

## “Thusia” by Zakiya N. Jamal

“Tonight’s the night,” my mother said. She brushed my hair back as I sat on the cold stone floor between her legs. I tried not to wince as she roughly pulled my dark curls back into a high ponytail.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Yes mother,” I said. I stared down at the old cracks on the floor so hard they seemed to blur. Or maybe it was just the tears in my eyes from her pulling my hair too tight.

“I know you’re probably nervous,” my mother said. She wrapped the hair tie around my hair and held a small mirror in front of me. “Do you like it?”

Although it didn’t really matter how my hair looked since no one was going to be there to see it, I looked anyway, not wanting to upset her. My shoulder length hair was pulled back into a perfect ponytail with no stray hairs visible. I looked away from my hair and met my own eyes in the mirror. Their normally bright hazel color seemed dim, and tried not to think too hard about why.

“I love it,” I said. I forced myself to smile and turned away to look up at my mother. “Thank you.”

“Well I just want you to look your best tonight,” she said with a smile. She laid the mirror down on the bed beside her. “So, are you nervous?”

I looked away from her and across the room. I stared at the bare stonewall, with just a small wooden dresser leaned against it. Just like the rest of this lonely tower, and the small island it stood on, there was almost nothing here except the bare essentials. Besides the small dresser the only other piece of furniture in the room was the small wooden bed my mother was currently sitting on. It made me wonder if anyone ever lived here at all. My mother never said. She just made me pack a change of clothes before we left home yesterday and then we got in a small boat I’d never seen before and she rowed us across the river to this little island.

“No,” I lied, pulling myself out of my thoughts. “Not at all.”

I slowly pushed myself up from the floor, walked over to the dresser, and pulled out the only piece of clothing left in the drawer. It was a long white dress that my mother

had given to me when she first told me of my purpose. Passed down from generation to generation, it was an honor to wear it.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” asked my mother.

“Yes,” I said. I looked down at the dress in my hands briefly before looking up again to meet my mother’s eyes. “Can I have the room for a second? I should probably change.”

She hesitated for a second before answering. “Of course,” she said. She got up from the bed and made her way to the door. “But don’t take too long. It’s almost time.”

I nodded and looked away from her and back at the dress. When I heard the door close behind her I threw the dress on the bed in frustration. All my life this dress had hung in the closet in my room, a constant reminder of my duty to my people. I loved our home. Our town was a small one, just on the coast of Greece, filled mostly of women who were so strong and independent I couldn’t help but feel inspired by their strength.

We lived right along the Achelous River that blessed us with good fish years, little storms, cool breezes when it was hot, and light rains in the dry seasons. My mother long ago explained to me that the reason we have been so blessed is because of the sacrifice of a 18 year old girl that must occur every generation.

“We must give to the river so He will give back to us,” she whispered to me as a child.

I used to be so proud to have this dress. This was an honor and I wanted to prove that I could be just as strong and as brave as the other girls who had come before me. Before we left many women came to our home and thanked me. I knew I should feel proud about what I was going to do tonight but now that it was staring me in the face I was scared.

I picked up the dress and looked down at it, running my hand over its soft fabric. It was the most beautiful dress I’d ever owned with a two long slits on each side of the dress that went up to my knees and just a single braided strap on the right shoulder. The dress seemed to shimmer in the light as I moved it through my hands, as if some gold was threaded through it.

I sighed and placed the dress back on the bed. I gently tugged off my shirt, careful not to mess up my perfect ponytail, and slid off my pants.

“Thusia, are you ready?” my mother called urgently from the hallway. “It’s almost time!”

I looked up at the door, startled. She must’ve been standing on the stairs because her voiced echoed into the room.

“Yes mother. I’ll be down in a second.”

“Good,” she said. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” I heard her footsteps fade as she headed back downstairs and I let go of a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

I quickly threw the dress over my head and on my body, gently tugging it down until it was all on. I picked up the small mirror my mother had left on the bed and looked at myself. Although I couldn’t get the full view I could tell the dress fit me perfectly, hugging my body in all the right places. I was beautiful.

Satisfied, I opened the door not bothering with shoes since we were just going to the beach. I headed downstairs slowly, careful not to trip over my dress that just grazed the floor. I walked down the stone steps, following the spiraling staircase, my hands gliding against the wall. Despite what I knew was coming I was glad to finally leave this place. Back home the sun shined but once we got here the sky was dark and gloomy and everything was quiet. There was only the one room upstairs that my mother let me have, the kitchen downstairs, and a little outhouse a few feet away from the tower.

I made it to the ground floor and saw my mother’s sleeping bag and the small pack she brought for this overnight trip tucked in the corner of the room. After tonight she’d go back home and I’d be gone. A part of me thought I should feel resentful but I didn’t. She didn’t choose this fate for me and I was sure if she could stop it she would.

*But what if I changed my mind,* I thought. The thought hit me so fast I took a step back and reached out a hand to lean against the cold wall. What if there was another way? Had anyone tried to sacrifice an animal or something else before? Maybe it didn’t have to be this way. Maybe if I pleaded with her we’d figure out another way. Together.

Suddenly I felt I had to try. She was my mother after all. She’d help me if she knew I didn’t want to do this and for the first time I wasn’t sure I did. I just had to explain how scared I was feeling. *She’ll protect me,* I thought.

I took a deep breath and walked out of the doorway and took in the kitchen area. The circular shape of the tower made the kitchen small with only a rusted white stove and

oven combination, and sink against one wall and a tiny fold up table along the other. The table was pushed against the wall with two small chairs on either side of it, one of which my mother was currently occupying. Her back was to me as she stared across the room at the only entrance and exit of the tower. The door was wooden with a metal lock to keep it shut against the cool wind that blew in all last night, rattling the door.

Hearing me walk in she turned and looked at me, smiling. I smiled back and clasped my hands in front of me squeezing them tight.

“You look beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you.” I walked over to the table and sat across from her, my back facing the open door. I felt the cool breeze on my back and tried to relax, taking a deep breath.

“Mother,” I started.

“We should head outside,” she said. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood. “It’s almost midnight.”

“I know mother,” I said. I turned and watched as she went to her bag and pulled out the small knife I saw her take from our kitchen at home.

“Mother, wait,” I said. Her back was to me but I saw her tense up for a second before she turned and looked at me. Her lips were pressed tightly together in a straight line and there was a brief look of irritation on her face before she sighed deeply.

“Thusia, we must go,” she said. She spoke like I was a little girl that didn’t want to go to school today. There was a mixture of annoyance and frustration in her voice that made me worry about what I was going to say next.

“I know mother,” I said. I stood from the table, keeping one hand on the edge. I needed something to hold onto otherwise I felt I would faint out of fear.

“Then let’s go,” she said harshly. I shrank back at her words and her face softened.

“I mean,” she said gently. “We should head outside. We don’t want to be late.”

“Right, of course, mother,” I said. “But-,” I paused, “But do I have to do this?”

My mother hesitated. She became quiet, as if she was trying to choose her next words very carefully. She silently put the knife on the stove and walked over to me. She gently grabbed my hands and I looked down at them, mine on top of hers, only her thumbs on the back of my hands. We were so similar with our slender limbs and long

fingers. She had the same long, curly dark locks as me, except some of hers were starting to go gray. She was only a few inches shorter than me but at that moment she seemed to tower over me.

“Thusia, this is your destiny,” she said.

“I know but-”

“But you’re scared,” she said.

I looked up at her then and met her eyes, the same color as mine.

“Yes,” I whispered. I felt the tears well up in my eyes. “I’m so frightened.”

She pulled me into her arms and hugged me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Shhh,” she said. “Don’t cry. Everything will be just fine.”

“Mother please,” I said. The tears were streaming down my face now. “Don’t make me do this. I beg you.”

“Don’t worry,” she said quietly. “You’ll be okay. I promise.”

“I can’t do this mother,” I said. “I thought I could be strong but I can’t.”

“And you don’t have to,” she said.

I pulled away from her and looked at her face. She smiled back at me and ran her hand down my cheek, wiping the tears away, a gesture that made me feel like I was turning five tonight, not eighteen.

“I don’t?” I asked.

“No, Thusia,” she said. “You don’t.”

“But-” I hesitated. “But what will happen?”

“Well, it’ll be terrible for everyone,” she said. She caressed my cheek and gave me a soft smile. “No one will be safe from the river’s wrath. But if this is what you want...”

Her voice trailed off. Something about it sounded strange. It reminded me of when I was little and she would come in and sing me to sleep. I fell asleep in seconds never remembering the words to the song but feeling completely at peace.

“I don’t want people to get hurt,” I said. My voice sounded different. As if someone was speaking through me.

“Of course not,” she said. She smoothed my hair down although I knew there wasn’t a stray hair out of place.

“Will it hurt?” I asked. My voice sounded so far away, as if suddenly it was separated from my body and speaking from the opposite side of the room.

“You won’t feel a thing,” my mother promised. “Nothing at all.”

“Okay,” I said. *But was it okay?* I thought. I wasn’t really sure. I felt this tugging at the back of my mind as if I was forgetting something important but I couldn’t grasp what it was.

My mother took hold of my hand and led me across the kitchen and I let her. She picked up the knife and we started heading for the door. I felt that fear rise up in me again but suddenly it was like someone told that part of me to be quiet. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I felt numb, at peace.

Guiding me by the hand, my mother took me outside. I looked up at the sky and it was so dark and cloudy, I couldn’t even see the moon. I turned my head away from the sky and instead looked at the back of my mother who looked so determined.

I said nothing as she practically dragged me across the sand. A part of me felt like I should say something but I couldn’t seem to form the words. Instead I remained silent as my mother kept her determined pace until she finally stopped at the edge of the beach, right by the water.

“We’re here,” she said, softly. She turned to face me and put both my hands in hers. “It’s time, Thusia.”

I nodded, still not finding my voice. Without being told I somehow knew what I had to do. I laid back on the sand, feeling the grains along my shoulders and the back of my arms. I was so close to the water the waves kept splashing my feet.

My mother dragged the knife around me forming a circle and took a step back. I then moved my arms out and spread my legs apart as far as I could without ripping my dress.

“Perfect, Thusia,” she said. She smiled down at me and all that fear I felt earlier seemed like a distant memory. I was just so happy to make her proud of me, to make my community proud. I was brave and strong just like the women who raised me. I could do this.

I smiled back at her and watched as she looked away from me and up at the sea. She threw her arms up in the air and began singing.

*“Our father, Achelous, we thank you and praise your name,” she sang. “We welcome your mercies and provide this blood in exchange. For every generation there must be one to continue your favor and your love. This Siren you take, our freedom is won.”*

The sky then rumbled and I saw a large streak of lightening shoot across the sky. The waves soundly got bigger, and soon the whole bottom half of my dress was soaked. Before I could think of anything else I felt a stabbing pain in my stomach and I finally snapped out of whatever spell my mother had me under.

I rolled over in pain, grasping at my abdomen but that just made it worse. I pulled my hands away and felt the wet, stickiness of blood on them. I laid back in the sand, and started choking on the blood that was coming up my throat. I looked up, searching for my mother, and found her walking quickly away from me and towards the boat we’d left at the shore. That’s when her words hit me as sharp as her knife. This was no sacrifice; it was an exchange. My life for the freedom of the women I had called my family: the Sirens.