

KERANIA VERSUS THE DREAM (2991 words)

I

Kerania Diakara looks out over the blustering sea and thinks about the fish. Her son stands like a stocky-Odysseus on the bow of his ship *The Penelope*, gazing out over the Eloundian bay. He's yelling out orders the way he yells for food – too loudly and with no tact. He's overseeing preparations for the Eloundian boats to join the fight against the Ottomans, to push the invader out. It's not him she's focused on, however, as he stands there with his hands on his hips. Kerania thinks instead about the red mullet, swimming unspoiled beneath the hulls of the moored Cretan boats. It could be swimming in olive oil instead, with a bit of garlic and lemon, to be fried up for dinner, if only Apostolos had thought to take care of this one thing before he left. If only he had thought of his mother at all.

It's Captain Apostolos now though, she supposes, and she can't help the stab of pride despite her fury about the mullet. Her spine straightens so she looks taller than her 5-foot 2-inch frame. Mothers and wives and daughters stand alongside her on the shore in a line of feminine obedience. Despite her height, she is the tallest of them, she thinks.

She feels something else there too, darker, and wilder. Something lower in her groin and hidden under her skirts, something she thought long ago destroyed.

The Dream.

It crawls out from its hiding place and with a twitch of its bat-like wrist switches her place with her son. It deposits her on the stern of *The Penelope*, slings a *toufeki* low across her waist, and threads wind through her hair. It tosses her son onto the shore and empties his larder and the days ahead. The Dream gives her pleated breeches and makes her son wear a stifling skirt. It adorns her head with a fringed kerchief, his with a widow's scarf. She would do a better job of command, the Dream whispers. She would have had them sailing hours ago. They wouldn't be in danger of missing the Cretan fleet near Heraklion. They'd be first amongst the brave.

If she had been born with balls between her legs that hung low like her husband's she could have torn the beating heart from an Ottoman chest, the Dream whispers. If she was a man, she might have plucked a winsome beauty off a roof on Kasos, and sucked protest from her lips. She would have wooed gently, the Dream insists. She still could.

Kerania breathes in and with the next out-breath shoves the Dream back under her skirts. She knows how to bury things. Her people have been burying things for thousands of years. Since Arkadi, and the innocents slain there, they've buried dreams. Since Egyptian mercenaries joined the Ottomans to slaughter hundreds of her fellow Kasiots on the island of her birth. Since Constantinople fell. Since

Megas Alexandros rode across the Steppes leaving his people behind. Since the Gods on Olympus sent firestorms to destroy the bloodline of King Minos.

A Dream like this one? That's the easiest thing to be rid of. It's not a husband, unwanted but needed, sent to his grave with too much *tsipouro*. It's not a mother, dead from the grief of never again seeing her daughter. It's not a son leaving his mother behind.

The Dream clings to Kerania's legs as her widow's scarf flaps against the Cretan wind and her pepper-coloured hair whips across her face. It tries to claw its way back up with nails that bite. On board *The Penelope*, Apostolos urges the men to move faster. They are little more than an army of merchant boats made war-ready with spit and a prayer. There are twenty in total, a big number for a small village. The boats bounce in the choppy waters as the ropes are tied, and the sails hoisted. Men rush from one to the other, climbing down ladders and up planks, scrambling to make them ready. Dark hair is plastered against sweaty foreheads. Kerania watches them until the last boat has left the harbour and her son has vanished from her sight. She watches and curses the Ottomans, and the sea, and the space between her legs.

Kerania watches and presses her hand down hard upon the head of the Dream and thinks stubbornly of the mullet.

II

The church Kerania is baptised in is barely three metres in each direction. It's lit by hundreds of half-melted candles stuck in rows of sand-filled trays. It's perched at the end of a craggy pass, reachable only via a path that winds up steps hewn from rock. On the day of her baptism at two years old, so the story goes, her mother had to carry her up on her back through the heat and dust, bent over like a mule muttering prayers and curses. Kerania's father wasn't there, having died the year before with 500 other men who'd been slaughtered by the invaders. It was left to her mother to ensure the child didn't fall to Satan. Hers had been a difficult birth, with lots of blood. Her aunts would daily remind her how much trouble she'd caused, coming into the world back-to-front like a stubborn donkey. It was mothers-blood that couldn't be spared given how much had already been spilled on Kasos, they said. As an only child and a girl, she had to pay it back with her obedience, since a dowry was something she would never be gifted, and men were hard to come by.

Kerania tells herself she doesn't care. At 16, she sits on the roof of their whitewashed house and sucks on the lemons she picks from their tree, ignoring the yells of the matriarch below. The lemons match her soul, tangy and sharp and not altogether edible. She spits the pips out like her mother spits at her to ward off the evil eye.

From this vantage point she can just see over the trees to the edge of the sea, where the few Kasiot boats left after the massacre are tied like chastened slaves. She hates the look of them, thinks often of

going down there and cutting them free, but her mother assures Kerania that such a thing would kill her with shame and Kerania is not so heartless as to wish her mother dead. Her eyes stray to the boats often though and her mind strays further and her heart further still and it's while contemplating the boats and sucking on the flesh of a particularly ripe lemon that Kerania first becomes aware of The Dream.

It is hairy and thin, pasty from lack of light. Its teeth are sharp. Its eyes are round and bright. Its bat-like wings are folded tight against its back. It settles beside her on the roof and points one thin claw towards the melting sun and squeals with delight.

Kerania is startled out of her reverie. This is a new thing, this wild excitement, this heart-pounding sense of something more. How long has the Dream been there. Why didn't it say something before now?

The Dream has been here since the day of her birth it whispers. Oh, it didn't arrive the way she did, screaming like a Fury and covered in slime. It arrived piece by piece in the still of night. Every whispered longing laid flesh across its bones. Every desperate passion was a threaded vein. Now it's strong enough to be seen and heard. And it wants to talk, the Dream says.

About what, Kerania asks, staring at the sunset.

About everything, the Dream breathes.

III

Kerania and the Dream sit often on the roof. Kerania and the Dream walk along the rocky shoreline and hang upside down together from the lemon tree, letting their hair dangle against the ground. In the deep night, the Dream places its face near hers and shows Kerania things from other worlds. In the day, Kerania sits arm in arm with it by the front door waiting for something only the Dream can see. The Dream holds her close and caresses her cheek and kisses her eyelids. Kerania's mother and aunts yell at her more than before, now that the Dream is here, but the Dream covers Kerania's ears with its bat-like hands and muffles their voices. It softens her pillow at night and fills her dreams with visions of the mighty Oceanos, of the dreaded Charybdis and songs of the Sirens, of the grey-eyed Athena and her mighty shield. In the morning it beckons her into the hills where butterflies brush her skin and jasmine tickles her nose and the *Anemoi* sigh with longings that thrill her.

Kerania and the Dream become inseparable. The Dream is the only warmth she needs and in return she feeds the Dream the passion it requires.

Could I run through the woods like Artemis? Kerania asks the Dream. Could I stand on the tallest mountain of Greece and sing to the gods? Could I stretch my arms out, and launch off the cliff tops and fly? Could I dance with the stars?

Yes, the Dream assures her. You could do that. You can do anything.

IV

He is a stocky man with a full moustache, bandied legs, and hard shoulders. His arms are longer than they should be, but his chest is all *palikari*, her mother says. He is a laddish clump of clay come to bestow worth on Kerania with his attention. His laugh is big, his presence bigger. The women in the house make space for him like water rushing away from an oil spill. They race to make him *kafe* and bring him a slice of *bougatsa* as he surveys his kingdom from their doorway. When he appears, Mihalis Zervandonakis takes up the whole of their world. He blocks out the sun.

"I have a boat," Mihalis brags to them. "I sailed from Aghios with it. I it carved myself. I mend the nets the fish get trapped in. I catch many fish and make a lot of money. I have good, strong hands."

He lays out his palms for Kerania. "You like strong hands?" he winks.

Kerania blushes, but not from modesty. Rather it's from the hot swell of rage that pops in her gut, spreading through her veins. There is no reason that she can find for her reaction, she doesn't understand what it means or why her mother's face turns pink. It just feels in-her-bones-wrong, and the Dream agrees for it pulls her sharply towards the room she sleeps in with her aunt and away from him. She flees the raucous laughter that follows like she's fleeing the Fates themselves.

V

The wedding is small and over quickly. They hold it forty days later in the same church Kerania was baptised in and with the same priest. She wears the lace dress her mother was married in, and her grandmother before that, although it gapes at her waist and has been too much mended. Their wedding *stefana* are created using the wildflowers that grow on the steps beside the church. Her aunts weave them together while singing folk songs that are half celebration, half dirge. Mihalis does not even trim his moustache for the occasion. He keeps it full and hairy. Kerania stares at it the entire time, avoiding Mihalis' eyes while she repeats the priest's words. Her brain processes half of what is said.

The night that follows is painful. She has only just begun exploring herself down there, understanding the ebbs and folds of her changing body, what draws pleasure and what indifference and what pain. She has only just discovered there was something there to find. Now it belongs to Mihalis, and he has less knowledge of her body than she does and none of the interest in unfolding its secrets. He is like the Minotaur tearing through the labyrinth, like Jason stealing the Golden Fleece. Afterwards she folds in on herself and draws as far from him as her mother's bed and his snoring will allow. She draws the Dream out from its corner and asks: Is this the thing you saw coming? Why doesn't it feel

any good? But the Dream is silent. It blinks at her with bat like eyes. Kerania feels its thoughts collide with her own, all of them miserable.

The day she departs Kasos for good, she sees relief battling with grief in her mother's eyes. "The world is hard for women without men, Kerania," her mother says. "Just ask your aunts. Mihalis asked for no dowry. You'll be taken care of." They are the only words her mother will gift her to explain the sudden upending of Kerania's world. They are the last words they will say to each other this side of life.

The Dream still does not dare speak. The Dream is thinking and watching. The Dream cannot explain the strange turn that's appeared in the road it had mapped out for them both.

VI

Slowly but without noticing, the air between Kerania and the Dream grows cold. It still whispers to her as she's transported like Ariadne across the Aegean sea and deposited in Aghios Nikolaos with all the tenderness of a betraying Theseus. It mutters as she is left behind to find her own way in a new town and home, while Mihalis sails away again and again for adventures and loves she will never enjoy. It hisses while she tries to do all the things her mother did for so long, things she developed no taste for. But every day is like the next here. There are no trees to hang from, no rooves she's allowed to sit on. The horizon is a world away. Her belly swells with the first of several miscarriages before she finally gives birth in a tidal wave of pain and relief to a baby boy. The Dream's ambitions grow muted. It talks no longer of songs that could catch the ears of the gods. It speaks instead of the tablecloth she might ask Mihalis to buy, or the harbour view she might take in. It reminds her of the song she might sing when she is alone or of the release to be found between her legs while Mihalis sleeps. When her son is born, it speaks of dreams for him and what he might become. At first she listens, and some of these small dreams come true, but many do not and Kerania learns to mistrust the Dream. Kerania resents it. Kerania asks it questions it can't answer and demands to know why it came to her at all, since it proved so untrustworthy. The Dream in turn becomes hairier, like some sick thing writhing in her belly. Comes a time, they no longer talk at all, though the Dream is ever fretful at the periphery of her vision and its promises never closer than the nearest star.

VII

Without the red mullet Kerania is forced to rely on a handful of small olives and hard, crusty bread for her dinner. She pairs it with the last of the *kefalograviera* she has from Apostolos' send off and calls her empty stomach filled. Her son will send more money, but it won't arrive for days. For now, Kerania cuts the last lemon she has and pops a small slice in her mouth. The zestiness explodes across her tongue. For a second it smooths the skin around her eyes. It darkens her hair. The Dream stirs

beneath her skirts. Then the taste passes, and she is old again, her joints aching, and her legs stiff. She tuts and throws the rest of the lemon away.

"That's life," she mutters. The Dream bristles.

You don't need to be here, she growls at it. Who told you that you had to stay?

The Dream goes quiet, but it doesn't leave.

VIII

Kerania dies on a Sunday. Her son is there with his wife and her grandson. Neighbours come to say goodbye. The priest reads the last rites and sprinkles water across her face. It has been a good life they tell her. She gave birth to a leader in the community. She has a grandson of whom she can be proud. She has done her duty. There is nothing more for her to do, no more that is needed. By any measure of a woman, her life has been a success.

Kerania hears none of them. She waits for them to leave until it is just her in the fading twilight. When everyone else has gone to sleep, the Dream finally slinks out of its corner and draws near to her for the first time in years. It lays down next to her, its face close to hers, their hair mingling like days of old. It folds a bat-like hand over her cold one and rests its temple against hers.

Many years from now, it whispers, in another place and time, there is a dark-haired girl-child that has fire for veins and stars for eyes. She has your strength and will. She has your intelligence. She has your stubborn pride. She is like you in so many ways. She likes lemons and odd jokes. Her soul sparkles. She is the match for any man. She can move mountains. And I promise you, she will sing to the gods. She will run through forests with the wind in her hair. She will commune with the trees. She will dance with the stars and kiss any lips she fancies. She will do everything you didn't get a chance to do. And she will know your name Kerania Diakara, this I promise.

The Dream kisses her temple. It smooths her furrowed brow. Kerania smiles and breathes out. She doesn't breathe back in. Only then, does the Dream spread its great bat-like wings and fly away.