at all, nor did the puddles that I managed to stomp through.

There was another reason I wasn't looking forward to my early morning trip to the bakery. The baker's wife was going to indulge in one of her favorite pastimes. Kiria Despina was the local matchmaker, as well as being the baker's wife. She was a lovely woman except for the fact that she wanted to introduce me to boys that were 'good marriage material.' She needed a new pastime. Matchmaking in the village was a respected position, and Kiria Despina had a good track record. I wasn't sure what that meant, but my mother talked about her like she was the Saint of Matchmaking.

I trudged up the road towards the bakery in silence, which was surprising. It was far too quiet. I looked up into the trees and stopped. Birds usually nested at this time of the year, and it was usual to hear the cacophony of chirping birds when I made the journey to the bakery.

Not today. There was an eerie silence.

I slowly turned when I finally heard a bird's tweet... It was flying high in the sky surrounded by other birds, and it seemed they were abandoning their nests. Why was this bothering me? Chickens not laying eggs and birds flying away... It was at that moment that I remembered something my father once said about birds that sent a chill through me. Papa was talking about the 1928 Corinth earthquake and said that animals started to behave abnormally before the quake struck the city.

He said animals have a unique sense of things that we humans don't possess. Papa was in Corinth then, and it was an experience he never forgot. Something was going to happen, and soon if the birds and the chickens were an indication. I secured the crossbow across my back and set off down the road at full pelt.

I had rounded the corner leading to the church when I felt the low rumble under my feet. Earthquake.

My father *was* right! It was the first time I felt the earth move under my feet, and it was the most unnerving thing I had experienced in my short life. I lost my footing and stumbled near the church steps. With my heart beating louder than the screams of the people who were streaming out of their houses, I got back up on my feet and almost fell over again. To my

horror, when I looked up at the church landing, I saw my aunt Theodora on her knees. She was a nun and lived on the island of Patmos in the Holy Annunciation Monastery. She rarely ventured back home, but she had made the journey for the christening.

"Aunty!" I screamed, but she couldn't hear me from the noise. My heart was in my mouth because if she didn't move, the loose blocks from the building were going to come down on her. I took to the stairs as if the dogs of hell had been unleashed and were after me. I reached the landing and tried to get Dora back on her feet. She looked at me, and it was then I saw the left side of her face covered in blood. "We have to move, Aunty!" I didn't wait for a reply. I helped her up, and we managed to get down the stairs. Just as we reached the bottom, the sound of the earth tearing itself apart made me shudder. I looked back at the church, and the loose blocks had come down on the landing just as I had feared.

I helped Aunt Dora sit on the ground while I used the small knife I had in my quiver and tore a strip of fabric off her long skirt. I used that to apply pressure to her bleeding head.

"We're in an earthquake!"

"I know, Zoe, I know. You must get to safety..."

"No, I can't leave you alone."

"My darling, go home and get out of the street. Our Lord will protect me."

I didn't give voice to the thought that God wasn't doing anything to protect anyone right now. "I need to get you to the hospital..."

"Zoe!" I looked up to find our village priest, Father Panayiotis Haralambos, running towards me, his crucifix violently swaying as he ran. He stopped and fell to his knees in front of us. "Sister Theodora!"

"Aunty is hurt, Father H. We need to get her to the hospital."

"We will, child, we will." With that, Father Haralambos signaled to one of the boys that had been following him. "Bless you, my child, bless you! We have much to do!"

Father Haralambos cupped my face and kissed the top of my head. He dusted himself off and pulled me up. We looked around at the devastation that surrounded us. All the homes near the church had either collapsed or were on fire. While he was giving orders to the boys, I turned back to my aunt.

"Father H will help you."

"Go help the family... you must help the family."

I kissed my aunt and set off on a dead run towards my family. My body was aching all over, and I found myself trying to avoid the debris of bricks and broken timbers. I couldn't stop because I feared what I would discover if I didn't run fast enough. There was

pandemonium on the streets as I tried to go around people and debris. The cries of those trapped inside the houses will haunt me till the day I die. There was nothing I could do but run.

I wanted to run faster, but my body betrayed me. I had to stop and catch my breath because my lungs felt like they were on fire. I didn't want to sit down because if I did, I thought I wouldn't get up. My hands were hurting, and it was only then I realized I had gravel embedded in the palms of my hands, and my knees were bleeding. With whatever reserves God had given me, I set off again and rounded the bend into the street where Uncle Petros lived.

The chaotic scenes that I had witnessed on my way to them were even worse. The dust was making my eyes sting, and I felt my throat constrict. I could taste the grime in the back of my throat. I found a water-filled drum that hadn't fallen over and scooped some water to splash it on my face. I cupped the water and took a drink. I ran towards the house and saw the men were trying to take people out of the demolished building. I spotted my father and Uncle Petros, who were helping pull people out of his house. I was horrified to see it had utterly collapsed; had I not been sent to the bakery, I would have ended up in that pile of rubble. Mama, Arty, and my grandmother were in there!

"Papa!" I screamed and joined him just as Uncle Petros pulled away from a large block of cement and reached into the rubble. I couldn't see what he had found because my father blocked my view. Strong arms held me, and I realized that my cousin Stavros was trying to pull me away from the collapsed house. He picked me up and hauled me off like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder.

Naturally, I fought him because I was not a child, but he wouldn't let up and took me to the other side of the street. Miraculously, the houses on that side were still standing and unharmed.

The house belonged to Uncle Ignatius. Stavros unceremoniously dumped me on the floor, where I landed with a thump. I was sore, angry, and ready to scratch his eyes out. Stavros didn't say a word; he just left and shut the door.

I was going to bolt for the door when I felt arms around me, and I looked up to find my mother's tear-streaked face. "Mama!"

"God was protecting you, my child!" My mother hugged the stuffing out of me. "We have a lot of work to do."

"Is everyone all right? I saw the house at..." I stopped talking when the door opened, and Arty walked through. She was covered in dust, and blood was on her hands, on her face and

clothes. The anger that coursed through my body evaporated when I took Arty into my arms and held her.

"She's dead, Zoe."

"Who is dead?"

Arty turned towards me, her pain-filled eyes glistening with tears. "Yiayia Maria!"

Chapter 3

March 02, 1941

MIDNIGHT

I stumbled to the back of Uncle Ignatius's back yard and slid down the base of the tree. It had stopped raining at some point in that God-forsaken day, but the ground was pot marked with holes where the rain had turned the soil into sludge. I flopped down onto the ground and found myself sitting in a puddle. I didn't care if I was sitting down in the cold mud, nor did I care that my stomach was growling, and I couldn't remember if I had eaten anything since that morning.

My beloved grandmother Maria had been killed. I couldn't believe it. At midnight she was making me laugh with her impressions of her crazy parrot and then...she was dead. I was numb and so tired that I could hardly keep my eyes open. The soles of my feet hurt even when I was sitting down. I contemplated the idea of just curling up and going to sleep in the mud. I drew a breath, and the cold air seared my nostrils. I wished this was a crazy dream caused by too much wine.

I looked down at the badly damaged birdcage in my hands. I had found it half-hidden in the rubble. I had this overwhelming feeling of guilt wash over me when I saw Polyxeni's broken body in the cage. I had killed her. She wanted out, and I didn't let her; she knew what was coming and wanted to escape. I managed to pry apart the bottom of the cage. I took out the battered body and held her. I was crying for a bird. I had cried so much during the day I thought I had no more tears left.

I glanced up when I heard the back door open. A lantern lit up my mama's weary face as she approached me. She looked as shattered as I felt. I could see the sheen of unshed tears in her green eyes, and her usually curly red hair that she always wore in a bun was cascading down her shoulders in dirty red ringlets. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, even when she was dirty. I wanted her to hold me. I wanted her to tell me that everything was going to be all right, that this was indeed a nightmare and I had just woken up.

Without saying a word, Mama put the lantern down, took Polyxeni from my hands, and sat down next to me. Right there in the puddle with me. She put her arm around me, and the floodgates opened. I felt like a child and I couldn't stop crying.

"Tell me everything will be all right."

Mama didn't say a word for a long time. "I can't."

"You can lie to me, Mama. I don't mind."

I felt her body shake with laughter and looked up to see tears streaking down her face even though she was laughing. She kissed the top of my head and brushed her tears with the back of her hand.

"With God's help..."

"Dora!" I had just remembered my aunt.

"Dora is fine, and she's with her sisters tending to those who are hurt."

"Oh, good," I mumbled and settled in my mother's embrace. "I'm tired. Even my toes hurt..."

"I'm so proud of you, Zoe. You had worked hard throughout the day and night, even when you were tired."

"You look tired too."

My mother didn't respond; she tried, but every time she went to speak, her voice broke, and I could see the effort it was taking for her to even look at me. "I will be fine. With God's help, I will be."

"I got Polyxeni killed."

"No, you didn't. Polyxeni would have died in the earthquake anyway. She couldn't fly even if you let her out."

I glanced at the dead bird that lay in the mud for a long moment. "Do birds go to heaven?"

"I don't know, but if they do, your grandmother and Polyxeni are together."

I looked up at Mama. "Pappou will be there."

She didn't say anything for a moment. "They are together again."

"I wonder if he will fling his slippers at Polyxeni like he used to?"

My mother chuckled and wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve. "Zoe, you brighten the darkest day."

I deepened my voice and gave the best impression of my grandfather that I could muster. "Maria! I'm going to roast that parrot!" My mother was laughing and crying at the same time. I was glad I made her laugh. My impressions of my grandfather always made my grandmother smile too. Now they were laughing together, up there somewhere.

A drizzle began to fall, and my toes had gone numb from the cold. In addition to my grandmother, we had lost quite a few of our family throughout the day. The wailing always signaled someone had lost their life. While I loved my cousins and the rest of the family, my

favorite was my grandmother.

"We are going through the darkness, my darling. I want you to take Arty and go to Michael's house..."

I violently shook my head. "No."

"Not tonight, Zoe; don't disobey me."

"I'm not leaving you..."

"I love you very much, but you have to go. There will be—"

"No. I want to help you prepare..."

"That's not your job, my darling. That is the job of the older women of the family."

"What am I going to do while you are helping..." Helping to prepare the dead for burial is what I wanted to say, but I didn't.

"You are helping me. I know you will be safe at Michael's home, and before you say anything, Stavros has assured me it wasn't damaged."

"But—"

"Please. Listen to me. There are times we must do what we don't want to do, but, in those times, we must remain steadfast, and we do it."

I wanted to protest.

I wanted to haggle with her, to make her understand that I was not a child, that I wanted to help. I didn't.

She was right despite my objections. "Can I say goodbye to Yiayia before I go to sleep?"

"Of course you can but..."

"I will be strong, Mama. Just like Yiayia said that Laskarina Bouboulina was strong."

"Your grandmother loved that woman." My mother's voice was breaking with emotion. "She was thrilled you had fallen in love with her heroine. You two are so much alike. She said that the boy who marries you would be the luckiest man alive. Only yesterday, your grandmother said she wanted to sing and dance at your wedding..." She took a deep breath. "You can say goodbye to her, and then you will take Arty and go to Michael's home, all right? Do you give me your word that you will do that?"

"Yes, Mama." I nodded. My word was good enough for her because in our family, if you swore an oath, it meant you made a covenant with God. My mother got up from the muddy puddle we were sitting in and gathered me into her arms. "God is on our side, my precious child. God is always on our side."

"He must have taken the day off..."

I was expecting a scolding for chastising God, but my mother shook her head and put her

arm around my shoulders. She kissed me, and we walked back, caked with mud, through the rain, and to the house.

Chapter 4

March 02, 1941

3 AM

God was playing a cruel trick on me. I was so tired, but I couldn't sleep for more than a couple of hours. After Arty and I left the house to go to Michael's home, we walked through the damaged town in disbelief. The streets were filled with people who didn't want to go back to their homes, or they had no homes. They slept out in the open away from covered areas in case loose building material would collapse on top of them.

"Arty, I can't feel my feet."

Arty stopped and looked down at my mud-splattered shoes. "They're still there."

I was about to respond when I heard trucks coming towards us. We watched them pass us. "Our soldiers have arrived."

Greek soldiers got out of a truck that stopped across the road from my brother's house. It was followed by a second truck with more soldiers and supplies. To my surprise, we saw familiar faces: Arty's Markos, and the Athenian, Apostolos Kyriakou.

Arty started to giggle and nudged me when Apostolos caught sight of us and alerted Markos. They broke away from the group and joined us. Arty and Markos drifted to the side to have a private conversation while I was alone with Apostolos, who offered his condolences.

"Thank you." I wasn't sure what to say other than that.

"We're here to help."

"Can you bring back all those who have died?" As soon as I said it, I knew it was wrong. Apostolos was not to blame for the dead, nor was he to blame for the earthquake, but somehow, at that moment, he became my focus to vent my sorrow and fury.

To his credit, Apostolos shook his head. "If I were God, I could bring them back, but I'm not."

"It's too bad you are not. Who are those soldiers? They don't look like ours."

"English soldiers. They are sending more supplies, and they're going to help us."

I didn't have a chance to say anything else because both men were called away to rejoin their squad. The English had arrived to help us, and for the first time that day, I felt that we

had not been forgotten. The English set up camp across the street from Michael's house. I lingered in the doorway and watched them unload supplies. After multiple tugs on my shirt, Arty pulled me inside.

The downstairs bedrooms stored all the furniture and assorted boxes. I had forgotten that Michael's house was in the process of being painted to get it ready for when he returned from the Albanian front. "I think we're going to sleep in the kitchen. Let's get some blankets and the flokati rugs so we won't have to sleep on the wooden floor. The last thing I want is splinters stuck in my butt."

"What if..."

"There won't be another earthquake, Arty. The big one has hit us."

"Are you sure?"

"That's what my mother said. Now, up you get before I decide to sleep on the steps."

"I'll push you up." It was a joke, but I wished she could push me up the stairs. I didn't want to trudge mud up there, so I took off my shoes and socks and left them by the door. My legs felt like they were made of lead, but we eventually went up the steps.

White sheets covered the wooden floors to protect them from any spilled paint, and empty paint drums served as chairs. We didn't care. I moved the paint drums away from us and set up our bed. We collapsed onto our rugs, and the moment our heads touched our pillows, our shattered world disappeared.

When I awoke, light from the street flooded the kitchen, but it wasn't morning. I checked my watch, and to my dismay, it was only three in the morning! I attempted to go back to sleep, but once I was awake, all hope for falling back asleep evaporated.

I kicked off the blanket and got to my feet. If I couldn't sleep, then I would get up; there was no point in looking up at the ceiling. I managed to accidentally kick a paint bucket and step on every creaky step going downstairs. Arty was usually a light sleeper, but tiredness won this time. I opened the front door and stood at the threshold. Despite the hour, there was a lot of movement of soldiers and Greeks. I felt my body shudder even though there was no cold wind to make me shiver. What do they say when this happens? Was someone stepping on my future grave? Something like that... I banished that thought from my mind. I didn't need to be reminded about death today. The rain had stopped, and the crescent moon was high up in the sky, casting its shadow across the once leafy street.

I was about to close the door when the air sirens sounded, sending everyone into a panic. My first mistake was to turn and bolt up the stairs leaving the door open. The screams coming from outside were matched by Arty calling my name from upstairs. Moments later, she came

running down the stairs, pushed past me, and flew out the door.

I almost fell but managed to hang on to the railing, which broke my descent. As soon as I got out of the house, the broken shards of rock pierced my bare feet. I cursed myself for my stupidity while I quickly grabbed my shoes. The mud had stiffened the soft leather, but with some effort and a lot of cursing, I managed to put them on and set off after Arty like a woman possessed.

I had almost got to her when I heard the warplanes above me. I froze and just stared up as if the power to move had been taken away from me. I needed to run, but I couldn't move. I was frozen in place and ripe for a bomb to explode and end my short life.

That's when the bombs started dropping; one exploded further down the street, and I willed myself to run as fast as I could to get to Arty. Everyone was trying to hide from the bombs, but there was no escape. Where were they going to land, and who was going to die? It was a game of roulette and the winner's prize was death.

Everyone was running away from the center of town, but I went the opposite way and ran after Arty, who was getting further away from me.

"Arty!" I screamed, but it was in vain. My voice was drowned out by the cacophony of sirens, screams, planes, and bombs. Above all the other noises, it was the whistling of the bombs before they exploded what pierced through the chaos that surrounded me.

To my horror, my beloved cousin kept running. The bombs seemed to be everywhere, and I frantically looked around for somewhere to hide.

There was no protection, so I chose to run faster than I could imagine, fueled by fear and determined to catch Arty before we both got killed. I stumbled over debris from the earthquake and lost my footing. I was angry with myself that I wasn't watching where I was going. That anger coursed through my body and powered me back up. I set off once again, rounded a corner, and found myself slamming into an English soldier. He didn't say a word but instead picked me up and hauled me out of the street as the bombing continued. When he put me back down, I could see he was not much older than me.

"Don't go out there! Stay here!" He spoke Greek with a heavy accent. I wanted to yell at him for wanting to hide, but I didn't have time to deal with a scared soldier. I tore myself away from him and bolted after Arty.

"Artemis Mavrakis! Stop! Dammit!" I screamed once again, hoping she could hear me. I saw her look back at me for a moment. In that split second, when I thought she heard me and was about to run back to me, that infernal whistling sound echoed all around me. What I feared the most happened before me—a bomb hit the ground just meters from where Arty

was standing. I watched in stunned disbelief as she was engulfed in flames from the explosion.

I fell to my knees while my world collapsed around me.



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