

## Chapter 1

“I will not sacrifice one child to save the other!”

Her mother’s voice was a shrill cry, nearly lost among the crash of waves and pounding rain that beat against the planks of the vessel. The seas around their ship thundered as the oarsmen struggled against the rain-slick grips of their bucking oars. The vessel heaved with each wave that slid under it and water came slopping over the sides.

Helle crouched beside her brother near the middle of the ship. They were young, she and Phrixus, still small enough, at twelve and thirteen years of age respectively, to wedge themselves between the central walkway of the ship and the few pieces of cargo still lashed down. Above them, the bulging sail snapped as gusts of wind tore at it. All around them, wooden crates and wine jars had broken their lashings and were tumbling and crashing about between the rowing benches that ran from bow to stern. Cold water swirled almost to the children’s waists, but it was better to stay low, better not to look at the sea rearing up above the curving sides of the open wooden ship. Instead, Helle watched the rowers with wide eyes as they cursed, cried, or called upon the gods.

Even though half of the rowers had their backs to her, Helle still felt that everyone was watching her. It was her they meant to sacrifice, this time.

Their mother, half crouching, clung to the raised deck at the stern of the ship, her wet hair whipping on the wind, her purple dress dark in the gloom. Beyond her, at the stern, two men struggled to hold steady the steering oar. Next to them was the Cretan master of the ship. His white kilt was plastered against his legs, its starch long gone. He stumbled as the vessel bucked, slapped long dark curls out of his eyes, and shouted into the wind at Helle’s mother. “Lady Nephele, your defiance of the gods caused this storm! You should have allowed them to plow your son into the fields to end the drought, instead of fleeing Orchomenus. It was madness to sail in this season, especially when—”

The ship lurched downward with a crash. The Cretan slid and grabbed the shoulders of the men nearest him for support. Then the bow, carved in the shape of a ram’s head, butted into a wave. Water sprayed over the side of the vessel in a sheet, mocking the efforts of those crew

members who had shipped their oars and were bailing frantically with pots.

Other oarsmen still sat at their benches, muscles bulging as they strained to keep the ship even, working two to an oar. Without warning, one of the heavy oars bent like a bow, then snapped suddenly from its lashings and sprang backward. Striking an oarsman square in the chest, it sent the man crashing down between the seats, where he lay in an unmoving heap among the tangled lines of the sail. Then the oar, like a live thing, leaped overboard. As the other oarsmen ducked to avoid its deadly arc their own oars tangled and the ship lurched to one side.

The ship's captain leaped down from the stern onto the central gangway. Nephele caught at his arm with both hands. Staggering as the ship shifted beneath them, she and the captain locked eyes as the sailors hauled the injured oarsman out of the dirty water that swirled across the bottom of the ship.

"I had to leave Orchomenus!" Helle's mother shouted. She looked wildly about her. "There must be some other option than running before the storm. Something that does not require—"

"We have lost our anchor, Nephele. We cannot shelter offshore, and the only safe harbor is at Troy," the Cretan shouted back at her. He gestured above the heads of the straining oarsmen, pointing at a horizon hidden by swells. "If we put in there, King Laomedon will make us his slaves or slaughter us; he no longer trusts the Achaeans. Ahead lie the narrow straits, and they will take our last ounce of strength. Poseidon calls upon us to pay our passage!"

Nephele's fingers went white as she tightened her grip on the captain's arm. "But my daughter is—" Helle felt herself shiver as the wind swept her mother's words away. "—and a princess. The man who marries her may claim the throne!"

The Cretan refused to look at Nephele. Instead, he cast a worried eye at his oarsmen. Several were leaning with oars upon their knees, drooping like lathered horses exhausted by a run. The broad blades of their oars hung high above the shifting water. The men, fear plain on their faces, watched their captain.

"Sacrifice is our only hope." The captain's voice was grim. "Let me give the girl to Poseidon." He tried to place a hand upon Nephele's shoulder, but a lurch of the ship sent him staggering.

"Give one of the children to Poseidon or we are all lost!" one of the oarsmen cried.

Helle glanced at her big brother. Phrixus' dark eyes were fixed upon their mother and the Cretan. His head strained forward to catch snatches of shouted argument.

“Phrixus,” Helle said, tugging on his cloak. “I’m frightened.”

He shrugged her off.

Hot tears joined the cold rain that was lashing Helle’s face. She blinked them away, choking back any noise. A princess wasn’t supposed to cry. But everything had changed so quickly.

It had only been a few short days ago when their mother, with wild eyes and in frantic haste, had bundled them into their traveling cloaks and hurried them out of the city. It had been another dry, dusty day, heat shimmering above the white walls of Orchomenus. The people’s eyes had been as hard as beetles, but none dared stop Helle’s mother.

Now Helle, wet and miserable, her stomach lurching with each slow roll of the ship, could barely remember the start of their voyage and the stifling heat. She’d laughed at Phrixus on the day they set out for being such a trembling doe. Now she wished she hadn’t.

Beneath her feet, the ship groaned like a dying thing. She thought of the deer her father had sacrificed, about its kicking legs and the blood pumping from its neck. Why didn’t they just stop, pull the ship up on the beach, and offer sacrifice there? There had to be some animals on shore. If Phrixus suggested it, they might listen.

“Phrixus.” Helle tugged at his cloak again.

“Quiet!” Phrixus hissed. Pushed backward by his hand, Helle struck her back on the seat behind her. She cried out, more in surprise at Phrixus’ hostility than in pain.

A strong hand grasped her shoulders and helped her sit up. Wiping the salt spray from her eyes, Helle clung to it for support and recognized the tattooed blue lines on the wrist of their Thracian servant Crius. Burying her face in the curve of his arm, she clung to him and wept. His hand stroked her hair as rain and sea spray splashed against her back.

“Quiet, little Helle.” His gray beard brushed against her cheek as he spoke in her ear.

“I want to go home!” Helle told him, pulling on the leather cord of the amulet he wore around his neck. For a moment, he looked at her sternly and raised his hand. She drew back, astonished that a servant would think it his place to chastise her. But then he lowered his hand. “None of us can go home, Helle. Not for a very long time. Possibly never.” Then he stiffened. The captain’s shouting stopped, and Helle could hear her mother crying.

One bare foot holding his oar against the deck, Crius pulled Helle against his chest. He was trembling. Although her hearing was muffled while his strong hands pressed her head to his wet tunic, Helle could hear him shout, “Wait!” Then quickly, Crius pulled the amulet from his neck,

struggling to get the stiff leather thong over his head. Helle felt it pulled down roughly over her ears, and the tiny horse amulet that hung on it, carved of blood-red amber, was pressed into her hands. Holding her head in his rough hands and looking into Helle's eyes, Crius spoke in an urgent voice.

“Give this to Poseidon, Helle,” he said quickly. “Plead for his servant Crius. Ask the gods to welcome me favorably when I meet the fate the oracle's words proclaimed.”

Helle trembled, frightened by tears in the eyes of a man she had never seen cry, not even on the day they had brought him into the palace with a foot bloodied by a horse's hoof. Then the ship's captain loomed over Crius, his hands reaching for Helle. She twisted and screamed, but he was too quick. He gripped her wrist, then staggered as the ship rolled sickeningly to one side and hung there. After what seemed an age it rolled slowly back again.

“Speak kindly of me to the gods, sweet Helle,” shouted Crius. “Tell them an old man treated you kindly. Wait for me there, for I too—”

“Enough!” The captain's stern voice cut through the raging wind. “This child belongs to the gods.”

Fingers dug into her waist as the captain dragged Helle from Crius. Kicking wildly, she felt herself hoisted high in the air above the black-haired Cretan. Somewhere below her, her mother, kneeling on the deck with her head thrown back, kept screaming the same word: “No! No! No!” Her world spinning as the captain staggered to the bow, Helle saw the helmsman raise fist to forehead in a salute to the gods, saw Phrixus scurrying to the stern. He clambered over the wooden plank seats like a crab scuttling over stones. Nephele's arms closed around him.

“Into your hands, Poseidon, I give this child!” the captain shouted. “Give us fair winds and calm seas in return!” Then he hurled her overboard.

Helle tumbled through the air, snatching at sea spray. As she plunged toward the ocean she heard her mother wail.

A cold wall of water hit Helle like the slap of a giant's hand. She heard a roaring noise, saw a wave towering over her—and then there was silence and a dull humming in her ears as the water closed over her head. She choked, felt the salt water burn her throat. Thrashing, hysterical with fear, she fought against the weight of the water, clawing her way through it, uncertain of direction but desperate for air.

Her head broke the surface. Heaving upward on a shifting wave, Helle coughed violently.

She gasped in a great breath of air and fought to keep her head above water as she tumbled into the trough of a wave. Around her, the swells crashed and curled in white froths, roaring like the thunder of horse hooves. The ship, weaving from side to side, slid past her and then was hidden by a crest of wave. Oars waved drunkenly in the air as the vessel tipped to one side.

The cold water numbed Helle's skin, even as stark fear numbed her heart. "Mamma!" she gasped. Then she was pulled underwater again as the hands of the sea god plucked at her cloak, dragging Helle down. Fighting them, she ripped herself free of the heavy cloth and flailed with wild strokes back to the surface.

Gasping, she tumbled out of the side of a wave. Rain lashed her face as she struggled to stay on the surface. She wanted only to curl up and cry, but Poseidon tossed her from one sea-filled palm to the next, playing with her like a bit of cork.

But she was not cork. Just a small girl, rapidly tiring as she fought the god for air. The ship was gone, the shouting of those on board devoured by the roaring of the wind. She was alone. For the first time in her young life the realization came to Helle. She would die. Her mother, whose warm arms had always protected her from harm, had abandoned her.

Helle would have cried then, would have sunk weeping beneath the pounding waves. But something caught at her throat, choking her as it pulled sharply across her narrow neck. Clawing the thong away from her throat, Helle's hand brushed the tiny amber horse that floated beside her at the end of the leather cord. "Poseidon," she said. A curling wave crashed over her head, sending her down into darkness.

Something thumped against her like the muffled kick of a horse. Helle struck out at it and felt the object push sluggishly away. Then her head was above water. She screamed as the long pole of a broken oar shoot up out of the water like a hurled javelin. It crashed down beside her, hissing as it struck the water. Helle grabbed for it, wrapping her arms tightly around its slippery sides.

The broken oar was thick—wider than one of Helle's legs. It rode the waves, sliding up one crest and down the next, crossing the gaps of the heaving sea with Helle clinging to it. In time, her mind became numb, her body chilled. Wave after wave surged up above her or spilled her down into a trough. But her arms and legs stayed wrapped tightly upon the oar.

Time blurred as darkness fell.

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The rough stones under her bruised body brought Helle back to herself. Somehow, as a wave knocked her against the pebbled shore once more, she found the strength to drag her battered body up the slope. Waves sucked back down the shore, nudging the oar against her. Behind her, the beach stones grumbled.

Shivering with cold, she pulled herself from the clinging surf. From somewhere ahead of her came the sound of women singing and the clashing of metal on metal. Bones aching, her head thick with fog, Helle retched. A thin trickle of salt water and spit stung her cracked lips. She rolled onto her back and watched the stars spin above her head. Her hand, tangled in the thong of the amulet which still hung around her neck, thumped onto her chest.

The moon, a yellow crescent high above, rocked crazily from side to side. The hard stones below her seemed to heave like ocean waves. Frightened, uncertain whether she lay on solid ground or was dreaming and still at sea, Helle whispered a final plea. “Mamma.”

Torchlight stung her eyes. Helle blinked, turning her head away. Coughing weakly, she felt the cold of the stones against her cheek as her body went into sharp, deep shivers. She stared dumbly at the booted foot of the person who held the torch so high above her head. It was a woman, her breasts bare and rouged like those of a Cretan priestess. But her legs were wrapped in the trousers worn by the barbarians who lived beyond Thrace.

The woman bent low over Helle and spoke. Then she moved the crackling torch closer. It cast a circle of warmth upon Helle’s chilled body. The woman’s narrow hand brushed gently over the places where Helle’s torn tunic had exposed her water-puckered skin.

The woman touched the amulet and spoke again in her strange language. Then she put the torch down and slid her arms under Helle’s body. Helle cried out, remembering how the Cretan had lifted her, fearful that she would be flung back into the sea. But the woman instead stooped to retrieve her torch and then turned to stride inland.

The last thing Helle saw before losing consciousness was a circle of surprised women, bare from the waist up, dancing with torches, spears, and shields in hand. They froze in mid-step as the woman carrying Helle strode into their midst.

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