



## 1. Prey

Clytemnestra looks down at the steep ravine but can see no trace of dead bodies. She searches for cracked skulls, broken bones, corpses eaten by wild dogs and pecked by vultures, but nothing. There are only a few brave flowers, growing between the cracks, their petals white against the darkness of the ravine. She wonders how they manage to grow in such a place of death.

There were no flowers down there when she was little. She remembers crouching in the forest as a child, watching the elders drag criminals and weak babies up the trail and throw them into the gorge Spartans call Ceadas. Down the cliff, the rocks are as sharp as freshly cast bronze and as slippery as raw fish. Clytemnestra used to hide and pray for all of those men whose death would be long and painful. She couldn't pray for the babies: the thought made her restless. If she walked closer to the edge of the ravine, she could feel a soft breeze caressing her skin. Her mother had told her that the dead infants lying at the bottom of the Ceadas spoke through the wind. Those voices whispered, yet Clytemnestra couldn't grasp their words. So she let her mind wander as she looked at the sun peeping through the leafy branches.

An eerie silence looms over the forest. Clytemnestra knows she is being followed. She descends quickly from the high ground leaving the ravine behind, trying not to trip on the slippery stones that form the hunting trail. The wind is colder, the sky darker. When she left the palace, hours ago, the sun was rising, warm on her skin, and the grass was wet against her soles. Her mother was already sitting in the throne

room, her face glowing in the orange light, and Clytemnestra slipped past the doors before she could be seen.

There is a sudden movement behind the trees, and the sound of crunching leaves. Clytemnestra slips and cuts her palm against the sharp edge of a rock. When she looks up, ready to defend herself, two big dark eyes are staring back at her. Just a deer. She clenches her fist, then wipes her hand on her tunic before the blood can leave tracks for her hunter.

She can hear wolves howl somewhere far above her but forces herself to keep going. Spartan boys of her age fight wolves and panthers in pairs as part of their training. Clytemnestra once shaved her head, like a boy, and went to the gymnasium with them hoping to prepare for a hunt. When her mother found out, she didn't feed her for two days. 'Part of the training is to starve Spartan boys until they are forced to steal,' she said. Clytemnestra endured the punishment – she knew she deserved it.

The stream leads to a spring and a little waterfall. Above it, she can see a crevice, an entrance to what looks like a cave. She starts to climb the mossy rocks at the sides of the spring. Her hand throbs and slips on the surface of the cliff. Her bow is slung over her back, and the dagger hangs loose from her belt, its handle pressing against her thigh.

At the top, she stops to catch her breath. She tears off a piece of her tunic, douses it in the clear water of the spring and wraps it around her bleeding hand. The crowns of the oaks blend with the darkening sky, and everything is blurred to her tired eyes. She knows she is too exposed on the ground. *The higher you climb, the better*, her father always says.

She scrambles up the tallest tree and pauses astride a branch to listen, holding her dagger tightly. The moon is high in the sky, its contours clear and cold, like a silver shield. Everything is silent, except for the water of the spring below her.

A branch cracks, and two golden eyes appear in the darkness in front of her, studying her. Clytemnestra remains still, blood pulsating in her temples. On the tree opposite her, a silver shape slips away from the shadows, revealing a coat of thick fur and pointed ears. A lynx.

The beast jumps and lands on her tree. The impact makes her lose her balance. She clutches the branch, but her nails break, her palms slip. She falls and lands on the muddy ground. For a second, she is blind and her breath is gone. The animal tries to jump down on her, but her hands are moving fast to her bow and arrows. She shoots, and rolls onto her side. The lynx's claws scratch her back and she screams.

The animal stands, its back to the narrow crevice that leads into the cave. For a moment, woman and lynx stare at each other. Then, swift as a striking snake, Clytemnestra throws her dagger into the animal's shoulder. The lynx shrieks, and Clytemnestra runs past it, towards the blackness of the cave. She barely passes through the crevice, grazing her head and hips, sinks into the darkness and waits, praying that the cave has no other entrance, and no other visitor.

Slowly, her eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Her bow and most of her arrows are somehow intact and she sets them aside. She removes her bloodied tunic and rests her back against the cold rock. Her panting echoes in the humid air as if the cave itself were breathing. Can the goddess Artemis see her now? She wishes she could, though her father has always told her not to bother with gods. Her mother, on the other hand, believes that forests hide the gods' secrets. Caves to her are shelters, minds that have thought and lived the lives of the creatures they have hosted over time. But maybe her father is right: this cave sounds as empty as a temple at night. There is only the moaning of the wounded lynx, which moves further and further away.

When it dies, Clytemnestra drags herself closer to the crevice and peeps out. Nothing moves on the muddy ground. She slips back into her tunic, flinching when it sticks to her wound, then leaves the cave, her hips brushing against the smooth rocks.

The lynx lies close to the spring, its blood spreading on the orange leaves, like spilled wine. Clytemnestra limps closer to it and retrieves her dagger. The animal's eyes are open, reflecting the bright shape of the moon. Surprise is still etched on them, and sadness. They are not so different from a dead man's eyes. Clytemnestra ties the animal's paws to her quiver and starts to walk, hoping to be home by morning.

Her mother will be proud of her hunt.

## 2. One Girl Wins and the Other Loses

‘Slow down, Clytemnestra! Artemis will shoot me if I am second again!’

Clytemnestra laughs and the sound echoes like birdsong across the plain. ‘She won’t. Mother told you that to make you run faster!’

They are racing between the rows of olive and fig trees, their hair catching the leaves, their bare feet stepping on fallen fruit. Clytemnestra is faster. Cuts and bruises cover her arms, and her eyes show her determination to reach the river first. Behind her, Helen pants, calling to her sister. Whenever the sunlight catches her hair, it glows as brightly as the ripe fruit around her.

Clytemnestra jumps out of the grove onto the sun-baked earth. The ground burns her feet so she hops onto the yellow grass. She stops only when she gets to the river to look at her figure mirrored in the water. She is dirty, dishevelled.

‘Wait for me,’ Helen calls.

Clytemnestra turns. Her sister has stopped at the edge of the grove, sweat pouring down her tunic. She is glowering at her. ‘Why must you do everything in a hurry?’ Helen asks.

Clytemnestra smiles. To their people, Helen of Sparta may look like a goddess, but truly, she follows her sister in everything she does. ‘Because it’s hot,’ Clytemnestra says. She throws aside her tunic and plunges into the river. Her long hair dances around her, like seaweed. The fresh breeze of the early morning is making way for the summer heat. Along the banks of the Eurotas river, between the dry plains and rough mountains, a few blood-red anemones struggle to

grow. Not far from the banks, the thin strip of fertile soil with olive and fig trees stretches shyly, like a ray of sun in a clouded sky. Helen is lingering by the bank, the water up to her thighs. She always walks slowly into the river, wetting herself with her hands.

‘Come on.’ Clytemnestra swims towards her and hugs her waist.

‘It’s cold,’ Helen moans, but keeps walking into the water. When Clytemnestra tries to let go of her, Helen clings to her warm body, pressing as close as she can.

‘You are no Spartan woman,’ Clytemnestra says, with a smile.

‘Not like you. If you were a man, you’d be among the strongest fighters in Greece.’

‘I’m already among the cleverest in Sparta,’ Clytemnestra says, grinning.

Helen frowns. ‘You shouldn’t say these things. You know what Mother says about hubris.’

‘*The pride that comes before a fall*,’ Clytemnestra recites, bored. ‘But Father always says he’s the bravest warrior in Sparta and no one has punished him yet.’

‘Father is king. We aren’t, so we shouldn’t anger the gods,’ Helen insists.

Clytemnestra laughs. Her sister, moving through the world as if life were all mud and murk, always amuses her. ‘If you’re the fairest woman in all our lands and beyond, I might as well be the cleverest. I don’t see why the gods should be angry with that – they’ll always be cleverer and more beautiful anyway.’

Helen thinks it through. Clytemnestra swims towards a patch of sunlight glistening on the water, and her sister follows. The two remain floating in the river, their faces like sunflowers, always following the light.

They reach the gymnasium in time for their daily practice. The sun is strong, and they hurry under the shade of the

trees that surround the courtyard. On the sand, young girls are already practising, running around the square fully naked. Here the Spartiates, daughters of the best and noblest warriors of Sparta, train with commoners, and will continue to do so until they start a family. Their bodies are covered with oil, old scars pale against the tanned skin.

Clytemnestra steps onto the yard, Helen close behind her. The sand burns under her feet, like a heated blade, and the air is thick with the smell of sweat. The master – one of her father's warriors – gives them a discus, then a spear, and corrects their posture as they throw again and again. The sun grows higher, and the girls jump, race and run, their limbs hurting, their throats sore in the dry, hot air.

At last, there is the dancing. Clytemnestra catches sight of Helen smiling at her; the dance is her sister's favourite moment. The drums start beating and the girls begin. Bare feet thud on the sand, pulsing through the sunlit air, and the dancers' hair moves, like tongues of flame. Clytemnestra dances with her eyes closed, her strong legs following the rhythm. Helen's movements mirror her sister's, but are more composed and graceful, as if she were afraid of losing herself. Her feet light and precise, her arms like wings, she looks ready to take flight and soar high, away from the others' eyes. But she can't rise, so she keeps dancing, relentless.

Clytemnestra dances for herself; Helen dances for others.

The water of the bath is cold and pleasant on the skin. Only Helen, Clytemnestra and the Spartiates are allowed to share the small room in one corner of the courtyard. Most of the other athletes, commoners and girls who can't claim to be native Spartans, are washing away the sweat in the river.

Clytemnestra rests her head against the stony wall, watching Helen as she rises out of the pool, golden hair plastered to her shoulders. At sixteen, their bodies are changing, their



faces growing leaner, firmer. It scares Clytemnestra to witness it, though she doesn't speak of it. It reminds her that, at their age, their mother had already married their father and left her homeland.

Leda had come to Sparta from Aetolia, the arid land of mountains in the north of Greece famous for its wild beasts, nature gods and spirits. Like every Aetolian princess before her, Leda was a huntress, skilled with the axe and bow, and she worshipped the mountain goddess Rhea. King Tyndareus loved her for her fierceness, and married her, even though the Greeks called the tribes of Aetolia 'primitive' and spread rumours that they ate raw meat, like animals. When Leda, a strong woman with raven hair and olive skin, had given birth to Helen – a light-skinned girl with hair the colour of honey – everyone in Sparta believed that Zeus was her lover. The god was famously fond of beautiful young women, and enjoyed taking different shapes to ravish them. He had been a bull to abduct the Phoenician princess Europa, a shower of golden rain to touch the lovely Danaë, a dark cloud to seduce the priestess Io.

So he did with Leda. Disguising himself as a swan, he found her sitting alone on the bank of the Eurotas, her hair black and shiny as a raven's feathers, her eyes lost and sad. He flew into her arms, and when she caressed his wings, he raped her. Rumours indulge in details, so the Spartans talked of how Leda fought as he seized her, his beak wounding her, his wings keeping her still. Others spoke differently: the union was so pleasurable, they said, that she was left flushed and breathless.

'Of course, she must have liked it,' Clytemnestra heard a boy say in the gymnasium once. 'The queen is different . . . Her people are more *barbaric*.' Clytemnestra hit his face with a rock but didn't tell her mother. Such rumours spread out of jealousy: Leda was beautiful and the Spartans distrusted

her. But wicked voices are hard to ignore and even the king came to believe that Helen wasn't his child. He saw nothing of himself in her, as she grew to become passionate about music and dancing, and cried when she saw a wounded soldier.

But Clytemnestra knows Helen is her sister. She knows that, even though as a child Helen seemed frail and gentle, her will is as strong as her own. When they were little, Helen would stand next to her and compare every tiny part of their bodies, until she found a similarity and was satisfied. After all, as Helen used to say, their eyelashes were thick, their fingers skinny, their necks long. And when Clytemnestra replied that her own hair was darker, the colour of dirt, Helen would scoff.

'The boys will be here soon.'

Clytemnestra looks up. The other girls have left, and Helen is gazing at her, her head tilted like that of a curious doe. Clytemnestra wants to ask her if she, too, is scared of the future, but somehow the words don't come, so instead she stands. 'Let's go then.'

Tonight there are no men in the dining hall. The room is lively with the women's laughter and the smell of roasted meat. When Clytemnestra and Helen walk in, their mother is seated at the head of the table, speaking to a few servants, while Timandra, Phoebe and Philonoe, Clytemnestra's younger sisters, fill their plates with flatbreads and olives. They smile as they chew, their hands and cheeks greasy with fat from the meat. Helen and Clytemnestra take the two empty seats at their mother's sides.

The hall is large and bare, its tall windows opening onto the plain. There are only a few old weapons hanging on the walls, and a long table, dark wood scratched and faded, where men and women usually eat together.

‘Make sure no one has stolen from the grain stores,’ Leda is telling the servants, ‘and leave some wine for the king when he comes back from his journey.’ She dismisses them with a wave of the hand, and they slip out of the room, as silent as fish moving through water.

Phoebe wipes her hands on her brown tunic and leans towards her mother. ‘When *will* Father be back?’ she asks. She and Philonoe are still little, with their mother’s deep green eyes and olive skin.

‘Your father and your brothers will return from the games tonight,’ Leda says, savouring her cheese. Clytemnestra’s uncle has been hosting races in Acarnania, and young men have gathered from every Greek city to participate.

‘It will be as boring as an elders’ meeting, sister,’ Castor had told Clytemnestra before he had left. ‘You will have more fun here, hunting and helping Mother to run the palace.’ He had brushed his lips against her forehead and Clytemnestra had smiled at his lie. He knew how much she wanted to come.

‘Do you think Castor and Polydeuces have won anything?’ Philonoe asks.

‘Of course they have,’ Timandra says, her teeth sinking into the juicy pork flesh. She is thirteen, with stark, uninteresting features – she looks much like her father. ‘Polydeuces is stronger than any Spartan, and Castor runs faster than the gods.’

Philonoe smiles, satisfied, and Phoebe yawns, slipping a piece of meat under the table for the housedogs.

‘Mother, why don’t you tell us a story?’ she asks. ‘Father always tells the same ones.’

Leda smiles. ‘Clytemnestra will tell you a story.’

‘Do you want to hear of the time Castor and I killed that wolf?’ Clytemnestra asks.

Phoebe claps her hands. ‘Yes, yes!’

So Clytemnestra tells her stories, and her sisters listen. Blood and death don't frighten them because they are still young, growing up in a world of myths and goddesses, and they don't yet understand the difference between what is real and what is not.

Outside the window, the sky is orange-flushed. Someone is singing in the village, and the air is hot and sweet.

'Timandra is so like you,' Helen says, ready for bed. Their room is at the very end of the *gynaecium*, the women's apartments, and has walls painted with simple images – red flowers, blue birds, golden fish. There are two wooden stools, where their dresses are neatly folded, a water bowl, and a bed of Egyptian ebony – a gift from the Athenian Theseus to Helen, when she was fourteen.

Clytemnestra lifts a handful of water to wash her face.

'Do you think she looks like you? Timandra?' Helen repeats.

'Hmm. Yes.'

'She is mischievous.'

Clytemnestra laughs, wiping her forehead. 'Are you saying I am mischievous?'

Helen tilts her head, frowning. 'That is not what I meant.'

'I know.'

Clytemnestra lies down on the bed next to her sister, looking at the ceiling. She sometimes likes to think it is painted with stars. 'Are you tired?' she asks.

'No,' Helen whispers. She hesitates, taking a breath. 'Father will come back tonight and tomorrow he'll tell you and Timandra all about the races. He loves you very much.'

Clytemnestra waits. She feels for the scar on her back, touching its jagged ends.

'It must be because I have never killed anything,' Helen says.

‘It is not,’ Clytemnestra says. ‘You know it is because he thinks Leda had another man.’

‘Well, did she?’

How many times have they had this conversation? Clytemnestra sighs, ready to repeat what she always tells her. ‘It doesn’t matter. You are Leda’s daughter and my sister. Now, let us rest awhile.’

No matter how many times she says it, Helen listens as if it were the first. She gives Clytemnestra a small smile and closes her eyes, her body relaxing. Clytemnestra waits until she hears Helen’s rhythmic breathing, then turns to her. She looks at her sister’s perfect skin, smooth as an amphora ready to be painted, and wonders, *When did we start lying to each other?*

The next morning is wrestling day. The servants brush and flatten the sand in the gymnasium, then carry a high-backed chair under the shade of the trees. The Spartiates gather in one corner of the ground. Some are restless, picking up handfuls of sand, others stand quietly, touching old bruises. Clytemnestra stretches her arms while Helen ties back her hair so that the strands don’t fall into her face. Her sister’s fingers on her head are gentle.

Up on the hill, the palace bathes in the hot sun opposite the river and mountains, which are cool and shaded. The exercise yard is quiet, half hidden by rocks and tall grass. Often in spring and autumn the girls come here for their music and poetry classes, but it is too warm now, the sun high overhead, hot air sticking to the skin like wet sand.

A small group of men appears on the dusty path that runs from the palace. The servants move away from the courtyard, crouching behind the trees, and the Spartiates fall silent. Clytemnestra watches the warriors take their places around the yard, as her father sits on the high-backed chair. Tyndareus is short but strong, his legs stiff with muscles. His eyes linger

on the girls, bright and sharp as an eagle's. Then he clears his throat. 'You live to honour Sparta and your king. You fight so that you may have strong, healthy children and rule your houses. You fight to prove your loyalty to the city. You fight to belong. Survival, courage and strength are your duties.'

'Survival, courage and strength are our duties,' the girls say in unison.

'Who will start?' Tyndareus asks. He casts a quick glance in the direction of Clytemnestra. She looks back at him but remains silent. It can be foolish to challenge the other girls straight away – her brother has taught her that. She has wrestled the Spartiates for years yet there are always new things she can learn about them, secret moves they haven't shown her yet. It is important that she observes them first.

Eupoleia steps forward. She chooses her adversary, a thin girl whose name Clytemnestra doesn't know, and so the wrestling begins.

Eupoleia is slow but violent. She shouts and tries to grab the other by the hair. The girl looks scared and edges round slowly, like a stray cat. When Eupoleia aims at her head once again, the girl doesn't jump far enough, and Eupoleia's fist meets her jaw. The girl falls and doesn't stand. The game is over.

Tyndareus looks disappointed. He doesn't come often to watch them train, and when he does, he expects a good fight. 'Someone else,' he says.

Cynisca steps forward, and the other girls make space, like frightened dogs. Daughter of an army comrade of Tyndareus, she is tall with a beak nose and strong legs. Clytemnestra remembers when Cynisca tried to steal her toy, a painted clay figure of a warrior, years ago at the marketplace.

'Who are you fighting, Cynisca?' Tyndareus asks.

Something in Cynisca's eyes stirs Clytemnestra's blood. Before she can volunteer to fight her, Cynisca speaks: 'Helen.'

The girls gasp. No one has ever challenged Helen before, because they know the fight would be too easy, and there is no honour in that. They are afraid that Tyndareus might intervene in favour of his daughter, but Tyndareus doesn't favour anyone. Everyone looks at him, waiting for an answer. He nods.

'No,' Clytemnestra says. She takes her sister's arm.

Tyndareus frowns. 'She can fight like any other Spartan.'

'I will fight,' Clytemnestra replies.

Helen pushes her sister aside. 'You are shaming me.' She turns to Cynisca. 'I will fight you.' She ties her hair back, her hands shaking. Clytemnestra bites the inside of her cheek so hard that she tastes blood. She doesn't know what to do.

Helen walks to the centre of the ground and Cynisca follows her. There is a moment of stillness, when the sand glimmers and a soft wind blows. Then Cynisca strikes. Helen leaps aside, graceful and quick as a deer. Cynisca steps back and moves slowly, thinking. The most dangerous kind of wrestler, Clytemnestra knows – one who thinks. Cynisca prepares to strike again, and when she does, Helen moves in the wrong direction and is punched in the neck. She falls sideways but manages to grab Cynisca's leg and drag her down with her. Cynisca jabs her fist at Helen's face, again and again.

Clytemnestra wants to close her eyes, but that is not how she was taught. So she watches, thinking of how she will hurt Cynisca later, in the forest or by the river. She will take her down and make her face purple until the girl understands that some people must not be touched.

Cynisca stops punching and Helen crawls away, her face swollen, her hands bloody. *Fly, fly away*, Clytemnestra wants to shout, but deer have no wings and Helen can barely stand. Cynisca doesn't give her time to compose herself. She strikes and kicks again, and when Helen tries to hurl her backwards, Cynisca leaps on her and snatches her arm from under her.

Clytemnestra turns to Tyndareus. He is watching the fight, his face expressionless. He will do nothing, she is sure of it.

Helen cries out, and Clytemnestra finds herself running to the centre of the ground. Cynisca turns and her mouth drops open in surprise, but it is too late. Clytemnestra takes her by the hair and hurls her aside with all her strength. Cynisca raises her head from the dirt but Clytemnestra puts her knee into her backbone, because the dirt is where the girl belongs. She hooks an arm around her head and pulls, aware of Helen, lying half conscious in the bloody sand a few inches from them. It is over, Clytemnestra thinks, but Cynisca takes her leg and twists her ankle, hard. Clytemnestra trips and Cynisca takes a moment to breathe, her eyes bloodshot.

‘This is not your fight,’ Cynisca says, her voice hoarse.

*You are wrong.* Her leg hurts but pain doesn’t trouble her. Cynisca lunges at her. Clytemnestra moves aside and shoves her to the ground. She stands on Cynisca’s back so she won’t rise any more. When she feels the body give in, she limps away. Helen is barely breathing and Clytemnestra lifts her from the sand. Her sister wraps her arms around her and Clytemnestra takes her away, her father’s angry stare following her, like a hound.

Clytemnestra’s ankle swells. The skin grows purple; the foot slowly becomes numb. A servant dresses the wound, her little hands quick but gentle, her eyes downcast. Helots, people like her are called, former inhabitants of the valley, now slaves since the Spartans took their land. They are everywhere in the palace, their faces dull and sad in the torchlight, their backs bent.

Clytemnestra rests her head against the wall, rage twisting inside her. Sometimes her anger feels so real that she wishes she could cut it out with a knife. She is angry with Cynisca



for daring to touch her sister; with her father, for letting Helen be beaten; with her mother, who never intervenes when the king's indifference hurts her daughter.

'It is done,' the girl says, checking Clytemnestra's ankle. 'You should rest now.'

Clytemnestra springs up. She needs to check Helen.

'You can't walk,' the servant says, frowning.

'Bring me my grandmother's stick,' Clytemnestra orders. The girl nods and scampers away towards the king's quarters, where Tyndareus keeps his family's things. When she comes back, she is holding a beautiful wooden cane.

Clytemnestra never met her grandfather Oebalus; she knows only that he was the son-in-law of the hero Perseus. Her grandmother Gorgophone, on the other hand, is well marked in her memory. A tall, strong woman, she married twice, something unheard of in her country. When her first husband died – a king of Messenia whose name Clytemnestra doesn't remember – Gorgophone married Oebalus, even though she was older than him. She outlived him anyway, and Clytemnestra remembers when Gorgophone, wrapped in sheepskins before she died, told her and Helen that their family was a dynasty of queens.

'You girls will be remembered longer than your brothers,' Gorgophone claimed, in her deep voice, the lines on her face as dense as those of a cobweb, 'just like me with my dear brothers. Alcaeus, Mestor, Heleus . . . good men, brave men, but does anyone remember them? They don't.'

'You are sure of this?' Helen asked. She was only twelve, yet her face was as serious as a woman's.

Gorgophone stared at them, her eyes clouded but alert. 'You are fierce and loyal, but I see wariness inside you too. I have lived among kings and heroes for so long, and they all grow too proud. When men grow proud, they become too trusting. Sooner or later traitors cut them down.' She was

mumbling, though her words had clarity and wisdom. Clytemnestra felt compelled to listen. 'Ambition, courage, distrust. You will be queens soon enough and that is what you will need if you want to outlive the men who'll wish to be rid of you.' Gorgophone was dead a few hours later and Clytemnestra had turned her words over and over in her head, savouring them like drops of honey left on the lips.

Her ankle is now throbbing. Leaning on her grandmother's stick, Clytemnestra walks past the stony halls and corridors. The lit torches on the walls cast shadows that look like black figures painted on amphorae. She reaches the *gynaecium*, gritting her teeth against the pain in her leg. Here the windows are smaller, the walls painted with bright patterns. Clytemnestra walks to the baths, where Helen is meant to be resting, and stops outside for a moment. She can hear voices, loud and clear.

'I will not tell you,' Helen is saying. 'It is not fair.'

'It is not fair that she fought you. You know how things are. If one can challenge you, others will.' It is Polydeuces. Her brother's voice is sharp, like an axe-blade. Helen keeps silent. There is the sound of water and of Polydeuces' impatient steps, back and forth, back and forth.

'Tell me, Helen, or I will ask Clytemnestra.'

'There is no need,' Clytemnestra says, entering the room.

Helen is lying in a painted clay bath. The wounds on her arms are dressed with herbs; her face is broken and battered. Her lips are swollen, and one of her eyes is half shut so that the light blue iris is hardly visible, like a glimpse of clear sky on a cloudy day. Polydeuces turns. He is slender like Clytemnestra but taller, and his skin is the colour of honey. At twenty, he will soon stop training and go to war.

'It was Cynisca who challenged Helen,' Clytemnestra starts. Polydeuces is about to leave, his face twisted. She grabs his arm. 'But you will do nothing. I dealt with it.'

Polydeuces looks at her leg. There is a spark in his eyes that Clytemnestra knows too well: her brother is like a flame, always ready to pick a fight. 'You shouldn't have,' he says, shaking her away. 'Now Father will be angry.'

'With me, not with you,' Clytemnestra says, knowing how much her brother hates disappointing Tyndareus.

'She protected me,' Helen says. 'The girl was killing me.'

Polydeuces clenches his fists. Helen is his favourite, always has been.

'She had no choice,' Helen continues. She speaks slowly, in pain. Polydeuces nods, opens his mouth as if to say something, but then leaves, his steps light on the stony floor. Helen closes her eyes, rests her head against the edge of the bath.

'I am ashamed,' she says. Clytemnestra can't tell if she is crying. The lights are dim and the air smells of blood.

'At least you are not dead,' Clytemnestra says. Neither Tyndareus nor any other Spartan would agree that a life with shame is better than a glorious death, but Clytemnestra doesn't care. She would rather live. Glory is something she can earn later.

She finds her father in the *megaron* speaking to Castor and Leda. The great hall is large and beautifully lit, and she limps past the frescoed walls towards the throne. Next to her, the painted figures are running, hunting and fighting, the colours as brilliant as the morning sun, frightened boar, rabid hounds, and heroes with spears, their long hair like ocean waves. Flocks of geese and swans fly over the shimmering plains, horses galloping beneath them.

Tyndareus sits on his throne near the hearth, holding a cup filled with wine, and Leda, beside him, occupies a smaller chair draped with lambskins. Castor is leaning against one of the columns, his manner relaxed as usual. When he sees Clytemnestra, he smiles. 'You are always in trouble, sister,'

he says. Like Polydeuces', his face is already sharp with manhood.

'Cynisca will recover soon,' Tyndareus says.

'I am glad,' Clytemnestra replies. She is aware of her brother's amused stare behind her: there is nothing Castor enjoys more than trouble and watching someone else's scolding.

'We were lucky it was a girl,' Tyndareus continues. Clytemnestra knows this already. A king's children can burn down houses, rape, steal and kill as they wish. But hurting another noble's son is forbidden.

'Cynisca offended your daughter,' Clytemnestra says.

Her father frowns in annoyance. 'You offended Cynisca. You didn't give her a fair fight.'

'You know the rules,' Leda adds. 'When two girls are wrestling, one wins and the other loses.' She is right, Clytemnestra knows it, but matches aren't always that easy. Leda has taught them that there are winners and losers in every fight, and nothing can be done to change that. But what if the loser is your loved one, and you have to watch her fall? What if she doesn't deserve to be beaten and turned to dust? When Clytemnestra asked these questions as a child her mother would always shake her head. 'You are not a god,' she said. 'Only gods can intervene in such matters.'

'Cynisca would have killed Helen.' Clytemnestra repeats what her sister said, even though she knows this isn't true. Cynisca would have just hurt Helen, badly.

'She wouldn't have killed anyone,' Tyndareus says.

'I know Cynisca,' Castor intervenes. 'The girl is violent. She punched a helot to death once.'

'How would you know her?' Leda mocks him, but Castor doesn't flinch. They are all well familiar with his tastes anyway. For a few years now, Clytemnestra has started hearing moans and whispers from behind closed doors. Servants and

the daughters of noble warriors have been in her brothers' beds, and will continue to be so until Castor and Polydeuces decide to marry. When she walks around the palace, Clytemnestra watches servant girls pouring wine, cutting meat and scrubbing floors, and wonders which among them have slept with Castor. Most, probably. But then it is easy to pick out those who have been with Polydeuces. They are the ones who look like Helen, fair hair and skin, eyes like water springs. Not many.

'Father,' Clytemnestra says, 'I did only what soldiers do in war. If they see a friend dying next to them, they come to the rescue and fight.'

Tyndareus tightens his grip on the cup. 'What do you know of war?' He lets the words linger in the air. 'What do you know of anything?'

'Finally someone gave Cynisca what she deserved,' Castor says cheerfully as they leave the *megaron*. He carries his sister on his shoulders, and Clytemnestra looks at his hair bouncing as he walks. She remembers when they used to do this as children, Clytemnestra on Castor's back and Helen on Polydeuces'. The two boys raced each other carrying their sisters, tumbling and laughing until their faces hurt.

'I wanted to kill her,' she replies.

Castor laughs. 'Well, you've always been bad-tempered. *And* you always cared more about others than about yourself.'

'That's not true.'

'You know it is. Not that you care about everyone, of course. Just your family.'

They reach the stables, close to the lower part of the palace, where the ground is more even and less rocky. Some young men are training; others are feeding the horses.

'Come,' Castor says, 'let us ride awhile.' They share one

sturdy stallion, named for Ares, the god of war, and ride into the plain, towards the Eurotas. They pass the fig trees, the scorched earth dotted with yellow and red flowers, closer and closer to the river. Ares' hoofs raise a cloud of dust and sand until they finally splash in the water of the river. Castor rides fast, whistling and laughing, and Clytemnestra clings to him, her ankle hurting, her face warmed by the sun. When they stop, Castor helps her down and they sit on the riverbank. Grass and flowers grow here, but sometimes corpses can be found too, putrid and rotten.

'You know Father is right, though,' Castor says, lying on his back. 'Cynisca had every right to beat Helen.'

'She didn't. Helen is different.'

'We are all different in our own way.'

Her eyes meet his. 'You know what I mean.'

Castor smirks. 'You are wrong in protecting her too much. You underestimate her. If Cynisca kept beating her, Helen would have fought harder the next time.'

'And what if she had died?'

He lifts his brows, amused. 'People have always challenged each other. The strongest rise and fall, the weaker come and go. But some keep standing.' He plays with a blade of grass before ripping it out. 'You inherit Father's and Mother's strength, but Helen has strength of her own. She may be sweet and frail but she is crafty. I wouldn't be surprised if she outlived us all.'

His wit warms her like a sun-hot stone. This is how her life has always been: pleasure and misery, games and races, her brother always next to her ready to unravel the mysteries of the world and laugh at them.

For a moment, she wonders what it will be like when he is gone.



### 3. A King

Every time a stranger arrives in Sparta, the palace turns into a house of whispers. News travels as fast as sea breeze and the servants make every surface shine like gold. In the late afternoon, when the light is thinning and the air scented, they call Clytemnestra for her cleansing. 'An important man will be here for dinner,' they twitter.

'A warrior?' asks Clytemnestra, as they walk towards the baths in the darkness of the corridor. Her ankle hurts less every day, and soon she will be able to run and exercise again.

'A king,' they say. 'Or that is what we heard.'

In the bathroom, Helen is already cleaning herself in the painted clay bath, the old wounds on her arms dressed with herbs. Her face is smooth, luminous again. Only one bruise remains, on her left cheek, where the bone was broken. Two more tubs are ready beside her, filled to the brim with water, and behind them an old servant woman is preparing soap. It is made from olives, and it smells rich and fruity.

'Have you heard?' Helen asks.

Clytemnestra takes off her tunic and climbs into her tub. 'It's been a while since we had any guests.'

'It was time,' Helen says, smiling to herself. She always enjoys it when visitors come to the palace.

The door opens. Timandra rushes into the room, breathless, and leaps into the cold bath. Her feet and hands are dirty, her hair messy. She has already started to bleed but her body is still lean, without any trace of feminine curves.

'Clean yourself, Timandra,' Clytemnestra says. 'It looks like you've been rolling in the dirt.'



Timandra laughs. 'Well, that is what I was doing.'

Helen smiles and her face glows. She is in a good mood. 'We can't be dirty for a while,' she says, her voice lively with excitement. 'A rich king is coming.'

The servant starts combing her hair, her brown spotted hands untangling Helen's locks as if they were spun gold. Timandra feels for knots in her own dark hair. 'I can be dirty,' she says, eyeing Helen. 'The king must certainly be for you.'

'I am sure he doesn't come for marriage. It must be some economic proposition.'

Clytemnestra feels hurt. Why must Helen be the only one ready for marriage?

As if she's read her mind, Helen says, 'Maybe he will court Clytemnestra.' Her words are as silky as cream, but for the first time something underlies them, something Clytemnestra can't quite tell.

'I hate kings,' she says carelessly. There is no reply, and when she turns to her sister, Helen is looking at her, her eyes dark and fierce.

'No, you don't,' Helen says. 'You will marry a king.'

Clytemnestra wants to say she doesn't care about marrying a king as much as becoming a great queen. But she can see that Helen is hurt already – the same hurt that creeps in every time Clytemnestra dismisses her – and knows it is a useless argument. Let the men be proud and quarrelsome. She reaches out her hand and touches Helen's shoulder.

'We all will,' she says.

Helen smiles and her face brightens, like the ripest fruit.

They sit together in a large room close to the dining hall for their *mousike* class, a chest filled with flutes and lyres in front of them. Their tutor, an older noblewoman who often performs poetry at dinner, is teaching them a new tune, plucking the strings of her lyre. Helen's brows are furrowed in

concentration. Timandra is scoffing, looking at her feet, and Clytemnestra nudges her.

It is a song on the wrath of Artemis, on the wretched fate of the men who dare to challenge the gods. The teacher sings of the hunter Actaeon, who saw the goddess bathing in a spring on the mountains and called the rest of his party to join him. But no man is allowed to watch Artemis without witnessing the goddess's rage. *Thus the hunter became the hunted*, the teacher concludes, *and as Actaeon fled deeper and deeper into the woods, Artemis turned him into a stag.*

When it is their turn to perform, Timandra forgets half of the words. Helen and Clytemnestra's voices blend together like sky and sea – one light and sweet, the other dark and fierce. They stop singing and the teacher smiles at them, ignoring Timandra.

'Are you ready to impress the foreigner at dinner?'

They turn and Castor is standing by the door, with an amused smile.

Helen blushes and Clytemnestra puts down her lyre. 'Do not be too jealous,' she tells her brother. 'I am sure he will have eyes for you too.'

Castor laughs. 'I doubt it. Anyway, your lesson is over, Clytemnestra. Leda is waiting for you in the *gynaecium*.'

Outside her mother's room, the corridor is full of noise – women's whispers, hurrying feet, the clatter of pots and pans – and the smell of spiced meat drifts from the kitchen. Clytemnestra opens the bedroom door and closes it quickly behind her. Inside, it is as quiet as a tomb. Her mother is sitting on a wooden stool, staring at the ceiling as if praying to the gods. Slivers of light from the small windows touch the walls at intervals, illuminating the white flowers painted against a bright red background.

'You wanted to see me?' Clytemnestra asks.

Leda stands, and smooths her daughter's hair. 'Do you remember when I took you to the sea?'

Clytemnestra nods, though she can only recall glimpses: Leda's skin, wetted by the crystalline water, the drops tracing paths on her arms and belly, and the shells, scattered among the pebbles. They were empty. When she had asked why, Leda had explained it was because the animal that had been living there was dead and its body had been eaten by another.

'I told you about my marriage with your father that day, but you were too little to understand.'

'Do you wish to tell me again?'

'I do. Do you know why marriage is called so by the Spartans?' *Harpazēin* is the word she uses, which also means *to take with force*.

'The man kidnaps his wife and she needs to put up a fight,' Clytemnestra says.

Leda nods. She starts plaiting Clytemnestra's hair and her hands are rough against the back of her daughter's neck. 'A husband needs to show his strength,' she says, 'but the wife must prove herself a worthy match.'

'She must submit herself to him.'

'Yes.'

'I don't think I can do that, Mother.'

'When your father came to take me to his room, I struggled but he was stronger. I cried and shouted but he wouldn't listen. So I pretended to give in, and when he relaxed I put my arms around his neck until he choked.' She finishes her daughter's hair, and Clytemnestra turns. The green in Leda's eyes is dark, like the evergreens on the highest mountains. 'I told him I would never submit. When I let him go, he said I was worthier than he had expected and we made love.'

'Are you saying I should do the same?'

'I'm saying that it is hard to find a man who is really strong. Strong enough not to desire to be stronger than you.'

There is a knock on the door, and Helen steps inside. She is wearing a white gown and a corset that barely conceals her breasts. She stops when she sees her mother, afraid to interrupt.

‘Come in, Helen,’ says Leda.

‘I am ready. Shall we go?’ Helen asks. Leda nods and takes her hand, guiding her out of the room. Clytemnestra follows, wondering if Leda has already told her sister what she has just vouchsafed to herself.

The dining hall looks different tonight. Wooden benches have been draped with lambskins, and tapestries are hanging in place of the bronze weapons. Royal hunts and battle scenes with bleeding men and godlike heroes now cover the walls. Servants move quickly and silently, like nymphs around streams. Tyndareus has ordered more oil lamps hung up, and they cast flickering lights on the large table where a few noble Spartans and the foreign king are eating.

Clytemnestra can’t take her eyes off the stranger. The man looks young and different from every other guest. His hair is as black as obsidian and his eyes turquoise, like the most precious gems. Tyndareus introduces him as the King of Maeonia, a land in the east, far across the sea. Men like him are called *barbaroi* in Greece, people ruled by despots, who live with neither freedom nor reason. Clytemnestra wonders if kings fight their own battles in Maeonia, as they do in Sparta. It doesn’t seem so, for the stranger’s arms are smooth, quite different from the scarred bodies of the Spartans around him.

The table is laid with rare delicacies – goat and sheep meat, onions, pears and figs, honeyed flatbreads – but Clytemnestra doesn’t want to eat. The King of Maeonia is talking to Helen, who is seated beside him. When he makes her laugh, he stares straight at Clytemnestra.

She looks away as her father speaks, addressing the stranger over the loud chatter: 'Tell me, Tantalus, are the women in your homeland as beautiful as they say?'

Is Tyndareus trying to arrange a marriage? Sparta rarely has guests from such faraway lands, and the King of Maeonia must be very wealthy. Tantalus doesn't blink. He smiles, and two small lines appear at the corners of his eyes.

'They are, but nothing like the beauty you find here in Sparta.' He looks at Clytemnestra once more. This time she stares back, her heart racing as though she were running. She can almost feel Castor smirking at the other end of the table.

'Your women possess the most precious beauty of all: strength of body and character.'

Tyndareus raises his cup. 'To the women of Sparta,' he says.

Everyone echoes his words, and the golden cups shine in the light of the lamps.

The sun sets late in summer. Standing on the terrace in front of the main hall, Clytemnestra looks at the mountains to the west and the east. Their peaks are perfectly outlined against the orange sky, then slowly become blurred, melting into the growing darkness. When she hears steps approaching behind her, she doesn't turn. Tantalus appears next to her, as she hoped he would. She wanted him to follow her, but now she doesn't know what to say. So she waits. When she turns to him he is staring at the golden earrings that graze her neck and shoulders as they swing. They are in the shape of big anemones.

'Do you know the origin of windflowers?' he says, breaking the silence. His voice is warm, his skin as dark as oak.

'We call them anemones,' replies Clytemnestra.

'Anemones,' he repeats. 'They were created by the goddess Aphrodite from the blood of Adonis, the boy she was in love with.'

‘I know what happened. Adonis was slain by a wild boar.’

Tantalus frowns. ‘The boy dies but the goddess’s love for him remains. It is a reminder of beauty and resistance in times of adversity.’

‘That is true, but Adonis is dead, and no flower can replace him.’

Tantalus smiles. ‘You truly are a strange woman.’

*I am not strange*, Clytemnestra wants to say, but she keeps silent, her breath held.

‘Your father says you are as wise as a mature woman can be, and when I ask your sister about you, she says you always know what you want.’

Clytemnestra tilts her head. ‘That would be enviable, even for a man.’

Tantalus’ smile disappears and she fears he will walk away from her. But then he reaches for her hair. He touches her plaits, finds her neck. His hand on her is like a flame, yet she wants more of it. She takes one step forward, close enough to feel his heat. Desire runs through her, but she can’t come closer. He is a stranger, after all. They are still, the world moving around them.

The shadows grow longer on the terrace. Everything around them is soft, fading, as the skies merge with the earth, and their faces dissolve, like fleeting breath.



## 4. The Tales of Tantalus

It is early morning and Clytemnestra is sitting next to her father's throne in the *megaron*. The room feels hot and the frescoes seem to be melting. She can smell Tyndareus' sweat, while her brothers argue over a Spartan warrior who claimed a fellow comrade's wife as his own. Soon people will flood the *megaron* with their daily requests, and she will have to listen, but all she can think of is the feel of Tantalus' hand on her neck. It was like being touched by a star.

'The warrior needs to pay,' Polydeuces is saying, his voice raised.

Clytemnestra rubs her eyes and tries to focus.

'You are always too vengeful, my son,' Tyndareus says. He is eating some grapes out of a bowl, juice staining his beard. 'Terror doesn't rule alone.'

'We are talking about a man who stole another's woman!' Polydeuces replies sharply.

'Maybe she went with him willingly,' Castor smirks. 'Make sure he pays the other comrade in gold. Then let the men be.'

'If it is just money that the man has to give as punishment, what will stop him the next time he wants to fuck someone else's woman?' Polydeuces asks. 'But if you take his child, his wife, show him that he, too, can lose the ones he loves, he will obey. He won't *ask* for forgiveness, he will *beg*.'

'The man has no wife,' Castor points out. 'He's a widower.'

Tyndareus sighs. 'What do you suggest, Clytemnestra?'

She sits up. 'Summon the woman. Ask her what she did and why.'

Her brothers turn to her quickly. 'And then?'



‘Then act accordingly.’ When no one says anything, she continues, ‘Are we in Sparta or in Athens? Do we not take pride in our strong, free-willed women or do we lock them into the house so they grow fragile and useless?’

Castor frowns. ‘And if the woman claims she went with another man willingly?’

‘Then she will have to ask for her husband’s forgiveness with the man. If he raped her, he will apologize to her, not to her husband.’

Tyndareus nods, and Clytemnestra’s face grows warm with pride. Her father rarely listens to anyone else.

‘See this woman, then,’ Tyndareus orders Castor and Polydeuces. Clytemnestra moves to stand but her father stops her. ‘Stay.’

When her brothers have disappeared, Tyndareus offers her some grapes. His hands are large, calloused. ‘I want to ask you about the King of Maconia, Clytemnestra.’

She takes the ripest grapes and swallows them, keeping her face as expressionless as she can. ‘What about him?’

‘The agreement for which he has come here has been discussed. He can return home. But he tells me he likes spending time with you.’ He stops, then continues, ‘What do you want?’

Clytemnestra looks at her own hands, long fingers covered with tiny cuts, palms smoother than her father’s. *What do I want?*

‘Many men of Sparta will soon ask for your hand,’ Tyndareus says. ‘You are loved and respected.’

‘I know.’

Because she doesn’t speak further, Tyndareus asks, ‘And yet you wish Tantalus to stay?’ He waits for her answer patiently, popping grapes into his mouth until the bowl is emptied.

‘Yes, Father,’ she says finally. ‘I want him to stay a little longer.’

She becomes obsessed with Tantalus. She aches for contact when he is around, and when he is not, her mind drifts, and she finds herself thinking about his eyes and lean body as she has never done with anyone else.

Helen doesn't understand, but how could she? Clytemnestra knows very well that she herself is her sister's greatest obsession. To Helen, all men are the same – strong, violent, excited by her beauty, but nothing more. They feel no challenge to conquer her heart, they see her only as a prize, the most precious one, but a prize still, as a cow or a sword might be. Tantalus, though, has seen something in Clytemnestra that he loves and wants, and he seems willing to do anything to have it.

'He is no different from all the others,' Helen tells her, as they hurry down the narrow street of craftsmen's workshops and stores around the palace. The street is a shortcut to the square where textile manufacturers and dyers run their errands.

'I believe he is different, but we will see,' Clytemnestra replies, missing some steps on the cobbled street.

'Slow down! Why are you running?' Helen pants.

Clytemnestra knows Tantalus is in the stables and hopes he will still be there when they come back.

'We need to collect Mother's tunic before sunset. Hurry!' she says, stumbling from the darkness of the narrow street to the light of the square. The end of summer is near but the sun is fierce, blinding. Clytemnestra stops abruptly, and Helen bumps against her.

'Oh, come on,' she says. 'You want to go back to see Tantalus.'

She takes her sister's arm and guides her across the square. She stops in front of the perfume-makers' store to look at the fruit trees and herbs planted in an inner courtyard. Clytemnestra pushes her forward, past the dyers' shops,

animal skins hanging by the doors, and towards a smaller shop in one corner. It sells textiles, domain of spinners and weavers. Inside, the space is large and well organized, women working on raw wool and linen.

‘We are here for Leda’s new *chiton*,’ Clytemnestra says, her voice loud and clear.

A woman with black hair and pale skin comes forward, leaving aside the wool she was working on. ‘Welcome, Princesses,’ she says. She leads them to the back of the store, where older women are working on tall looms. ‘Wait here.’ She disappears behind a curtain.

‘When will Tantalus leave?’ Helen asks. ‘Guests never stay so long.’

‘Maybe he won’t,’ Clytemnestra says.

Behind them, the women are whispering. Clytemnestra turns, trying to catch the words, and they stop immediately, focusing on their looms. Helen is blushing, her eyes downcast.

‘What did they say?’ Clytemnestra asks.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Helen whispers. Before Clytemnestra can insist, the woman comes back holding a crimson tunic.

Clytemnestra takes it from her and turns to her sister. ‘Let’s go. We must get back.’

Helen mumbles something, but as soon as she speaks the women are whispering again. They hurry out of the shop, the women’s eyes following them.

Outside, in the square, Helen walks ahead of Clytemnestra. She seems troubled, so Clytemnestra leaves her be. She can’t wait to leave the tunic by the palace door and run to the stables.

‘You really didn’t hear that word, did you?’ Helen asks suddenly. She is still walking ahead so Clytemnestra can’t see her face.

‘No.’

‘Those women called me *teras*.’ The word is cutting on her lips. *Portent*, it means, like a rainbow that appears over the clouds, but also *freak*, like a gorgon, the monster with snakes as hair. ‘They’ve been saying this in the gymnasium too.’

Clytemnestra is angry. ‘Why? Why would they say that?’

Helen turns. Her cheeks are crimson, her eyes full of tears. It is painful to watch her face, the sadness it shows. ‘They think that Tyndareus isn’t my father. That I was born after Zeus raped Leda. They believe this, but they don’t say it to my face.’

Clytemnestra takes a deep breath. ‘Let’s go back to the shop.’ Her brother is right: some people must be taught a lesson.

‘I thought you were in a hurry to see Tantalus,’ Helen replies, her voice bitter.

Then she is walking, almost running, up the cobbled street that leads back to the palace. Clytemnestra stays in the blinding light of the square, her mother’s tunic crumpling in her hands. She wishes the light would scorch her, so Helen could see her pain.

Back in the half-deserted stables, Tantalus is feeding a chestnut stallion. She walks to him slowly, as if she hadn’t run the whole way. When he sees her, he gives the horse a last handful of hay, then turns to her. ‘I have just heard that you were recently injured in a fight,’ he says.

‘It was nothing. I sprained my ankle.’

His eyes are a bright blue, like a gemstone catching light, always in a different way but safe, like the crystal-clear water of the shore, never too deep, never too scary.

‘Do you fight?’ she asks.

‘Yes, but not like you. We fight with weapons.’

‘What happens when someone attacks you and you have no weapon?’

Tantalus laughs. ‘There are guards around us.’