
HOUSE OF ATREUS
AGAMEMNON RISING
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BOOK ONE OF THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

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Chapter 1: Radiant Witness

I have watched Tantalus and his descendants since before Mycenae had walls.

Many years ago, I stood in a courtyard and watched the newest member of the House of Atreus draw his first breath. His name was Agamemnon. I let myself hope that he would be different than those who came before him. It wasn't the first time. I had let myself hope with his father, and his father's father, and every cursed son of Tantalus before him. But they all turned out the same in the end.

I had continually whispered into the conscience of Agamemnon's ancestors, across the years. I wanted, badly, to believe that a man born into a family built upon blood, deception and horror could rise above it all, and choose a different path for himself. But each time I hoped, my hopes were dashed. Until, finally, I no longer believed they would ever change. Despite that, I continued to whisper to Agamemnon.

There is a shore in Aulis, in Greece, where a thousand ships once waited for a wind that would not come. Where a king slew a sacred deer out of sheer boredom and where his fate was sealed by the actions of one of my siblings, the goddess, Artemis. He stood at the edge of a choice no father should be asked to make. Where a young girl, who did not know what her own composure would cost, would someday die.

I will not describe what happened there. Not yet. Not because it is too terrible to tell. I have watched worse, and told worse, and I will again before I finish writing down the full story that I wish to convey to you. For now, after millions of years of life, I am at the end. My death is near, and I want this history to survive me.

I hesitate only because you do not know these people yet. You have not seen who Agamemnon was before the throne broke him as a man. You have not seen Clytemnestra's face turn to stone a second time, nor do you yet understand why she will remember the day for the rest of her life, and beyond it.

So, instead, I will show you how it began. Not at an altar. Not with a sacrifice. Long before that. Eighteen years earlier, in a palace built by a man who once served his own sons to their father at a feast and called it justice, a Spartan princess arrived to smooth relations between two kingdoms. She did not yet know she had walked into the middle of a curse built over four generations. Nor did she know that something was waiting for someone new to either break it… or complete it.

That is where the story starts.

What happened at Aulis is coming. I will not pretend otherwise. I will not lie to you. Nor will I soften it when it arrives. But these people, and not only these people, but also my own siblings, the "gods," deserve to have their story told with honesty, rather than as a lie dressed up as mercy.

Grief can mean far more than happiness once you know what it cost to earn. But, so can hope. Bear witness with me. Because it all began, as most things do, with a choice someone thought very small.

Chapter 2: The Cost of Silence

Mycenae, Ancient Greece – Palace of King Atreus – 18 Years Earlier - 3,230 years ago

Clytemnestra, princess of Sparta and priestess of Hera, stood in the courtyard of Mycenae's Temple of Hera, watching smoke spiral upward from braziers positioned at precise intervals around the sacred space. The incense hung so thick in the air it stung her eyes.

Around her, the Mycenaean priestesses moved through their duties. But something was wrong. The younger priestess to her left held her shoulders too rigidly. The older woman near the altar kept glancing toward the palace gates.

"The offerings are prepared, my lady," said Eurydice.

She was the eldest priestess. Perhaps fifty years old, dark hair streaked with gray, eyes lined with wrinkles that came from watching too many things she could not change. "Will you inspect them before we begin?"

Clytemnestra followed her to the altar. Fresh barley cakes, honey, a young lamb without blemish. Everything according to custom. Yet Eurydice's hand trembled as she gestured toward the arrangements.

"Something troubles you?" Clytemnestra asked quietly.

Eurydice's eyes darted toward the palace, then back.

"No, my lady. All is as it should be." Eurydice's hand trembled.

Clytemnestra had arrived only three days ago as part of her father's diplomatic mission. King Tyndareus valued his alliance with Mycenae despite Atreus' reputation for brutality. When you commanded the largest army in Greece and controlled key trade routes, reputation mattered less than utility.

I am here to smooth relations between Sparta and Mycenae. To show that Hera blesses this union. Not to make waves.

A young servant rushed into the courtyard and made direct for one of the priests near the eastern colonnade. Urgent whispers. Clytemnestra caught only fragments.

"The king's men."

"Another execution."

Her stomach tightened. The fourth since her arrival.

The priest's face went pale. He hurried to Eurydice and repeated the news. The older woman's composure cracked for just a moment,

revealing something that might have been grief or rage or simply exhaustion. Then the mask returned.

Before Clytemnestra could speak, a palace guard appeared at the courtyard entrance. Young, perhaps twenty, with the hard eyes of someone who had learned not to question orders.

"Princess Clytemnestra of Sparta," he announced formally. "King Atreus requests your presence in the palace megaron for a celebration of Mycenae's strength. Your attendance would honor us."

The phrasing was courteous. The underlying command was clear.

"Of course," Clytemnestra said, keeping her voice steady. "I would be honored to attend."

King Atreus' courtyard had been transformed into a theater. Banners bearing the golden lion of Mycenae hung from every column. Long tables were heavy with food and wine. Musicians played near the eastern wall, their cheerful melodies obscene given what Clytemnestra suspected was coming.

King Atreus held court in the megaron, the great hall at the heart of his palace. His throne stood against the right-hand wall, with his back against the solid stone of the citadel. This ensured that no man could approach unseen.

The circular hearth at the hall's center blazed with flames. Its light caught the frescoes on the walls: depicting bulls, processions, and the hunt. Smoke hung thick in the air, mixing with the smell of roasting meat.

Atreus reclined on cushions of dyed wool, his body angled toward the room like a man who never truly rested. Attendants moved quietly between him and his low table, setting down cuts of meat, barley cakes, dark wine mixed with water. Fifty years old, powerfully built despite the iron-gray hair, he wore his age the way the citadel walls wore theirs. Proof he had survived many enemies.

To his right sat his two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, sharing a table. Beyond them, the megaron opened into the courtyard where nobility and warriors gathered in careful hierarchy. The tables were arranged according to rank. The highest-ranking nobles were positioned closest to the king. Common soldiers stood in the outer court.

Every placement, every cup distributed, every portion allocated was a statement of power. The king sat at the apex of it all, and everyone faced him, always lower, always aware of the stone wall at his back.

As a virgin priestess of Hera, modesty required Clytemnestra to wear a semi-translucent veil. But she studied everything she saw with

analytical precision. Menelaus was a few years younger than his brother, Agamemnon, with an open face that still held traces of boyhood. He stood slightly behind his brother.

It was Agamemnon who attracted and held a majority of her attention. He looked about twenty-four or twenty-five, which was consistent with the information about him that she'd been briefed on, before leaving Sparta. He was tall and lean, handsome, with a regal bearing. He had the look of a well-trained warrior.

A guard escorted her to a position near the platform. Close enough to show honor. Far enough away to maintain her status as observer rather than participant.

"Princess Clytemnestra," King Atreus called out, his voice carrying easily across the megaron. "Thank you for joining us. Sparta's presence graces our celebration."

"The honor is mine, great king," she replied, executing a formal bow that satisfied protocol without suggesting subservience.

Atreus smiled. He gestured to a servant, who brought forward a chair positioned to give her an unobstructed view, positioned among the highest nobility, at his right side. She sat and a personal table was brought for her.

'He wants me to see his power and carry word to my father…' She thought to herself.

Then, the musicians fell silent. Conversation died. Every person in the courtyard turned their attention toward the king.

"Now, we shall witness justice done," Atreus announced. "We will demonstrate how Mycenae deals with those who would undermine the foundations of our city-state, and the stability we have built."

Guards emerged from the palace, dragging seven men in chains. Nobles, she could see, from their bearing, and the remnants of fine clothing. But they had been beaten. Blood marked their faces. Their hands were bound behind their backs.

"These men," Atreus continued, "have been found guilty of opposing the royal tax assessments. Stirring up dissent. They have spread their poison among the merchant class. They have questioned my authority and encouraged others to do the same."

One of the prisoners, an older man, lifted his head.

"We asked only for fairness, my lord. The taxes have tripled in two years. Our people starve..."

Atreus' expression didn't change.

"Did I give you leave to speak?" Atreus asked.

"No, my lord, but..."

"Silence him."

A guard struck the man across the mouth with casual efficiency. The old nobleman fell to his knees, blood streaming from split lips.

Clytemnestra's hands clenched in her lap. Every instinct screamed at her to intervene. This is not how her father ruled. This was unjust. But she was a guest in a foreign court, representing her father's interests. One wrong word could shatter the alliance Sparta desperately needed.

"The sentence for undermining the king's authority is clear," Atreus said. "Each of these men will have his left hand struck off. A permanent reminder of the cost of treason."

The courtyard erupted in murmurs. Even among those accustomed to Atreus' brutality, it seemed excessive. These were not common criminals. Their families were well thought of. Now she understood the faces of the Mycenaean priestesses of Hera. All of the priestesses, generally speaking, came from the noble families, and they were, no doubt, aware that Atreus was about to cut the hands off their relatives, friends or associates.

But Atreus seemed unconcerned by the murmurs and the discontent it might signal. He gestured toward the executioner. A massive man stepped forward carrying an axe.

The first prisoner was forced to his knees. His hand was placed on a wooden block. Clytemnestra forced herself to watch, even as her stomach churned. She would not let anyone see a princess of Sparta become squeamish, no matter what the atrocity.

When the executioner raised his axe, Agamemnon moved.

Clytemnestra saw the tension in him. Almost as if he were bracing for a blow, himself.

He stepped forward, leaning close to his father. The movement was smooth, practiced. His voice was too low for Clytemnestra to hear, but she watched Atreus' face shift from certainty to irritation to calculation.

Agamemnon's expression remained neutral, but his shoulders carried tension. The posture of someone balanced between obedience and defiance. One wrong word and he would incur his father’s wrath. But he held his ground, and for thirty seconds that felt like an eternity, father and son existed in silent negotiation.

Finally, Atreus raised his hand. The executioner lowered his axe.

"My son reminds me that the House of Atreus can also show mercy," Atreus said, though his tone suggested he found this concept distasteful. "Therefore, I will offer these men an alternative. A fine of one hundred gold talents each. To be paid within one month."

The amount was staggering. Enough to bankrupt all but the wealthiest noble families. But it was better than mutilation.

"However," Atreus continued, his voice hardening, "if any of you are discovered engaging in similar activities in the future, there will be no further mercy granted. Your hand will be taken, and possibly your head as well. No pleas will be heard. Do you understand?"

The prisoners nodded frantically, relief and terror warring on their faces.

"Take them away," Atreus commanded. "They have one month to pay the fine. If they do not, the executioner will finish what we started today."

As the guards dragged the prisoners back toward the palace, Clytemnestra found her eyes drawn to Agamemnon. He stood motionless beside his father's throne, his expression revealing nothing. But he had risked his father's displeasure to prevent seven mutilations.

The festivities resumed with forced gaiety. Wine flowed. The musicians played. Nobles laughed too loudly and drank too quickly, trying to wash away the memory of what they had almost witnessed.

Clytemnestra picked at her food, maintaining the appearance of participation while her mind worked through all the implications. Her father needed to know about this. Not just Atreus' brutality, but of the fear that permeated every level of Mycenaean society.

But what could her father do with that information? Break the alliance, leaving Sparta vulnerable to northern aggression? He wouldn't. She was sure of that. There was no good option.

The summons to Atreus' private chambers came that evening.

She had expected it. The "celebration" was the performance. Now came the private conversation where the real message would be delivered.

She was escorted through corridors lined with tapestries depicting Mycenae's victories. Past rooms where servants moved quietly, eyes downcast. Guards stood at every corner. The palace felt to her like a fortress of unhappiness.

Atreus' private study was surprisingly simple. Maps covered the walls, showing trade routes and territorial boundaries. A desk held scrolls and correspondence. The only luxury was a wine service of exceptional quality, cups carved from alabaster and inlaid with gold.

The king stood by the window, looking out over his domain. He didn't turn when she entered.

"Tell me, Princess," he said, "what does Sparta think of today's events?"

Clytemnestra chose her words carefully.

"Sparta appreciates strength, my lord. We understand the challenges of maintaining order."

"A diplomatic answer." Atreus turned to face her. His expression mimicked paternal warmth, but his eyes remained cold. "But I asked what you think, not what your father's diplomats would say."

She met his gaze steadily.

"I think justice and terror are not the same thing, though they may sometimes appear similar from a distance."

"Interesting." He poured two cups of wine, offering one to her. She accepted it but did not drink. "You sound like my son, Agamemnon. He has similar ideas."

He moved to the desk, gesturing for her to sit. She remained standing.

"Let me share the truth with you, Princess," He sipped his wine. "Loyalty is a luxury. Fear is what keeps a king on his throne when all else fails."

"My father rules through respect, not fear."

"Does he?" Atreus' smile sharpened. "Or does he rule through Sparta's military reputation, which is itself built on fear of what Spartan warriors can do? Your father understands that power requires a foundation. Mine is simply more honest about its nature."

The argument carried some truth. Sparta's strength did rest partly on other kingdoms' fear of its warriors. But there was a difference between respect earned through martial prowess and compliance extracted through brutality.

"Your father allied with me," Atreus continued, "because he needs Mycenae's wealth and numbers. The alliance stands because he is a practical man. So am I."

Much as she would have liked to deny it, he spoke the truth.

'My father knows what Atreus is. But he believes the alliance is necessary.'

"I see understanding in your eyes," Atreus said. "You're intelligent, Princess. Too intelligent to hide behind comforting illusions. The world is built on hard choices. Your father makes them. I make them. Someday, if the gods will it, my son will face similar choices."

He set down his wine cup with deliberate care.

"When you return to Sparta, tell your father that Mycenae remains strong, that our alliance serves both kingdoms' interests. Most importantly,

tell him that I am the devil he knows. And in these uncertain times, that may be the most valuable thing I can offer."

It was a dismissal wrapped in courtesy. Clytemnestra bowed with precise formality and turned toward the door.

"One more thing, Princess."

She paused.

"My son interceded today. Convinced me to show mercy." Atreus' voice carried a note of almost academic curiosity. "What did you think of that?"

Clytemnestra considered her answer carefully.

"Your son showed courage."

"Or weakness. Sentimentality that may undermine him when he rules."

That night, Clytemnestra stood on the balcony of her chambers, looking out over Mycenae.

The city sprawled below, its walls and buildings illuminated by torchlight and moonlight in equal measure. From this height, it was beautiful. The palace complex rose like a crown atop the hill. The lower city spread outward in concentric rings. Trade routes stretched toward distant horizons, carrying wealth from every corner of the world to and from Mycenae. It was both beautiful and powerful. But, it was also a hollow place.

She thought of the seven noblemen who would spend the next month desperately trying to raise an impossible sum of money. Of the priestesses whose hands were shaking during sacred rituals. Of Agamemnon's eyes and his quiet intercession that had saved seven hands.

What could she do? She was a princess masquerading as a priestess. She had no army, no power, no real voice. Her mission was given to her by her father, King Tyndarius of Sparta. She was to observe and advise. Pretend to perform the rituals of Hera. Bless the alliance. But for reasons of political necessity. The mindset of these two cities, though both Greek, was as different as night and day.

A sound in the courtyard below caused her to look. A solitary figure was walking in the shadows. But even from this distance, she knew who it was. Prince Agamemnon seemed different than his father, King Atreus. More humane and decent. It didn’t hurt that his height, obvious strength and the way he held himself made him interesting to every young woman. She secretly watched him until he disappeared into the palace's labyrinthine corridors.

Then, Clytemnestra turned from the balcony and moved to the small altar in her chamber. As a priestess of Hera, she maintained all the proper appearances. She lit the incense, poured a libation, and knelt before the goddess's image. But the prayer that formed in her mind was not a traditional one.

She thought of Atreus' words about choosing allies. About her father's pragmatic acceptance of an alliance with Mycenae. Atreus was obviously a monster. What would happen if she sent word of this to her father? Would he dismiss it simply as the cost of politics? Probably.

As she mulled the idea of complaining to her father she poured the libation. The wine pooled on the stone, and she whispered:

'Hear my prayer, Hēra Basíleia, oh great and powerful Queen of the gods! When the gods next demand blood, let it be the blood of this tyrant and not of a decent man...'

The incense smoke rose straight and pure, carrying her unspoken oath toward whatever powers might be listening. Probably none, she decided. The gods were probably just imagination and nothing more. Meanwhile, outside her chamber, Mycenae slept quietly. The largest city-state of Greece. It was a beautiful city, but it was run by a tyrant.

She moved over to the desk in the corner of her room and began to write a message. She wrote about King Atreus' brutality, and his son's intercession. When she was finished, she rolled the scroll and slipped it into a carrying canister, sealing it with her personal version of the royal seal of Sparta.

Chapter 3: Mercenary Soldier

In the hills near, Sicyon, a city in the northern Peloponnese 3,232 years ago (2 years prior to Clytemnestra's arrival in Mycenae)

Aegisthus had spent his life watching sheep graze, give birth, and die. Sometimes, they died to provide food for his family. Other times, simply from accident or disease. It didn't matter. It wasn't the life for him.

At thirteen, he was already stronger than some men twice his age. He was quick-witted, restless and hungry. But that hunger wasn't for food. It was for meaning and purpose. Neither existed in the grass covered Greek hills. He felt like he was wasting his life away.

By law and custom of the ancient world, at the age of thirteen, he was already a man. The right to choose his future was his own. And that future did not include becoming a shepherd in the hills. Beyond the hills, there was an entire world. It lay waiting. He longed to participate in it. He had promised himself that this pastoral existence would soon be over, and the desire to leave was burning in his chest.

That desire was, in truth, a fire that had been lit long before he was even born. It was lit by destiny. He needed to be somewhere else, and knew it as a matter of instinct. For the moment, however, he was trapped. His father had died several years before, weighed down by hard labor in the pasture. Finally felled by disease. His mother was old and weak. Almost too old, it almost seemed, to have borne him. Yet, somehow, she must have.

Mama had been sick all winter. Now, she was pale, thin and frail. Her breathing tended to be slow and labored. She could barely rise from her bed. His grandfather still lived, but the old man was also frail, and couldn't take care of his daughter-in-law alone. Aegisthus had no choice. He had to stay.

One morning, his mother called him to her side as she lay on her bed. He came, carrying a cup of water, but she waved it aside. She touched him with one trembling hand.,There was something in her eyes he had never seen before. Gravity. Confession.

"Sit," she said.

He sat.

"You have been a good son," she began, "But I don't deserve that. You were never really mine."

"Mamma," Aegisthus replied, "What are you talking about?"

"You were not my child at birth. You came to me when you were only a few days old. A young woman, robed in temple white, brought you to our door. She asked us to raise you. Her only condition was that we tell no one that you are her child. Not even you. I had no son of my own…no child at all…so I agreed. And, your father, agreed out of love for me. I did what the priestess asked.

I raised you as my own son. I loved you. Truly, I did love you. I still love you as much as I would love a child of my own womb. But, I am dying, and you must know the truth. About your true mother. The priestess of the Temple of Hera in Sicyon. She is named Pelopia "

Aegisthus felt the breath leave his body. He did not speak.

"I'm sorry I lied,' she whispered.

Then she coughed. A violent, wet sound. She gripped his wrist with surprising strength.

"Find her. Let her know that you live…" She urged.

She relaxed her grip and lay back down on the bed, satisfied with fulfilling what she felt was her obligation. Then, she fell asleep. Later that night, she died.

He buried her the next day, alongside the man he had once believed to be his father. It was in an otherwise barren plot of land behind the house. Very little grass grew there. Only graves. Family members who had died in this isolated place.

The funeral was attended by two men. Aegisthus and his grandfather. More accurately, the man he'd believed was his grandfather. The old man had survived both his son and his daughter-in-law.

Neither of them said anything as he lowered her into the ground. There was nothing to say. When he was finished, Aegisthus returned to the house and packed a set of meager provisions. The old man watched as Aegisthus took the spiked wooden club that hung by the door.

Bronze weapons were a luxury. Only the wealthy could afford them. Not poor shepherds. Yet, even a shepherd can't go fully unarmed in a lawless day and age. The old wooden club bristled with sharpened flints at its tip.

"Go," the old man said finally, standing in the doorway. "Find what you are looking for. You were never meant to be a shepherd. We both know that."

"What about you, grandpa?"

"I'll be fine." the old man replied, "Your aunt, my daughter, lives in Athens now, as you know. I'll sell the sheep and, maybe, this land, if I can find a buyer. Move to Athens. But don't wait for that. Go now, and find your destiny..."

Aegisthus left before the sunset.

The Temple of Hera rose before him, its white marble columns gleaming. The highly polished columns caught the light and reflected it. That process gave it an other-worldly glow. He arrived while priestesses moved between chambers. He asked for Pelopia.

She was alone, in the main chamber, performing purification rites at an altar. Her hands moved with practiced grace through sacred gestures. Aegisthus saw her from behind: dark hair bound carefully, the line of her back rigid beneath her robes. Then she turned, reading some shift in the air that warned her she was not alone.

And despite the years, despite the distance between the infant she'd given away upon birth, and the young man before her, she knew who he was. The recognition struck her and her hands fell to her sides. The water vessel she had been holding shattered against the marble floor.

"Mother?" Aegisthus asked.

She moved toward him, with a tear rolling down her cheek. Her eyes examined him. She reached out one trembling hand and touched his cheek.

"I see you," she said.

She stared at him, then spoke.

"And I see him. I see both of you..."

Confusion at her words coiled within him, but he did not pull away.

She was young, no older than her late twenties. Beautiful in a way that unsettled him.. Yet, there was something that looked broken about her. He did a quick calculation in his head. He was 13. The woman in front of him, his mother, had not been much older than himself when she'd given birth to him.

"Why did you give me away?" Aegisthus asked.

She sank down onto the edge of the altar.

"Because I had nothing. Because I was broken. I wanted you free of my shame, free of what had been done to me."

"What was done to you? Tell me."

"I can't," Her voice was firm in spite of her trembling. "I can't. It is enough for you to know that I could not keep you after you were born. I gave you to the shepherd's wife because I had no other choice. Yet, I've spent nearly every day since then, praying to the goddess, that you would live well, prosper and enjoy a normal life. Something you never could have had with me."

"Because you're a priestess of Hera?" he asked, "Because you became pregnant when you were supposed to stay a virgin?"

She hesitated for a moment, but finally nodded, and gave to him the convenient lie that avoided having her explain that she'd been raped.

"Yes," she said, "something like that. That's what it was. That was the reason."

His club was suspended over his shoulder, in a sling and was long enough so that it was actually somewhat longer than he was. The hilt was wrapped with leather, and it protruded well above the level of his shoulder. He noticed her staring at it, and so he unsheathed it and tested the weight, waving it a bit, imagining combat. He was proud of the club, despite the poverty it put on display.

"I'm going to become a sell-sword.' he insisted, "I'll fight for the kings of Greece and make lots of money. It's a good business…"

Her face showed fear, for a moment, and in spite of her never having raised him, maternal anguish.

"It would be better for you to learn a useful trade," she suggested, "There's a blacksmith whose wife prays here. He might take you as an apprentice."

"No," Aegisthus declared definitively, "I'm destined for greatness. The astrologer told me the last time I came to town. I will apprentice myself to a warrior, and learn the work of kings!"

"The men who go to war are noblemen," she warned him. "They have swords of bronze that will cut through the wood of your club, and the flints embedded in it like paper, leaving you defenseless."

He felt the sting of that assessment more than she imagined. But, instead of admitting the inadequacy of his weapon, he weighed the heavy club in his hands, finding confidence in its solidity.

"This is a very strong club." He declared, "Before an enemy can cut it, it will destroy him."

Pelopia stared at her naive son for a moment, saying nothing, but then spoke.

"Come with me…" She said, rising and motioning him to follow.

They made their way through multiple corridors until they finally came to her personal chamber. She opened the door and walked to a section of wall that seemed indistinguishable from any other. Then, she pressed against the wall with the heel of her hand, and a section swung inward, revealing a narrow space. From that space, she withdrew a sword, and handed it to him.

The hilt was wrapped in fine leather. At its crossguard, a jewel caught the light. The deep red of a precious ruby, faceted, expensive

beyond measure. The blade balanced perfectly. The craftsmanship was flawless. The hilt fit his hand as if it were made for him.

"Where did you get this?" He asked her.

"It belonged to your father," Pelopia said, her voice barely audible.

"My father?" He asked, "Who was my father?"

"He was a nobleman. A person of great importance."

"But, who was he?" Aegisthus asked, "What was his name?"

"I can't tell you that." She insisted.

Her words were both true and untrue at the very same time. She didn't actually know the name of the man who raped her.

"Why not?"

"He came to me like a dream."

"Was he a god?"

"Perhaps…"

"I knew it!" Aegisthus decided aloud, swinging his newly acquired sword, like the adolescent that he was, in the air, play-fighting imaginary enemies, "That's why I was never happy being a shepherd. I'm the son of a god! And, now, I carry a god's sword!"

Pelopia didn't respond directly to his egotistical boast. Instead, she simply said:

"Use the sword only for worthy causes. Don't take unnecessary risks. Promise me that you will choose carefully who you fight for. Do not fight for tyrants simply because they pay you..."

Aegisthus felt the weight of the blade and its perfect center of gravity. For the first time in his young life, something in the universe had finally aligned itself correctly.

"I won't, mother. I promise," he said.

He left Sicyon before nightfall.

And he entered the ranks of those who fight for money, seeking employment. Word of the magnificent sword spread like wildfire. A boy, a young teenager, carried a sword with a large ruby in its hilt. No one knew his parentage. He wouldn't tell anyone. All he would say is that his parents were dead.

Yet it was clear that the young man was either of noble birth or an outright thief. The loss of such a sword would be known, and no such loss had been reported. It also became clear, in a short time, that the boy did not possess the personality traits of a thief. He was a person who could be trusted.

Therefore, it was clear to everyone that the boy was the son of a noble house, regardless of what he was willing to admit.

"Royal make, that blade. Where'd you get it, boy?" one man asked.

"It was a gift," he answered curtly, offering nothing more.

That response, as certain and consistent as it was, convinced almost everyone that he was the secret member of a house of high nobility who chose not to disclose the truth about himself. Where else could such an expensive "gift" come from?

As a result, he was able to apprentice himself to one of the most accomplished mercenaries in Greece. The first campaign took him to a border skirmish between two minor lords in the Peloponnese. He had little training in sword fighting, yet it seemed to be an innate skill he was born with. He killed three men on his first day of actual combat.

He did not hesitate. He did not falter. He did not celebrate afterward. He killed without pride and without compassion. He did so with the efficiency of someone whose violence was somehow separated from himself.

By the time he'd reached the age of 14, going on 15, his mentor was killed in a large skirmish between the forces of several city-states, and those of Sparta, which did not employ mercenaries. With his master dead, and his reputation growing in spite of his youth, he became an independent operator.

His discipline earned respect. His skill earned fear. By the time he was fifteen, he had served in seven campaigns. His name was already spoken of in reports sent to kings who needed soldiers. The boy with the jeweled sword who never lost a sword fight. Who had managed to kill Spartan warriors without sustaining a scratch on himself! It was almost unbelievable. But, the stories were told and retold by so many men that they could not be false.

And he was more than simply a lethal swordsman. He was also a keen observer of men. He saw how one general's weak decision could result in the defeat of his entire army. How resentment that festered in the hearts of officers who were passed over for promotion, could work against those they fought for. In every noble house, every king's war room, every encampment, there were always men who were disloyal. Not just mercenaries, mind you. But petty squabbles and hidden resentments that existed everywhere, even between brothers. A clever man could make use of them.

Even those who seemed to be loyal followers of a king could, sometimes, be turned, simply by the promise of money or power. Aegisthus listened far more than he spoke. He gathered information and filed it away in his mind. He learned about palace intrigue. How there were always those who wanted, those who feared and, still others, who

resented the actions of those above them. Cracks in authority were everywhere. All you really needed to do, to find them, was simply look.

By the end of his fifteenth year, going on sixteen, Aegisthus was known across multiple kingdoms. Kings began to request him specifically. Money accumulated. His reputation grew. He was the boy with the jeweled blade who never lost, never failed, never spoke of his origins, had no mercy, and was scrupulously honest and true to those who employed him. It was that reputation that finally brought him to the attention of King Atreus of Mycenae.

The king sat in his war room, surrounded by maps and reports. His regime was becoming increasingly unstable. Word had reached him that Thyestes was stirring. His brother had managed to escape his prison cell and had vanished years ago. Now, he was back. That thorn in his side was moving freely among the serfs and laborers, whispering of injustice and tyranny. Speaking of Atreus' cruelty. He held himself up as a victim and a martyr. Sympathy for Thyestes and the idea of overthrowing the existing order, meaning King Atreus, was spreading fast, throughout the kingdom.

Atreus had once thought the problem had been solved. He'd broken Thyestes' spirit by killing, cooking, and feeding him the flesh of his own sons, spiced and cooked like the finest lamb. A feast that had violated every law of man and of the gods. He had expected that the humiliation would destroy his brother forever. But broken men heal. And Thyestes had learned to hide in the shadows. King Atreus wanted him dead.

A public execution would make Atreus look weak, and might also make Thyestes' memory an even more powerful tool against him. The serfs and common folk would look to the martyr as a symbol. Rebellion might crystallize around his death. It was better for him to die quietly, silently, at the hand of someone who had never been associated with Mycenae. Better yet, by an unfortunate accident. But, in any case, in a way that couldn't be traced back to King Atreus.

A General named Ktesias brought him the solution.

"There is a sell-sword," Ktesias said, laying out his case as methodically as a hunter laying out his weapons. "Very young, but known to possess exceptional skill. They call him 'the boy with the jeweled sword.' One of the finest swordsmen in Greece now. Not only skilled with a blade, but also highly disciplined. He drinks no wine and tells no tales. When he takes a contract, he completes it and then vanishes into thin air."

"Tell me more about this young sell-sword…" Atreus requested and his general complied.

"He served in the armies of Corinth and Argos as well as on behalf of many lesser nobles. He's killed perhaps a hundred men. If something goes wrong… if someone eventually discovers we hired him, we can deny it. He's just a mercenary. He takes jobs for many masters. There would be no proof of your involvement. And, in a worst case scenario, you could order him found and executed for the crime of killing your brother…"

Atreus nodded. The plan was elegant. A mercenary was always expendable. It was perfect!

"Bring him to me," the king commanded.

Aegisthus arrived at Mycenae two days later. And he was suitably impressed. The palace was everything the mercenary camps were not. A vast elegant complex, filled with luxuries, and holding unnumbered secrets. He was taken to Atreus' war room, a space lined with maps and reports of military campaigns. The king himself sat behind a heavy but finely polished wooden desk, and he studied the sell-sword that was being brought before him with the intensity of a man evaluating a blade he was thinking about purchasing.

"You are the one they call the boy with the jeweled sword," Atreus said.

"I am," Aegisthus replied.

"I have a task. It is a simple one. An execution. But I would prefer it if you could make it look accidental. A man named Thyestes. He is a problem. He moves through the countryside, stirring unrest, speaking against me. I want him dead, but I want his execution carried out quietly."

Atreus laid out the situation, without disclosing the history between him and his brother. Thyestes was simply a former servant of the king. Weak and disloyal. Greedy. One who'd been broken by years of exile and humiliation. He would be easy prey.

"Here is a bag of gold coins," Atreus continued, gesturing to a small bag of coins, open at the top, to make sure he could see them in their full glory. "Take it now. As partial payment. Find Thyestes in the countryside. Kill him. Return, and I will give you a bag of gold twice this size."

Aegisthus looked at the proposed payment breathlessly, for a moment. It was much more than everything he'd been paid in the past, combined! He released the breath he didn't know he was holding and he grabbed the bag of gold.

"Where do I find him?" Aegisthus asked.

The king and his general didn't have the exact location. But they told Aegisthus that Thyestes was hiding in the rough country to the northwest, likely in a ravine valley that offered shelter and water. There

were reports that he was gathering followers. But there were not many of them. Not yet. Aegisthus left Mycenae before sunset.

The hunt took three weeks.

Tracking was an art that had been carefully taught to him by his now-dead master. He knew how to read broken branches and estimate the age of boot prints. He knew how to follow the patterns of men moving through terrain trying to hide. He could read fear in tracks: the way the foot fell, the irregular nature of the spacing between steps, sometimes doubling back, other times running straight without thought. And, most importantly, Thyestes was not skilled at remaining hidden.

Therefore, the young mercenary moved with patience and purpose through forests and across open country. He spoke to frightened villagers who had encountered Thyestes or his followers, reading their fear to determine if they were lying. Most of them were too terrified to do anything but tell the truth.

'Yes, the man passed through here. Yes, he seemed worn and tired. Yes, there were other men with him, but they were mostly old men, like Thyestes himself.'

The ravine, when he found it, looked like what it was. A desperate man's last refuge. The camp was rough, constructed from branches and cloth, the kind of shelter people build when they have nothing else. A fire pit. Scattered provisions that suggested whatever supplies they had were nearly exhausted.

There were three older men sitting around the fire. None of them saw Aegisthus coming.

He moved with calculated precision, the jeweled sword held low, his body primed. He was a predator moving in for the kill. The first man died without seeing the weapon that opened his throat. The second attempted to stand, got halfway up and was cut down with a blade between his ribs. The third tried to run, but Aegisthus was faster. The running man died before ten paces.

When Thyestes emerged, drawn by the sounds of combat, he found himself facing a young man holding a sword reddened with blood. The elder man was gaunt and aged. His hair was long and unkempt and so was his beard. His eyes had a haunted quality about them. But he was not entirely broken and his skill with a sword was the equal of the young man who faced him.

He drew the only weapon available to him: a comparatively inexpensive bronze blade. While there was really no such thing as a cheap bronze blade, the sword he now carried was no match for the one Aegisthus held.

And the duel began.

Aegisthus had the advantage mostly by reason of youth. He was stronger and faster. His sword was a nobleman's weapon, perfectly balanced, whereas Thyestes held a tool fitting a simple infantry man. As skilled as he might once have been, the old man was out of practice. He had been weakened by years of hardship. The outcome was never in doubt.

Therefore, Thyestes did not fight to win. He knew he could not. Not in open battle. Instead, he hoped for delay. Delay the young man long enough to find an opening for a trick. An opportunity to slip his blade past that of a younger man that his greater experience might see.

The blades met and separated, repeatedly. Thyestes' movements were more about conserving strength and staying alive rather than pressing any offensive attack. Aegisthus pressed his advantage, driving the old man backward, moving with the cold efficiency that he was known for.

Then Thyestes' eyes fell upon the ruby that sparkled in the hilt of Aegisthus' sword and recognition flashed across his face. He stumbled backward, his blade lowering slightly, his eyes locked on that hilt with an intensity that transcended combat.

"That sword," Thyestes gasped. "Where did you get that sword?"

Aegisthus hesitated, though he knew not why. He suspected that the man was trying to distract him. He'd never hesitated before but, for the first time, he did. The question and the slightly lowered blade of his opponent was an advantage that he normally would have capitalized on immediately. But, this time, he didn't.

In that moment of hesitation, his entire life began to rearrange itself. Something in the old man's recognition of the sword... something in the power of that single object broke the momentum of violence. Something made him pause.

"It was a gift," he said, the same answer he always gave.

"From whom?" Thyestes demanded, stumbling further backward. "Answer me, boy. From whom did you get that sword?"

But Thyestes could see that the young man had no intention of answering him. So, he began to laugh and this confused young Aegisthus. The king of Mycenae had already explained that the man was a rabble-rouser. Apparently, he was also crazy. Thyestes continued to laugh as he raised his servant's blade again to defend himself against a renewed attack.

But as he did so, he spoke words that Aegisthus thought he would never hear and those words shocked the young man into pausing.

"You are the fulfillment of prophecy. I am your father!" Thyestes stated, in a deeply resonant tone that conflicted completely with his seeming exhaustion.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Aegisthus doesn't yet know what he's about to become. Thyestes' words hang in the air like a blade that hasn't finished falling…

He doesn't know that a false prophecy, whispered through the mouth of an Oracle, by something far older and darker than the gods of Olympus, has set him on a collision course with the House of Atreus.

He doesn't know that the sword in his hand—his father's sword—will one day be drawn against that house itself.

Blood, betrayal, and a debt three generations old are converging on a single shore, a single altar, and a single choice no father should ever have to make.

The gods are watching.

So is something else.

The curse of the House of Atreus has only just begun.

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