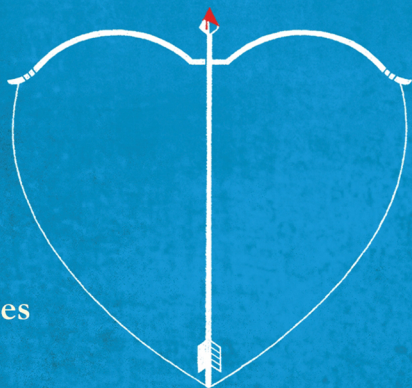


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THE SONG OF ACHILLES



'Sexy,
dangerous,
mystical'
Bettany Hughes

'Captivating ...
A hard book to
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BBC History

‘It’s brilliant at conjuring a world where capricious gods and unbreakable prophecies are simply part of life, and at capturing the tangled amorality of politics and war, like some delirious fusion of *Game of Thrones* and Jean Genet ... The story wonderfully brings home how eye-poppingly weird and gripping classical mythology really is’ *Word*

‘I loved the book. The language was timeless, the historical details were slipped in perfectly. I hope *The Song of Achilles* becomes part of the high school summer reading lists alongside *Penelopiad*’
Helen Simonson, author of *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*

‘Miller is able to take these legendary characters and make them fresh, so that the centaur Chiron is immensely attractive in his wise horsiness, and Achilles’s goddess mother, Thetis, seeps iciness through the pages. Highly recommended’ *Courier Mail*

‘A real page-turner. It’s a gripping narrative and vividly told’ Charles Palliser, author of *The Quincunx*

‘A beautiful book’ Zachary Mason, author of
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THE SONG OF ACHILLES

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THE SONG OF ACHILLES

MADELINE MILLER

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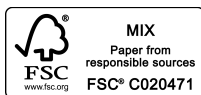
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To my mother Madeline, and Nathaniel

Chapter One

MY FATHER WAS A king and the son of kings. He was a short man, as most of us were, and built like a bull, all shoulders. He married my mother when she was fourteen and sworn by the priestess to be fruitful. It was a good match: she was an only child, and her father's fortune would go to her husband.

He did not find out until the wedding that she was simple. Her father had been scrupulous about keeping her veiled until the ceremony, and my father had humoured him. If she were ugly, there were always slave girls and serving boys. When at last they pulled off the veil, they say my mother smiled. That is how they knew she was quite stupid. Brides did not smile.

When I was delivered, a boy, he plucked me from her arms, and handed me to a nurse. In pity, the midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me. My mother hugged it. She did not seem to notice a change had been made.

Quickly, I became a disappointment: small, slight. I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing. The best that could be said of me was that I was not sickly. The colds and cramps that seized my peers left me untouched. This only made my father

suspicious. Was I a changeling, inhuman? He scowled at me, watching. My hand shook, feeling his gaze. And there was my mother, dribbling wine on herself.

I am five when it is my father's turn to host the games. Men gather from as far as Thessaly and Sparta, and our store-houses grow rich with their gold. A hundred servants work for twenty days beating out the racing track and clearing it of stones. My father is determined to have the finest games of his generation.

I remember the runners best, nut-brown bodies slicked with oil, stretching on the track beneath the sun. They mix together, broad-shouldered husbands, beardless youths and boys, their calves all thickly carved with muscle.

The bull has been killed, sweating the last of its blood into dust and dark bronze bowls. It went quietly to its death, a good omen for the games to come.

The runners are gathered before the dais where my father and I sit, surrounded by prizes we will give to the winners. There are golden mixing bowls for wine, beaten bronze tripods, ash-wood spears tipped with precious iron. But the real prize is in my hands: a wreath of dusty green leaves, freshly clipped, rubbed to a shine by my thumb. My father has given it to me grudgingly. He reassures himself: all I have to do is hold it.

The youngest boys are running first, and they wait, shuffling their feet in the sand for the nod from the priest. They're in their first flush of growth, bones sharp and spindly, poking against taut skin. My eye catches on a light head among dozens of dark, tousled crowns. I lean forward to see. Hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold – the circlet of a prince.

He is shorter than the others, and still plump with childhood in a way they are not. His hair is long, and tied back with leather; it burns against the dark, bare skin of his back. His face, when he turns, is serious as a man's.

When the priest strikes the ground, he slips past the thickened bodies of the older boys. He moves easily, his heels flashing pink as licking tongues. He wins.

I stare as my father lifts the garland from my lap and crowns him; the leaves seem almost black against the brightness of his hair. His father, Peleus, comes to claim him, smiling and proud. Peleus' kingdom is smaller than ours, but his wife is rumoured to be a goddess, and his people love him. My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me.

'That is what a son should be.'

My hands feel empty without the garland. I watch King Peleus embrace his son. I see the boy toss the garland in the air, and catch it again. He is laughing, and his face is bright with victory.

Beyond this, I remember little more than scattered images from my life then: my father frowning on his throne, a cunning toy horse I loved, my mother on the beach, her eyes turned towards the Aegean. In this last memory, I am skipping stones for her, plink, plink, plink, across the skin of the sea. She seems to like the way the ripples look, dispersing back to glass. Or perhaps it is the sea itself she likes. At her temple a starburst of white gleams like bone, the scar from the time her father hit her with the hilt of a sword. Her toes poke up from the sand where she has buried them, and I am careful not to disturb them as I search for rocks. I choose one and fling it out, glad to be good at this. It is the only memory I have of my mother and

so golden that I am almost sure I have made it up. After all, it was unlikely for my father to have allowed us to be alone together, his simple son and simpler wife. And where are we? I do not recognize the beach, the view of coastline. So much has passed since then.

Chapter Two

I WAS SUMMONED TO the king. I remember hating this, the long walk up the endless throne room. At the front, I knelt on stone. Some kings chose to have rugs there for the knees of messengers who had long news to tell. My father preferred not to.

‘King Tyndareus’ daughter is finally ready for marriage,’ he said.

I knew the name. Tyndareus was King of Sparta and held huge tracts of the ripest southern lands, the kind my father coveted. I had heard of his daughter too, rumoured to be the fairest woman in our countries. Her mother Leda was said to have been ravished by Zeus, the king of the gods himself, disguised as a swan. Nine months later, her womb yielded two sets of twins: Clytemnestra and Castor, children of her mortal husband; Helen and Polydeuces, the shining cygnets of the god. But gods were known to be notoriously poor parents; it was expected that Tyndareus would offer patrimony to all.

I did not respond to my father’s news. Such things meant nothing to me.

My father cleared his throat, loud in the silent chamber. ‘We would do well to have her in our family. You will go and put

yourself forth as a suitor.’ There was no one else in the hall, so my startled huff of breath was for his ears alone. But I knew better than to speak my discomfort. My father already knew all that I might say: that I was nine, unsightly, unpromising, uninterested.

We left the next morning, our packs heavy with gifts and food for the journey. Soldiers escorted us, in their finest armour. I don’t remember much of the trip – it was overland, through countryside that left no impression. At the head of the column, my father dictated new orders to secretaries and messengers, who rode off in every direction. I looked down at the leather reins, smoothed their nap with my thumb. I did not understand my place here. It was incomprehensible, as so much of what my father did was. My donkey swayed, and I swayed with him, glad for even this distraction.

We were not the first suitors to arrive at Tyndareus’ citadel. The stables were full of horses and mules, busy with servants. My father seemed displeased with the ceremony afforded us: I saw him rub a hand over the stone of the hearth in our rooms, frowning. I had brought a toy from home, a horse whose legs could move. I lifted one hoof, then the other, imagined that I had ridden him instead of the donkey. A soldier took pity on me and lent me his dice. I clattered them against the floor until they showed all sixes in one throw.

Finally, a day came in which my father ordered me bathed and brushed. He had me change my tunic, then change again. I obeyed, though I saw no difference between the purple with gold or crimson with gold. Neither hid my knobbly knees. My father looked powerful and severe, his black beard slashing across his face. The gift that we were presenting to Tyndareus stood ready, a beaten-gold mixing bowl embossed with the story of the princess Danae. Zeus had wooed her in a shower of golden light, and

she had borne him Perseus, Gorgon-slayer, second only to Heracles among our heroes. My father handed it to me. 'Do not disgrace us,' he said.

I heard the great hall before I saw it, the sound of hundreds of voices banging against stone walls, the clatter of goblets and armour. The servants had thrown open the windows to try to dampen the sound; they had hung tapestries, wealth indeed, on every wall. I had never seen so many men inside before. Not men, I corrected myself. Kings.

We were called forward to council, seated on benches draped with cowhide. Servants faded backwards, to the shadows. My father's fingers dug into my collar warning me not to fidget.

There was violence in that room, with so many princes and heroes and kings competing for a single prize, but we knew how to ape civilization. One by one they introduced themselves, these young men, showing off shining hair and neat waists and expensively dyed clothing. Many were the sons or grandsons of gods. All had a song, or two, or more, written of their deeds. Tyndareus greeted each in turn, accepted their gifts in a pile at the centre of the room. Invited each to speak, and present his suit.

My father was the oldest among them, except for the man who, when his turn came, named himself Philoctetes. 'A comrade of Heracles,' the man beside us whispered, with an awe I understood. Heracles was the greatest of our heroes, and Philoctetes had been the closest of his companions, the only one still living. His hair was grey and his thick fingers were all tendon, the sinewy dexterity that marked an archer. And indeed, a moment later he held up the largest bow I had ever seen, polished yew wood with a lionskin grip. 'The bow of Heracles,' Philoctetes named it, 'given to me at his death.' In our lands a bow was mocked as the

weapon of cowards. But no one could say such a thing about this bow; the strength it would take to draw it humbled us all.

The next man, his eyes painted like a woman's, spoke his name. 'Idomeneus, King of Crete.' He was lean, and his long hair fell to his waist when he stood. He offered rare iron, a double-headed axe. 'The symbol of my people.' His movements reminded me of the dancers that my mother liked.

And then Menelaus, son of Atreus, seated beside his hulking, bear-like brother Agamemnon. Menelaus' hair was a startling red, the colour of fire-forged bronze. His body was strong, stocky with muscles, vital. The gift he gave was a rich one, beautifully dyed cloth. 'Though the lady needs no adornment,' he added, smiling. This was a pretty bit of speech. I wished I had something as clever to say. I was the only one here under twenty, and I was not descended of a god. Perhaps Peleus' blond-haired son would be equal to this, I thought. But his father had kept him at home.

Man after man, and their names began to blur in my head. My attention wandered to the dais, where I noticed, for the first time, the three veiled women seated at Tyndareus' side. I stared at the white cloth over their faces, as if I might be able to catch some glimpse of the woman behind it. My father wanted one of them for my wife. Three sets of hands, prettily adorned with bracelets, lay quiet in their laps. One of the women was taller than the other two. I thought I saw a stray dark curl peek from beneath the bottom of her veil. Helen is light-haired, I remembered. So that one was not Helen. I had ceased to listen to the kings.

'Welcome, Menoitius.' The speaking of my father's name startled me. Tyndareus was looking at us. 'I am sorry to hear of the death of your wife.'

'My wife lives, Tyndareus. It is my son who comes today to

wed your daughter.’ There was a silence in which I knelt, dizzied by the spin of faces around me.

‘Your son is not yet a man.’ Tyndareus’ voice seemed far away. I could detect nothing in it.

‘He need not be. I am man enough for both of us.’ It was the sort of jest our people loved, bold and boasting. But no one laughed.

‘I see,’ said Tyndareus.

The stone floor dug into my skin, yet I did not move. I was used to kneeling. I had never before been glad of the practice in my father’s throne room.

My father spoke again, in the silence. ‘Others have brought bronze and wine, oil and wool. I bring gold, and it is only a small portion of my stores.’ I was aware of my hands on the beautiful bowl, touching the story’s figures: Zeus appearing from the streaming sunlight, the startled princess, their coupling.

‘My daughter and I are grateful that you have brought us such a worthy gift, though paltry to you.’ A murmur, from the kings. There was humiliation here, that my father did not seem to understand. My face flushed with it.

‘I would make Helen the queen of my palace. For my wife, as you know well, is not fit to rule. My wealth exceeds all of these young men, and my deeds speak for themselves.’

‘I thought the suitor was your son.’

I looked up at the new voice. A man who had not spoken yet. He was the last in line, sitting at ease on the bench, his curling hair gleaming in the light of the fire. He had a jagged scar on one leg, a seam that stitched his dark brown flesh from heel to knee, wrapping around the muscles of the calf and burying itself in the shadow beneath his tunic. It looked like it had been a knife, I thought, or something like it, ripping upwards and leaving

behind feathered edges, whose softness belied the violence that must have caused it.

My father was angry. 'Son of Laertes, I do not remember inviting you to speak.'

The man smiled. 'I was not invited. I interrupted. But you need not fear my interference. I have no vested interest in the matter. I speak only as an observer.' A small movement from the dais drew my eye. One of the veiled figures had stirred.

'What does he mean?' My father was frowning. 'If he is not here for Helen, then for what? Let him go back to his rocks and his goats.'

The man's eyebrows lifted, but he said nothing.

Tyndareus was also mild. 'If your son is to be a suitor, as you say, then let him present himself.'

Even I knew it was my turn to speak. 'I am Patroclus, son of Menoitius.' My voice sounded high, and scratchy with disuse. 'I am here as a suitor for Helen. My father is a king and the son of kings.' I had no more to say. My father had not instructed me; he had not thought that Tyndareus would ask me to speak. I stood and carried the bowl to the pile of gifts, placed it where it would not topple. I turned and walked back to my bench. I had not disgraced myself with trembling or tripping and my words had not been foolish. Still, my face burned with shame. I knew how I must look to these men.

Oblivious, the line of suitors moved on. The man kneeling now was huge, half again as tall as my father, and broad besides. Behind him, two servants braced an enormous shield. It seemed to stand with him as part of his suit, reaching from his heels to his crown; no ordinary man could have carried it. And it was no decoration: scarred and hacked edges bore witness to the battles it had seen. Ajax, son of Telamon, this giant named himself. His

speech was blunt and short, claiming his lineage from Zeus and offering his mighty size as proof of his great-grandfather's continuing favour. His gift was a spear, supple wood beautifully cut. The fire-forged point gleamed in the light of the torches.

At last it was the man with the scar's turn. 'Well, son of Laertes?' Tyndareus shifted in his seat to face him. 'What does a disinterested observer have to say to these proceedings?'

The man leaned back. 'I would like to know how you are going to stop the losers from declaring war on you. Or on Helen's lucky new husband. I see half a dozen men here ready to leap at each other's throats.'

'You seem amused.'

The man shrugged. 'I find the folly of men amusing.'

'The son of Laertes scorns us!' This was the large man, Ajax, his clenched fist as big as my head.

'Son of Telamon, never.'

'Then what, Odysseus? Speak your mind, for once.' Tyndareus' voice was as sharp as I'd heard it.

Odysseus shrugged again. 'This was a dangerous gamble, despite the treasure and renown you have won. Each of these men is worthy, and knows it. They will not so easily be put off.'

'All this you have said to me in private.'

My father stiffened beside me. *Conspiracy*. His was not the only angry face in the hall.

'True. But now I offer you a solution.' He held up his hands, empty. 'I have brought no gift, and do not seek to woo Helen. I am a king, as has been said, of rocks and goats. In return for my solution I seek from you the prize that I have already named.'

'Give me your solution and you shall have it.' Again, that slight movement, from the dais. One woman's hand had twitched against her companion's dress.

‘Then here it is. I believe that we should let Helen choose.’ Odysseus paused, to allow for the murmurs of disbelief; women did not have a say in such things. ‘No one may fault you, then. But she must choose now, at this very moment, so she will not be said to have taken council or instruction from you. And.’ He held up a finger. ‘Before she chooses every man here must swear an oath: to uphold Helen’s choice, and to defend her husband against all who would take her from him.’

I felt the unrest in the room. *An oath?* And over such an unconventional matter as a woman choosing her husband. The men were suspicious.

‘Very well.’ Tyndareus, his face unreadable, turned to the veiled women. ‘Helen, do you accept this proposal?’

Her voice was low and lovely, carrying to every corner of the hall. ‘I do.’ It was all she said, but I felt the shiver go through the men around me. Even as a child I felt it, and marvelled at the power of this woman who, though veiled, could electrify a room. Her skin, we suddenly remembered, was rumoured to be gilded, her eyes dark and shining as the slick obsidian that we traded our olives for. At that moment she was worth all the prizes in the centre of the hall, and more. She was worth our lives.

Tyndareus nodded. ‘Then I decree that it is so. All those who wish to swear will do so, now.’

I heard muttering, a few half-angry voices. But no man left. Helen’s voice, and the veil, gently fluttering with her breath, held us all captive.

A swiftly summoned priest led a white goat to the altar. Here, inside, it was a more propitious choice than a bull, whose throat might splash unwholesomely upon the stone floor. The animal died easily and the man mixed its dark blood

with the cypress ash from the fire. The bowl hissed, loud in the silent room.

‘You will be first.’ Tyndareus pointed to Odysseus. Even a nine-year-old saw how fitting this was. Already Odysseus had shown himself too clever by half. Our ragged alliances prevailed only when no man was allowed to be too much more powerful than another. Around the room, I saw smirks and satisfaction among the kings; he would not be allowed to escape his own noose.

Odysseus’ mouth quirked in a half-smile. ‘Of course. It is my pleasure.’ But I guessed that it was not so. During the sacrifice I had watched him lean back into the shadows, as if he would be forgotten. He rose now, moved to the altar.

‘Now Helen,’ Odysseus paused, his arm half-extended to the priest, ‘remember that I swear only in fellowship, not as a suitor. You would never forgive yourself if you were to choose me.’ His words were teasing, and drew scattered laughter. We all knew it was not likely that one so luminous as Helen would choose the King of barren Ithaca.

One by one the priest summoned us to the hearth, marking our wrists with blood and ash, binding as chains. I chanted the words of the oath back to him, my arm lifted for all to see.

When the last man had returned to his place Tyndareus rose. ‘Choose now, my daughter.’

‘Menelaus.’ She spoke without hesitation, startling us all. We had expected suspense, indecision. I turned to the red-haired man, who stood, a huge grin cracking his face. In outsize joy, he clapped his silent brother on the back. Everywhere else was anger, disappointment, even grief. But no man reached for his sword; the blood had dried thick on our wrists.

‘So be it.’ Tyndareus stood also. ‘I am glad to welcome a

second son of Atreus to my family. You shall have my Helen, even as your worthy brother once claimed my Clytemnestra.’ He gestured to the tallest woman, as though she might stand. She did not move. Perhaps she had not heard.

‘What about the third girl?’ This shout from a small man, beside the giant Ajax. ‘Your niece. Can I have her?’

The men laughed, glad for an easing in the tension.

‘You’re too late, Teucer.’ Odysseus spoke over the noise. ‘She’s promised to me.’

I did not have the chance to hear more. My father’s hand seized my shoulder, pulling me angrily off the bench. ‘We are finished here.’ We left that very night for home, and I climbed back on my donkey, thick with disappointment: I had not even been allowed to glimpse Helen’s fabled face.

My father would never mention the trip again, and once home the events twisted strangely in my memory. The blood and the oath, the room full of kings: they seemed distant and pale, like something a bard had spun, rather than something I lived. Had I really knelt there before them? And what of the oath I had sworn? It seemed absurd even to think of it, foolish and improbable as a dream is by dinner.

Chapter Three

I STOOD IN THE field. In my hands were two pairs of dice, a gift. Not from my father, who'd never think of it. Not from my mother, who sometimes did not know me. I could not remember who had given them to me. A visiting king? A favour-currying noble?

They were carved from ivory, inset with onyx, smooth under my thumb. It was late summer, and I was panting with my run from the palace. Since the day of the races I had been appointed a man to train me in all our athletic arts: boxing, sword-and-spear, discus. But I had escaped him, and glowed with the giddy lightness of solitude. It was the first time I had been alone in weeks.

Then the boy appeared. His name was Clysonymus and he was the son of a nobleman who was often at the palace. Older, larger and unpleasantly fleshy. His eyes had caught the flash of the dice in my palm. He leered at me, held out his hand. 'Let me see them.'

'No.' I did not want his fingers on them, grubby and thick. And I was the prince, however small. Did I not even have this right? But these noble sons were used to me doing what they wished. They knew my father would not intervene.

‘I want them.’ He didn’t bother to threaten me, yet. I hated him for it. I should be worth threatening.

‘No.’

He stepped forward. ‘Let me have them.’

‘They’re mine.’ I grew teeth. I snapped like the dogs who fight for our table scraps.

He reached to take them, and I shoved him backwards. He stumbled, and I was glad. He would not get what was mine.

‘Hey!’ He was angry. I was so small; I was rumoured to be simple. If he backed down now, it would be a dishonour. He advanced on me, face red. Without meaning to, I stepped back.

He smirked then. ‘Coward.’

‘I am no coward.’ My voice rose, and my skin went hot.

‘Your father thinks you are.’ His words were deliberate, as if he were savouring them. ‘I heard him tell my father so.’

‘He did not.’ But I knew he had.

The boy stepped closer. He lifted a fist. ‘Are you calling me a liar?’ I knew that he would hit me now. He was just waiting for an excuse. I could imagine the way my father would have said it. *Coward*. I planted my hands on his chest and shoved, as hard as I could. Our land was one of grass, and wheat. Tumbles should not hurt.

I am making excuses. It was also a land of rocks.

His head thudded dully against stone, and I saw the surprised pop of his eyes. The ground around him began to bleed.

I stared, my throat closing in horror at what I had done. I had not seen the death of a human before. Yes, the bulls, and the goats, even the bloodless gasping of fish. And I had seen it in paintings, tapestries, the black figures burned on to our platters. But I had not seen this: the rattle of it, the choke and scrabble. The smell of the flux. I fled.

Sometime later, they found me by the gnarled ankles of an olive tree. I was limp and pale, surrounded by my own vomit. The dice were gone, lost in my flight. My father stared down angrily at me, his lips drawn back to show his yellowing teeth. He gestured, and the servants lifted me and carried me inside.

The boy's family demanded immediate exile or death. They were powerful, and this was their eldest son. They might permit a king to burn their fields, or rape their daughters, as long as payment was made. But you did not touch a man's sons. For this, the nobles would riot. We all knew the rules; we clung to them to avoid the anarchy that was always a hair's breadth away. *Blood feud*. The servants made the sign against evil.

My father had spent his life scrabbling to keep his kingdom, and would not risk losing it over such a son as me, when heirs and the wombs that bore them were so easy to come by. So, he agreed: I would be exiled, and fostered in another man's kingdom. In exchange for my weight in gold, they would rear me to manhood. I would have no parents, no family name, no inheritance. In our day, death was preferable. But my father was a practical man. My weight in gold was less than the expense of the lavish funeral my death would have demanded.

This was how I came to be ten, and an orphan. This is how I came to Phthia.

Tiny, gemstone-sized Phthia was the smallest of our countries, set in a northern crook of land between the ridges of Mount Othrys and the sea. Its king, Peleus, was one of those men whom the gods love: not divine himself, but clever, brave, handsome, and excelling all his peers in piety. As a reward, our divinities offered him a sea-nymph for a wife. It was considered their highest honour. After all, what mortal would not want to bed a

goddess and sire a son from her? Divine blood purified our muddy race, bred heroes from dust and clay. And this goddess brought a greater promise still: the Fates had foretold that her son would far surpass his father. Peleus' line would be assured. But, like all the gods' gifts, there was an edge to it; the goddess herself was unwilling.

Everyone, even I, had heard the story of Thetis' ravishment. The gods had led Peleus to the secret place where she liked to sit upon the beach. They had warned him not to waste time with overtures – she would never consent to marriage with a mortal.

They warned him too, of what would come once he had caught her: for the nymph Thetis was wily, like her father Proteus, the slippery old man of the sea, and she knew how to make her skin flow into a thousand different shapes of fur and feather and flesh. And though beaks and claws and teeth and coils and stinging tails would flay him, still Peleus must not let her go.

Peleus was a pious and obedient man and did all that the gods had instructed him to do. He waited for her to emerge from the slate-coloured waves, hair black and long as a horse's tail. Then he seized her, holding on despite her violent struggles, squeezing until they were both exhausted, breathless and sand-scraped. The blood from the wounds she had given him mixed with the smears of lost maidenhead on her thighs. Her resistance mattered no longer: a deflowering was as binding as marriage vows.

The gods forced her to swear that she would stay with her mortal husband for at least a year, and she served her time on earth as the duty it was, silent, unresponsive and sullen. Now when he clasped her, she did not bother to writhe and twist in protest. Instead she lay stiff and silent, damp and chilled as an old fish. Her reluctant womb bore only a single child. The hour

her sentence was finished, she ran out of the house and dived back into the sea.

She would return only to visit the boy, never for any other reason, and never for long. The rest of the time the child was raised by tutors and nurses, and overseen by Phoinix, Peleus' most trusted counsellor. Did Peleus ever regret the gods' gift to him? An ordinary wife would have counted herself lucky to find a husband with Peleus' mildness, his smile-lined face. But for the sea-nymph Thetis nothing could ever eclipse the stain of his dirty, mortal, mediocrity.

I was led through the palace by a servant whose name I had not caught. Perhaps he had not said it. The halls were smaller than at home, as if restrained by the modesty of the kingdom they governed. The walls and floors were local marble, whiter than was found in the south. My feet were dark against its pallor.

I had nothing with me. My few belongings were being carried to my room, and the gold my father sent was on its way to the treasury. I had felt a strange panic as I was parted from it. It had been my companion for the weeks of travel, a reminder of my worth. I knew its contents by heart now: the five goblets with engraved stems, a heavy knobbed sceptre, a beaten-gold necklace, two ornamental statues of birds, and a carved lyre, gilded at its tips. This last, I knew, was cheating. Wood was cheap and plentiful and heavy, and took up space that should have been used for gold. Yet the lyre was so beautiful no one could object to it; it had been a piece of my mother's dowry. As we rode, I would reach back into my saddle-bags to stroke the polished wood.

I guessed that I was being led to the throne room, where I would kneel and pour out my gratitude. But the servant stopped

suddenly at a side door. King Peleus was absent, he told me, so I would present myself before his son instead. I was unnerved. This was not what I had prepared myself for, the dutiful words I'd practised on donkeyback. Peleus' son. I could still remember the dark wreath against his bright hair, the way his pink soles had flashed along the track. *That is what a son should be.*

He was lying on his back on a wide, pillowed bench, balancing a lyre on his stomach. Idly, he plucked at it. He did not hear me enter, or he did not choose to look. This is how I first began to understand my place here. Until this moment I had been a prince, expected and announced. Now I was negligible.

I took another step forward, scuffing my feet, and his head lolled to the side to regard me. In the five years since I had seen him, he had outgrown his babyish roundness. I gaped at the cold shock of his beauty, deep-green eyes, features fine as a girl's. It struck from me a sudden, springing dislike. I had not changed so much, nor so well.

He yawned, his eyes heavy-lidded. 'What's your name?'

His kingdom was half, a quarter, an eighth the size of my father's, and I had killed a boy and been exiled and still he did not know me. I ground my jaw shut and would not speak.

He asked again, louder: 'What's your name?' My silence was excusable the first time; perhaps I had not heard him. Now it was not.

'Patroclus.' It was the name my father had given me, hopefully but injudiciously, at my birth, and it tasted of bitterness on my tongue. 'Honour of the father,' it meant. I waited for him to make a joke out of it, some witty jape about my disgrace. He did not. Perhaps, I thought, he is too stupid to.

He rolled on to his side to face me. A stray lock of gold fell half into his eyes; he blew it away. 'My name is Achilles.'

I jerked my chin up, an inch, in bare acknowledgement. We regarded each other for a moment. Then he blinked and yawned again, his mouth cracked wide as a cat's. 'Welcome to Phthia.'

I had been raised in a court and knew dismissal when I heard it.

I discovered that afternoon that I was not the only foster child of Peleus. The modest king turned out to be rich in cast-off sons. He had once been a runaway himself, it was rumoured, and had a reputation for charity towards exiles. My bed was a pallet in a long barracks-style room, filled with other boys tussling and lounging. A servant showed me where my things had been put. A few boys lifted their heads, stared. I am sure one of them spoke to me, asked my name. I am sure I gave it. They returned to their games. *No one important.* I walked stiff-legged to my pallet and waited for dinner.

We were summoned to eat at dusk by a bell, bronze struck from deep in the palace's turnings. The boys dropped their games and tumbled out into the hallway. The complex was built like a rabbit warren, full of twisting corridors and sudden inner rooms. I nearly tripped over the heels of the boy in front of me, fearful of being left behind and lost.

The room for meals was a long hall at the front of the palace, its windows opening on to Mount Othrys' foothills. It was large enough to feed all of us, many times over; Peleus was a king who liked to host and entertain. We sat on its oakwood benches, at tables that were scratched from years of clattering plates. The food was simple but plentiful – salted fish, and thick bread served with herbed cheese. There was no flesh here, of goats or bulls. That was only for royalty, or festival days. Across the room I caught the flash of bright hair in lamplight. *Achilles.* He sat with a group of boys whose mouths were wide with laughter at

something he'd said or done. *That is what a prince should be.* I stared down at my bread, its coarse grains that rubbed rough against my fingers.

After supper we were allowed to do as we liked. Some boys were gathering in a corner for a game. 'Do you want to play?' one asked. His hair still hung in childhood curls; he was younger than I was.

'Play?'

'Dice.' He opened his hand to show them, carved bone flecked with black dye.

I started, stepped backwards. 'No,' I said, too loudly.

He blinked in surprise. 'All right.' He shrugged, and was gone.

That night I dreamed of the dead boy, his skull cracked like an egg against the ground. *He has followed me.* The blood spreads, dark as spilled wine. His eyes open, and his mouth begins to move. I clap my hands over my ears. The voices of the dead were said to have the power to make the living mad. *I must not hear him speak.*

I woke in terror, hoping I had not screamed aloud. The pinpricks of stars outside the window were the only light; there was no moon I could see. My breathing was harsh in the silence, and the marsh-reed ticking of the mattress crackled softly beneath me, rubbing its thin fingers against my back. The presence of the other boys did not comfort me; our dead come for their vengeance regardless of witnesses.

The stars turned, and somewhere the moon crept across the sky. When my eyes dragged closed again, he was waiting for me still, covered in blood, his face as pale as bone. Of course he was. No soul wished to be sent early to the endless gloom of our underworld. Exile might satisfy the anger of the living, but it did not appease the dead.

I woke sandy-eyed, my limbs heavy and dull. The other boys surged around me, dressing for breakfast, eager for the day. Word had spread quickly of my strangeness and the younger boy did not approach me again, with dice or anything else. At breakfast, my fingers pushed bread between my lips, and my throat swallowed. Milk was poured for me. I drank it.

Afterwards we were led into the dusty sun of the practice yards for training in spear and sword. Here is where I tasted the full truth of Peleus' kindness: well-trained and indebted, we would one day make him a fine army.

I was given a spear, and a calloused hand corrected my grip, then corrected it again. I threw and grazed the edge of the oak-tree target. The master blew out a breath and passed me a second spear. My eyes travelled over the other boys, searching for Peleus' son. He was not there. I sighted once more at the oak, its bark pitted and cracked, oozing sap from punctures. I threw.

The sun drove high, then higher still. My throat grew dry and hot, scratched with burning dust. When the masters released us most of the boys fled to the beach, where small breezes still stirred. There they diced and raced, shouting jokes in the sharp, slanting dialects of the north.

My eyes were heavy in my head, and my arm ached from the morning's exertion. I sat beneath the scrubby shade of an olive tree to stare out over the ocean's waves. No one spoke to me. I was easy to ignore. It was not so very different from home, really.

The next day was the same, a morning of weary exercises, and then long afternoon hours alone. At night, the moon slivered smaller and smaller. I stared until I could see it even when I closed my eyes, the yellow curve bright against the dark of my eyelids. I hoped that it might keep the visions of the boy at bay.

Our goddess of the moon is gifted with magic, with power over the dead. She could banish the dreams, if she wished.

She did not. The boy came, night after night, with his staring eyes and splintered skull. Sometimes he turned and showed me the hole in his head, where the soft mass of his brain hung loose. Sometimes he reached for me. I would wake, choking on my horror, and stare at the darkness until dawn.

Chapter Four

MEALS IN THE VAULTED dining hall were my only relief. There the walls did not seem to press in on me so much, and the dust from the courtyard did not clog in my throat. The buzz of constant voices eased as mouths were stuffed full. I could sit with my food alone and breathe again.

It was the only time I saw Achilles. His days were separate, princely, filled with duties we had no part of. But he took each meal with us, circulating among the tables. In the huge hall, his beauty shone like a flame, vital and bright, drawing my eye against my will. His mouth was a plump bow, his nose an aristocratic arrow. Seated, his limbs did not skew as mine did, but arranged themselves with perfect grace, as if for a sculptor. Perhaps most remarkable was his unself-consciousness. He did not preen nor pout as other handsome children did. Indeed, he seemed utterly unaware of his effect on the boys around him. Though how he was, I could not imagine: they crowded him like dogs in their eagerness, tongues lolling.

I watched all of this from my place at a corner table, bread crumpled in my fist. The keen edge of my envy was like flint, a spark away from fire.

On one of these days he sat closer to me than usual; only a table distant. His dusty feet scuffed against the flagstones as he ate. They were not cracked and calloused as mine were, but pink and sweetly brown beneath the dirt. Prince, I sneered, inside my head.

He turned, as if he had heard me. For a second our eyes held, and I felt a shock run through me. I jerked my gaze away, and busied myself with my bread. My cheeks were hot, and my skin prickled as if before a storm. When, at last, I ventured to look up again, he had turned back to his table and was speaking to the other boys.

After that, I was craftier with my observation, kept my head down and my eyes ready to leap away. But he was craftier still. At least once a dinner he would turn and catch me before I could feign indifference. Those seconds, half-seconds, that the line of our gaze connected, were the only moment in my day that I felt anything at all. The sudden swoop of my stomach, the coursing anger. I was like a fish eyeing the hook.

In the fourth week of my exile, I walked into the dining hall to find him at the table where I always sat. My table, as I had come to think of it, since few others chose to share it with me. Now, because of him, the benches were full of jostling boys. I froze, caught between flight and fury. Anger won. This was mine, and he would not push me from it, no matter how many boys he brought.

I sat at the last empty space, my shoulders tensed as if for a fight. Across the table the boys postured and prattled, about a spear and a bird that had died on the beach and the spring races. I did not hear them. His presence was like a stone in my shoe, impossible to ignore. His skin was the colour of just-pressed olive oil, and smooth as polished wood, without the scabs and blemishes that covered the rest of us.

Dinner finished, and the plates were cleared. A harvest moon, full and orange, hung in the dusk beyond the dining room's windows. Yet Achilles lingered. Absently, he pushed the hair from his eyes; it had grown longer, over the weeks I had been here. He reached for a bowl on the table that held figs and gathered several in his hands.

With a toss of his wrist, he flicked the figs into the air, one, two, three, juggling them so lightly that their delicate skins did not bruise. He added a fourth, then a fifth. The boys hooted and clapped. More, more!

The fruits flew, colours blurring, so fast they seemed not to touch his hands, to tumble of their own accord. Juggling was a trick of low mummers and beggars, but he made it something else, a living pattern painted on the air, so beautiful even I could not pretend disinterest.

His gaze, which had been following the circling fruit, flickered to mine. I did not have time to look away before he said, softly but distinctly, 'Catch.' A fig leaped from the pattern in a graceful arc towards me. It fell into the cup of my palms, soft and slightly warm. I was aware of the boys cheering.

One by one, Achilles caught the remaining fruits, returned them to the table with a performer's flourish. Except for the last, which he ate, the dark flesh parting to pink seeds under his teeth. The fruit was perfectly ripe, the juice brimming. Without thinking, I brought the one he had thrown me to my lips. Its burst of grainy sweetness filled my mouth; the skin was downy on my tongue. I had loved figs, once.

He stood, and the boys chorused their farewells. I thought he might look at me again. But he only turned, and vanished back to his room on the other side of the palace.

* * *

The next day Peleus returned to the palace and I was brought before him in his throne room, smoky and sharp from a yew-wood fire. Duly I knelt, saluted, received his famously charitable smile. ‘Patroclus,’ I told him, when he asked. I was almost accustomed to it now, the bareness of my name, without my father’s behind it. Peleus nodded. He seemed old to me, bent over, but he was no more than fifty, my father’s age. He did not look like a man who could have conquered a goddess, or produced such a child as Achilles.

‘You are here because you killed a boy. You understand this?’

This was the cruelty of adults. *Do you understand?*

‘Yes,’ I told him. I could have told him more, of the dreams that left me bleary and bloodshot, the almost-screams that scraped my throat as I swallowed them down. The way the stars turned and turned through the night above my unsleeping eyes.

‘You are welcome here. You may still make a good man.’ He meant it as comfort.

Later that day, perhaps from him, perhaps from a listening servant, the boys learned at last of the reason for my exile. I should have expected it; I had heard them gossip of others often enough. Rumours were the only coin the boys had to trade in. Still, it took me by surprise to see the sudden change in them, the fear and fascination blooming on their faces as I passed. Now even the boldest of them would whisper a prayer if he brushed against me: bad luck could be caught, and the *Erinyes*, our hissing spirits of vengeance, were not always particular. The boys watched from a safe distance, enthralled. *Will they drink his blood, do you think?*

Their whispers choked me, turned the food in my mouth to ash. I pushed away my plate and sought out corners and spare