

PROLOGUE

Elektra

Mycenae is silent, but I can't sleep tonight. Down the corridor, I know that my brother will have kicked away his blankets. Every morning when I go in to rouse him, he has them in a wild tangle about his legs as though he has been running a race in his sleep. Maybe he runs after our father, the man he has never met.

When I was born, it was our father who named me. He named me for the sun: fiery and incandescent. He'd told me that when I was a little girl: that I was the light of our family. 'Your aunt's beauty is famed, but you're far more radiant than her already. You'll bring more glory to the House of Atreus, my daughter.' And then he'd kiss me on my forehead before he set me down. I didn't mind the tickle of his beard. I believed what he said.

Now, I don't care about the lack of suitors clamouring in our throne room for me. I've heard the stories about my aunt Helen, and have never felt envy. Look at where her beauty

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led her. All the way to a foreign city that has held our men for ten years. Ten years that I have lived without my father, clinging to every victory related to us by messengers who pass through Mycenae. News of each triumph gives me a surge of pride, of elation, that it is my father, Agamemnon, who has fought for so long, and who rallies his men to fight on until the towering walls of Troy crumble into rubble beneath their conquering feet.

I see it all the time, in my mind's eye. How he will storm the gates of the city; how they will fall cowering at his feet at last. And after it all, he will come home to me. His loyal daughter, waiting here for him as year after year passes.

I know that some people will say he never loved his children, that he couldn't have done, given what he did. But I remember the feel of his arms around me and the steady beat of his heart against my ear, and I know there will never be a safer place in this world for me than that.

I have always wanted to grow up to be the woman he thought I would become, the woman I could have been, if only he had been able to stay. To live up to the name he gave me.

More than anything else, I want to make him proud.

Somewhere in this palace, I have no doubt that my mother will be wandering, staring out into the distant dark. She is always noiseless, her soft feet cushioned in delicate sandals, her hair bound back with crimson ribbons, scented with crushed petals and perfumed oils, her polished skin gleaming in the moonlight. I won't leave my chamber and risk encountering her. Instead, I rise and walk towards the narrow window cut into the stone. I expect to see nothing when I rest my elbows on the sill and lean out: nothing, except perhaps a smattering of stars. But as I watch, I see a beacon leap into flame up on a

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distant mountain top, and, in answer, another light, and then another, in a chain of fire that leaps towards Mycenae. My heart pounds in my chest. Someone out there is sending us a signal. And there is only one thing that all of us are united in waiting to hear.

A flutter of orange sparks spirals into the sky as another beacon lights, closer still. Tears start in my eyes. As I watch the beacons in disbelief, I feel a spark ignite within me, the dazzling realisation of what this means.

Troy has fallen.

My father is coming home.



PART I

1

Clytemnestra

The House of Atreus carried a curse. A particularly gruesome one, even by the standards of divine torment. The history of the family was full of brutal murder, adultery, monstrous ambition and rather more cannibalism than one would expect. Everyone knew of it, but when the Atreidae, Agamemnon and Menelaus, stood before me and my twin sister in Sparta a lifetime ago, well, the silly stories of infants cooked and served up to their parents seemed to shimmer and crumble like dust motes in sunlight.

The two brothers were full of vitality and vigour – not handsome exactly, but compelling, nonetheless. Menelaus' beard glinted with a reddish tint, whilst Agamemnon's was dark, like the curls that clustered tightly around his head. Far more handsome suitors stood before my sister – indeed, the great hall in which they gathered seemed to swell and groan with the sheer volume of sculpted cheekbones and fine shoulders, jutting jawbones and flashing eyes. She had her pick of

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the finest men in Greece, but Helen had eyes only for the awkward Menelaus, who shifted his powerful bulk uncomfortably and stared mutely back at her.

Daughter of Zeus, that's what the stories said of Helen. Whilst I was born red-faced and squalling from the commonplace indignity of childbirth, my sister supposedly tapped her way delicately through a pure white eggshell and hatched whole and beautiful. The legend was adorned with fanciful details – it was well known that Zeus could adopt many forms, and on this particular occasion he had appeared to our mother feathered and snowy white, gliding down the river towards her with unmistakable purpose.

To be blessed by Zeus in such a way was a thing of glory. That's what everyone said. If Leda, our mother, had been deemed lovely enough by the ruler of the gods himself, it was a great honour to our family. It was not a disgrace to our father to raise the product of such a union himself.

And Helen's beauty was legendary indeed.

They had gathered at our home in their dozens, these suitors of Helen. How they jostled one another, surging forward, peering at her fluttering veil, eager for a glimpse of the woman named the most beautiful in the world. As the mood shifted, became restive, I noticed how their hands hovered closer to the swords at their hips. Helen noticed it too and turned to me briefly, just long enough for our eyes to meet and a moment of concern to dart between us.

At the edges of the hall, our guards stood straighter and gripped their spears a little tighter. I wondered, though, how quickly the boiling heart of the crowd might spill towards us, and how long it would take the guards to fight their way through the tumult.

Our father, Tyndareus, wrung his hands. The day had started out so promisingly for him; our storerooms overflowed with the rich gifts each young man had brought to support his own cause. I had seen him gloat over the loot and the status this glorious day had brought him. Blithely, he had placed all of his confidence in the ability of our brawny brothers to protect us as they had always done, but I had to doubt even their proficiency against the number of men that had come here to win my sister today.

I looked at Penelope. Our quiet, grey-eyed cousin could always be relied upon to keep a cool head. But Penelope did not return my frantic stare, for she was intent upon Odysseus. The two of them gazed into one another's eyes as though they wandered alone across a fragrant meadow, rather than being trapped in a hall with a hundred fraying tempers and the spark about to be struck to light them all into flame.

I rolled my eyes. Odysseus was here as one of Helen's suitors just like the rest of them, but of course nothing that man did was as it seemed. *We could rather do with his famous wits in this situation*, I thought, frustrated that he instead preferred to lose himself in some romantic daydream.

But what I had mistaken for a dreamy exchange of glances between my cousin and her lover was actually the silent formation of a plan, for Odysseus bounded up on to the platform where we sat and shouted for order. Though short and bandy-legged, his was a commanding presence, and the hall fell silent at once.

'Before the lady Helen makes her choice,' he boomed, 'we will all swear an oath.'

They listened to him. He had a gift for bending the will of others to his own purpose. Even my clever cousin was

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enthralled by him, and I had thought no man's intellect could ever be a match for hers.

'We have all come here today for the same purpose,' he continued. 'We all wish to wed the beautiful Helen, and we all have good reason to think that we are a worthy husband to such a woman. She is a prize beyond any that we can imagine, and the man that can call her his own will have to go to great lengths to protect her from those that would seek to seize her away from him.'

I could see that every man in the room was imagining it. They had all envisaged being the one to have her, but Odysseus had soured the dream. They gazed up at him, enrapt, waiting for him to reveal the solution to the conundrum he had presented.

'So, I propose that we all swear that, no matter whom she chooses, we will all join him in protecting her. We will all make a most solemn vow that we shall defend his right to have her – and keep her – with our own lives.'

Our father leapt up, overjoyed that Odysseus had saved his triumphant day from almost certain disaster. 'I will sacrifice my finest horse!' he declared. 'And you shall all make your promise to the gods upon its blood.'

And so, it was done, and all our father lost that day was a horse. Well, a horse and his daughter, I should say, and a niece as well, to make it quite the bargain. All were taken off his hands in one fell swoop, for Helen had only to breathe the name 'Menelaus' before he was up, clasping her hand in his and stammering out his gratitude and devotion; Odysseus offered for Penelope in almost the next breath; but my eye was caught by the dark-haired brother, whose surly gaze stayed fixed upon the stone tiles. Agamemnon.

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