

## Clytemnestra

She stands at the window, looming like an obelisk or a cartoon villain, centre stage. That is the first thing he notices, pausing in the gaping gravel driveway outside the Manor. Hers is the only window lit up, so the mansion looks like it is winking, mocking him. He is already unsettled, although he can't pinpoint why. In the dark, with the chauffeur having taken the limo to the garage, the neo-classical style seems like a mistake; the trees are crowding around as spectators. The air is suddenly, thick, syrupy. It's hard to breathe. He tugs at his tie, steeling himself.

If she wants a divorce, she will have to ask for one. But she won't. The gold-digging harpy in her would never. The wind picks up, and the sky, swelled with bruised clouds, murmurs. He storms up the steps, but the huge door dwarfs him. No servant comes to open it, so he heaves it open himself.

"Madam. He is in the foyer."

She turns from her place at the window. She nods graciously at the butler.

"You're dismissed."

He pauses. She sacked the other servants weeks ago. But the butler has served the family for years. His ice-blue eyes are a constant fixture, as though they belong to the furniture. His skin has now become lined like bark, and his hands are twisted with arthritis. His shoulders are hunched in the jet-black uniform.

"Wouldn't you like to go on a little holiday? Just for the weekend. It's all booked."

She lays a hand on his lapel. His heart beats under her fingers. She looks up at him through her ebony lashes.

"My husband will not be here when you get back. Business trip, you know how it is?"

He tenses, meeting her eyes.

"So soon after his return?"

She remembers his face folding, tears, silent and sap-like flowing down his face as the small coffin was lowered into the ground. His stiffness as she collapsed after the funeral, howling. He had patted her awkwardly on the back, his lips trembling and bowing as he attempted to keep control of himself. In another time, she would tear up. But she is turned to stone.

She tilts her head. He blinks once. Just once, and then he nods.

"Of course, madam."

The staircase stretches out before her like the train of a bride, dipped in blood. His wife stops at the top of the new crimson carpet she must have had fitted. He loosens his collar.

"Wasn't this too expensive?" He clears his throat, but too little, too late. His voice is weaker than a little bit of thread. He catches sight of himself in a new painting, where the ceremonial axe used to be displayed. It's of a lioness, her maw dripping with the hunter's blood. He looks pale, ill.

She looks fantastic. Of course she does. She stalks down toward him, looking down on him like a giant. The silk of her vermillion dress is smooth as liquid, running down her figure. It picks up the perfectly applied lipstick, the red bouncing from her pale skin. Her crow-black hair is twisted into a knot at the base of her neck. Her collarbones are blade sharp. Maybe it's the glint in her eyes, like the sparks when swords clash. But that's probably just the reflection of the silver chandelier hanging above him, like a net.

"Only the best for you, my darling."

She steps into a strip of moonlight that momentarily hits the mahogany panelling a couple of metres from him. It gives her skin a grey-ish tinge. She smiles, but her eyes are dead. She could have risen from some crypt fifteen minutes ago, and he would have believed it. Her heels hitting the stone floor could be gunshots in the silence.

"Oh, no," he pushes, "I couldn't possibly dirty it."

A cloud covers the moon, plunging them into near darkness. She looks at him, long. Her eyes scrape down his body. A floorboard creaks above them. She says nothing, turning and striding up the stairs. Fire consumes him in a hot fever, and suddenly he can't bear her above him again. He is following her before he knows what he is doing.

"Where are the kids?" he tries at her back.

She pulls her body taught like a wire. She turns, her hair exploding out of the style at the suddenness of the movement, black like a void. Her eyes blaze, the moonlight's spark catching her again. "My daughters are not here."

She growls it. He steps back, involuntarily; his shoulder blades hit the wall: the thinness of the corridor in this damn rabbit warren is shoving them nose to nose. Her fists are clenched so tight he can't help but think she might draw blood. His lips twitch into a grin. She is always so easy to rile. Disappointment is bitter ashes on his tongue, as she turns her back to him, seeming to check herself. Her skirts hiss as she curls away from him; every inch of her is coiled, tense. Her voice is choked, violently forcing its way out of her.

"I've- run a bath- for *you*."

"Have you?"

He doesn't wait for her answer, brushing past her on his way to the bathroom. God, he could use a long, hot, soak.

Her hands are clean. The skin is smooth and white as snow. Long ballet-dancer's fingers, shaped from years of toasting her husband's politician friends at dinners. The only marks, little scars of rope-burn on her palms, disappear under foundation.

The mirror is gleaming, along with the rest of the bathroom. There is only one spot left. Decorating her face in red, the shape of a tiny kingdom. She slides a cloth down the bridge of her nose, and it disappears. The dregs of the water in the bathtub make their last gasp and disappear down the plughole.

The trees outside rub their leaves together in glee as the wind teases its way through them, while Aegisthus gouges out a grave at the bottom of the garden. She can't hear it. But she knows he's doing it. The spade will be hitting the ground in a steady rhythm, one, two, three- like heartbeats. Heartbeats her husband won't be having anymore, of course. Neither will her youngest daughter. It won't bring her back. Of course it won't. The police will catch them eventually. Of course they will. But Agamemnon will not take another breath. He will not twitch the mouth that told the press swarming the front steps that he would give anything, *anything* for their daughter's safe return. He will not move the hands that took her away.

Clytemnestra braces herself against the sink, deep red nails clawing at it as she shakes, remembering the glow of the carpet reflecting on his hands. It had coated them in a fitting shade. The blood of Iphigenia can never be washed away.

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