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Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

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## Andromache

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Andromache

Rachel Hungerford

In fulfillment of English Honors

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Even through her tears, she could tell Hector was smiling.

Andromache blinked and he came back into focus: the strong set of his jaw, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the curls that tumbled over his brow. There were throngs of people all about them, celebrating, singing hymns, strumming lyres, playing flutes. But Hector bent his head and the world hushed to the two of them.

“Wife.” She heard the smile in his voice. She reached to touch his face, but her hand met air as he was yanked away by a group of his brothers. Laughing, she watched as the surprise on his face transformed into exasperation—they were teasing him. She knew well what that was like, with seven brothers of her own.

“I am so happy for you,” a voice said at her elbow, and Andromache startled to see a woman—a girl, really—that had not been there moments before. The girl’s features sparked familiarity: Hector had the same high cheekbones, the same wild curls.

“Lady Cassandra,” Andromache said politely. “I’m grateful.”

Andromache wasn’t sure what to say to Hector’s younger sister. She had heard stories—fables, really—about Cassandra’s eccentricities. How she had fits of madness, tears and hysterics, telling wild stories of events that she claimed were prophecy. But standing before her, Cassandra seemed perfectly ordinary, if a little nervous. Her gaze darted around, looking past Andromache’s shoulder, drifting to the gilt on Andromache’s necklace, before rising to meet her eyes again briefly.

“You will bring the most good to him,” Cassandra said simply. Her eyes were oddly solemn. “He will fight because of you.”

Andromache stared, not knowing what to make of her words, but Hector returned then. “Little sister,” he said affectionately, kissing the top of her head. Cassandra laughed and pushed him away, pretending annoyance, and the eerie feeling in Andromache’s chest evaporated as Hector glanced at her with a smile.

“Come,” he said. “The banquet is ready.”

He took her hand, and they walked to their wedding feast.

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Hector went to visit the horses one morning and offered to take her with him. Bored by the weaving room, homesick for the stables of Thebe, she said yes. Her husband checked the animals for grooming, asking the stable boy about health and temperament, but Andromache went from stall to stall, stroking each velvet nose, murmuring soothing nonsense when a colt seemed about to be spooked.

On the way back, Hector needed to stop at a farmer’s house to inquire over the autumn crop. When their business was done, they walked through the fields together, admiring the weather. “Besides,” Hector said, with a rare mischievous smile, “I didn’t tell my father when we would be back. Who knows how long it will take to get back to the palace?”

Andromache beamed at him and took his hand.

They talked as they strolled along, and despite the cluster of guards that trailed them some forty paces behind, Andromache felt at ease. She hadn't seen Hector for a few days except in brief snatches: mealtimes, or passings in the hall. Princely duties had kept him busy, and although they shared the same rooms at night, that time wasn't always spent with talking. It was pleasant to have a conversation that wasn't constrained to trade agreements or the plans for the spring games—and to have Hector's full attention, not distracted by his father's questions or his mother's knowing remarks.

She was telling him about some incident that happened, a poor maidservant getting flustered by some sordid gossip from the older girls, when she realized he was staring.

"What's wrong?" she asked. He stopped, and she turned to face him. "Do I have hay in my hair?"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Andromache kissed him back after a moment's surprise and broke away, laughing his name.

He smiled, and she was struck by the picture of him: fondness in his eyes; curls mussed and swept over his forehead; tall and steady as the wheat that swayed around them in the breeze. "You looked like a farmer's wife," he said. "Like an ordinary woman."

Now her smile was bemused. "And you would be an ordinary man?"

The joy in his expression faded. He took her hands and tugged her close. "I would," he said quietly, "if it meant I could be with you, and nothing else."

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Cassandra wasn't in the weaving room the next morning. When Andromache took a seat next to Laodice, and asked after Cassandra, the other woman didn't seem concerned.

"Probably having one of her episodes," Laodice said in a hushed voice. "They happened more often when we were younger, but every now and then they show up again."

Andromache had been wondering how much of Cassandra's eccentricities were true and how much had been made up. She knew it was impolite to gossip, but she couldn't help her curiosity. "What happens to her?" she asked.

"She talks," Laodice said simply. "Sometimes it's just whispers. Other times it's more violent—she screams, or cries. Always terrible things, made-up things. I've seen her thrash around sometimes—that's why the healers are there, to tie her down so she doesn't hurt herself. Whatever it is, it's all very taxing on her. Often the healers give her treatments for fever." Laodice noticed her silence and added, "Don't fret. It's not contagious."

Andromache had been staring at her loom but not seeing it. Trying to imagine being a girl of nineteen and being tied to the bed because others thought you were a threat.

"Do you know what caused—the episodes?" she asked.

"They started around the same time as Helenus' gift," Laodice said. "He's a seer, you know, of Apollo. And Cassandra's twin. So until they turned thirteen they had done almost everything together. Well, one day they went to the temple of Apollo, and when they came back, Helenus was a seer and Cassandra was—"

She stopped and looked around, a little guiltily, before whispering: “*Hysterical!*”

“What kinds of things does she say?”

“Once,” Laodice confided, “she looked straight at me and told me I would love a man from Attica—Athens, I think. She said the man’s name, but I can’t remember.” She shook her head. “Not that it matters, since I’ll never travel to Athens. And I’m already married to someone from Troy.”

“But—” Andromache hesitated. “You don’t think it could still happen?”

Laodice stopped and looked at her. “Kings’ daughters do not travel outside of their cities,” she said primly. “And why would a man court me if I’m already wed? It just doesn’t make sense.”

She turned her attention back to the loom. Andromache tried to do the same, tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that turned her thoughts into unspooled thread: tangled and snagging again and again on Laodice’s words.

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A few hours after the midday meal, a slave appeared in the doorway. “The king requests that all his daughters be present in the throne room,” she said.

Andromache didn’t know of any ceremonies that happened in the afternoon, and certainly very few that required all of the king’s daughters to be present. She looked at Laodice, who shook her head and shrugged, but set aside her work nonetheless.

Well, Andromache was not a daughter of Priam. Not by blood, anyway. She lifted the shuttle to continue her work.

“Lady Andromache,” the slave said. “The queen has requested your presence as well.”

The eyes of every other woman left in the room went to Andromache. She felt herself flush with the attention, but she busied herself with placing the shuttle on the loom. Then she rose and went to join the other women.

The stone walls seemed to whisper as she walked quickly around the corner. *Something is about to happen*, they said. *Something is about to happen*.

But no, she told herself, trying to shake off her apprehension. That was just everyone else with their hurried, whispered conversations. She saw Laodice in the back of the throng of women and seized her arm.

“Why are you here?” Laodice hissed in surprise.

“The queen wanted me to come,” Andromache whispered back. “Do you know—”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” said Polyxena, who had fallen back to walk with them. “It’s not a festival day, and no one’s getting engaged—”

“That you know of,” Laodice cut in. “Maybe that’s why Cassandra wasn’t here this morning, some unlucky man signed up for—”

“Don’t be cruel,” Polyxena retorted. “Cassandra has enough disgrace from the court without you adding to it—”

“Sisters.” Ilione’s soft voice was reproachful. They were approaching the entrance to the throne room, and Ilione had stopped to shepherd the last of the women inside.

“Be quick and quiet,” Ilione instructed in a whisper. “There’s a man inside, and Father looks angry.” She turned and swept into the room. Hastily, Andromache followed.

The king and queen sat on the two great thrones at the front of the room, of course, but standing in front of them, back to the entrance, was a man. Andromache could only see the back of him: a head of thick, tousled dark hair and the dull clothes of a common man. A farmer, maybe.

Inside, the throne room had the same crawling feeling that Andromache had sensed in the hallway: tense, thick, hushed, like the collective was holding its breath. Maybe they were. Behind the king and queen, Priam’s children sat clustered together. For the most part, the men sat with men and the women with women; but Andromache spotted Creusa and Aeneas standing together among the assembly. She approached the dais looking for Hector behind the two thrones and realized, with a pang of embarrassment, that he was sitting next to his father. As the heir apparent, he was considered his father’s second-in-command, and sat in on the appeals of the common people. She quickly sat in the empty seat next to him.

As Polyxena and Laodice took their places, Hector took her hand. She glanced at him in surprise; his expression was dark, not angry, but clearly troubled. Before she could say anything—as though she could say anything—the man shifted, and Andromache took in his full appearance.

Though his clothes were faded and poor, his overall appearance was striking. His face was, undeniably, beautiful: high cheekbones, a sharp jaw, a fine mouth, vibrant eyes. He had clearly known hard work—his limbs were muscular and tan—but his posture was surprisingly proud: he stood straight, shoulders back and chin raised, nothing like the deferential slump that some adopted in the throne room. Andromache would have called him defiant, except for the smile that softened his shapely features. It turned his expression into something inviting, charismatic. *I know a good story*, his smile seemed to say. *Will you stay and hear it?*

Priam cleared his throat. “Shepherd,” he said. He didn’t have to speak loudly; the stone chamber amplified his voice. “Tell me again why you have come to my court.”

The shepherd’s smile grew wider as he surveyed Priam’s children—no, Andromache thought, with a sickening feeling. Only the women sitting to the right of Hecuba. “My king, you have many beautiful daughters,” he said, and there was something in his voice that spoke of a hidden jest. “Some might say the most beautiful daughters in the world.”

“Answer the king.” Hector’s voice carried a note of warning.

The man’s expression didn’t change. His gaze slid back to the king and queen. “Troy has regained a prince,” he said, still smiling. “Your Paris has returned to you.”

Whispers rose from behind the thrones—*regained a prince? returned to you?*—but Priam held up a hand and silence fell again.

Hector dropped her hand and gripped the arm of his chair. “Explain yourself,” he snapped at the man. “I never had a brother named Paris. Who are you, and why are you presenting yourself as a prince of this city?”

“But you *did* have a brother named Paris,” Hecuba said fervently. “That’s why we called you here.”

Priam took a heavy breath. “We told you”—he glanced at his children gathered behind him—“we told all of you who were old enough that your mother’s third son was stillborn. But that wasn’t the truth.” He gaze lingered on Paris, and then dropped away. His voice was wooden when he spoke.

“Your mother had a dream the night before Paris was born—that the child she was carrying had turned into a flaming torch that, left unattended, burned the city to the ground. She asked every seer, every dream-interpreter we had, and every one of them said it was a sign.”

Hector’s voice grew quiet. “A sign of what?”

“A sign,” Priam said, “that the child would be the destruction of Troy.” He paused. Andromache bit the inside of her cheek. *Something is about to happen.*

Priam said, “They told us that we needed to kill him before his actions caused the death of others.”

“And you refused,” Hector said. Andromache heard the unspoken question: *didn’t you?*

Priam looked at his eldest son, and his eyes were haunted. “We couldn’t,” he said. “So we left it to someone else. A shepherd. He was meant to deliver the child to the wilderness to die. But now—” He made a helpless gesture in Paris’ direction. “A miracle.”

Hector stared at his mother and father for a long time, before he stood. “My king,” he said to Priam stiffly, and bowed much the same way. “Please excuse me.”

He walked out. Andromache stood, bobbed her head in a hasty bow, and followed him.

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That night at the evening meal, Paris was the guest of honor. Usually Hector and Andromache were the only ones at the king and queen’s table—the abundance of Priam’s children meant that the dining room had many small tables scattered around rather than one large one—but tonight, Paris sat with the four of them. He had changed out of his shepherd’s cloth into finer tunic, and Andromache suspected someone had drawn a bath for him. She caught the glint of a gold belt at his waist; as she passed behind him to find her chair, she caught a hint of perfume in his hair.

Hector sat beside her. She glanced at his face, but his expression was impassive. They hadn’t spoken after he had walked out. She had tried to find him, but it seemed he didn’t want to be found, until a slave told her that he was training for the next war games and he had asked not to be disturbed.

Never mind that the next games was months away, in the spring. She hadn’t pressed the slave, but it was harder to go back and focus in the weaving room, and not only because there was more gossiping going on than weaving.

Across the table, Paris looked perfectly comfortable: not slouching, but at ease in his chair, affable smile on his face. He looked, Andromache thought, like a prince.

He caught her looking. He didn't seem discomfited by the attention; in fact, his smile grew. It felt like he was testing her—but always, always, with that effortless confidence. She looked away.

As slaves served the food, conversations bubbled up around the room. The sound was usually a comfort—it was nice to hear everyone talking and laughing, all of these siblings and half-siblings and their spouses. But Andromache noticed the glances at the king's table, more than usual, trying to catch a glimpse of the so-called lost son. And it was uncomfortable to be an island of quiet in the sea of chatter. Hecuba asked Paris about the quality of his bath and the efficiency of his servants, but Hector barely spoke, and Priam was subdued. Andromache felt some sympathy for Hecuba, having to lead the conversation, and anyway, Paris didn't deserve to be ignored.

"Lord Paris," she ventured, when there was a lull, "what was your life like before—all of this?"

She was afraid that the question might sound rude to his ears, but he laughed. "Certainly not a life with a title to my name," he said. "Unless you wanted to call me king of the sheep."

Priam chuckled. Andromache saw gratification brighten Paris's eyes. He sat up a little straighter.

"The shepherd Agelaus raised me," he said. Across the table, she saw Hector's expression turn pained. "He had no other children, so he taught me his trade. But he died before he could tell me my true parentage. I was taken in by Agelaus' brother, who only knew that Agelaus had found me abandoned in the wilderness."

At last Paris seemed to notice the somber mood around him. He cleared his throat. "But that's not relevant to the actual story," he said cheerfully. "Agelaus kept bulls as well as sheep, and, well, I started to pit them against each other for fun. It was boring out in the pasture with nothing to do—I mean, you can only have so many conversations with your cousins and sing so many herding songs, it all eventually becomes monotonous. And I like risk, and competition. When other cowherds pitted their bulls against mine, I started to gain a reputation. I was good at picking out which bull would win. Usually it was mine, but I was fair. I knew when I was going to lose, too. And then—" He paused, and his smile grew dreamy. "And then, a few weeks ago, the goddesses appeared."

Priam choked on his wine and coughed loudly. Hecuba, usually inscrutable, looked appalled. Andromache felt Hector stiffen beside her. The rest of the hall noticed the change in mood: voices lowered. Stares flocked to the king and queen.

Priam cleared his throat and smiled. "More wine," he said to a slave nearby. The boy practically ran to the hall.

Hecuba met Andromache's eyes across the table, deliberate. "My dear," she said, "what are you working on these days?"

The queen was not one for pet names. "A tapestry, your majesty," Andromache fumbled, "for our rooms. A horse. It's very—complicated."

"Yes," Hecuba said, "it seems that way."

The slave returned with a jug and poured the king's wine. The other tables had begun to pick up their conversations again. Andromache felt her shoulders drop with relief.

Priam waited until the slave left. “My son,” he said to Paris, his tone placating, diplomatic, “perhaps the shepherds have different ways of speaking about beautiful women—”

“I’m not talking about women,” Paris said defensively. “These were goddesses.”

The king and queen exchanged a glance. Finally, Priam sighed and inclined his head, and Paris continued.

“I was out with the sheep in the morning, and I walked down to the spring to have a drink. It was early, so I didn’t expect to see anyone else.” His eyes had that faraway look again. “I could—I would—swear that there was no one there when I bent down and cupped my hands in the water,” he said. “But when I looked up, there were three goddesses looking down at me.

“I knew they were goddesses, because they were so beautiful. And they asked me to settle a dispute between them. ‘Which one of us is the most beautiful?’ they asked. The first goddess—she had a peacock feather in her hair—she said she could make me the ruler of the ends of the earth. The second goddess, with the most striking grey eyes I’ve ever seen, said she could give me unlimited wisdom. And the third—”

He paused, looking like he was searching for the right words. “She was the most mesmerizing,” he said finally. “I looked at her, and everything else seemed to grow quieter, dimmer. For a moment I knew I would do anything to please her, and then I wasn’t thinking about that because she was speaking to me. She said she would give me the most beautiful woman in the world.

“I looked up at her and said, ‘Does that mean you would marry me?’ She laughed and touched my face, and her hand felt like it was burning my skin, even as my skin wanted to be burned. ‘Does that mean you would choose me?’ she said.

“I don’t remember if I nodded, or if I said yes, but there was a flash of light and I stumbled away. When I opened my eyes again, it was just the third goddess before me. She told me that she was Aphrodite, and that I was a prince, and that I needed to return to Troy as soon as possible. So I left my bulls and my sheep with my cousins and travelled here.”

“Who is the woman?” Priam asked.

“I don’t know,” Paris said. “But Aphrodite is sure to reveal her to me.”

Hecuba was smiling—the happiest Andromache had ever seen her—but there was something else. She looked relieved. “This means,” she said, “that the prophecy was wrong. It wasn’t about destruction, it was a blessing. You’ve come back to bless us, Paris.”

Only Hector didn’t seem reassured. He asked, “Didn’t you think it was strange that you had to pick one? Weren’t you afraid of offending the other two?”

“It was a test,” Paris said. “I chose the best one, and I passed the test.”

Andromache thought she heard her pulse in her ears—until the sound grew louder. *Slap-slap-slap*: the sound of bare feet on stone floor. As the steps grew closer, so did the sound of labored breathing. And then Cassandra burst into the room.

“Murder!” she screamed. “Murder to Troy, murder to my brothers, my father, women crying and babies screaming—and blood—and ships—”

The chamber rang out with her torrent. Her chest was heaving—from running, or screaming, or both—but she drew in breath and screamed again: “Death to Troy, to the sons of Troy, violence to the women of Troy, all the towers burning, burning, this brother will do it, this *brother* will do it—”

The court had frozen with shock, transfixed by the explosion of sound, but the spell broke as people roused themselves: guards dropped their spears and advanced, women gasped, and a man stood and strode towards Cassandra. Helenus, Andromache realized, as he glared at the guards and said, “Don’t touch her.”

Cassandra’s shouts had lessened to a speaking volume at her twin’s presence, but somehow the change was more eerie than her screams had been, now almost a chant: “Troy is burning, Troy is dead. Troy is burning, Troy is dead.”

Helenus stood so that he blocked her view of Paris. Cassandra’s voice lowered to a whisper as he touched her cheek. He spoke a few soft words to her, and she let herself be led out of the room, glancing back at Paris as she left, mouth moving soundlessly all the time.

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Back in the rooms that she shared with her husband, Andromache tried not to worry. Hector was standing on the balcony outside their bedroom that looked down onto the city. She could tell he was upset, but he had forced a smile and asked to be alone. She tried to distract herself by weaving, on the small loom that resided in their bedroom, but it was hard to focus on the tapestry when her mind kept replaying the events of the day.

She heard rain dropping on the roof. Soon it was raining hard. She glanced up at the balcony entrance every few moments, expecting Hector to be driven inside, but he did not appear. At last, she sighed, stood, and draped a veil across her hair. If Hector was determined to get soaked, that didn’t mean she had to be.

He was facing the city, his back to the entrance, heedless of the rain pouring down. She leaned against the doorway, half inside the hall to keep dry, and waited a moment to see if he would sense her presence. Finally she said his name. He turned, and she saw a flash of guilt in his expression as he noticed her.

“You’ll be ill if you stay out here,” she said. “Come inside.” When he looked away, she stepped onto the balcony and took his hand. “Please,” she said.

He consented to be led inside.

“Talk to me,” she said, when she had gotten one of the slaves to fetch a towel and they were sitting across from each other. “You’ve been distant all day. I know you’re upset, but we can’t conceal things from each other.”

He was silent. Well, if he wouldn’t speak, she would. “Has Cassandra ever done that before? In front of the whole court?”

“She wasn’t always like that,” Hector said quietly.

He didn’t look at her. Andromache, surprised into silence, waited to hear if he’d say more.

“She used to be clever.” His voice was pained. “She used to be kind. Now she’s—”

He cut himself off before he could finish, but she could hear what he didn’t say. She saw the gaps in Laodice’s story, or maybe what Laodice didn’t understand as a young woman: Cassandra had once been stable, predictable, a thoughtful child, a gentle sister. Now, she looked the same; but it was impossible to recognize her. It was the difference that was hard to bear.

Hector looked at her, and his expression was bleak. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Are you angry at Paris?”

“No.” At the look on her face he sighed. “I don’t know.” His hand, resting on the arm of his chair, slowly clenched into a fist. “He claims he was approached by goddesses and doesn’t even question what the consequences of his choices were? I respect the gods. That means I respect *all* the gods. I don’t just pit them against each other like they’re common bulls. I want to consider the options before I make a choice. Maybe the gods don’t give you very many options, but I’d like to know what I’m choosing between before I hand the damning of the city off to somebody else!”

Andromache stayed silent.

“My parents knew what the choices were,” he said, measured now in his anger, “and they still availed themselves of the ability to choose. They’re the leaders of Troy—they’re responsible for this city. For every man, woman, and child who dwells here. Being a leader means you make the choice for the many even if—”

He stopped himself before he could finish.

“It was their child,” Andromache said softly.

“Yes.” He covered his face for a moment. His hand dropped: behind the curtain, anguish. “Yes. I know that. That’s what makes me want to hate them.”

“Your brother is alive. They didn’t actually—”

“But they did!” he cried. “They intended to. And they are not absolved because they handed the matter off to somebody else.”

Andromache watched him for a moment. “What would you do?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t think—” He let out a sharp breath, frustrated. “I know it would be difficult,” he said slowly, “but I would like to think that I could *make* a choice. That I could be certain when it came down to it.”

Outside, the rain drummed on the roof. Hector’s hair was still wet from it. A drop of water spilled onto his face and he brushed it aside.

“I’m not angry at Paris,” he said. “Not really. But—” He rubbed at his jaw, pensive.

“What are you thinking?”

“I worry,” he said quietly, “that it wasn’t just a misreading. That his arrival means something is going to happen.”

His eyes were dark, and far away. Seeing somewhere else. She reached out and took his hand.

"If it does," she said gently, "we'll meet it."

He took a breath, and sighed. Then he looked at her, and slowly, he smiled.

"I am sorry," he said. "For being distant. For raising my voice."

"It's forgiven," she said.

They sat and listened to the rain. Andromache could imagine it, falling on the city, the houses and farms, the citadel where the king and queen might be sleeping. She hoped it would be cleansing, a kind of benediction for this family and their complicated choices.

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The court settled back to normal more quickly than Andromache had expected. The novelty of Paris' presence faded as the days passed; soon, he sat with the other unmarried men in the banquet hall. From where Andromache sat at the king's table, she could see him, usually throwing his head back and laughing, or else gesturing as he told a story, hands fluid, eyes flashing, captivating those who sat around him.

Hector still seemed nettled by his parents, but tensions between them faded, too. Andromache saw the sense in it: Hector had to spend every day with Hecuba and Priam, and the queen and king did not seem likely to apologize over something that hadn't actually happened. Still, she knew Paris' return had broken Hector's trust, and although the initial wound had healed, the scar still remained. Things would never be as easy between them as they once were.

Meanwhile, Hector was learning, slowly, how to have a relationship with a brother he had never known. Hector had many brothers, but he had grown up with all of them, knew all their habits, flaws, likes and dislikes from birth. Paris was unexpected. He had been shaped by the culture of shepherds rather than the etiquette and community of the court, and so had an entirely different temperament than the rest of his brothers. Contrary to his easy grace, he was determined but patient with himself. Or at least he knew how to laugh at himself.

"He knows when he's been beaten, without any kind of guile," Hector told her, after having sparred with him one afternoon.

He complimented without guile, too. Andromache had experienced this firsthand one evening at dinner. "You have beautiful eyes, Lady Andromache," Paris had said, and she had frozen, watching his comfortable smile, waiting for the joke. When it didn't come—when she'd realized that he had been sincere—she swallowed and smiled as her face flushed. It was startling to be the object of such charm.

Despite his acceptance at court, Paris didn't always appear at ease. Andromache caught a strange look on his face one night at dinner: he was scanning the hall as though he were looking for someone, smile replaced with something that looked like sadness. She wondered at the way he suddenly seemed, like a child searching for a parent, or a lover searching for his love, until Hecuba asked her a question and the moment was forgotten.

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“My father,” Hector said one night, “has proposed that Paris be the new representative to Sparta.”

He didn’t sound particularly pleased. “Do you think it unwise?” Andromache asked.

“No. It will give him some actual experience at representing our people. And he’s getting restless—this will get him to stop moping around the court. He needs direction.”

“What, then? Don’t tell me you’re resenting his success.”

“I might be,” he said, “if it seemed unwarranted. But he’ll be good at it, with that mouth of his.” He sighed. “I’m afraid he’ll be more concerned with chasing veils than paying attention in council. Really, I worry he’s taking her words too seriously.” She didn’t have to ask who he meant. “The gods aren’t like us. They don’t always speak clearly.”

Andromache thought of Cassandra in Apollo’s temple. Had the god not spoken clearly to her? Was that why she acted so strangely?

“And,” Hector said, drawing her from her thoughts, “there’s the issue of the queen.”

“The queen?”

“King Menelaus’ wife,” he explained. “Helen. She’s rumored to be the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She froze. Paris’ exact words. “You don’t think—” she started to say, stopped as she heard the words coming out of her mouth.

“No,” he said, understanding her. “No. Paris might be naïve, but he’s not a fool. The worst he can do is flirt with her—and I’ll warn him of that before he departs. Besides, she’s probably surrounded by guards most of the time, if the stories are true.”

She turned to look at him. “What stories?”

He smiled wryly. “I’ve heard,” he said, “that all of Achaea turned up to vie for her hand when she came of age. I don’t know how her father picked a husband out of such a crowd. Aren’t you glad our engagement was simple?”

“Simpler,” she corrected. “Choosing a wife for the crown prince of Troy was no easy task. As I recall, it took three months and ten other women before you told my father you wanted to see me again.”

“And I told you,” he replied, “that my mother kept insisting I meet those other women. Something about how I needed several possibilities. Now I think it was her way of bringing us closer together.”

She smiled, then realized they had strayed from the point. “But why the guards?” she asked. “If Helen is married, what’s the concern?”

“Menelaus is a jealous man,” Hector said, “or so they say. I suppose he wants to keep his prize under lock and key.”

“Poor woman,” Andromache said. Since she had married Hector, she had more limitations on what she could do, where she could go, than she’d had as a girl, but she couldn’t imagine being guarded like a piece of treasure.

Hector glanced at her in surprise, then looked thoughtful. "Yes. Maybe so. But it's probably just hearsay, Andromache."

"I suppose Paris could tell us when he returns," she said, half-teasing. Hector laughed, and the conversation turned to other things.

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Paris was due to stay in Sparta for a week. It was a four to five days' journey to Sparta, and six to seven days back, so it was plausible that he would be gone for three weeks in total, give or take a few days for low winds or the extravagance of Sparta's hospitality. Priam had a new ship built for his son's journey, and Andromache had to admit it was a handsome vessel. She watched, standing beside Hector, as Paris waved in the early morning light as the sailors cast off.

"The gods go with him," Hector said quietly. He caught her glance and his troubled expression eased into a smile. "For good fortune," he said. "It can't hurt."

Twenty days passed. Then twenty-three. Andromache saw the way the king and queen exchanged glances, the way worry settled like a weight on their faces. On Hector's face.

"Bad weather," he said, when they were in their chambers at night. "He'll have a story to tell when he returns."

The days dragged on. Priam and Hecuba looked more and more haggard. The dining hall was subdued at meals; the weaving room was full of gossip. "Maybe," Laodice whispered to her one long afternoon, "he's gone and found a Spartan woman for a wife."

Or maybe King Menelaus was generous with his guests. Or maybe Paris was regaling the Spartan court with his silver tongue. Or maybe a storm had cropped up somewhere across the Aegean and the ship was forced to sail into another port.

Andromache knew that no one really believed in these possibilities. It was clear, just from looking at their faces, what they thought had happened.

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"My father has made a decision," Hector said. Five weeks had passed since Paris had set out for Sparta. "He's asked Helenus to perform an augury."

Andromache paused in combing her hair. "So we'll leave it to the gods."

"Yes." He looked troubled. "Andromache—it's not that I want him to be dead, but—what if he's not? Where could he possibly have been all this time?"

"He's young," she said. "He's probably never traveled beyond Mount Ida before. And there's no one to outrank him among his crew, perhaps he's sailing around before heading home. Perhaps it will teach him a lesson about responsibility."

Hector smiled, but it was weary. "Is that what you believe?"

She sighed. "No." She had just wanted to take the worry off his face, even for a moment.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I suppose the gods will tell us."

And the gods heard and answered their prayers, because Paris's ship sailed into the harbor at the first light of dawn, the answer to their question standing beside him on the deck, dressed like a queen.

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Hector was livid. Andromache had never seen him so angry before. Pacing the small antechamber to the throne room, he looked ready to hit Paris across the face.

"Don't me you stole a woman," he hissed. "A married woman! From her own kingdom!"

"I wouldn't call it stealing—"

"What would you call it?" Hector demanded.

"Liberating," Paris shot back. "Following the command of a goddess."

Hector stopped pacing and stared at his brother in disbelief. "Zeus King," he said, growing louder with each word, "save my brother from his idea of piety that involves *destroying the peace!*"

Andromache tried not to flinch. Thankfully, Priam interceded. "All right," he said, hands raised, looking between his two sons. "All right. I'm angry, too," he said to Hector, "but shouting isn't going to help. And you"—to Paris, with a glare—"your impertinence is not going to draw our sympathy."

Paris raised his chin, still looking at his brother. "The goddess told me—"

"The gods don't always speak plainly," Hector said, quieter now, but still with an undercurrent of frustration. "You can't expect them to—"

"No," Paris broke in. "She *told* me. When I was in Sparta, in the palace. She appeared to me." He took a breath. "I know I sound like a lunatic, but hear me. I'm not trying to lose your good opinion."

Andromache thought he was being sincere. She had heard him tell a story before, and this was different. He didn't look starry-eyed, and he didn't sound as confident as usual, pleased at his own ability to enthrall his listeners with his words. His eyes were clear and his voice, as he recited, had been straightforward.

"Start over," Hecuba said. It was the first time she had spoken since Hector had dragged Paris into the room. "From the beginning. What happened when you first sailed into port?"

Paris let out a ragged breath. "The voyage was fine," he said tiredly. "We found horses. We made it to the city and announced ourselves. The king served us." He looked at Priam. "It was all as you said, father. The talks were easy."

"But something happened," Priam said.

Paris looked away. "King Menelaus left Sparta," he said. "He received word that his grandfather had died, that he was to preside over the funeral."

"So you took advantage of his wife while he was grieving?" Hector demanded.

“It wasn’t taking advantage—I was sitting across from her for three days,” Paris defended himself. “It was impossible not to notice her. There was something, more than her beauty, something underneath the surface. I could tell she was intelligent. But I couldn’t talk to her comfortably while her husband was there. So when Menelaus left, I felt—relieved. I wasn’t going to do anything, I swear, except talk to her. And then, two nights before I was set to leave—the maidservant appeared to me.

“She looked like a young woman, but there was something about her voice—it was utterly persuasive. I had to go to Helen’s room. It was a need, as strong as hunger in a famine. But I—” He paused, remembering. “Just before I turned the corner, I looked back and the girl was gone. I knew it had been Aphrodite, somehow.”

“And then?” Hecuba prompted.

“And then,” Paris said, “I went into Helen’s room, and we made love, and I asked her to come with me to Troy. And—” He breathed a laugh. “She said yes. She almost refused, but she said yes.”

“How did you get her out of the city?” Priam asked.

“I don’t know,” Paris said. “I told her I would come to her room the next night and we would leave the palace together, but she didn’t want that. She said she would be fine on her own. And she came to meet me with only one slave, to carry her things. Somehow, no one stopped us.” He paused, brow knit, speaking almost to himself: “Even at night, someone should have stopped us.”

Hector rubbed a hand across his face. “This is a catastrophe,” he said grimly. “I can’t imagine how angry Menelaus must be.”

Paris raised his head, and Andromache realized that for the first time he looked scared. “Will he come for her?”

Hector looked like he was about to snap again, but he saw his brother’s face. Some of his frustration faded. “Not now,” he said. “The winter storms will be starting up. It will be too dangerous to travel until spring.”

“But,” Priam said heavily, “he will come. Eventually.” He shook his head. “Whether to sow peace or conflict—that’s harder to say. And what we will do when he gets here.”

“We will come up with something,” Hecuba said. “For now”—she glanced at Priam. “All we can do is host her comfortably. And prepare as best we can. If the gods have given us anything to help us, it’s time.”

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When Andromache walked into the weaving room the next morning, the queen of Sparta was sitting at a loom. Her presence was transformative: the familiar sounds of soft chatter and laughter had been replaced by an uneasy silence. Some of the younger women were stealing looks every now and then. The older women pushed their shuttles through their tapestries, more industrious than Andromache had ever seen, except that every one was tight-lipped and solemn.

Helen had chosen the seat next to Andromache’s loom. There was no choice but to summon some dignity and sit down.

“Good morning,” she offered softly. Helen looked up and nodded in reply. She did not smile. There was nothing on her expression except the recognition of a greeting.

Her disregard stung. Andromache wondered if she should try again, ask a question, but she thought it might seem irritating. Better to resign herself to the discomfort of sitting next to this woman in silence. Inwardly, she sighed. She was going to be fidgeting all day. Across the room, Polyxena shot her a sympathetic look.

But unexpectedly, Helen spoke. “Who are you?”

It was a naked question—unadorned, unsure—and she asked it without looking away from her loom, as though the wooden frame was a shelter she could hide behind. Andromache recognized that feeling. She had been the same way when she was getting to know the other women. The earlier sting faded a little.

“Andromache,” she said. “I’m Lord Hector’s wife.” She paused, then added, “I’m from Thebe, south of Troy.”

Helen’s expression didn’t change, and she didn’t look away from her work, but Andromache felt something soften, or open up, in Helen’s impervious demeanor.

“Where did you grow up?” Andromache ventured.

Helen glanced at her, then back at the loom. “Sparta,” she said, as though it were obvious.

Andromache was struck silent by embarrassment—and confusion. Usually women went to live with their husbands when they were wed, not the other way around. “But—I mean, when you married—”

“Menelaus?” Helen kept her eyes on her weaving. “He was from Mycenae. But his brother was the elder of the two, and they would not have ruled together in peace. Luckily, my father was happy to abdicate once Menelaus and I were wed.” She smiled: subtle, the slightest curl of her lips, but Andromache caught the spark of humor in her eyes. “You might say he married up.”

There was a question Andromache wanted to ask, but she wasn’t sure if it was the right moment. Helen shot her another glance. “Go on,” she said. “I’m not some ceremonial relic. I’ll answer if you ask.”

“Is it true...” Andromache hesitated. “Is it true there was a contest for your hand?”

Helen smiled again. When she spoke, she almost sounded proud. “Yes. Everyone from Olympia to Pylos came, and then some. Everyone bringing gifts and puffing themselves up and explaining to my father why they should be my husband. At least a hundred men, and all jealous for me.” She paused a moment to finish a row. “There would have been blood spilt,” she said casually, “had someone not offered a clever plan. Lord Odysseus, from Ithaca.” Her smile changed to something a little more genuine, as though she was recalling a fond memory. “He had the nerve to tell my father that he shouldn’t be the one to make his daughter’s match, that I should do it instead.”

She must have seen Andromache’s expression because she let out a soft little laugh. “Of course my father wasn’t pleased, but what could he do? He knew if he picked my husband, all the other men would protest and maybe even spit him on the end of their spears. So he gave in.”

“But what about the man who would be your husband?” Andromache asked. “Wouldn’t he get the same treatment as your father?”

“Ah,” Helen said, “that was the second part of Odysseus’ plan. Each man had to swear an oath that if I picked my own husband, he would defend the marriage with his life. If any one of them tried to take me away for himself, the rest would come after him and fight for me.”

Her words were conversational, explanatory, but Andromache suddenly felt cold. She stared at the shuttle in her hand, thinking of Hector’s anger in the antechamber.

“Helen,” she said slowly. “You don’t think that the men would remember their oaths and come here? To Troy?”

Helen scoffed. “No,” she said. “That was more than ten years ago. The only people who really cared about the oath were my father and Odysseus. And Odysseus didn’t even want me—he wanted my cousin, Penelope. My father said he would help Odysseus if he provided an easier solution for my marriage. Once the plan was settled, Odysseus wed my cousin and sailed back to Ithaca. I heard they have a son now—Telemachus, I think. Oh, that was poor,” she said, frowning at her loom, and started to pick out the offending thread.

“No,” she said after a moment, “Odysseus would be the last man to fight for my hand now.”

“And what about your husband?” Andromache asked cautiously.

“Menelaus,” Helen said, concentrating on another row, “does not have the gall to sail across the Aegean for me. He doesn’t have the gall for much of anything these days.” She sighed. “And here I picked him because I thought he would be good in bed.”

She looked at Andromache, smile mischievous this time, and even though instinct told her to do otherwise, Andromache felt herself smile in return.

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In the afternoon, she gave Helen a tour of the palace. Since it was a pleasant day, they walked through the courtyard on their way back to the citadel.

“Do you mind,” Helen said apologetically, “if we sit for a moment?” She gestured to a stone bench.

“No, not at all,” Andromache said. Then, carefully: “The palace seemed massive to me when I married Hector. I’ve only recently adjusted.”

Helen laughed. “Thank you for saying that”—and despite her laughter, she sounded genuinely touched. “Sparta’s palace is large, but it’s nothing compared to this.” She paused, peering at something behind them. “Who is that?”

Someone was coming quickly down the path, and Andromache felt her heart leap. She called his name, and he looked up and slowed.

“Wife,” Hector said, breaking into a smile. “And”—he inclined his head, hesitating between *lady* and *queen*, before deciding on, “Queen Helen.”

“Lord Hector,” said Helen, “won’t you stay and sit for a moment?”

His smile turned forced. "Forgive me, but I can't. I have important business with my father." He nodded to them in parting.

Helen watched him go, then turned back to Andromache, expression amused. "Does he always have a fire under him like that?"

"He's the heir," Andromache said. "He's involved in all of his parents' decisions. He wants to be ready to rule when it's time." She paused. "Isn't your husband—Menelaus—ever busy with ruling Sparta?"

"Not like that," Helen said. "Not so—purposeful. It's admirable."

Andromache looked away. There was an uncomfortable feeling in her chest that she didn't want to name. "Yes, it is," she said, and stood up. "Would you like me to lead you back to your rooms?"

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Over the next few days, Helen seemed to grow more comfortable in Troy. At first there was still a modesty, a carefulness to the way she spoke. She didn't talk very much about herself beyond what she had already said: not calculated, but cautious. Andromache thought about the rumors she'd heard, of the guards surrounding Helen, and decided it was likely that a woman put on a pedestal might be wary of attention.

But as a few days passed and her presence in the banquet hall was less of a shock, Andromache saw how Helen relaxed at the king's table, sitting beside Paris, talking with the king and queen. She showed interest in the workings of the court. And she tended to ask Hector a lot of questions. What were his duties as heir? What was it like growing up with so many brothers and sisters?

Andromache tried not to feel jealous. Helen was just curious, and Hector didn't seem to be reciprocating her interest. He was only being polite. When Hector caught her eye, he smiled, and it was easy for Andromache to smile back.

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The next morning the queen appeared in the doorway of the weaving room. There was the rustling of dresses and veils as every woman stood and nodded in deference.

"Good morning," Hecuba said. "Andromache, would you walk with me?"

"Yes, your majesty," Andromache murmured, and followed the queen with a hot face.

Hecuba was already walking quickly down the hall. Andromache tried not to run, tried to stride as confidently as a queen would. Her heart was pounding. She took a deep breath; it didn't do much to calm her nerves.

"Your majesty," she said, "have I done something wrong?"

"No, no," Hecuba said, glancing at her. Andromache couldn't help but feel she was being measured and found wanting under the queen's keen eye.

They passed through the doorway to the outdoor paths. "Did I say something at dinner?"

"It's nothing you've done or said, child," the queen said. "But let's go somewhere more private before we talk."

The silence didn't help the anxiety tangling in her chest like so much unspun wool. Despite the queen's words, Andromache tried to remember every conversation, every comment, every word she'd spoken in the king's presence in the previous few days.

At last the queen stopped in a courtyard—the same courtyard where Andromache and Helen had talked a few days earlier. This time the queen lowered herself onto the bench and gestured for Andromache to sit opposite her.

"I wanted this to be between ourselves," Hecuba said. "I want you to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

The queen tilted her head, and Andromache registered the pity on her face. "Prepared," she said, "if my son chooses Helen over you."

Dread shot through her in a hot bolt. For a moment she couldn't find words. "Why—" She swallowed against a closed-up throat. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't think you're naïve, Andromache," Hecuba said. "You've seen the way they talk at dinner. And you know the king has other women besides me in his bed."

"But Hector—"

"Is a good man," the queen finished. "I know that, and I am proud. My husband is also a good man. A good king. And he can have what he wants." She shrugged, a graceful ripple of her shoulders. "I'm not saying it will happen, but it could. For your sake, I pray that Hector is different. Perhaps his feelings will only be that—feelings. But watching someone else's longing for another can be just as painful."

She leaned forward and touched Andromache's shoulder. "You're still his wife," she said, not unkindly. "That does count for something."

"Aren't you—" Andromache struggled to find a word: angry? upset? *Overwhelmed*, a voice in her mind said. *Afraid*.

"No," the queen said, anticipating her question. "Because my feelings don't matter. Marriage is bigger than the two of us." She raised her eyebrows significantly. "Than the two of you."

Andromache's heart was pounding. She drew a shaky breath. "What do you do? When—if—it happens?"

"Do?" The queen was not smiling. She looked steady and practical and unflinching. She looked singular and alone on the opposite bench. Andromache imagined her in the queen's chambers, looking the same way, lying awake in the dark, knowing the king was with a woman that wasn't her.

"This is the way of the world," Hecuba said. "You don't *do* anything. You simply adjust."

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"You weren't gone for very long," Helen said, when Andromache sat back down at the loom. "I hope everything's all right."

Andromache bit her tongue before she spoke. “It was nothing,” she said. “Just a piece of advice.”

She tried not to be angry at Helen. It wouldn’t do any good to be angry, because she wasn’t trying to control Helen’s affections. And maybe she didn’t have any cause to be angry. She didn’t want to believe what Hecuba had said; something in her rebelled against the thought that Hector would be unfaithful. But then she wondered if she *was* being naïve, if she only wanted to believe that because it was simpler, easier, than the truth. She could push aside her own doubts, but it was harder to dismiss the queen’s.

As morning stretched into afternoon, she threw herself into her work. If she focused on the shuttle, the warp and weft, the precision of each stitch, she didn’t have room to think about anything else.

She was dreading seeing Hector before dinner—they usually talked briefly as Andromache’s handmaiden made her up—and was relieved when a slave told her that he was occupied with a dispute that had gone over. Then she was ashamed at her relief. He was her husband; she shouldn’t be grateful to avoid him.

At dinner, the food was tasteless. She paid attention to conversation, and spoke when spoken to, trying to distract herself. But the queen’s words kept playing themselves in her mind, a repeating line of dissonant music.

“Tell me, Lord Hector,” Helen said, and Andromache felt an unpleasant jolt of surprise. “Who is most likely to be champion in the spring games? I asked my Paris”—she threw a mischievous smile to the man beside her—“but he couldn’t tell me.”

Hector gave a reply, but Andromache didn’t hear it. She was too busy watching her husband’s face. She told herself she was imagining the warmth in Hector’s smile; she tried to be firm with herself. *You’re still his wife. That does count for something.*

She met the queen’s eyes and quickly looked away. Hecuba’s lingering gaze burned like a brand.

Hector didn’t seem to notice, but on the walk back to their rooms it was harder to keep up the pretense. She couldn’t muster the usual enthusiasm as he told her about his day, not when she was struggling to keep a question inside her mouth. The words were ripe on her tongue, and she clenched her jaw to keep them inside.

Hector said her name, and she looked at him. “Are you feeling all right?” he asked, brow creased with concern. “Do you want me to send for the healer?”

She smiled. It felt painful. “I’m well. Simply tired.”

He wasn’t convinced, she could tell, but he didn’t press her.

They walked in silence for a moment. She heard herself speaking: “Do you—” She pressed her fingers to her mouth, stopped short in the middle of the hallway, horrified to have been so thoughtless.

He turned to face her. “Do I what?”

“It’s nothing,” she said quickly. “It’s foolish.”

He considered her. She had liked this about him when they first met: that he looked at her when she spoke, and listened to what she had to say. At the time, giddy with the possibility of romance, she had imagined that his careful attention reduced the world to the two of them alone.

She was disabused of that fantasy now. She knew he had other responsibilities, other ambitions. The low light made his eyes unfathomable.

Still: the queen had reminded her that marriage was a commitment, a treaty ratified in a relationship. And Andromache was thinking of the night Paris had returned, the pain in Hector's face that threatened to weaken that tie. *We can't conceal things from each other*, she'd said. She took a deep breath.

"Do you have feelings for Helen?" she asked.

He drew a sharp breath. He looked like he'd been struck across the face. "Andromache—"

She had intended to let him speak, but it was like someone had pierced a wineskin: the words poured out of her. "I need to ask," she said, hating the way her voice trembled, "I need to know, because your mother warned me this might happen, and it would hurt me more not to know and then find out later, and I need to have time to know what to do, and—" She saw him opening his mouth and pushed forward before he could interrupt. "I know she's beautiful, and half the court is—drawn to her, and the way that she talks to you—I don't, I don't blame her, but—"

He took her by the arms, and though his touch was gentle, she almost flinched. She wanted to be somewhere else, be *someone* else, crawl out of her skin.

"Andromache," he said, as gentle as his touch, "you are my wife."

"That doesn't mean what you think it means," she whispered, thinking of Hecuba, queenly and abandoned; thinking of Helen, trading a king for a green shepherd boy. What she would do with a crown prince.

He looked at her, eyes wide, lips parted, silent as he fought for words. "Are you so convinced," he said at last, "that my love for you is so changeable?"

She covered her mouth so she wouldn't let out a sob. "It's not that simple—"

"It can be," he said. "It is. For me, it is." He reached out to cup her face, to brush away the tears that had spilled down her cheek. "Helen is beautiful, but not in the way you are beautiful. You are not interchangeable. You are my *wife*," he repeated, voice fervent, "and that means I love *you*, and no one else."

The relief was hot and sharp in the back of her throat, and so close to the grief she had anticipated that it was hard not to cry. When Hector's arms came around her, she buried her face in his shoulder.

At last he pulled away. "I will say it as many times as you need," he said, "but words can only do so much." His eyes were dark for a different reason. "Would you like me to prove it to you?"

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Later, when their room was awash in moonlight and they were lying in bed, Hector spoke again.

"I know what my father has done to my mother," he said quietly. "I know that. But I won't do that to you. I swear it."

He took her hand and kissed it, as if to seal his oath. She believed him.

It was easier to accept Helen's presence after that. Still arresting sometimes, to see golden hair and light eyes, the veil extravagantly embroidered with flowers, the silver bracelets that clinked together at the loom. She didn't exactly blend in with the other Trojan women. But Andromache felt the initial tension, the hostility toward this foreign queen, subside as weeks passed.

She overheard a man in the great hall one night who said that once you looked at her, you couldn't stop looking. His tone and his smile had been suggestive, but Andromache had to admit there was some truth to his words. Helen's beauty was more than her eyes or her smile or her golden hair. There was something mesmerizing about her, charismatic. Something that was not quite human. Something, perhaps, god-touched. God-born.

People smiled when they saw her. Men watched her with longing, of course; women watched her with some envy, but admiration, too. *How bold*, they whispered in the halls, *to leave your husband for a lesser prince! How much poise, how much confidence to travel to a different land!* They laughed with her in the weaving room; they exclaimed over her skill at the loom; they listened to her stories about Sidon and Egypt with rapt faces. Quite simply, they had fallen in love with her.

And then: the messenger.

"An embassy," Priam said.

They were gathered in the throne room's antechamber: Priam and Hecuba, Paris and Helen, Hector and Andromache. The sun poured in through the windows, unusually warm for the season, but Andromache barely felt it, numb to everything but worry.

"And this is all that the messenger said?" Hector asked.

The king sighed. "No," he said. "If we refuse to give her back, they're threatening war."

The word fell like a stone in the middle of the room. Andromache felt her breath catch.

"Is it only Sparta that's threatening war?" Helen asked. "Only Menelaus?"

Her face was carefully impassive, but she sounded uneasy. Suddenly Andromache knew why.

"Helen"—and she could hear the accusation in her voice but she couldn't help it. "You told me that they had forgotten about the oath."

"I thought they had by now—"

"What oath?" Hecuba asked sharply.

Helen's blank mask was slipping, and there was fear underneath it. "When my father gave my hand in marriage," she said slowly, "all the rulers of Achaea agreed to fight for me if I was ever—taken away."

"So," Priam said quietly. "That explains the last part of the message."

"How many kings are in Achaea?" Andromache asked.

“More than thirty,” Hector said. “And that’s not accounting for the men they could recruit.”

Priam cleared his throat. “No talk of war yet,” he reminded them. “The embassy comes first. And”—he turned to Paris—“if there is an oath that binds these kings together, then you need to think about accepting their demands. About giving Helen up.”

Paris stopped and stared at his father. “Why should I?” he asked. “She’s my *wife*. She was given to me by a goddess. Are you asking me to scorn her gift?”

“We can’t know the full extent of her gift,” Hector argued.

“If I told you to break off your marriage—” Paris said hotly.

“I wouldn’t have been so *reckless* in the first place—”

“My sons,” Hecuba said. Her voice was firm. “It is useless to argue about what’s been done.”

Hector’s face fell, and even Paris looked chagrined.

“We cannot make the choice for you,” the queen said to Paris. “But we ask that you consider those outside of your marriage. All those who might be affected if diplomacy does not go as planned.”

She swept a look around the room, and her gaze landed on her sons. “We’re not at war yet,” she said. “But we must stand together.”

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Winter faded into a hesitant spring. Patches of green emerged amidst the tired, brittle grass, and the rains lessened as the weather warmed. With the change in season came talk about when the Achaeans would arrive. At first it was all a bit clandestine—hushed voices, muffled laughter, guilty smiles when eyes met. Ilione had tried to discourage it the first few times, but she had given up and sat silent, tight-lipped, whenever talk circled back to jealous men and ships on the horizon. Andromache felt some sympathy for her, but it was difficult to constantly keep a grim future in mind. Rumors were an entertaining distraction.

Helen was not offended by this talk, as Andromache had feared. On the contrary, she seemed to enjoy it. She had a streak of cleverness and was not above teasing Menelaus. Andromache had to admit it was entertaining to watch her spar with the other women.

She stopped her work for a moment to listen to the conversation. Laodice was talking, and her voice was dreamy.

“If I snuck away in the dead of night, I’d want my husband to come after me. Isn’t there something romantic about that?”

“If your husband was Menelaus,” Helen said, “you might not think so.”

The women broke into gales of laughter. “He cares more about how things look than he cares about me,” Helen continued. “It’s always ‘Is this really the best wine that we have?’ ‘Are we showing our best bard tonight?’ I swear, he would give orders about how I dressed if he knew anything about clothing!”

Next to Andromache, Cassandra sat quietly, working slowly. Her hands were steady, but she was not the most efficient weaver. And her sporadic presence led to work half-finished for days at a time. Today, her loom was a riot of color. Andromache leaned over to look more closely, but she couldn't see any kind of pattern or design.

"I suppose they'll be coming any day now," she heard Polyxena say pensively. "Now that the winter storms are through." There were murmurs of assent from some of the other women. The earlier mirth faded away. Andromache turned back to her own loom, feeling grim.

"They're wrong," Cassandra said softly.

Andromache was learning how to tell Cassandra's good days from her bad, and this was one of her good days. Her voice, like her hands at the loom, was steady, and her eyes were clear.

"Wrong about what?" Andromache asked.

"The Achaeans." Cassandra didn't look up from her work. "They won't be here for a long time."

"Polyxena was right," Andromache said gently. "I don't want to believe it either, but now that spring is here, they'll be able to travel."

"No," Cassandra said. "Not yet."

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In the evening, Helen asked to take a walk. It had been an unseasonably warm day, and it was still mild outside, so Andromache agreed. They strolled through the gardens, not speaking. Helen was pensive, and Andromache didn't want to pry.

At last Helen stopped at the crest of a hill. The sunset turned the sky into a patchwork of color: faint blue, lavender, rose, orange, and in the midst of it all the sinking sun, a blaze of fire behind the descending tiers of houses. Andromache was struck by the ordinary beauty of it, arresting as it was every clear evening.

"I wasn't just teasing, you know," Helen said quietly.

Andromache glanced at her, startled. "About what?"

"This afternoon, about Menelaus. I think he really does care more about his image than he does about me. Sometimes—" Her voice was filled with anger. She took a steadying breath. "Paris makes me feel valued," she said. "He desires me, yes, but he does care. He asks what I want. He's attentive. He speaks to me like I'm his equal, instead of this"—her face twisted in frustration—"this untouchable *thing*."

She glanced at Andromache and smiled faintly. "I envy your marriage," she said.

Andromache bit her lip, hard, but something must have shown on her face because Helen's smile grew more genuine. "Not in that way," she said. "I would never come between you—I couldn't. Hector is completely enamored with you. It's obvious to anyone on the outside." She looked out towards the city below. The shadows deepened the hollows in her face, making her look tired, haggard. The most beautiful woman in the world, looking weary and worn.

“It took me so long to realize what love was,” Helen said. “My parents said they loved me, but I was always a piece of collateral before I was their daughter. And when my father was drunk he liked to say that I was never really his daughter. My sister loves me, but she’s the younger of us. And she’s easily resentful. There would have been jealousy one way or the other. And Menelaus—”

She shook her head. “What you have, in your marriage—it began with love. You don’t have to prove yourself as an equal; Hector already sees you that way. You give to one another, you’re generous with each other.” She sighed. “If I had known that marriage was meant to be reciprocal from the start, I might not have chosen Menelaus.”

“You wouldn’t be queen of your own kingdom,” Andromache said.

“Maybe,” Helen said, “some things are more important than that.”

The sunset had faded, and it left the night cold around them. Andromache stared down at the city below for a moment before turning away, turning towards the light and warmth of the citadel.

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The next night, Hector came in later than usual. Andromache turned from where she was sitting at her dressing table, happy to see him, but at the look on his face she hesitated.

She waited until he sat down to speak. “What’s wrong?”

He took a heavy breath. “My parents,” he began, and stopped. “The king and queen,” he amended, “have appointed me commander of the army if it comes to war. They told all the men today.”

Andromache stared at him. “Euphemia,” she said to her slave, “leave us, please.”

The girl disappeared from the room.

“Are you angry?” Hector asked.

There were many things she was feeling, but anger was the easiest to address. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I’m angry. They expect you to be responsible for your brother’s mistake?”

“Every man that fights has that responsibility—”

“But it’s different for you,” she said. “You’ve never been in favor of her being here—you berated Paris when he came back—”

“Andromache,” he said quietly. “I know.”

She looked him, calm, even subdued, sitting solemn in his chair. “Why aren’t you angry?”

“Because I see it as an opportunity,” he said. “Because it’s a chance to earn the Achaeans’ respect, the respect that Paris lost. It’s a chance to take up the responsibility that my parents neglected.” Now his eyes were bright with determination. “And because someone has to do it.”

“But why does it have to be you?” she asked, helpless now that her anger had faded. “Why not someone else?”

“My father is too old,” Hector said. “Deiphobos is too rash, and Helenus is too careful, and Aeneas—he hasn’t come into his own yet. It has to be me.”

*Deiphobos and Helenus don’t have wives*, she wanted to snap. *You’re too important*. But she saw the selfishness of it as soon as she thought it. What she really meant was: *you’re too important to me*. She looked away so he wouldn’t see it on her face.

“I didn’t know if the men would support me.” Hector’s voice was pensive. “I wasn’t sure if there would be infighting. But they all pledged to stand behind me. They cheered.” He smiled faintly. “‘You’re not alone in this,’ Aeneas told me afterwards. He said he would be my second in command if no one else stepped up. I said I wouldn’t have anybody else.” He looked at Andromache, and she saw some of the desperation underneath his mask of composure. “But I will feel alone,” he said slowly, “I will be alone, if you are not behind me.”

“I am behind you,” she said. “In everything. But Hector—” She closed her eyes, feeling her breath come short, finally recognizing the thing underneath it all. “It frightens me.”

His expression softened. He came to her and held her.

“I know,” he whispered. “I know.”

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A week later, Andromache stood on the balcony of her room in the morning and watched the ships come in to land: tiny specks on the horizon at first, then darker, more defined blots out in the middle of the sea. Far below, past the walls, the ships would land on the beaches. The Achaeans would make camp when they touched land, Hector had told her, and then make their way to the gates in the evening. A herald would meet them and lead them to the citadel, where the banquet and the embassy would take place.

In the weaving room, the mood was somber. There was little conversation between the women. Everyone avoided meeting Helen’s eyes.

At last Helen set down her shuttle. She told a story, nothing recent, nothing from her own life, but a tale of a land far from Troy. It was meaningless, irrelevant. But Andromache watched as Polyxena and the other girls slowly turned their attention to the romance of the characters, and the older women relaxed at their looms, and for an afternoon, Helen made them forget the storm looming down on the beaches.

As they left the weaving room to prepare for dinner, Andromache caught Helen’s arm. “Are you nervous?” she asked quietly.

Helen looked at her. “Yes,” she said. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something else, but she shook her head, slipped from Andromache’s grasp, and disappeared down the hall.

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Andromache didn’t know faces, but she knew names. Menelaus, of course. His brother, Agamemnon, from Mycenae. Odysseus, from Ithaca. And Nestor, from Pylos.

Menelaus and Odysseus she knew from Helen’s stories. And Agamemnon—well. A rumor had slipped off a trade ship and circulated through the palace a few weeks ago. Supposedly, the Achaean commander

had killed a stag sacred to Artemis in the forests at Aulis. Impatient to sail for Troy, he had neglected to make the proper reparations, and Artemis refused to let the Achaeans sail until the slight was corrected. In a fit of desperation, Agamemnon ordered his eldest daughter, a priestess of the goddess, to come to Aulis—only so he could slit her throat for the proper sacrifice.

Andromache had shuddered to hear the story. Priam waved it off as a story blown out of proportion; surely, some young sailor wanting to shock his peers. But Hector's expression stayed dark, and Helen, face impassive, said nothing—she, who surely knew her brother-in-law, neither confirming nor denying his capability to do such a thing.

"My lady," a voice said softly. Euphemia, dressing her for the banquet. Andromache looked up.

"Forgive me," she said. "I was thinking about something else. What is it?"

"Your sash is finished, my lady. It's just the veil left."

Hector walked in then, and she felt a wave of anxiety. "I can manage the veil, Euphemia," she said quickly. "You're free to go."

The girl left with a few murmured words.

"They're not here yet," Hector said, and Andromache felt some of the tension leave her. "But," he continued, "my mother wants us to be ready when they are."

She sighed. "I'm not sure I'll ever feel ready," she confessed.

He crossed the room and took her hands. "There isn't going to be any fighting tonight," he reassured her. "At least, not with swords or spears. Besides, they've proposed an embassy first, instead of simply attacking. That gives me faith."

"And will they accept our reasons?" she asked.

His smile faded. "My father is going to argue in favor of Paris. It would be difficult to convince anyone to accept that. But," he said, "he's worked out many a conflict of interest before."

She bit her lip. "This is more important than reworking a trade agreement."

"I know." After a moment, he said, "You look very beautiful tonight."

She smiled despite her worry. "I'm glad to know you think so."

She turned to fasten the veil to her hair. When she turned back around, her eyes caught on the doorway, and she felt the fear rise in her again. All the things that could go wrong. It felt like peering over a precipice, and not knowing whether she was going to fall forward or fall back.

When Hector took her hand, she felt her balance settle a little. "It will be all right," he said softly.

Andromache didn't really believe in the words, but she believed in him. They walked towards the banquet together.

The members of the embassy were given seats at the king's table, so Andromache and Hector sat with Deiphobos and Helen, effectively part of the masses for the night. It was a vain attempt to keep attention away from the object of the embassy: Helen could not be hidden in a crowd, not with her distinctive features. But Hecuba had reasoned that having her sit with the king and queen would be seen as an act of provocation. No one disagreed.

The banquet hall rippled with the soft undulation of voices, a hundred murmured conversations, but everyone went silent as the great doors swung open. Andromache took a breath. Hector found her hand under the table, and she felt a swell of gratitude for the small comfort.

As Achaeans walked into the banquet hall, Andromache tried to match Helen's descriptions with their names: the one in front, proud and tall, must have been Agamemnon. Behind him, with similar features but redder hair, Menelaus. With a grizzled face, looking elderly but keeping pace with the younger men, Nestor. Which meant that the last man, barrel-chested, shorter than the rest, was Odysseus.

Priam had stood at their entrance, and now he spread his hands in greeting. "Welcome, honored friends," he said. "Please, dine with us and be entertained."

Agamemnon smiled, but it had an edge of mockery to it. Andromache feared he would reject Priam's hospitality, but his words were mild. "We are honored by you," he said, "Trojans, breakers of horses."

The Achaeans approached the dais where Priam stood. Agamemnon swept his gaze around the room as though he was looking for something. Suddenly he stopped. He went rigid. Fury poured over his features like molten bronze.

He was looking right at the table where Andromache sat, and for a long moment her mind was blank with panic. But then reason returned, and she realized the object of his wrath: Helen, sitting across from her, had met his eyes.

Beside Agamemnon, Odysseus touched a hand to his elbow. He said something, so quiet that Andromache couldn't hear, but it seemed to be calming. The anger faded from Agamemnon's face. He clenched his jaw and kept walking.

They had to pass Andromache's table before mounting the dais. This time, Agamemnon didn't stop, looking straight ahead, but Menelaus had seen what his brother had seen, and his stare was unbroken as he walked closer and closer. His footsteps slowed until they paused right beside the table.

Andromache didn't breathe. Beside her, Hector tensed.

"Wife," Menelaus said shortly.

"My lord," Helen replied, eyes cool.

Andromache saw something flicker over his expression at his wife's dispassion, but he managed to shutter his feelings and nod in assent before he walked to his chair. It was impressive—especially compared to his brother, who seemed to show everything on his face. She glanced at Helen, who raised a golden brow as if to say: *so what?*

Slaves brought food and drink as the Achaeans sat down. Slowly, conversation began to pick up: first in undertones, then louder, echoing around the room as the wine poured. Andromache breathed a sigh of relief. The first trial was over.

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Halfway through dinner, when Hector and Deiphobos were distracted by the bard singing at the front of the room, Helen leaned over and said, "I need a moment out of this hall. To get some air."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Andromache asked.

Helen smiled. "No. I won't be long."

As she left, Andromache glanced around the hall. There hadn't been any more mishaps since dinner started. The hall was as lively as it always was, and their guests seemed to be enjoying the Trojan hospitality.

As her eyes passed over the king's table, she paused. Something was missing. She counted the people at the table: Priam, Hecuba, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Nestor, and—

Menelaus was missing. She tried to tell herself it was just a coincidence that both Helen and Menelaus were gone from the hall. She couldn't convince her own mind. While the discussion between Hector and Deiphobos grew heated, she excused herself.

In the hallway, she tried to think of where Helen would have gone, but she didn't have to search. There were voices, familiar and close by. Andromache paused behind the corner.

"—what's to stop me from stealing you back right now?"

Helen's voice was cool: "Your brother, I think."

Menelaus scoffed. "Agamemnon does not command me—"

"Oh, yes he does," Helen snapped back. "Otherwise you would have been the one leading all of Achaea through Troy's banquet hall."

Menelaus was quiet.

"And your brother is out for blood," Helen continued. "Even the blood of his own children, it seems, as long as it runs red."

"Wife." Menelaus's voice was dangerous. "Don't speak of things you don't understand—"

"I think I understand perfectly," Helen said. "Who's next? Electra? Orestes?"

"Helen—"

"His own child, Menelaus! She was barely of age! And the word is that he *deceived* her into dying—"

"That's not—"

"Would he make you kill Hermione? Would he do it himself, or would he hand you the knife?"

“You didn’t see him afterwards,” Menelaus burst out. “It destroyed him. It still does. He just knows how to hide it.” His voice hardened. “And it was all in service to get to you.”

She heard Helen’s breath catch. “Don’t you dare.” Her voice had dropped to a hiss. “Don’t you dare put her blood on my hands.”

“But you’ll be responsible for so many other deaths,” Menelaus said, “if diplomacy fails.”

Andromache stepped around the corner. Menelaus’ back was to her, but he turned at the scuff of her sandals against the stone floor. Up close he seemed taller than he had in the banquet hall. And he was angry now, and as much as he was Helen’s husband, Andromache was also reminded that he had come here to fight, with words or otherwise.

But Helen was standing behind him, and there were tears in her eyes. That resolved her. If she had to take Helen away from this man with her own hands, she would push aside her fear and do it.

“Speak,” Menelaus said abruptly.

Andromache looked at Helen. “The queen is asking after you,” she lied.

Menelaus glanced between them. “Well,” he said. “We should return to the banquet, then.”

Helen did not speak. Her mouth was pinched, and her chin trembled, but the tears in her eyes did not fall. She started to walk towards Andromache; she paused beside her husband. She turned towards him, her face burning with emotion, and then strode past him.

As they turned the corner, Andromache reached for Helen’s hand. Helen’s grip was tight. There were tear tracks on her cheeks.

“I told him,” Helen said finally, when they were almost to the hall’s entrance. Andromache stopped and looked at her. “Why I did it. I told him.” Her light eyes were like embers. “And he didn’t care.”

Andromache embraced her. It was brief; Helen pulled away after a moment. But she looked more composed as she wiped her eyes, and she entered the hall first, chin raised. Not beaten yet.

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The bard was singing a different song when they sat down. Hector glanced at her, a question in his eyes—clearly, he had noticed their absence—but she shook her head. They would talk later.

The last notes of song faded into the silence of the hall. Applause replaced the silence, and the bard bowed his head in thanks. As he took his place in the back of the hall, Priam stood. He was holding a staff in his hand, elegantly carved. Hector had explained that it was a way to keep order during the embassy, to let each man have a turn to speak. A speaker was safeguarded from interruption as long as he held the staff.

“Alas,” Priam said, “we have not gathered here tonight simply to feast and be entertained. The purpose of this evening is to try and reach a compromise, to hear what our guests have to say and reach a solution, if possible. In that spirit, please”—Priam gestured to the Achaean kings. “Speak first.”

Andromache had expected Agamemnon to stand—out of all of them, he was clearly the leader—but Menelaus was the one who nodded in thanks and took the scepter.

“King Priam,” he said. “This is a matter of personal honor. I welcomed your son when he arrived at my court. I fed and entertained him and his men. I talked with him, and listened to what he had to say, even though he was a young man. And when I was absent from my kingdom, grieving the death of my father’s father, he returned my hospitality by stealing my wife from me.” His eyes lingered on Helen. Andromache felt a stab of pride at Helen’s unflinching expression.

“Not only is this theft an insult to myself and my marriage,” Menelaus continued, “but it is a violation of our highest standard—an insult to Zeus himself, since Zeus is the god of guest-friendship. I ask that you return my wife and her possessions to me in recognition of this fact.”

He sat down and passed the staff to Odysseus. The king of Ithaca had been quiet as Menelaus spoke—Andromache had seen him staring into the distance and wondered if he was paying attention. Now he grasped the staff, but his grip was unbalanced, his hand clenched around the wood, and though he glanced briefly at Priam his gaze settled on the ground: vacant, indifferent.

Was this the same Odysseus who had solved the problem of Helen’s feuding suitors? Helen had made him sound energetic and cunning. This man looked inexperienced and dull.

“King Priam,” he said. “Men of Troy. My lord Menelaus is correct—this is not simply a matter between a husband and wife. The issue at hand is greater than that. And it raises a question: do you value guest-friendship as the highest principle of your people?”

“If you do value it,” Odysseus continued, “then this embassy is easily solved. Guest-friendship has been violated. A prince of Troy has stolen something from the king of Sparta. All we ask is that Lord Menelaus’ property be returned to him, with compensation, and that the proper penance be done to Zeus.”

He had fooled them, Andromache realized with some embarrassment. He had made a show of his incompetency, but his voice was steady and powerful. He was a skilled orator—perhaps even more than Menelaus.

“However. If you do not share this value with us—if you say you value it but refuse to yield to our demands—then we cannot come to an agreement. And that means that we are forced to be in conflict.

“Down on your own beaches,” he said, “on the shores of Troy, every man from our ships has been bound by an oath. They are sworn to defend Helen, queen of Sparta, from theft, captivity, and dishonor. These men have—” For the first time his voice wavered. He cleared his throat. “These men,” he said again, “have left their homes, their wives and children, their honored parents, in order to band together for their common cause. In short, this embassy affects more than you, Trojans, and more than those men gathered down on your beaches. This conflict has consequences for all of Achaea—not only our relations in future years, but also every wife missing a husband, every child missing a father, every father and mother missing a son.”

He offered the staff to Priam and sat back down.

Priam gazed at the staff in his hands for a long moment before he stood. He did not lean on the staff for support, but stood tall. He looked wise and steady: not an old man but a respectable patriarch.

“My honored lords,” he said gravely. “Of course we value guest-friendship. We would not have hosted you with Troy’s best if we didn’t. And we respect and honor Zeus. We also want to consider the will of all the gods, and perhaps consider that another god’s will falls under that of Zeus.” He paused. “My son Paris was visited by the goddess Aphrodite just months before he sailed to Sparta.”

Andromache watched the Achaeans’ expressions. Odysseus was inscrutable, but Agamemnon’s eyes narrowed, and Menelaus frowned.

“She promised my son the most beautiful woman in the world,” Priam continued. “And later she revealed that this woman was Helen. I regret the way in which she was passed on to Paris, of course, but it is clear that this was not an action spurred on by lust or a desire for fame. This was from the gods themselves.

“We believe that Zeus can use anyone or anything for a mouthpiece for his bidding. His ways are unfathomable to mortal minds. Why not reveal his will through another goddess, through an act that looks like a violation of guest-friendship? And if this act was ordained by Zeus, then how could it be a violation at all, seeing that he is the god of guest-friendship?

“May I remind you, my sister Hesione was taken from our hallowed city when she was barely of age and already betrothed. There was no need for war to solve that conflict. In the same way, there is no need to destroy families and livelihoods in order for us to live peacefully. We have accepted the will of the gods.” He looked at each of the Achaean kings in turn. “I ask that you do the same.”

The Achaeans glanced at each other. Andromache was too aware of the silence of the hall, the scent of burning from the braziers, the pound of her own heart.

Menelaus kept his face neutral, but his voice was low with barely controlled anger. “I don’t see how you can be so casual. The difference between your sister and my wife—”

Odysseus cleared his throat. Menelaus pressed his lips together, but he subsided.

“The difference,” Odysseus said, “is the difference between betrothal and marriage. Marriage is something blessed by the gods, a tie that cannot be undone. Zeus Xenios is also Zeus Horkios, the keeper of oaths. Your son has come between an oath of marriage. He has tried to rend the tie—”

“—at the behest of another goddess,” Priam interrupted. “If this was an act of mortal hubris, I would be in full agreement with you. But these events are beyond us. We cannot anticipate every desire of the gods, as I’m sure you know well.”

Andromache bit her lip, hard. Priam’s words were unassuming, his voice mild, but all at once Agamemnon’s expression sparked back to fury. If the rumors about his daughter were true—and the way Helen and Menelaus had been talking seemed to confirm them—then Priam’s words could be construed as a thinly veiled insult.

But before Agamemnon could open his mouth, Odysseus spoke again. “King Priam. We have been traveling for the past three days, and we are tired. I propose that we all find beds for the night and come back refreshed tomorrow evening.”

Priam nodded. “A wise proposal, Odysseus. But I won’t have you go all the way back to your camp in the dark.” He raised his eyes to the assembly. “Antenor,” he called, and a middle-aged man stood. “You will

host Odysseus and Menelaus. And Thymoites”—another man approached the dais. “You are responsible for Lords Agamemnon and Nestor.”

As before, everyone stood as the Achaeans made their way across the hall. This time, the kings did not look at Helen as they passed, but Andromache felt the brothers’ anger, as pungent as the smell of the braziers, linger in the hall.

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The Achaeans returned the next night. Andromache wasn’t certain if the mood was more or less tense than the night before—certainly, the Achaeans were not strangers anymore, but this evening was riding on the back of the last, and the final exchange had been strained. As far as she could tell, the festivities were well-received, and the three Achaeans showed no sign of irritation. Regardless, the night ended much like the first: frustration, impatience, or perceived slight drove the conversation to the edge of fury, before Priam managed to pull it back with a careful suggestion.

Andromache could see why Odysseus and Menelaus had been chosen for the embassy. Odysseus could be charming, but most of the time his expression was unreadable. It was his words—careful, elegant, and often sympathetic—that did the convincing. It was easy to believe that he did not want to go to war. And besides being Helen’s husband, Menelaus had his own skill in speaking: he was forceful but direct, brief but articulate. He was fair, and he listened to each man without interruption, but he was not afraid to argue, either.

“It’s refreshing,” Hector admitted to her, after the second night. “He’s not trying to confuse us with flowery language. I can respect that, even if I don’t agree with everything he says.”

Agamemnon did not do much talking. Diplomacy was a delicate dance, a skillful balance of intention, perception, and choice of words. Andromache guessed that it was not one of Agamemnon’s strengths, not with his quick temper. But what could Menelaus and Odysseus do, when he was their commander, their figurehead? Leaving him behind at the camp would risk insult to Priam, and Agamemnon did not seem like a man content to wait around for others to do the important work.

But the third night, Agamemnon did not return with his lieutenants. Priam made no comment on the absence, except to express regret, but expressions around the hall were stormy, tight-lipped. Hector bristled as Menelaus made his apologies.

And the talk was no different from the previous nights. The men talked past each other, around each other; it was as exhausting as watching a dog chase its own tail.

Menelaus was not convinced by Priam’s argument. “You keep saying Aphrodite was involved. How do we know you’re not making that up?”

Odysseus held up a hand. “Speak carefully, my friend,” he warned. “We do not have a say in how the gods choose us.”

“I would ask that you take me at my word,” Priam said to Menelaus. “As I take you.”

But Menelaus’ frustration had not cooled. “What good is the word of a king who makes excuses for his coward son?”

Hector stood abruptly. After a moment's surprise, Deiphobos did the same. Andromache watched as Aeneas, Pandarus, Polydamas rose in defense of their king.

"May I remind you that you are standing in my hall," Priam said. His voice was deliberate, but Andromache knew he was angry. "I accepted your embassy when I could have turned you away. And Paris may have proven himself a coward, but I don't see how much more honor you have, when your own wife left you."

Menelaus moved as though to surge to his feet, but Odysseus caught him by the arm. He looked hard at Menelaus. Something in Odysseus' expression must have been convincing, because the king of Sparta settled back in his chair. With a clatter of benches, Hector and the other Trojan men sat back down.

Odysseus turned to look at Priam. "We must reach a decision," he said wearily. "Either you give up the lady, or we return to our camp and tell Agamemnon that we are at war."

"My king," said a voice. It belonged to a man that looked almost as old as Priam. "We do have a third option."

"And what would that be, Antimachus?" Priam asked.

Antimachus' face was impassive. "We could ensure that they never return to their camp," he said.

Andromache drew a sharp breath, heard other gasps whisper through the hall. Menelaus and Odysseus looked wary.

"That is a dishonorable thought," Priam snapped. "You have dishonored your city and your king by speaking it aloud."

"War takes little thought for honor," Antimachus retorted. "You know that they will kill our sons when the battle starts—"

"My friend," Priam said, voice grave. "We are not at war yet." He addressed the Achaeans. "You will leave my halls in peace. If anyone tries to harm you on your return to your camp, I will exact punishment. You have my word."

Odysseus inclined his head. "You have our gratitude," he said.

The Achaean kings filed out of the hall. It was quiet except for the sound of their footsteps on the stone floor. But something clamored inside of her to see Helen's husband, walking away. The only hope of peace, turning its back on Troy.

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She didn't speak to Hector on the way back to their rooms. She couldn't make her thoughts form words. She knew that if she tried to, she would cry or scream or end up doing both. Hector seemed just as immersed in his thoughts.

Euphemia removed her veil and took the pins out of her hair, but when she went to untie Andromache's sash, Hector dismissed her quietly. Andromache looked at him, but didn't try to stop the slave from leaving.

Just the two of them, in the room, but the silence was so tangible it felt like a chasm, like they were staring at each other across a great divide.

At last Hector took a deep breath. "I'm going to fight tomorrow," he said softly.

She looked away. "I know that."

"I don't want to be the commander of the Trojans," he said. "Not tonight."

She spoke around the ache of tears in her throat. "What do you want?"

He came to stand beside her. He reached for her hand, and she let him take it. Unbidden, her fingers curled around his. Gently, he pulled her to her feet.

"I want to be an ordinary man," he said. "I want to be with my wife."

He bent his head and kissed her cheek, her jaw, her neck. When he pulled back, she leaned up and found his mouth. They went to bed.

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The morning was a rush of moments: the meal at dawn, everyone grim in the grey light of the hall. Men with serious expressions, women with red eyes and set mouths. Hearing soft sobs echoing through the passageways, chiming from different voices, like eidolons haunting the citadel. Trying not to listen to parting words, trying to ignore parting embraces, trying to preserve the intimacy of others despite the open air of the palace. And Hector, saying goodbye at the gates.

He held her for a long time. She tried to forget her fear, louder than any war cry inside her head, and memorize the feel of his embrace, the scent of him, the sound of his heartbeat against her ear.

"I love you," he whispered. He kissed her: not desperate, not rushed, but slow, tender.

She tried to blink away the tears crowding her vision, wanting to capture a clear image of him, if it was to be the last. "I love you," she whispered back.

He was smiling: a slight smile, even though his eyes were solemn. He brushed away her tears.

Aeneas called his name, and the moment was broken. The smile dropped from his face. He pressed his lips to her forehead, and then he was gone, following Aeneas, going to hitch his horses to his chariot.

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The weaving room was a different place. It wasn't just the noticeably empty stools, or the dread that seemed to weigh the air down. The most significant different was the presence of the queen, sitting at a loom.

Andromache held the shuttle in her hand and stared at it for a long time. Fear's cold fingers were tight around her chest, tangling her thoughts with worry. It was strange to think that just a few weeks ago, they had been making jokes. Helen and the glint of mischief in her eye, the younger girls' nosy questions and the buoyancy of laughter—it seemed like a daydream.

"Andromache." She looked up to find the queen standing above her.

"Would you come with me?" Hecuba asked, and Andromache nodded. She followed the queen into another room.

Inside, the space was windowless and dim. Spools of thread sat in neat lines on shelves; in the corner were distaffs empty of raw wool. "It's the supply room," Hecuba said briskly. "No one will bother us in here."

Andromache waited.

"You've barely touched your work this morning," the queen prompted.

"It doesn't feel very important."

"Would you rather be doing something else?"

Andromache stared at her. The queen's face was impassive. "It's an honest question. What would you rather be doing?"

"I don't know what to do," Andromache burst out. "Hector and all the other men are fighting out there, and I'm so afraid, and it doesn't seem—" She pressed a hand to her mouth, suddenly close to crying. "It doesn't seem right," she said, trying to be more measured, "to do the work I've always done, when I may have said goodbye to my husband for the last time."

"But what can we do?" Hecuba asked. "Would you have every woman in the citadel grieve, all day and all night, in expectation of death?"

"That's not fair," Andromache whispered.

The queen opened her mouth, then closed it. "You're right," she said. "It's not. Forgive me."

"Your majesty—" She took a deep breath. "What is this about?"

Hecuba considered her for a moment. "This war will ask something from everyone," she said. "Not just the men, though I pray the gods preserve them. Wives who have to run their households by themselves. Mothers who have to raise children who don't understand what war is. Countless women waiting and hoping that their fathers or their brothers or their husbands will come home whole."

Hecuba stepped closer and took her hands. "But I can't help thinking," she said gently, "just how much this war will ask of you, child."

The tears rose again in her throat. Looking at the queen, face lined and eyes compassionate, Andromache felt how fiercely she missed her own mother. As much as she willed herself not to break, she felt her mouth tremble.

"We've put you in an impossible situation," Hecuba said. "We've asked every woman to choose between their husband and their city. But we've taken away your choice."

"My son could rattle off a list of reasons why he married you," Hecuba continued. "If his father or I had any doubts about your engagement, I'm sure he would have. But one of those reasons is that you are queenly, whether you recognize that or not. You have the strength to help Hector lead this city." She glanced at the doorway to the weaving room. "To be an example to all those women."

She looked back at Andromache, and her face was set. "The men will face their battle," she said firmly. "Let us face ours."

She squeezed Andromache's hands and strode into the other room.

Andromache took a shuddering breath and lifted her eyes. "Preserve Hector," she whispered. "And preserve me."

Another moment, another breath, and she followed Hecuba's lead.

The rest of the morning, all through the unchanging grey afternoon, Andromache started to learn about hope. It was difficult, because it was difficult to replace her feeling of dread with any other feeling, even simple determination not to despair. It was monotonous, because it was monotonous to turn aside every thought of Hector injured or Hector dying and focus every ounce of attention back on the loom. But it was better, if not easier, to strive against despair with the shuttle in her hand, instead of sitting passively with only her thoughts. Sometimes the loom blurred before her and she had to blink the tears away; and always, fear kept a tight band around her chest. But midway through the afternoon, she looked up from her work and saw Creusa and a few other women working in the same way. That gave her enough to make her feel like she was doing something right.

The time came to prepare for the evening meal, and Andromache wondered if she should even bother. She wasn't sure she could summon the desire to eat anything. But she thought about going back to her rooms, about sitting alone, or lying in bed in the dark, and those things were worse than the thought of going to dinner, no matter how solemn or strange it would be. She put down the shuttle and made to stand, but just then a shout came tearing down the hall. Polyxena's voice, calling for her mother.

The queen stood just as her daughter reached the doorway. "What's happened?" Hecuba said sharply. "Are you hurt?"

"No—" Polyxena was breathless. "It's the army—our army. They're coming back inside the walls. The fighting's over for the day."

The earlier apathy in the room evaporated. Suddenly Andromache was being jostled down the hall. In the tumult, someone grabbed her hand—Helen, eyes blazing. Andromache wasn't sure if she should feel grateful or angry at Helen's presence, but there was no time to deliberate because they were outside, in the wan light of a cloudy evening, pressing towards the wall to watch the men pour inside the city. They found the queen and stood beside her. Andromache gripped Helen's hand on one side and Hecuba's on the other until she saw a chariot yoked to two black and two white stallions. Xanthos and Podargos, Aithon and Lampos, Hector's horses.

She let go of Helen and Hecuba's hands and ran. She ignored Priam's warning shout, managed to dodge the hands of the guards and slaves that reached out to stop her. She didn't stop until she reached the gate, where a throng of peasant women waited for their own husbands or brothers or fathers, their faces bright and tense with hope. A man's voice yelled for the gates, and with a creak of rope and a groan of wood, they slowly swung open.

Up close, the sound of hooves and sandals striking the ground was deafening. Every man's armor looked the same. Andromache scanned the faces wildly, her heart throbbing in her chest, breaths coming in painful gasps. It seemed as though hundreds of chariots passed her, thousands of horses, millions of men on foot. *Please, she prayed to any god. Please, let him be alive—*

Someone called her name. Her head turned. A chariot stopped in the midst of the tumult, an island in the sea of movement. A man dismounted.

His breastplate and helmet were splattered with red; his hands and arms were streaked with it. When he took his helm off, she could see scarlet smeared on his cheek.

Andromache felt her hand go to her mouth. "It's not mine, I'm not hurt," Hector rushed to reassure her. "It's not mine, it's—"

He stopped abruptly. He seemed to shrink into himself. Andromache searched his eyes, and realized the expression on his face was shame.

Her husband had killed men today, men who had wives and daughters and sons. Taken lives, sent spirits down to the underworld.

Andromache stepped close to him. "I love you," she whispered. "I'm glad you're alive."

She reached up to touch his face. She tried to ignore the way he flinched.