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**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

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

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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'Why did you choose Menelaus?' I asked Helen later. A flurry of handmaidens encircled her, draping her dress, braiding her hair into elaborate swirls, and making countless tiny adornments that were entirely unnecessary.

Helen considered my question before she answered. People only ever spoke of her dazzling radiance, sometimes moved to poetry or song in praise of it. No one ever mentioned that she was thoughtful or that she was kind. I could not deny the odd pang of envy that had reared up inside me, cold and poisonous, growing up alongside a twin whose magnificence would always throw me into shadow. But Helen had never been cruel to me or tormented me. She had never boasted about her beauty or mocked her inferior sister. She could not help that heads would swivel to gaze wherever she walked any more than she could turn the tides of the sea. I made my peace with it, and, to be truthful, I didn't yearn to bear the weight of her legendary allure.

'Menelaus ...' Helen said meditatively, lingering over the syllables of his name. She shrugged, twisting a smooth curl of hair around her fingers, to the visible annoyance of one of the handmaidens, whose fussing ministrations had produced nothing like the bounce and gleam that Helen's effortless coiffing did. 'Perhaps there were others richer or more handsome,' she said. 'Bolder, certainly.' She curled her lip slightly, maybe thinking of the undercurrent of violence that had throbbled invisibly around the hall as the suitors eyed one another. 'But Menelaus ... he seemed different.'

She did not need treasure; Sparta was wealthy enough as it was. She did not need good looks; she could provide all the beauty in any partnership. Any man was eager to be her husband, as we had seen. So, what was it that my sister had

been looking for? I wondered how she knew, what magic had sparked between them, what it was that made a woman sure that a particular man was the right one. I sat up straighter, waiting to be enlightened.

'I suppose . . .' She breathed out as a girl handed her an ivory-handled mirror, the back of which was ornately carved with a tiny figure of Aphrodite emerging from her great shell. She flicked her eyes over her reflection, tossed back her hair and adjusted the gold circlet that rested atop her curls. I heard a faint sigh go up from the clustered girls who awaited her judgement on their unnecessary efforts. 'I suppose,' she continued as she bestowed a smile upon them, 'that he was simply so very *grateful*.'

I paused, the words I had sought evaporating on the air.

Helen noticed my silence, perhaps read some reproof in it, for she straightened her shoulders and fixed me directly in her gaze. 'You know that our mother was singled out by Zeus,' she said. 'A mortal woman beautiful enough to catch his eye from the peak of Mount Olympus. If our father were not of a quiet and uncomplaining disposition . . . who knows how he may have felt? If he were more like Agamemnon than Menelaus, for example.'

I stiffened a little. What did that mean?

'A man like that doesn't look like he would take any affront without protest,' she continued. 'Would he see the honour in his wife being chosen, or would he see it differently? I don't know what my destiny might be, but I know that I was not born to do nothing. I don't know what the Fates have planned for me, but it seemed –' she searched for the right word – '*prudent* to make my choice carefully.'

I thought of Menelaus, the adoration in his eyes when he

looked at Helen. I wondered if she was right, if he'd be able to see things the way our father had done. If winning the contest in our halls really would be victory enough, whatever might happen later.

'And of course, this way I can stay in Sparta,' she added.

For this, I really was thankful. 'So, is it agreed? You will live here together?'

'Menelaus can help Father with the ruling of Sparta,' Helen said. 'And, of course, Father can help him in return.'

'How?'

'How much do you know about him and Agamemnon?' Helen asked. 'And Mycenae?'

I shook my head. 'I've heard stories about the family. The same ones as you. The curse of their ancestors, fathers killing their sons, and brothers turning on each other. It's all in the past, though, isn't it?'

'Not entirely.' Helen waved away the girls around her and leaned in confidentially. I felt a little thrill. 'They came here from Calydon, you know.'

I nodded.

'But that's not their home; they've stayed there with the king. He gave them hospitality, but he couldn't give them what they really need – what Father can.'

'What's that?'

She smiled, delighted to be the one to impart something exciting. 'An army.'

'Really? What for?'

'To take back Mycenae.' Helen tossed her head. 'They're taking what's theirs. Their uncle killed their father and exiled them when they were children. Now they're men, and they have the support of Sparta.'

I knew that much of the story. Menelaus and Agamemnon were sons of Atreus, whose brother, Thyestes, had murdered him for the throne and cast them out. I suppose he had just enough mercy not to want the blood of children on his hands. That was the crime for which their family had been cursed by the gods generations before: the crime of Tantalus.

*Perhaps it wasn't surprising that Menelaus intrigued Helen,* I thought. The old legend of the family was one we'd heard before, a grisly story that chilled the blood but seemed so distant from reality. Now it was a step closer – two brothers seeking justice, healing the wounds of a tortured family with one final act.

'Won't Menelaus want to go back to Mycenae, then?' I asked.

'No, Agamemnon will take Mycenae,' Helen said. 'Menelaus is happy to be here.'

So, Menelaus would get the prize of Helen and Agamemnon would have the city. No doubt that seemed a fair bargain to them both.

'It's just a question of what they do about the boy.'

'Which boy?'

'Aegisthus,' Helen said. 'The son of Thyestes – just a boy, like they were when Thyestes killed their father.'

'Won't they exile him, too?'

Helen raised an eyebrow. 'And let him grow up like they did? Nurturing the same dreams that they did? Agamemnon won't want to risk it.'

I shuddered. 'He won't want to kill a little boy, though, surely?' I could understand the brutal logic of it, but I couldn't bring myself to picture the young men I'd seen in that hall plunging a sword into a weeping child.

'Maybe not.' Helen stood up, smoothing out her dress. 'But let's not talk about war any longer. It's my wedding day, after all.'

Later, I slipped away from the celebrations. They would go on all night, I was sure, hours still to come of feasting and drinking, but I was tired and felt strangely flat. I wasn't in the mood to dodge the increasingly drunken nobility of Sparta; the usually stern and severe military generals becoming red-faced and loose-tongued, their clumsy hands groping out like the tentacles of an octopus. All were puffed up with self-congratulation at the alliance and the oath sworn by all the important men of Greece to defend Menelaus' prize. Their loyalty was bound to Sparta.

I walked to the riverbank. Wide and lazy, the Eurotas wound its way through our city to the distant southern harbour, which was the only way any foreign invaders could reach us. To the other sides, the great mountains of Taygetus and Parnon towered west and east, whilst the northern uplands were equally impenetrable to any army. We were snug in our valley, protected and fortified against any who might come intent on sacking us for the wealth and lovely women that gave us our fame. And now the loveliest of them all had a waiting army ready to rise up in her honour against any possible enemy. No wonder the men relaxed and drank deeply tonight.

Bacons burned across the valley, bright flames in the darkness proclaiming the momentous importance of the day. Smoke would be rising from every shrine, carrying the savour of the pure white bullocks whose throats had been slit, taking it up to the Olympians through the black skies.

I had noticed that Agamemnon alone held himself apart from the celebrations. No doubt he was preoccupied by the impending invasion of Mycenae. And Helen's new husband would be gone within days, off to fight alongside his brother. They had an army, and I knew that Spartan soldiers were renowned for their skill and ferocity. There was little to worry about. But it was there, in the back of my mind, the sneaking, treacherous worm of a thought. If the battle didn't go in favour of the brothers, if they didn't come back, then nothing would have to change. Helen and I could go on a little longer, as we'd always been.

I shook my head, as though I could dislodge the idea altogether. It would all change, even more so. A hundred men had come to marry her, the next one would take Menelaus' place in an instant.

And then I saw him, half hidden in the shadows.

His head turned at the same moment, and our eyes met. I saw his surprise and confusion, a mirror of mine.

'I didn't realise anyone else was out here,' he said, making to withdraw.

'Why aren't you inside?' I asked. I hadn't spoken a word to Agamemnon so far, and I certainly shouldn't be starting a private conversation with him, unseen in the darkness, away from everyone else. But something about the stillness of the night, the shouts of laughter drifting over from within the palace, the feeling I had that everything we'd known so far was about to come to an end, one way or another, made me reckless.

He hesitated.

'Don't you want to celebrate with your brother?'

His heavy brows were drawn together. He looked wary and unwilling to speak.

I sighed, suddenly impatient. 'Or will you wait until after you've conquered Mycenae?'

'What do you know about that?'

I felt a little victory in having prompted him to reply. A breeze rippled across the water, and I felt a yearning all at once for something I couldn't name. So much was happening – weddings and war – and none of it involved me. 'I know what Thyestes did,' I answered, 'to your father and to you. How he stole your kingdom.'

He nodded curtly. I could see he was about to walk away, go back inside.

'But what will you do about the boy?' I asked.

Agamemnon looked at me incredulously. 'The boy?'

'Thyestes' son,' I said. 'Will you let him go?'

'What does it have to do with you?'

I wondered if I'd gone too far, if I'd genuinely shocked him. Everything about this conversation was wrong. But I'd started it now. 'It's a Spartan army that you're taking with you. Whatever you do, it's in Sparta's name, too.'

'Your father's army. Menelaus' army.'

'It just seems wrong.'

'To you. It can be dangerous, though, to let a son grow up with vengeance in his heart.' He was looking out over the river, his whole stance radiating discomfort, but he glanced back at me briefly. 'There is a curse on my family; it has to be ended.'

'Can it be ended like that? What if it angers the gods more?'

He shook his head, dismissing my words. 'You want to be merciful,' he said. 'You're a woman. But war is the business of men.'

I bristled at that. 'You have Sparta,' I said. 'You'll take Mycenae. And all those men in the hall, all the fighters and