

Iphigenia

Eos drove her great chariot over Aulis, heralding the coming of a new day. Mother and I had arrived at the Greek camp at midnight, so I hadn't yet seen its full glory in daylight. It was overwhelming. A true display of Grecian might. An even truer display of my father's might, for these men had assembled from all across Greece to be under his command. As I gazed in wonder at the rolling stretches of tents, housing Greece's most fearsome warriors; one of whom I was to marry, my mother laid her hand gently on my shoulder. Whispering, "It is time to prepare, your father wishes you married before noon". Mother's voice was always quiet, but even more so today.

Reluctantly, I turned to her and accepted her outstretched hand. She guided me back into the crude tent my father had set up for us; Mother had tutted upon seeing it last night, bemoaning how it was unfit for the Queen of Mycenae and how he clearly had left it to the last possible minute. I thought in the crudeness lay safety; safety from the men here not loyal to my father. The gentle hand on my shoulder guided me further into the tent. Waiting inside was an entourage of slave girls, four filling a terracotta bath with steaming water and another laying out cosmetics in a neat row on the stool next to the bath. Upon seeing us re enter two of the slaves got up from their task and approached me. They bowed their heads, and the shorter of the two asked if they could undress me for my bath. I nodded, Mother withdrew her hand from my shoulder and instead went to inspect my bridal robes. Deft hands removed my linen chiton and the few brass bracelets I had worn to bed. These hands now took ownership of my shoulders and moved me towards the bath, which the other slaves had finished with.

Juniper and laurel scented the hot waters, my senses filling with the smells as I crouched into the bath. The water was slightly too hot, staining my skin with a hue of pink. A slave girl softly took my arm and began lathering it with scented olive oil, another following suit and taking my other arm. All the different smells were beginning to overwhelm me, never before had I been bathed in this level of finery; despite my being a Princess. Tonight I wouldn't be just a Princess, I would be a wife too. The wife of Achilles and his future Queen of Phthia. The wife of Aristos Achaion, the best of Greeks. I was drawn from my thoughts by two cold blades scraping down my arms in synchrony, removing the dirt of travels and sleep. The slave girls were skilled with their strigils, knowing exactly where to push and where to relent. Cool metal gave me a slight reprieve from the almost choking steam I had been breathing. They continued this practised ritual on my legs, paying greater attention to what lay between them, and on my breasts; preparing me for my wedding night. A taller slave girl guided me out of the bath, dabbing at my skin with linen, while another rubbed even more perfumed oils into my now dry skin.

With the bathing ritual complete, the slaves moved onto dressing me. The taller one draped the crimson robe over my body, pinning it into place with gold brooches. A slave girl with bronze skin brushed my hair and pulled it into an elaborate bun, with a few curled strands left free to artfully frame my face. A shorter one took the saffron veil and laid it gently over my hair, securing it with a smaller gold pin. The fabrics felt good against my skin. Soft and high quality. Fit for a King's daughter and a Prince's bride. Finally, a slave girl placed embroidered slippers on my feet while another layered gold bracelets on my wrists, gold necklaces with blood red pendants on my neck, and pearl earrings in my ears. Mother raised a mirror, so I could view their work. I stared back in disbelief. Never in my life had I looked this mature, this regal, this perfect. Mother smiled softly at my expression, undoubtedly

knowing the thoughts within my head. A mother's instinct, she would say. "It is time, Iphigenia." Those words filled me with anticipation and dread. I wanted to make my father proud, be the wife Achilles was expecting, but I felt like a small girl playing with her mother's clothes. I nodded and allowed mother to take my arm.

Purposefully, I ignored the tears in her eyes and moved towards the tent's exit. I was my father's daughter, Agamemnon's daughter, I had no room for weakness. Sunlight blinded me. A man stood outside, introducing himself as Calchas. Father had charged him with leading me to the altar. We traversed briskly across the sand, mother on my right and Calchas on my left, approaching the hordes of soldiers gathered to witness the ceremony. As we walked through them, they parted, giving me my first view of the altar. It was simple and unadorned; Father stood to the left of it, grim faced as always, but I was glad to see him. I couldn't see Achilles. I searched the faces of the gathered soldiers, looking for any trace of divinity, but they diverted their gaze. Out of respect for my father and groom I assumed.

A soldier of Mycenae approached, firmly laying his hand on mother's shoulder. I turned to her, suddenly unsure, I had assumed she would be with me until the moment I stepped in front of the altar. She looked back at me, nodding almost imperceptibly with a slight smile, though she scowled at the soldier and withdrew from his touch. I continued on, this time with only Calchas at my side. I searched the soldier's faces more intently, growing increasingly confused with the absence of my groom. Perhaps this was a Phthian wedding tradition? The bride arrives first, then the groom?

We were ten paces from father. His face was still stony, the perfect mask of a king.

Nine paces and I see the wetness in his eyes, the only hint of emotion he showed. It must pain him greatly, losing his eldest child, even if it is just to marriage.

Eight paces and I attempt a small smile, hoping to ease his worries.

Seven and he breathes in deeply.

Six and he is in arms reach.

Five and he grabs my hands, pulling me in. It surprised me. Father was a rarely affectionate man, especially in front of outsiders. He must be grieving deeply, to hug me so desperately in front of these soldiers. He turned me around, so my back was against his powerful chest. So I was facing the gathered soldiers and mother. She looked confused, likely also wondering where my groom might be.

Her confused eyes changed to horror, two soldiers standing on either side of her grabbed her arms roughly. It was then that I felt the cool metal of the dagger against my throat. I stiffened, straining my neck upwards to look at my father and ask what he was doing. "What?" I managed. Cold eyes answered my question, replacing it with fear. Those eyes were not that of my fathers, they were not eyes he had ever used to gaze upon me before. The grip on the dagger tightened, mother screamed. He drew it across my neck with no hesitation, the cold blade slicing through my fragile flesh like it was lard. Hot blood flowed down my neck and onto the crimson robes those slave girls had so painstakingly dressed

me in only minutes before, ruining the expensive fabric. Mother's screams heightened, reaching a ferocity I had never heard from her before. I felt my legs go weak, like the gods had plucked the bones from them and left only skin and fat. I slumped. I would have fallen had father not held me up. His eyes were as cold as the knife. I felt my own filling with tears. From betrayal. From fear. From the inability to breathe. I wished desperately to lift my hands and clutch at my throat, staunching the flow of my lifeblood onto the sand. I did not have the strength. My gaze rolled to mother, wanting to feel her kind hands once more, not the apathetic hands of this man. I dropped into the puddle of my blood. Father had let go, he was leaving. I could hear mother running towards me despite my failing ears. The moon shone gently in the sky, despite it being day.

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