THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

Helen's Judgement



Susan C Wilson

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The Publishing Post

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NEEM TREE
PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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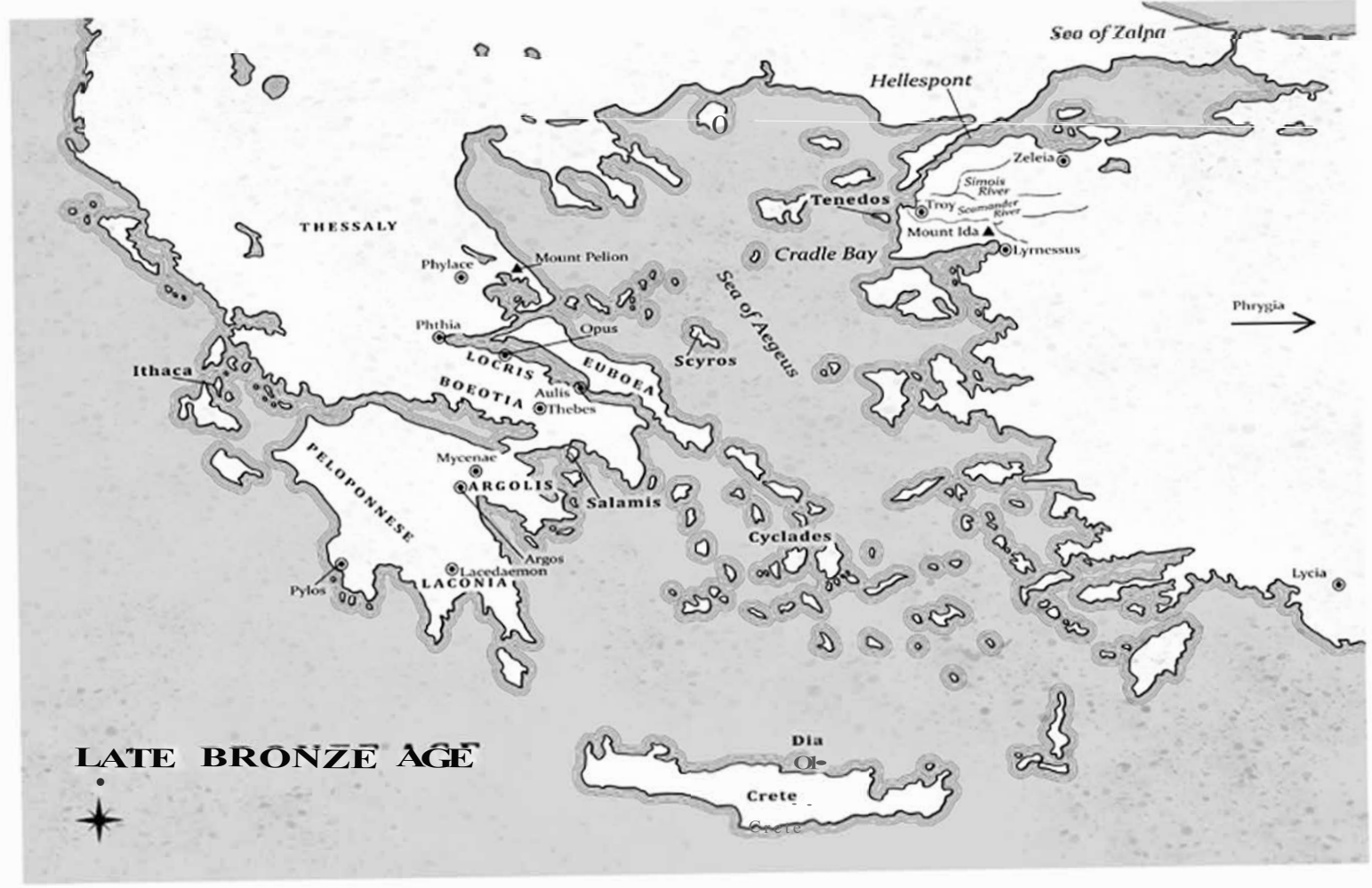
Even so a man reared in his house a lion's whelp, robbed of its mother's milk yet still desiring the breast. Gentle it was in the prelude of its life, kindly to children, and a delight to the old. Much did it get, held in arms like a nursling child, with its bright eye turned toward his hand, and fawning under compulsion of its belly's need.

But brought to full growth by time it showed the nature it had from its parents. Unbidden, as payment for its fostering, it prepared a feast with ruinous slaughter of the flocks; so that the house was defiled with blood, and those who lived there could not control their anguish, and great was the carnage far and wide. A priest of ruin, by order of a god, it was reared in the house.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

See now, how men lay blame upon us gods for what is after all nothing but their own folly.

Homer, *The Odyssey*


Sea of Zalpa
Hellespont
Zeleia
Simois River
Tenedos
Troy
Scamander River
Mount Ida
Lyrnessus
Cradle Bay
THESSALY
Phylace
Mount Pelion
Phrygia
Phthia
Opus
Sea of Aegeus
Scyros
Ithaca
LOCRIS
EUBOEA
BOEOTIA
Aulis
Thebes
Mycenae
PELOPONNESE
ARGOLIS
Salamis
Cyclades
Argos
Lacedaemon
LACONIA
Pylos
Lycia
Dia
Crete
LATE BRONZE AGE

CHARACTERS APPEARING IN THE HOUSE OF ATREUS TRILOGY

HOUSES OF ATREUS & LACEDAEMON

Pelops
Former king of Pisa

Hippodamia
Pelops' queen

Thyestes
Former king of Mycenae

Atreus
Former king of Mycenae

Aerope
Former queen of Mycenae, Atreus' 1st wife

Tyndareus
Former king of Lacedaemon

Leda
Former queen of Lacedaemon

Pelopia
Former queen of Mycenae, 2nd wife of her uncle Atreus

Agamemnon
King of Mycenae, Clytemnestra's 2nd husband

Clytemnestra
Queen of Mycenae

Tantalus
Former king of Mycenae, Clytemnestra's 1st husband
Son of Thyestes

Aegisthus
Foster son of Atreus and Pelopia

Iphigenia
Princess of Mycenae

Electra
Princess of Mycenae

Orestes
Agamemnon's heir

Iphitus
Former prince of Mycenae

Three murdered boy-princes
Sons of Thyestes

Menelaus
King of Lacedaemon, Helen's 1st husband

Helen
Queen of Lacedaemon Later, princess of Troy

Paris
Trojan prince, Helen's 2nd husband

Hermione
Princess of Lacedaemon

Nicostratus
Son of Helen and Paris





HOUSE OF TROY

HOUSE OF AEACUS

Chiron
Teacher, healer

Laomedon
Former king of Troy

Strymo
Former queen of Troy

Endeis
Former queen of Aegina

Aeacus
King of Aegina

Menoetius
Maternal half-brother of Aeacus

Hecabe
Queen of Troy

Priam
King of Troy

Hesione
Trojan princess Telamon's slave

Telamon
King of Salamis

Periboea
Queen of Salamis

Peleus
King of Phthia

Thetis
Queen of Phthia

Teucer
Prince of Salamis, archer

Aias
Prince of Salamis, war leader

Achilles
Leader of the Myrmidon warriors

Deidamia
Princess of Scyros

Neoptolemus
Prince of Scyros and Phthia

Andromache
Hector's wife

Hector
Trojan heir

Cassandra
Trojan princess

Polyxena
Trojan princess

Deiphobus
Trojan prince

Patroclus
Healer

Astyanax
Hector's heir



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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

It's cold here in the earth. My companions are the gibbering dead. They flit like sparrows in the darkness, but at least the flutter and chatter of birds has meaning.

How long have I lain here? Perhaps a season. Perhaps a generation. Those who live above ground still remember me. Their libations of wine, honey and blood trickle through the soil to revive my shade. Surely I'll never be forgotten? *Godlike Achilles*, men called me—the greatest warrior of the ages. But gods can be replaced, their altars abandoned. If such a disaster befalls me, those long years spent suffering on the Trojan Plain, fighting for another man's cause, would have been for nothing.

We Achaeans gave our lives on the battlefield, became meat for scavenging dogs and circling vultures. I didn't join the war against Troy from a lust for plunder. I simply required that my allotted rewards should reflect my worth in the eyes of my comrades, be evidence of my prowess for the world to see, securing my reputation. Everlasting fame is the only compensation for death, the only immortality that matters. Without it, we thirst like the forgotten wraiths who flock around me now, yearning for libations and sacrifices that never come.

My boyhood tutors taught me that the most brilliant warriors receive the greatest honours. On the windy Trojan Plain, I learned this was a lie. I discovered that men can be as jealous as gods, persecuting mortals who reach too high.

Listen, and I'll sing you a song of that earthly awakening—an awakening akin to death. Light a torch; let me sense the heat of its flame. It's hard to endure eternity without light. Even worse, I must endure without my lyre, since no one thought to burn it with my body. But the most talented singers need no accompaniment, and I received as many blessings from the Muses as from the gods of war.

This song was years in the making, woven from the threads of many stories that intertwined with my own. Men and women, young and old, Achaean and Trojan, lent their voices. They writhed and swayed as they sang. They clapped their hands and stamped their feet. They span until their heads swam and their bodies fell.

The first cymbal clash rang out years before the war erupted. The song began in Troy, with a queen.

*

Hecabe, perpetually with child, sat on a birthing stool, clasping the shoulders of the two ladies who flanked her. Few men ever see such a sight, except for those chosen by the Muses to receive the knowledge of secret things.

In a lapse from her precious dignity, the labouring queen cried, "He's tearing me apart!"

"Courage. Just a few more pushes, and Troy will have another little prince," soothed the midwife.

The queen groaned a quick prayer to the Lady Who Loosens Girdles. She focused her attention on the encouraging wobble of the midwife's chins—and she pushed.

The splitting torment left her body, though she knew her baby hadn't emerged. The sacred herbs must be bringing relief at last. She no longer needed to make any effort. The fussing of her ladies seemed unnecessary. She smiled to reassure them. She opened her mouth and tried to say, "My son is almost here."

The chamber grew bright, almost too bright. Hecabe marvelled at the glowing rugs and tapestries: the vibrant reds, yellows and blues. The designs depicting scenes of maternity took on a movement of their own. She must find out which of the palace weavers had woven them and ensure their promotion. Her ladies seemed not to notice the colours radiating all around them or to feel the air pulsate.

The intensity became too much. Hecabe's eyes stung. Heat seared through her body; incandescent light filled the chamber.

The midwife held out a firebrand. "Lady, your child."

Before Hecabe could reach for the burning brand, the floor split at her feet. Through the crevice, she saw Troy: its towers and mansions and high walls. The city was screaming like a woman in labour. The screams grew louder, multiplied, became a hundred screams and more. Hecabe listened, mesmerised.

The midwife still cradled the blazing brand.

"Give him to me," Hecabe demanded.

The midwife shook her head. Only, she was no longer the midwife but a bold-eyed girl with hair the colour of dark, viscid honey, a girl in a flamboyant skirt that jangled with golden discs and a jacket cut to display her naked breasts: the immodest garb of Achaean women.

The beauty opened her arms and let the firebrand fall through the crevice.

"My baby!" cried Hecabe.

The girl clapped her lovely hands and laughed. She knelt at the edge of the crevice to watch the firebrand spiral towards the city. She traced its hazy afterglow with her fingertip and whispered, "Troy is burning."

And Troy had burned, while Hecabe, powerless, looked on. It burned until all that remained were the foundations of the palace, temples, workshops and hovels. Even the once-towering circuit walls were destroyed. Somewhere in the conflagration, the firebrand too turned to ashes.

Hecabe wept. She rocked back and forth on the birthing stool until, slowly, she became aware of a hand squeezing her shoulder. She gazed up into the round, beaming face of the midwife. The woman pressed a child into Hecabe's arms, a flesh-and-blood prince. Sticky and warm. Soft and helpless. Hecabe touched the black hair slicked to the boy's head. She clutched her son to her breast.

Her husband, King Priam, would never learn of the vision she'd had. If she told him, he'd demand an interpretation from his sly seer. This was a man who unsettled Hecabe as few ever could. Priam suffered Hecabe to exert only a tactful influence

over his decisions, but he betrayed not the slightest shame over his dependence on the rolling-eyed Achaean omen-monger. The seer would interpret Hecabe's vision in a way that caused maximum mischief, relishing the opportunity, as he always did, to test the limits of his power.

"Alaksandu," murmured Hecabe, as her womb once more began to contract. "My Alaksandu."

The midwife, squatting to deliver the afterbirth through the opening in the birthing stool, said, "Hasn't the king chosen the name 'Paris'?"

Priam would, of course, call the baby whatever he liked; but Hecabe would think of her son by this special name, Alaksandu. It meant, "Defender of Men".

The gods had shown her a possible future, a destruction she must do everything she could to prevent. She must remain vigilant, guard her child, mould him into a strong and virtuous man. She must ensure that Alaksandu was worthy of his name.

*

Hecabe failed in her attempts to mould Paris into an Alaksandu. The boy inclined towards pleasure, not battle. Even before the first downy hairs budded on his upper lip, tales of his dalliances reached his mother's ears. Servants clacked their tongues and grinned as they whispered in the palace corridors about his exploits. His many siblings—born to his mother or to his father's concubines—chided him, with indulgent exasperation. King Priam, peeping myopically about to see whether Hecabe stood nearby, ruffled the boy's hair and cautioned him against excess. Paris hung his head sheepishly, smiled charmingly, and carried on exactly as before.

The princeling spent most of his days prowling the villages dotted about the Scamander Plain, delighting in the simple hospitality of the farmers—and even more so in the welcoming arms of their daughters. He whiled away many an afternoon in the fields, entwined with some yielding young body or another.

Few could resist his olive-skinned beauty and smiling eyes, or the air of perpetual serenity that made those with heavier burdens sigh.

He bought his pleasure at the cost of innumerable teardrops, though none were his own. Paris never meant to hurt anyone, never meant to make promises he wouldn't keep. It was just that, sometimes, things might be said in the passion of the moment, or be implied with a touch or a look. Sometimes, a love affair went too far.

Hecabe blamed Paris' friends for leading him astray. She blamed his brothers. Blamed his lovers.

Later, she blamed Helen.

We all blamed Helen.

*

Pretty Helen, youngest daughter of King Tyndareus of Lacedaemon, loved dancing and chariot rides. She loved dressing up in her mother's skirts and jewellery, while Queen Leda looked indulgently on. She thrilled to the bold adventures of heroes, sung by the palace bard. But nothing delighted her more than sitting at her father's feet while he, caressing her hair, told her stories about their illustrious ancestors and spoke of her golden future.

Soon, Tyndareus must surely allow suitors to come courting. Helen had persuaded him to let her choose her own husband, provided he and her mother approved of her choice. She already had a vision in her head of a tall, handsome youth, with curling black hair and sparkling eyes. She didn't doubt that her parents would accept her wishes.

She'd never known disappointment—until the strangers came to Lacedaemon.

Though her father hadn't invited the strangers, he'd thrown an arrival feast as hospitality required. The most high-ranking among them sat at the royal table, while the rest occupied little round tables throughout the hall. Helen's father didn't like her

mingling with warriors, especially such ones as these, but he'd granted their leader's request for her attendance at the feast. Agamemnon of Mycenae was, after all, the most powerful king in all the land of Achaea. But not for much longer, Helen was certain.

Soon, very soon, her father would stand up to Agamemnon, pay him back for past misdeeds. Tyndareus must pick his moment wisely, and, when he did, his daughter would savour the humiliation of the Mycenaeans.

In the meantime, there was amusement to be had.

Helen held her cup to her lips and scanned the room in search of a prize. She locked eyes with a young Mycenaean warrior, who stared back until his mouth slackened. A lump bobbed in his throat. Suppressing her laughter, she widened her eyes like the startled deer she saw when she followed the hunt. She dropped her gaze with the innocence of her fourteen summers. The boy swallowed. He fumbled for his wine and knocked over his cup.

Drunk with heady power, Helen sought out a fresh target. She jolted as her cup left her hands. Agamemnon thrust it at a serving girl for a refill. He slammed it back down on the table, sloshing purple wine over the rim.

"Drink up, girl," he urged Helen.

She sipped, her cheeks flushing beneath her chalk and rouge. She wasn't accustomed to the stronger mixes taken at men's feasts, and she hadn't yet eaten. The cooks, roasting joints of beef and mutton over the vast central hearth, had only just begun to instruct the carvers to fill platters for distribution around the hall.

Helen smiled to reassure her father, whose face had turned ashen as he watched her from the head of the table. Tyndareus himself had collected her from the women's quarters before the feast. He'd reproached her for painting her face with her mother's cosmetics and instructed her to behave modestly. Helen had nodded and dimpled, barely listening, her heart already amid the whoop and clatter of revelry.

Now, Tyndareus' white-knuckled fingers tightened around his cup. He rapped it against the table, bronze thudding dully against wood. A hush fell over the hall.

"Warriors of Mycenae, welcome to Lacedaemon," he said, in formal greeting. "Before we eat, we should recall the sacred law of xenia."

Agamemnon shrugged. "Yes, why not?"

"When men share a table as guests and host," continued Tyndareus, "they make a vow of unending friendship. Zeus Xenios, Guardian of Hospitality, punishes any man who'd break that vow. Eat in my hall, Mycenaeans, and become brothers to the Lacedaemonians until the last generation."

Helen stared at him. She'd never known her father to lie so glibly, or even to lie at all.

"How right and proper," said Agamemnon. "Before I leave your citadel, I intend to make our bond doubly unbreakable." His hand brushed Helen's thigh beneath the table.

Tyndareus frowned. He raised his cup for the feast to begin.

Agamemnon's table manners were as unpleasant as his roving hands. Helen tried not to listen as he tipped a bowl of stew to his mouth and swilled the contents with all the delicacy of the boar it had formerly been. A trail of grease trickled from his thin lips into his coarse, coppery beard.

Across the table, another man nudged a bread basket towards him. Helen had barely glanced at this man until now. His features resembled Agamemnon's too closely for her liking, though he was paler, with lentil-red hair. As if sensing her watching him, the man blushed and looked away.

Agamemnon mopped at his oily mouth with a hunk of bread. A fleck of meat dangled from his lower lip. "Not a bad feast, Tyndareus. Seems you've less cattle rustlers and sheep stealers troubling your herds than we have on the Argive Plain. It's my ambition to crush the thieving neighbours who keep Achaea divided."

"A worthy ambition," said Tyndareus.

"Glad you agree. The Achaeans sorely need an overlord to unite them."

The cup froze halfway to Tyndareus' lips.

Agamemnon's beady eyes gleamed. "Imagine, if you will, what Achaea could achieve under a high king. An empire powerful enough to rival Egypt and Assyria. To rival the Land of Hatti."

Helen's elation faded like low-grade perfume. Agamemnon wanted her father to champion his cause, to help him gain untold power? He should be abasing himself before Tyndareus, should be begging forgiveness for his crimes against her family, only for Tyndareus' army to drive him from Achaea like the greedy hound he was.

"Is that why you're here?" she demanded. "What about Tantalus?"

Agamemnon raised a bushy eyebrow. "Your daughter speaks without permission?"

"Hush, child," said Tyndareus. He held out his cup for more wine. A sirloin of beef lay untouched before him.

With a swipe of her hand, Helen sent her bowl clattering across the table. It struck the elbow of the lentil-haired man. Agamemnon snorted in disbelief. Tyndareus winced.

Her parents might refuse to speak of Tantalus' death, but Helen knew exactly how it had happened. She'd overheard servants speak of it in the corridors. Her stomach still fluttered at the memory of Tantalus' shy wedding-day glances at her sister, his bride. But Agamemnon had stormed King Tantalus' palace, murdered him, and prised the royal sceptre of Mycenae from the dead boy's fingers. Not content with usurping the throne, Agamemnon forcibly married Helen's sister, without pausing for her tears to dry.

Not, Helen suspected, that Clytemnestra would have grieved excessively. The older girl had often boasted she'd one day marry a brilliant warlord, scorning Helen's fantasies of black-haired, twinkling-eyed princes like Tantalus.

"Are you all right?" asked the lentil-haired man. "It's just, you're not eating." He dropped his gaze as Helen raised hers.

"I'm sure you can whet her appetite. How do you like my brother, girl?" Agamemnon knocked his elbow against Helen's arm. "Handsome, isn't he? Menelaus is every girl's dream."

She inspected the blushing Menelaus. Not handsome at all, and certainly not her dream. He appeared younger than Agamemnon, though rather old, above twenty. He had the rare fair colouring most often seen in Achaean warlords, with a freckled moon-face that peeked out through plaited hair, no lovelier than his brother's face of hewn rock. Menelaus lacked Agamemnon's vigorous build. His shoulders sloped, and ample flesh cushioned his muscles.

Under her scrutiny, his blush flooded into his earlobes and stole up to his hairline. Clearly, Menelaus loathed her looking at him and he seemed to loathe looking at her. Just wait until after supper when the palace bard would sing her praises. He'd regret his uncouth manners then. The bard had composed more songs extolling the flash of her eyes than Agamemnon had taken baths—epics eulogising her unblemished complexion, her athletic figure, and the way her honey-dark hair glistened with stolen sunrays. Her hair was her proudest feature, ever since she'd persuaded her mother to let her grow out the single-ponytailed, shaven style of girlhood.

Menelaus probably had a wife with a face like a chariot horse. Pretty girls reminded him of his misfortune. Helen giggled. What did he matter? Before long, her father would drive him from Lacedaemon, if not from the land of Achaea itself, along with his brother. Tyndareus' attention would be hers once more to command. She must step up her campaign for a husband. Father could never resist her smiles or the little kisses she planted on top of his head where his hair grew thin. He'd find her a boy as beautiful as Tantalus and as kindly as himself.

The slaves were removing the empty tripod cauldrons from the hearth fire and cleaning the guests' tables.

Agamemnon slung a brawny arm around Helen's shoulders. "Let's have a song from your bard, Tyndareus—Theseus seducing Ariadne from her father." His hot breath, pungent

with wine and wild garlic, wafted against Helen's cheek. "You'll like this one, girl."

At Tyndareus' tight-faced nod, the bard rose from his stool at the hearth, where he'd sat absorbing the fanciful boasts of the warriors all around him. He plucked his lyre from a peg on the wall. As he wandered around the hall, he wove a tale less of seduction than of Princess Ariadne's ill-fated love for Theseus. Agamemnon sighed with exaggerated boredom. He released Helen and drummed his fingers on the table.

The bard's silvery voice lulled Helen into a rapt trance. She imagined herself as Ariadne, beautiful daughter of the king of Crete. Bewitched by the goddess of love, the princess had fallen for Theseus, her father's guest-friend. But the young man had more than love on his mind: he intended to conquer Crete. Helen could imagine no worse agony than the choice Ariadne faced: betray her lover by revealing his plan, or betray her father by her silence.

Ariadne chose. She hid Theseus in a labyrinth beneath the palace, while his warriors waited further along the coast. At a signal, his men returned and stormed the palace. Amid the mayhem, they destroyed the shrine of the Young God, who demanded Ariadne in recompense. Theseus abandoned the princess on the god's holy island of Dia, as a living sacrifice.

Helen hung on the bard's words in an ecstasy of woe. She tried to divine how the song would end—not every singer, after all, is granted true knowledge from the Muses or has the wisdom to hear it when they whisper in his ear. She failed to notice, at a neighbouring table, an auburn-haired man studying her from beneath his hooded eyelids, a cold smile playing about his lips. She imagined Ariadne holding a dagger to her breast, the plunge of flashing bronze.

The bard transformed his voice into that of the mortally wounded princess, soft and choking: "We are the dying ones, the mortal race. We shine for but the briefest of days. And now love hastens me to my evil destruction."

After a moment's hush, cheers rang out. Warriors slapped their hands against their tables and stamped their feet on the

floor. Tyndareus took an electrum ring from his thumb and beckoned to the bard.

"Well deserved," said Menelaus, a dreamy look on his plump face.

Agamemnon's lips curled. "A honeyed rendering."

"Surely the sentiments appealed to you?" The hooded-eyed man at the neighbouring table smiled at Agamemnon and Helen, before turning to Tyndareus. "Forgive me, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Odysseus, prince of Ithaca. I'm honoured to call myself Agamemnon's friend and adviser."

Tyndareus nodded absently.

"It struck me, as I listened to your bard, that even the strongest men are helpless against the Lady of Love," said Odysseus. "When Agamemnon won back the throne of Mycenae from his cousin Tantalus, he was powerless to resist your beautiful daughter Clytemnestra. Just like Theseus and Ariadne."

"If the gods didn't want me to have Clytemnestra," said Agamemnon, "they would have spared that usurping little shit, Tantalus. I could have cast the girl out when I took back what was rightfully mine. I could have sold her, the field my enemy had ploughed. But I like her well enough. So, be grateful, Tyndareus. If anyone should bear a grudge, it's me, not you."

Tyndareus lifted his cup with shaking hands. "Grudge?"

"You married Clytemnestra to my cousin after he stole the throne I should have inherited. I told myself, *Maybe Tyndareus doesn't enquire into the deeds of his daughters' bridegrooms. Maybe no one brings news to his little hill-fort in Laconia.*" Agamemnon folded his arms across his barrel chest and squared his chin. "A less generous man would consider you his enemy."

Tyndareus' skin, in the flickering light of the lamps in their wall niches, had turned grey. Helen ached to go to him, to place her hands on his shoulders, but then his tormentors would consider him weaker than they already did.

"My generous friend Agamemnon took pity on Clytemnestra." Odysseus' voice was light, his expression that

of a practised gambler. "He married her so she could remain queen of Mycenae. Lucky girl. She lives in luxury, lacks nothing. No mule train passes between the peninsula and mainland without contributing to Agamemnon's storerooms. He makes or breaks the fortunes of the Achaeans. You would, of course, desire such a brilliant match for Helen?"

Helen's gaze snapped to Odysseus' bland face. Why would her marriage prospects interest him? Finding no answer, she returned her attention to her father, whose chest heaved beneath his white tunic. The thought of losing her always distressed him.

"We've dealt with the niceties," said Agamemnon. "Menelaus needs a wife, and my visit's satisfied me of Helen's health and looks. She'll breed vigorous sons for the House of Atreus."

Helen's jaw slackened. Menelaus, her bridegroom? Not possible. She didn't want him. She wanted a charming Tantalus, not a blushing dull-witted ox. Her father would never allow it. She caught the amused expressions of Agamemnon's warriors and took a deep breath. It tasted of tallow and exhaled wine fumes.

"You'll instruct Menelaus in the administration of Lacedaemon, and, when the time comes …" A crack split Agamemnon's granite face between his nose and copper beard. It reminded Helen of the day Earthshaker Poseidon tore apart the red soil of the hillside and shattered a section of the palace. Another occasion when her world shook. "When the time comes, a wise charioteer always knows when to hand over the reins."

"Father!" Helen cried. Why didn't he refuse? He looked like one of those blind men who wander from hall to hall singing for bread. Men whose milky eyes see nothing, and see everything.

"If I wanted, I could fight my own claim to Lacedaemon," said Agamemnon. "My wife is your eldest daughter, and Odysseus assures me you've no bastards running around to replace those sons of yours who died brawling. But can I be everywhere at once? Menelaus will rule Lacedaemon well

enough." He leaned back on his chair. "So, we've solved your succession problem."

"Menelaus will pay an excellent bride price," said Odysseus, earning Agamemnon's scowl. "The storerooms in Mycenae palace overflow with jewellery and jars of perfumed oil. Weapons, too, of every kind. And what city is more famous for its wool?"

"You think my father will swap me for some wool?" shouted Helen. Stupid man, with his expressionless face.

At last, Tyndareus looked at her. She nodded to kindle a spark in those hopeless eyes.

"It's too soon for her," he said.

Agamemnon looked her up and down. "She's ripe for breeding, I'd say."

His warriors hooted. Helen forced herself to straighten her shoulders and raise her chin.

"The most powerful house in Achaea has chosen both of your daughters," said Odysseus. "Rejoice in your great fortune, Tyndareus. Consider Agamemnon's wealth and his vast army. Consider all the warriors here in your hall, a mere portion of that army. Wouldn't you prefer to be his friend in these troubled times?"

"Father, no!" Helen rose from her chair. She ached to throw herself into Tyndareus' arms and nestle against his chest. Agamemnon's fingers bit into her wrist and dragged her back down.

She almost wept to hear her father's tiny, broken voice: "Then … I must consent."

Against her will, she turned to Menelaus. He squirmed on his chair and bowed his head. Loathing surged from the pit of her stomach. A weak, pathetic man.

Odysseus smiled with the sincerity of a painted figurine. "Menelaus craves a small reward for me, for my part in bringing about this happy union. Beauty and modesty runs in your family, Tyndareus. Your niece Penelope's reputation precedes her to my island. I'd like her to follow. Would you anticipate any difficulty in arranging that?"

Judging from their growls, Agamemnon's warriors had ways of dealing with difficulties.

As if through a muffling fog, Helen heard her father say, "I … I shouldn't think so."

Like a thunderclap, Agamemnon's laughter rumbled through the fog. "Now, now. Back to the matter at hand. I'm planning to extend the walls of my citadel, Tyndareus. It's a costly business, and time-consuming. As part of the dowry, I thought you could spare some villagers from that vast plain of yours."

"You mean, hand my people over as slaves?" Tyndareus shook his head slowly. "And—I don't understand—why would Helen's dowry be taken to Mycenae?"

"Your thoughts dart everywhere. I'm speaking, of course, of Clytemnestra's dowry. Our marriage was so sudden, you and I had no chance to renegotiate the dowry she brought to Mycenae when she married the usurper."

Tyndareus groaned. His chin curled into his chest. Only his forearms, flat on the table, kept him from slumping forwards.

Agamemnon's teeth flashed in his beard, wolflike, tearing the last scraps from the lamb's carcass. "It's been a long night, Father. You can go to bed soon. We'll settle Clytemnestra's dowry now, and Helen's can wait until morning."