



The Shield of Achilles

All Thetis had ever wanted was to protect her child.

Well, if we're being *really* honest, she had only ever wanted to make him the glorious immortal god that she was supposed to have been the mother of – and also keep him safe. But that old busybody Themis, goddess of justice, had seen to that.

You see, Thetis, favourite daughter of the Old Man of the Sea himself, was fated to give birth to a child who was even more powerful than his father. A child who could overthrow the king of the gods, Zeus, and create a new kingdom on Mount Olympus. But that nosy Themis had told Zeus, Poseidon, and all the other gods about the prophecy, and so they had decided to have Thetis married off to a mortal man, by the name of Peleus. A decent man as far as mortals go, even Thetis could admit that... but still a mortal after all.

And so when Thetis eventually did become a mother, it was to an all-too-fragile mortal baby, a boy she named Achilles.

Everywhere she looked there were dangers: here, the sharp corner of a sideboard or a heavy dish balanced precariously on the table; there, the scorching embers floating up out of the fireplace, or a piece of Peleus' armour, carelessly left lying around. Soon enough, she made a plan: she would make Achilles immortal like herself, free him from all the dangers that surrounded him, and fulfil her fate.

Some people say that she took him to Charon in the Underworld, and dipped him in the River Styx, so that his skin would be unbreakable – except, of course, for the part of his heel where she held him. Others say that she crept around her house at night, careful not to wake her husband, and placed the baby Achilles in the fireplace, feeding him ambrosia (the food of the gods), and slowly burning away his humanity. That is, until one night when Peleus woke up too soon and snatched Achilles from the fire, ruining Thetis' spell. Either way, Achilles was forever mortal – but the most powerful mortal who would ever live.

Achilles grew up, becoming the hero he was destined to be: the greatest of all the Greeks. So, when the queen of a distant land was kidnapped by a Trojan prince, and the Greeks went to war to get her back, no one in the Greek army would even dream of going without their hero. Without Achilles – it was said – the battle could not be won.

While Achilles got ready for war, Thetis worried, growing more and more angry at the thought of her son being in mortal danger – especially since she had heard another prophecy. Achilles, her beloved son, could truly be the best of the Greeks, and earn glory



beyond any other hero. But it would come at a steep cost, so the fates had told her: 'before the Trojan War ends, your son will die in battle.'

There was another choice open to the hero, however. He could retire from battle, give up his weapons, and live a long, happy life... but it would be a life without fame, without glory, and without any hint of heroism.

Thetis was devastated. What kind of a choice was this? That her beloved son, who she had known for just a few years, could die young and be remembered forever – but be lost to her... or he could live a long, miserable life among the other wretched humans. She decided to keep this particular prophecy from Achilles to allow him to make his own choice. This was one gift she *could* give her son. Achilles, of course, chose to be a hero and, as we all know, went off to earn his title as the best of the Greeks.

It wasn't too many years, though, before Thetis was forced to tell her son about the prophecy, and give him a second gift, when Achilles – furious and distraught at the death of his companion Patroclus – threw himself back into the fighting at Troy, ready to give up his own life to punish the Trojans.

'They must *SUFFER!*' Achilles roared, stamping back and forth along the beach where he had called his mother from the sea. 'How can Patroclus be dead while Hector survives, able to keep making circuits of his castle and enjoying his life? You must help me, mother!'

Achilles' words caused a pang of fear in Thetis' heart, as she realised the cost of his decision to fight.

'My child, this is your choice. If you go to fight Hector you will surely defeat him. I have no doubt of that at all... But you will die shortly afterwards, celebrated as the best of the Greek heroes and the saviour of this battle,' she told him, reaching out for his hand. 'But there is another way. You could leave – take your ship now! You will live a long and comfortable life, safe in your palace – I will make sure of it! ...but your name would fade among the ranks of heroes.'

'That's no kind of life for me,' Achilles said, angry tears rolling down his face. 'I wasn't born for that. Tomorrow, I will fight Hector, and I *WILL* win. But you can still help me, let me be a hero worthy of having a goddess for a mother. My armour, all of it, is off in Troy, lost when Patroclus was killed. I *will* fight Hector, but I cannot fight him like this...'

'Meet me here tomorrow,' Thetis said sharply, 'I will bring you weapons and armour worthy of the gods themselves.' And with that, she faded back into the sea, leaving Achilles alone on the beach.

Thetis did not stay in the sea for long, however; she soon journeyed up to Olympus to visit Hephaestus, the smith god who she had protected when he was just a child.



'Great Hephaestus,' she called, 'if you have any love for me as your protector, now is your chance to repay me! My son – my mortal child – goes back to the battle tomorrow, where he will face Hector, and die soon after. He goes without weapons, without armour, and without any hope... unless *you* can help him.'

Hephaestus looked up from the bellows where each day he forged thunderbolts for Zeus, and replied simply: 'For you, goddess, I will do it.'

Immediately, since the gods do not waste time, he set to work, leaving Zeus' thunderbolts to his assistants for the day. He stoked up the fire, melting bronze and silver and gold into an enormous mould. The metal poured and rippled, glittering as it filled the shape: a great circle of metal with five rings set within it. Then Hephaestus really got to work. He used his powers to create all kinds of fantastic designs on the shield. This wasn't going to be any old defensive weapon, but a beautiful piece of artwork, designed to stun and shock Achilles' friends and enemies alike.

Slowly the work took shape, as Hephaestus' hammer and tongs drew the earth, the seas, the moon, the sun, and all the thousands of constellations in the sky, rotating around the shield as if by magic. Next, he added two cities, one full of celebration, with weddings and gatherings and feasts all overlapping, and people dancing and playing music, while the other saw people at war, battling head to head in furious combat, with sparkling armour. Then he created a kingdom, with a rich and beautiful castle at its centre, and ships gliding around it, and fields extending out, tended by all sorts of workers, and vineyards full of grapes stretching right to the shield's edges. He even added a procession of animals – from a gleaming herd of bulls to fierce, golden lions, and dogs chasing eagerly after them. These creatures all encircled a set of dancing figures making their way across a wide dance floor, celebrating and spinning under the night sky. Finally, he fashioned the outermost band into the river of Ocean, continually flowing and encircling the whole shield. His work was finished.

After minutes, or maybe hours, Hephaestus placed the shield before Thetis, leaving her to admire his creation. She, in turn, brought it to her son, who gazed upon it in silent wonder, knowing for certain that he truly was the son of a god, and gifted beyond any other mortal. Then, shield in hand, he set out for war for the last time...