
Opening Extract from...

The Song of Achilles

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THE SONG OF ACHILLES

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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 storehouses 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.