

## ***Prologue***

### ***(Told in the Voice of Ajax of Lokris)***

I am one of the few still living who can tell the story of Troy's fall, for I was there when the ships set sail for the shores of that doomed city. No doubt the dead can tell the story, too, but theirs would have a different ending.

I was there when the battles began. I saw the great Hector struck down before the gates of Troy. Achilles, too, pierced in the heel by a well-aimed Trojan arrow, and I ran the footrace at his funeral games. I watched my friend, my battle companion, the great Telemonian Ajax, driven mad with jealousy when Achilles' armor was not awarded to him. And on the night he slew himself in shame, I found his body. I rode inside the horse and waited there through the Trojan revels at what they thought was peace. I stood atop the tower of the Scaian Gate when the citadel was breached and all the Achaian tribes swept in. I watched my warriors set the houses and temples on fire and held in my hands the bloodied crown of the murdered king. I ordered Troy's queens and priestesses rounded up, and watched as they were bartered and divided, along with all the other spoils of war. Weary as we all were after the long years of death, I set sail with just a handful of the forty ships I'd led from Naryx, gladdened only by the promise of home.

Few of us ever found our way back from Troy to our families and our fields. Within sight of landfall, dark storm-clouds began to gather over the cape at Euboea, the violent waves and wind scattering the Achaian fleet like chaff, and in that tumult, my ship went down, and my men, all my men, were lost. Some thought I'd drowned with them. Some say I climbed onto an island rock and shook my fist at Poseidon and at Zeus,

who struck me down with his thunderbolt. I am of all men most hated, and so the poets have invented many stories of my death.

But I did not die in war or sea or storm. I reached my home on foot, arriving like a beggar. I came home to Lokris, to my city of Naryx. And here I have spent my days in the temple of the goddess, my protectress, my destroyer, trying to understand the mystery. Her mystery. She who is old as the earth and older than time.

She was witness to what happened that night—not the crime and sacrilege the world accuses me of, though what else could they suppose? Even my own men believed what they'd been told, believed that I had raped the priestess of Apollo, there in the sanctuary of Troy's holiest shrine. When I came home, my own father, Oileus, turned his back to me, and the people of Lokris shunned me as one who brings ill-fortune.

I am a hated man, by day a sweeper of the temple steps, by night a wanderer of the hills, taking refuge where I can among the goatherds and the common folk. At night when the sky is filled with the turning stars, I sometimes hear old voices in the streams that tumble down from the rocky peaks toward the sea or toward the inland valleys. Low voices speaking to themselves inside the river stones. Sometimes the owl flies overhead and cries. Sometimes the wind turns in the leaves of the oaks and olive groves, and I know they are telling a story, too, but I don't know the language. Sometimes the evening light falls through the trees onto the surface of the water. And then I remember the day I first saw her, the Trojan priestess whom I loved.

“Loved,” I say, but now that it is uttered, I take back that word. What does a man feel when he says he loves? I know what it was to love my men and grieve for each who

fell on the plains below Troy's walls. I grieved when those who fought beside me and lived to return home went down with the ships in the storm off Euboeia's coast.

I loved my home and grieved to leave it, grieved to return, a son of Lokris, reviled by those I thought would welcome me. I have loved my land, its olive groves, its pines, its curving beaches, its woods and creeks hidden in the folds of the hills. I have loved the scent of sage, the sweetgrass, the ripening wheat and barley, the broad, dark leaves of the acanthus.

I loved the face of my cousin Ianthos, only a boy of eleven when we set sail for Troy. Loved the trust he placed in me, and standing beside him on the deck of the ship, I knew the love a brother feels, or father, though I have no sons of my own. I cried out his name as I watched his hand slip from mine when the ship cracked in two and he was pulled down to death into the furious sea.

And I have loved women, too. All of us on the plains of Troy spoke to each other about the women we'd lain with, laughed at the lust that stung us, longed for the lost days of youth, of peace that gave us leisure for such love.

And I loved Ajax, my battle-companion, stood beside him—tall as a tower, he was—and side by side we pledged ourselves as battle-brothers. The two Ajaxes, they called us, "Ajantes," as if we were true brothers in blood. I would have died to save him. Like him, I loved (sometimes too much) the heady musk of wine. Yes, I loved my brother Ajax, grieved his death, and even more the madness that drove him to that sorry end.

What I felt for the Trojan priestess was like none of these. I hardly knew her. My body hungered for her from the day I first saw her, but that was not love. I hid it from my men, my battle-brother, from myself when I could. It shamed me, but would not leave

me. Even when I stood atop Basika Hill, watching the funeral pyres that lit up the plains the night after the great battle, even then my hunger for her wouldn't let me sleep. And when I volunteered to ride inside the wooden beast, I thought only of the chance to satisfy my lust.

Would I have risked my life for her? For the chance to lie with her? I knew from the start that she was Apollo's chosen. I knew to lie with her would forfeit my life. And, yes, I would have died to save her if it had been in my power. But to say I loved her is a phantasia, a dream I teased and taunted myself with. A dream that comforts and tortures me now. No, I will not say I loved her, but that with my body and its hunger and its many loves, I honored her.

The world was smaller then. I lived on its surface. I was a man of war who had come to the end of the world, a spy sent to find something that might turn the fighting in our favor, that would free us from the spell the gods held us in, their endless jealousies. I climbed the hill to the postern gate and found the spring, the creek of cool, clear water above the River Simois. And when I looked on her, it seemed to me for a brief moment she held open a door I didn't know was there, through which I glimpsed another world beneath the city and its stone walls, beneath the towers, beneath the war-plains and ships on the shore. Her world—no. Not hers, exactly. For I think she was as lost as I was, only she was herself a door, the root of earth and heaven. And just as ignorant of what lay before us, beneath us in the darkness at the world's end. The mystery she would lead me to.

Where is she now, Cassandra, priestess, guide? When the voices in the water mutter their dark stories, then in my dreams at night I see her as I did on that last

morning, standing on the beach below the ruins of her burned and broken city. When the hawk shrieks, it is her voice I hear, crying out from the end of some bloody tragedy. My heart tells me she is dead, and so I think she must be. When I was a soldier sleeping in my war-hut on the beach, there were nights she came to me. In my dreams, I mean, but such dreams!—clearer to me than any of my deeds in battle. My nights are empty now. My days, too, except for what I can remember. Must remember.

Something she showed me that night Troy burned and her world, my world, fell into smoke and chaos. The serpent path. The serpents all around us outside the sanctuary where we lay. My desire like a hunger. “She will protect us,” she had said, and I trusted. “Don’t be afraid.”

Still the world around us fell in blood and ashes. Still the armies, scattered or drowned at sea. Still the news I hear these years of Mycenae, Tiryns, Araxos, Pylos, Sparta—one by one our kingdoms falling. Soon, Naryx, too, will fall. Nothing of our world will remain.

I put down my sword and shield that night inside her sanctuary, and never took them up again. What use were they to me after that night? What earthly use? And yes, I shook my fist at Zeus, at Poseidon, and at Apollo, too. At all the gods whose game we played out below Troy’s walls. I was angry then, and I am angry still. It is all I have left to feel, though it galls and smolders in this hollow chest where once beat a man’s heart. For twenty years I’ve walked these hills, bitter and alone, an exile in my own land.

Only the priestesses of this temple have not turned me away. They keep a shrine here in the hills, and they have made for me a small place in their garden, beside a stone table carved with a cockle-shell and roses, where sometimes I find small gifts of barley

cake and figs. Once on a winter evening, the high priestess herself came into the garden. She stood beside me where I sat shivering on the cold ground, and held out a cup of wine. The drink loosened a little the strings that bound my heart and tongue and, like a fool, I poured out my anger, and she did not stop my words. When the anger had passed, wave after wave, I told her then, and not again till now, of the night she whom I honored more than my life, opened the door of her body. Kissed awake my desire. Drew me into the mystery I am still trying to understand. The old priestess stood very still as she listened, her eyes closed, and her head bowed.

Then she knelt down beside me. She reached out her hand and pressed her finger against my lips. "Do not speak of this," she whispered. "Go to Delphi. There you will find your answer."

"Apollo has no answers for me," I said. "I have forsaken him and all the gods."

"Yes," she nodded. "But before it was Apollo's, the oracle there spoke the truth of Pythonis, the power under the earth. There are voices in the water, a language in the leaves. She speaks it still."

So I followed the river Cephissus from the hills of Naryx, across the plains of Elatea, then climbed the granite heights of Delphi. From atop the winding Sacred Way, I looked out towards the blue-grey peak of Mount Parnassus and farther still, down onto distant groves of this land I love, even as the gods must see them. I placed my offering on Apollo's altar. But the only answer I received were these two words: "Honor her." Nothing more.

Each day I come to this small temple at Naryx. Each day I ask the goddess (my protectress, my destroyer), why, of all the sons of Lokris, did I alone return? What is it

you want me to do? Why did you offer us your sanctuary that night, smile on our act of love, hold your wings over us so that for a brief time—an hour perhaps—time stopped?

I have only a handful of memories. Words I must not speak. I sweep and wash the temple porch each morning. I tend the healing plants the priestesses grow in the temple garden. Sometimes they hand me a white-clay pitcher, not yet glazed and fired, and I sit at my stone table, carving into its sides the images I remember. Must remember. The tree of life, the cross of death. The seven circuits. The couple locked in their pleasure and their pain. The story is there, but I cannot tell it. And Cassandra's bones, wherever they may lie, are silent now.

What can I do but go back to the end? To the beginning? Before my eyes are closed in death, I will return to the ruined walls of Troy. I will find again the spring where once Her temple stood. She of the sea-foam, of river sprung from rock, She whose names are now so many no one knows them anymore. I will build there an altar, a small shrine to honor the priestess the world says I defiled, the goddess they say I have wronged. I will make my peace with whatever sleeps there under stone. And though no one knows the story, not even I, those who come after may learn in time the secrets buried there.