

Children of Apollo (Eagles and Dragons – Book I)

Prologus

202 B.C.

She was like a weathered sack of bones, possessed bones. The seeress rocked back and forth, inhaling the pungent smoke of the fire. Her body creaked and a childlike whining emanated from deep within her throat.

What am I doing here? the Roman thought as he knelt uncomfortably on the other side of the flames. *I'm a soldier, a man of reason.*

The woman was Punic, of Carthage. His first thought was to have her flogged out of camp but he could not, not after seeing the look in her eyes when she clutched his forearm with her gnarled fingers.

“The Gods send me to you with a message,” she had whispered. “You *must* hear it!”

Reason or not, Punic or not, he could not afford to offend the Gods.

“Come inside,” he remembered saying before she shuffled past his personal guard. And now he sat there, dizzy with smoke on the morning of battle, audience to the ramblings of a decrepit hag.

The wind on the plain was up. It lashed the tent walls, pulled the roof skyward. There was a loud bang, not like thunder or angry gales, but like a distant call or announcement. The Roman clutched his knees, tried to hold back the bile that rose up in his throat.

Pieces of papyrus flew about the tent, a lamp fell over and went out in the sand. The fire was suddenly still. The crone threw her head back as if slapped, gurgled some words in a tongue he did not know. Her eyes rolled and she nodded. The Roman looked around but they were alone. He felt cold, began to sweat where the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

The seeress collapsed and the flames began to move again. The Roman got to his feet and moved to her side. She was breathing. He nudged her gently.

“Woman. Are you all right?” He tried not to let his fear or disgust show.

The bones suddenly jerked to life and her arms clawed at his, pulling him down as she crawled up, something out of the underworld. She was strong.

“I have words...I have words...” Her voice was raspish, her breath fowl. But, he had to listen. It was as though someone were pushing him downward to her, from behind. “It will be a mark of greatness in your line.”

“What will?” His voice shuddered, fear beginning to show as his courage waned. “My line is already great.” He tried to sound defiant but she shook her head, her eyes now open.

“For blood and butchery, maybe. The God has given you this symbol of wisdom and strength. You are chosen to carry it.”

“Which god? What symbol? I don't understand. Chosen for what? Tell me!” He held her tightly by the shoulders, bones lost in his grip.

Then, her appearance, her features, softened so that she resembled a kindly grandmother. She spoke soothingly to him.

“You are blessed, Metellus.” She reached for the filthy satchel she had brought with her, rooted around inside. “I had a dream...” she muttered, “...in it...I saw this.” She drew something out, something no larger than the palm of her wrinkled hand.

“What is it?” he asked.

She held it up to the firelight, turned it around reverently. It was a flat, clay image of a dragon.

“This is the symbol of your line to come.” She handed it to him. He accepted it, still unsure as to the meaning. “It is a symbol of wisdom, of strength.”

“Yes, you said that already,” he responded, impatient.

She raised her arms as if to the heavenly stars. “He has honoured you with it.”

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“Who?”

“The God.”

“Which one?”

“You will know when you are ready. He will come to you as he always comes to the chosen.”

The Roman shuddered at the thought. “Visited by a god?” Out in the camp, horns roused the army.

“I must go,” she said abruptly, packing up her things and standing.

“Wait! I have many questions.”

“Men always do.” She turned back to him. “They will be answered in time. For now, keep this symbol with you always.” She closed his hand around it. “Pass it on to the worthiest of your line only.”

“Why?”

She became impatient, as one does with a child who questions without end. “It is sacred, powerful, meant only for those strong enough to bear the burden.” She paused, peered into his eyes one last time. “Remember. You fight for more than yourself this day at Zama, more than Rome’s glory. I must go.”

“Wait, I’ll call you an escort out of camp...”

She was gone.