

**The Roof of Agamemnon's Palace, before dawn. A watchman stands guard.**

WATCHMAN. O gods, free me from this awful task! For one full year I've been stuck up on this tower of the Atreidae<sup>1</sup>, crouched on my haunches like a dog. I have come to know every single star in the night sky, the whole twinkling mob that arcs over my head with the seasons. And still I wait, hoping to spot another light, an earthly one — the signal fire from Troy,<sup>2</sup> heralding its fall. Those are my orders from the queen, her woman's heart steeled by a man's resolve.

I toss and turn up here on my dew-soaked cot. I never dream, because I never sleep. No. Fear comes and chases sleep away. My eyes refuse to shut. When I whistle or hum to stay alert, the sad melody makes me grieve for the terrible state of this house, the misrule and dishonor. Oh, how I wish my watch could end tonight! Whichever of you gods hears the prayers of humble men, hear me now, and let the light from Troy kindle an early dawn!

**Sees something far off.**

The Fire! At last! Gleaming in the night! O, welcome sight! Light of a new dawn — there'll be dancing in the streets because of you. (shouting) It's over! The war is over! I have to wake Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife — rouse her out of bed so she can lead the celebration. (again shouting) Troy has fallen! The fire says so! (to himself) As for me, first I am going to dance and treat the king's good luck as my own! The dice rolls. . . Triple sixes! I win! I win!

I hope the master returns soon. I want to clasp his hand in mine. As for certain other matters, my lips are sealed. A big ox stands on my tongue. Although, if this house had a tongue of its own, it might have quite a few tales of its own to tell. But of that I speak only to those who already know the situation. For those who do not, my mind is blank.

**Scene changes to the steps of the palace later that morning. Many women praying, far back, including Clytemnestra and her handmaidens. Chorus of Argive elders enters.**

CHORUS. Ten years have passed since Menelaus, Priam's great adversary, and lord Agamemnon, the two mighty Atreidae sharing sway in Argos, left with a thousand Argive ships, to press their cause with force — hearts screaming in their fury like a pair of eagles overwhelmed with the loss of their young.

Then one of the supreme powers — Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus<sup>3</sup> — hears their wailing, hears those screaming birds, who live within his realm, and sends a late-avenging Fury to punish the transgressors. In just that way, all-powerful Zeus, god of hosts and guests, sends the Atreidae against Paris, son of Priam,<sup>4</sup> for that woman's sake, Helen of many men — condemning Trojans and Achaeans<sup>5</sup> alike to innumerable conflicts.

Now things stand as they stand. What is destined to come will come. And no libation, sacrifice, or human tears will turn the gods' unbending wrath.

As for us, whose old bones confer no honor, we who were left behind when the army sailed so long ago, we wait here, using up our remaining vigor to prop ourselves up with canes, like little children, unfit for Ares, god of war. And so it is with old men, too, who, when they reach

1. The sons of Atreus: Agamemnon and Menelaus.

2. A powerful city in northwest Turkey.

3. Apollo, god of healing, music and prophecy, favored the Trojans; Zeus, king of the gods, tried to remain neutral during the war; Pan is a satyr, a minor deity.

4. King of Troy.

5. Greeks. "Achaean" and "Argive" are often synonyms for "Greek," Achaea and Argos used for Greece.

extremes of age, wither like leaves, and go their way three-footed, no better than a child, as they wander as if in a daydream.

But you, daughter of Tyndareus, queen Clytemnestra, what is all this? What reports have you received that lead you to send your servants out commanding all these prayers? For every god our city worships— all-powerful gods above the earth, and those below, and those in heaven, and those in the marketplace— their altars are ablaze with offerings. Fires rise everywhere, right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils brought from the palace. Tell us what you know, and set our minds to rest. For while things seem grim, these sacrificial fires give me hope.

I well recall that omens manifested to our kings, as they were setting out, foretold success for their expedition.

**Cross fade to strong wind, crashing waves, martial drums, clanking armour, marching, etc. under.**

The two generals of Achaea's troops, united in a joint command, led off the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears, marching against Troy, Priam's domain.

**Martial sounds fade out under eagles cry.**

A promising sign came to them — two eagles, kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships. One bird was black, the other's tail was white. They were gorging themselves, devouring a hare swollen with unborn young.

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, but let the good prevail.

Then the army's prophet, Calchas, saw the warlike Atreidae in those birds that were eating the hare. He then interpreted the omen, saying—

CALCHAS. In time, this army will capture Priam's city. But may no anger from the gods cast its dark shadow on our troops, our great bridle forged to curb Troy's mouth. For the goddess Artemis<sup>1</sup> rages at her father's ravenous birds. She pities the cowering hare, she pities its young, slaughtered in the womb. Artemis abominates the eagles' feast.

CHORUS. Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, but let the good prevail.

CALCHAS. And lovely Artemis— though you are gentle with the tender cubs of vicious lions and take special joy in the suckling young of all wild beasts — grant us a good outcome, as this omen promises, an auspicious sign, but ominous.

I call upon Apollo, god of healing, to stop Artemis from delaying the fleet with hostile winds. For the offering she now demands violates all human pity — it shatters families and makes the wife lose all respect and hate her husband. For in the home, a dreadful anger waits. It does not forget and cannot be appeased. Its treachery controls the house, waiting to avenge a child slain.

CHORUS. Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, but let the good prevail.

**Violent winds, crashing waves up, hold under:**

Achaea's army was stranded by opposing winds at Aulis, where tides ebb and flow. Troops grew hungry, as supplies dwindled. They wandered discontent and restless. The winds corroded ships and cables. Calchas proclaimed the cause of this was Artemis. And he proposed a remedy, but something harsh, even worse than the opposing winds, so painful that the Atreidae struck their staffs on the ground and wept.

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1. Goddess of the hunt, Apollo's sister. Angry at Agamemnon, she has caused contrary winds to blow at Aulis, demanding that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia.

Then Agamemnon, the older king, rose to speak—

AGAMEMNON. Heavy indeed my fate should I refuse this god's command — but to obey is harsher still — to butcher my daughter, the pride of my house — to stain a father's hands before the altar with a virgin's blood. Which choice is worse? How can I abandon my allies? Their call for sacrifice to calm the winds lies within sacred law — even the sacrifice of an innocent's blood. So be it! May all go well!

CHORUS. When Agamemnon strapped on the harsh yoke of necessity, his spirits changed, and his intentions became profane, unsanctified. He undertook an act beyond all daring. Troubles come, above all, from delusions that incite men to rash designs, to evil. So Agamemnon steeled his heart to make his own daughter the sacrifice, an offering for the Achaean fleet, so he could prosecute the war waged to avenge that woman Helen.

**Segue to men praying, build under:**

In their eagerness for war, those leaders paid no heed to the girl's pleas, her cries of "Father!" — nor to her virgin youth. Agamemnon offered up a prayer, then ordered men to seize her and raise her, high above the altar, like a goat. They forced a gag into her lovely mouth, like a horse's bit, to stifle any curse which she might cry against her kin. As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground, she glanced at the men, each of them, those carrying out the sacrifice, her eyes imploring pity.

**Sound out. Original ambience returns.**

What happened next I did not see. And I will not say — only that the rough winds abated as Calchas foretold. The scales of Justice move to show that wisdom comes through suffering. As for what will come — we will discover that when it comes. Until then, let it well enough alone. To know the future is to invite sorrow before its time. Whatever is ordained to happen will happen, like tomorrow's dawn. But I hope whatever follows will be well, and accord with the wishes of our queen, the guardian of Argos and our sole protection.

**Clytemnestra comes forward.**

CHORUS. Queen Clytemnestra, we have come here in deference to your royal authority. With our king abroad, his throne is empty — so it is only right for us to pay allegiance to his wife. I am eager to hear your news, whether what you have heard is good or not. Your sacrificial offerings give us hope. But we won't object if you stay silent.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I have a welcome message. As the adage says, "May Dawn be born from mother Night." You will hear great news, acceding all your hopes — the Argives have captured Priam's realm!

CHORUS. Tell me that again. I must have heard you wrong — what you said just now — it cannot be true!

CLYTEMNESTRA. I say that Troy is now in Argive hands. Is that clear enough?

CHORUS. Your words fill me with joy. So much so I cannot hold back tears.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Then your eyes confirm your loyalty.

CHORUS. Can you verify the truth of this report? Is there proof?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Of course. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS. Has some vision persuaded you of this, something in a dream?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Not at all. As if I would heed some phantom!

CHORUS. Perhaps some nascent rumor raised your hopes?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Now you treat me like a child.

CHORUS. When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTEMNESTRA. The very night in which this splendid day was born.

CHORUS. But how could a herald arrive so fast?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Hephaestus,<sup>1</sup> from Mount Ida sent forth his brilliant blaze. Beacon passed beacon on to us by courier-flame: From Ida, above the Trojan plain to Lemnos — to the strong blaze on the summit of Athos, sacred to Zeus. Thence, soaring high aloft so as to leap across the sea, the flame, speeding joyously onward, its golden beam, as another sun, passed the message on to the sentry at Macistus. And he, without delay nor carelessly yielding to sleep, did not neglect his part as messenger. Far over Euripus' stream came the light alerting the sentires on Messapion, who torched a heap of withered brush and urged the message on. Their flame, gleaming like the moon, arced over the plain of Asopus to Cithaeron's ridges, and sparked another relay of missive fire. Across Gorgopus' water shot the light, to Mount Aegiplanctus, from there it passed the headland of the Saronic gulf — until it reached the sentinel nearest to our city, the peak of Arachnaeus. And finally, it came to rest upon the rooftop of the Atreidae.

Such are the torch-bearers that I myself arranged, racing the course one after the other. And the victor is he who ran both first and last. This is the kind of proof and token I give you, the message of my husband, direct from Troy to me.

CHORUS. My queen, I soon will raise my prayers of thanks to all the gods, but now I wish to savor your wonderful news. What more can you tell?

CLYTEMNESTRA. On this very day Achaea's army holds the town of Troy. Within its walls, I fancy, voices shout in mass confusion. If you place oil and vinegar together in a bowl, they never mix, but stay separate. It is much the same in Troy, with the mingled cries of conquerors and conquered differing according to their share of triumph or defeat. Trojans fall upon the corpses of their husbands and their brothers. Children scream for their lifeless fathers. Captives now, they weep ceaselessly for their beloved slain.

At the same time, the Argives, weary and famished after a long night's work, gorge themselves on the bounty of the vanquished. They are sheltered now from frost and dew in captured Trojan homes — not according to their rank, but rather as luck allots each one his share. They are happy and they will sleep soundly through all the night, every single man. For, what need have they to post a guard?

Now — if these warriors fully and piously respect the gods of the conquered land and spare their shrines, those who have conquered will not, in their turn, be conquered. Therefore, I pray that no frenzied greed, no lust for plunder overcome the Achaeans, to make them plunder what they ought to leave untouched. For they still must travel far before they reach their homes. And, even if they do achieve a safe return without offending any god, the vengeance of the dead may lie in wait with some malicious purpose. So — Now you have heard my woman's speech. May good things now prevail for all to see. I think we all have cause to celebrate! (She enters the palace.)

CHORUS. You speak like a man of sense. And now that I have heard your news and affirmed its truth, it is time to raise our thanks to the gods, who have bestowed such blessings that well merit our gratitude.

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1. God of fire and the forge.

O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night, you have handed us great glories to keep as our possessions. You cast upon the towers of Troy your all-ensnaring net, and no one, young or old, escaped its fatal mesh.

I worship mighty Zeus, god of guests and hosts, who made this happen. For a long time now he has aimed his bow at Paris, making sure his arrow would neither fall short nor fly above the stars and miss.

Men will proclaim this a blow from Zeus and trace his presence in our victory. He acts on what he himself decides. Some people claim that the gods don't concern themselves about those men who trample underfoot favors from the pure in heart. Such people are profane. For we now clearly see that ruin is the penalty for those with reckless pride, who breathe a spirit boastful beyond decency, because their homes are overfull with riches. Let men have wealth enough to match good sense. Too many riches multiply misfortunes.

Wealth does not protect the insolent man who kicks aside and pushes from his sight great altars of virtue. Such a man is overpowered by warped Persuasion, insufferable child of scheming Folly. And there is no cure. His evil is not concealed. It stands out, a lurid glitter, like false bronze when rubbed. All men can judge his darkness, once events test him. He is like a child chasing a flying bird. He brands his city with disgrace that cannot be removed, for no god hears his prayers. The man who lives this way, doing wrong, the gods destroy. Such a man was Paris. He came the home of the Atreidae, and then abused their hospitality, running off with the wife of his host.

But she left her people the smash of shield and spear, a fleet well armed for war. To Troy she carried with her no dowry but destruction. Daring what should not be dared, she glided through Troy's gates. The prophets in this house cried out, "Terrible, terrible for house and home, and for the royal leaders here. Terrible for the marriage bed, still holding traces of her body, the one who loved her husband."

As for him, Menelaus, the husband, he sits apart, in pain, silent and dishonored. He does not blame her — no, he aches to be with her, the woman far across the sea. Her image seems to rule the house. Her husband finds no delight now in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes all beauty has gone. In his dreams he sees sad visions, memories of former joy — a vain relief, for when the man thinks he sees such beauty there, all at once it is gone, slipping through his hands, flying away along the paths of sleep.

These are the sorrows in the house, around the hearth, and pain much worse than this. For everywhere, throughout the land of Greece, in every home where men set forth to gather in that army, there is insufferable grief. Many woes pierce the heart. Instead of those who left, every house gets back weapons and ashes, not living men. For Ares, god of war, pays gold for the bodies of fallen soldiers. In spear fights he tips the scales. Then back from Troy he ships a heavy freight of ash, corpses burned on funeral pyres, sent home for loved ones to mourn. He trades dust for men, shiploads of urns filled with ashes.

At home the people weep, praising one man for his battle skill, another for courageous death. Some complain about that woman, how *she* is to blame for all of this — but they do so quietly. Nonetheless, this sorrow spreads resentment against the leaders of the war, the Atreidae. Meanwhile, over there, across the seas in Troy, around the city walls, the hostile ground swallows our best young men, now hidden in the earth they conquered.

The people's voice, once angered, can create dissent, ratifying a curse which now must go its way. And so, in my anxiety, I wait, listening for something dark, something emerging from the gloom. For gods are not blind to men who kill. In time, black agents of revenge, the Furies, wear down

and bring to naught the fortunes of a man who prospers unjustly. They wear him out, reverse his luck, and drag him down at last among the dead. There is no remedy.

To boast too much of one's success brings danger. Even the highest mountain peak is struck by Zeus' lightning. I would choose wealth no one could envy. May I never be the sort of man who puts whole cities to the sword. Nor let me ever see myself enslaved, my life in someone else's power.

This welcome fiery message has spread quickly all through the city. But is it true?

What man is such a senseless child he lets his heart catch fire at this news, only to be shattered by some fresh report?

That is just the nature of a woman — to give thanks before the truth appears.

Yes, they are far too trusting. The proper order in a woman's mind is easily upset. Rumors women start soon die out and come to nothing.

### **Messenger approaches from a distance.**

We will know soon enough about these flaming beacons passed from place to place. For I see a herald coming from the shore. An olive bough of triumph shades his face. The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes, tell me he will report the facts. Nor will he light some flaming pile of mountain wood to pass a signal on with smoke. No — he will shout out to us what he has to say, and we can then rejoice still more, or else . . . but I will not think of that. May good news add to what we know already. If anyone is praying for something else to happen to our city, let him reap the harvest of his own misguided heart.

### **The Messenger enters.**

MESSENGER. Hail Argos, my father's land! After ten long years, I return to you. I once had many hopes, but all are dashed, except this one — to come home. I long ago gave up any dream of dying here and resting in a grave hollowed from my native soil. I bless the land, the gleaming Argive sun! And I offer up my thanks to Zeus, our highest god — and to Apollo, lord of Pytho<sup>1</sup>. May you never aim more arrows at us! We had enough of those, my lord, beside Scamander's<sup>2</sup> banks, when you took your stand against us. But now, Apollo, preserve and heal us.

And hail to all gods assembled here, Hermes in particular, whose protection all messengers enjoy. And next I pray that the noble spirits who sent us off will welcome back the remnants of our forces, spared slaughter by the spear.

Oh, you hall of kings, you cherished roof tops, you sacred seats and gods who face the sun! If your shining eyes in former days have ever welcomed home our king, then do so now, after his many years away. He comes back bringing light into this darkness, for you and all assembled here — our mighty king, god-like Agamemnon.

Greet him with full respect. For, it was he who, wielding the ax of avenging Zeus, smote the walls of Troy, smashed them into rubble and ground them into the soil. He has obliterated the altars of the Trojan gods and all their shrines, laid waste to all that country's rich fertility. Around Troy's neck he has clenched a yoke of ruin.

He is on his way here now, king Agamemnon, blessed elder son of Atreus. Among all men, he deserves the highest honor. For neither Paris nor his allies, the Trojan people, can ever boast

1. A serpent like monster of Delphi slain by Apollo, hence, the region around Delphi, where Apollo is said to dwell.

2. Troy's river.

again that their triumphs outpaced their sorrows. Guilty of rape and theft, Paris has forfeited his plunder and brought devastation to his father's house, and to the land as well, which once sustained his city. So Priam's sons have paid a hefty fine.

CHORUS. A hearty welcome, herald! We rejoice in your return.

MESSENGER. I, too, rejoice, and would gladly die right now, if the gods should so decree, now that I am home.

CHORUS. Did you miss this land so much?

MESSENGER. Yes, which is why my eyes fill with tears.

CHORUS. Not unlike some sweet disease.

MESSENGER. How so? Tell me what you mean.

CHORUS. You suffered from love for those who love you.

MESSENGER. You mean the country and the army both missed each other?

CHORUS. Yes, so much so, my anxious heart would often cry aloud.

MESSENGER. You feared for your sons?

CHORUS. For ourselves as well.

MESSENGER. For yourselves! What caused this fear?

CHORUS. Long ago I learned to keep my silence, the medicine that best prevents more grief.

MESSENGER. Why? Were you afraid of someone once the kings were gone?

CHORUS. Indeed I was. In fact, as you have said, there would be great joy in dying now.

MESSENGER. True, we have done well. As for things that happened in the past, you could say some turned out well, and some badly. But who except the gods escapes all pain in a lifetime, eh? If I told you what we endured — privations, leaking tents, sparse provisions, constant peril — was there nothing we failed to grumble about?

We had to camp near the enemy wall. It was always damp. Dew from the sky and marshes soaked us. Our clothes rotted. Lice flourished in our hair. And we froze. The winters there unbearable, when snows from Ida froze birds to death. And then the heat, so hot at noon, the sea would boil. . . .

But why complain about it now? Our work is done. All suffering has ended for the dead, who are not about to spring to life again. Why should the living call the dead to mind? Why recall those blows of fate? The time has come, I think, to say farewell to sorrow. For those still living, the soldiers who survive, our luck has seen us through. No loss can change that now.

We have a right, as we go about the world, to boast, "The Argive forces that vanquished Troy, nailed their spoils of war up in gods' holy shrines throughout Achaea, as a glorious tribute and reminder of what was done!" So whoever hears the story of these deeds must praise our leaders — our city, too. Full honor and thanks must go to Zeus, to whom our victory is due. That is all I can say.

CHORUS. You speak the truth. I was wrong, I admit it. But the old can always learn from younger men, and your words enrich us all.

**Clytemnestra enters.**

CHORUS. But here is the queen. It is she who the news most concerns.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Some time ago I raised my voice in triumph, rejoicing when that first messenger arrived, the fiery herald of the night who told me Troy was ours. There were some who blamed me then and said, “How are you so easily swayed by signal fires? Is it not just like a woman to jump to conclusions!” Insults like these made me look as if I were mad. But I kept on with my hecatombs,<sup>1</sup> and all through the city, women raised their joyful cries, as custom demands, echoing their exultation through all our holy shrines, while tending incense-sweetened altar fires, and laying their offerings of thanks before the gods.

So, why do I now need a messenger of flesh and blood to tell me what I already know? Whatever else there is to tell I soon will hear directly from the king.

(to Messenger) But, so I may give my honored husband the finest welcome home, and with all speed — for what gives a woman greater pleasure than to unbar the gates to her own husband, once the gods have spared his life in war? — give him this message from me. Tell him to hurry back. The people are eager to feast their eyes on him again. And when he arrives, he will find in his house a wife as faithful to him as when he left, a watch dog of his home — loyal, a foe to his foes, and, for the rest, the same in every way as when he left.

Not once in all the time of his absence have I betrayed our bond. I have known no pleasure with other men, excited no whisper of scandal. I understand as much about such things as I do about forging bronze. I say this with pride, for I have carried myself the way a high-born woman should.

**She leaves.**

CHORUS. She seems to speak from the heart, but those who listen closely know she only says what is expected of her. But tell me, herald, what do you know of Menelaus, our younger king — did he come back with you?

MESSENGER. I fear a good report of Menelaus would be a lie.

CHORUS. I wish your news of him was true and good. It goes hard when these things clash.

MESSENGER. Menelaus vanished — the army lost sight of him and his ship.

CHORUS. Did he sail away from Troy, or did some storm attack the entire fleet and cut him off from you?

MESSENGER. Like a skilled archer, you hit the mark — your last surmise is right.

CHORUS. Have you heard nothing since the storm, whether he lives or not?

MESSENGER. No one knows, except the life-sustaining sun, arcing above the earth.

CHORUS. Tell me what happened when that storm struck the Achaean fleet.

MESSENGER. It seems wrong to spoil this auspicious day with talk of sad events. In deference to the gods we ought to keep good and ill apart. When a herald comes bowed down with woeful news, he tears a never-healing wound in the city’s heart. From many houses many men are driven to their end by the double whip that Ares, bringer of strife, so loves — disaster with two prongs, one for the city, the other for the hearth, a bloody pair. A messenger thus weighed down must dutifully sing the Furies’ song of triumph. But when he bears news of survival and victory that brings joy to the city . . . How can I mingle tales of good and ill fortune, telling of the storm that struck the Achaeans — a storm brought by angry gods?

Fire and sea, before now enemies, swore a common oath and then proclaimed it by destroying Achaea’s helpless forces. At night, roiling seas rose up, as Thracian winds smashed ships

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1. Burnt offerings to the gods.

together. Buffeted by the power of that storm, and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships scattered, then vanished, blown asunder by the savage shepherd's gale. Later, when the sun's bright light appeared again, we saw the Aegean blooming, as it were, with Achaean corpses and wreckage.

As for us, some god must have saved us — our boat survived, its hull intact. That was by no human action. Some immortal hand gripped our steering oar, perhaps Tyche, Fortune herself, rescued our ship from being swamped by surf or smashed upon the rocky coast as we rode at anchor. And then, when at last we realized that we had skirted Hades<sup>1</sup> on those seas, we were not as relieved at our good luck, as we were chastened by all our woes on the Trojan plain, and this fresh misfortune, which drowned all those ships and scattering what remained.

So if anyone is still breathing on those far-flung ships, he will believe that we are the ones who have come to ruin. Why not, when we believe the same of them? Though we can hope that all these things will end well. As for Menelaus, watch for his return. If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive, his vision still intact, his four limbs still attached and functioning — preserved by Zeus, who cannot possibly wish to snuff out the entire blood-line — there is hope that we will see him again.

Now that I have told you this, you have the whole truth as I have it to give you.

**Exit.**

CHORUS. Whoever came up with that name, a name so altogether true — was there some power we cannot see telling that tongue what to say, the tongue that prophesied our fate — I mean the man who called her Helen, that woman wed for warfare, the object of our strife? For she's lived up to that name — a hell for ships, a hell for men, a hell for cities, too. From her delicately curtained room she sailed away, transported by the West Wind, an earth-born giant. A horde of warriors with shields went after her, huntsmen following the vanished track her oars had left, all the way to where she had beached her ship, on the leafy shores of Simois.<sup>2</sup> Then came bloody war.

And so Troy's destiny is fulfilled. Wrath brings a dreadful wedding day, late retribution for dishonor to hospitality and Zeus, god of guest and host, on those who celebrated with the bride, who, on that day, sang aloud the joyful wedding hymns. Now Priam's city, in old age, has learned a different song. I think I hear loud funeral chants, lamenting as an evil fate the marriage Paris brought. The city fills with songs of grief. It must endure all sorrows, the brutal slaughter of its sons.

A man once raised a lion cub in his own home. In early life the cub was gentle. Children loved it, and it brought the old men great delight. They gave it many things and clasped it in their arms, as if it were a nursing child. Its fiery eyes fixed on the hands that fed it, the creature fawned, a slave to appetite. But with time the creature grew and its true nature showed — the one its parents gave it. So it paid back those who reared it, preparing a meal in gratitude, an unholy slaughter of the flocks, house awash with blood, while those who lived inside the home were powerless against the pain, against the massive carnage. By god's will they'd brought up a priest of doom in their own house.

I imagine she first arrived in Troy a gentle spirit, like a calming breeze, a delicate, expensive ornament — her soft darting eyes a flower which stings the heart with love. Then, changing her

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1. God ruling the land of the dead.

2. Small river in Turkey.

direction, she took her marriage to its bitter end, destroying all those she lived with. With evil in her train and led by Zeus, god of guest and host, she turned into a bride of tears, a Fury.<sup>1</sup>

Among men there is a saying, an old one, from times long past: A man's prosperity, once fully grown, has offspring. It never dies without producing children. From that man's good fortune spring up unquenchable pains for all his race. But on this I do not agree with other men. I stand alone and say it is the unholy act that breeds more acts of the same kind. A truly virtuous house is blessed, its children always fair and just.

Old violent aggression loves to generate new troubles among evil men — soon or late, when it is fated to be born, new violence springs forth, a spirit no one can resist or conquer, unholy recklessness, dark ruin on the home, like the malice from which it sprang.

But virtue shines out from grimy dwellings, honoring the man who lives in virtue. She turns her eyes away from gold-encrusted mansions where men's hands are black, and moves towards integrity, rejecting power and wealth, which, though praised, are counterfeit. Virtue leads all things to well-deserved fulfillment.

**Cheers off-stage. Agamemnon drives up in a chariot with Cassandra.<sup>2</sup> Clytemnestra and servants enter from palace.**

CHORUS. Hail, Atreides,<sup>3</sup> my king, scourge of Troy! How shall I address you? How honor you in seemly terms, expressing neither too little or too much? For, many men esteem appearance more than truth, offending decency. Many men have ready sighs for someone else's woes, though secretly unmoved. Or else they feign to share another's joy, their faces grinning masks. But a just man sees through false regard.

When first you mustered troops in Helen's cause — I will not lie — I saw you in another light. You seemed to me unfit to lead, an oarsman steering Argive ships astray, and trying by that wrongful sacrifice to raise the hopes of your unfortunate men. But now, with all my loyal heart, I cheer your hard-fought victory and welcome your return.

Quickly grasp the reigns of state again, my king! Seek to learn how Argos fared while you were gone, and ask which of those who stayed behind served the city well and which did harm.

AGAMEMNON. First, I salute Argos and its gods — the ones who brought about my safe return and the justice that I meted out on Priam's land. The gods were deaf to all the urgent pleas, then cast their lots — there was no dissent — into the urn of blood — to kill their men, to ruin Troy. The other urn, the one for mercy, stood there empty — Hope alone took up a stand beside it.

Smoke still rises from the charred remains, a fitting sign of the city's fall. The storms from its downfall will thunder in men's minds for years to come. As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths give off the reek of wealth. For all this, we must never forget what we owe the gods. Around the Trojan plain, the Argives cast a savage net. For a woman's sake, the beast from Argos, born from the belly of that wooden horse, at night as the Pleiades went down, sprang out with weapons drawn and razed the city. Bounding over walls, the famished lion gorged itself on royal blood.

So much for long preliminaries to the gods.

As for your concerns, old man, I heard your words, and will consider them. I agree with you —

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1. The Furies are ancient she-demons who avenge blood crimes.

2. A daughter of Priam and a prophet, now Agamemnon's slave and mistress.

3. Son of Atreus, that is, Agamemnon.

we will work together. Few men possess the inborn gift to banish envy when a friend is blessed with luck. Malicious venom seeps into the heart, doubling the pain of the stricken man, afflicting him with ills of his own, while he groans to see another prosper. I understand too well what false friends are — fealty no more solid than reflections in a stream. During my years away, those men who once seemed true to me became nothing more than shadows in my eyes. All except Odysseus.<sup>1</sup> He sailed with me against his will, but once in harness, he strove to do his best for me. I say this unaware of whether he be alive or dead.

Concerning other matters bearing on the city, we will call an assembly where all of us can talk things out in concert. We must ensure that everything that does our city good remains intact. And where we need to heal, we must make every effort to cleanse infection, searing whatever wounds we find, or cutting them away.

Now I go inside my palace, my hearth and home, first, to greet the gods who sent me off and brought me back this day. May victory, which was mine at Troy, stay with me forever.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Elders of Argos, I am not ashamed to speak before you, to say how much I love my husband. With time, men's fears wane. So I will speak out now. I do not talk as one who has been schooled in speech, so I will just describe my life, my oppressive life, all the many years my husband was away at Troy.

First, it is sheer torture for a woman to sit at home alone, far from her man. She has to listen to all sorts of dreadful rumors. Heralds arrive, hard on each other's heels, bearing news of some catastrophe — each one worse than those that came before. If my husband had suffered as many wounds as I heard tell of, he would have more holes in him than any net. If he had died as many times as rumor slew him, he could claim to be a second Geryon,<sup>2</sup> that triple-bodied beast, and boast of dying thrice, one death for every separate shape.

Because of all these dire reports, others have often had to cut me down, a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. That is why our son, Orestes,<sup>3</sup> is not standing here, the most trusted bond linking you and me. He should be, but there is no cause to worry. He is being cared for by a friendly ally, Strophius of Phocis,<sup>4</sup> who warned me twice — first, of your own danger under Troy's walls — second, of people here, how they could rebel, cry out against my governance, then overthrow the Council. For it is natural to men, once someone is down, to trample on him all the more. That is how I explain myself.

And it is all true. As for me, my eyes are dry — the welling sources of my tears are parched, no drop remains. Many long nights I wept until my eyes were red, as I kept watching for that signal light I had set up for you. But always it kept disappointing me. The faint whirring of a buzzing fly would often wake me up from dreams of you, dreams where I saw you endure more suffering than the hours in which I slept had time for. But now, after going through all this, my heart is free of worry.

So, I would salute my lord — the watch dog of our household, the mainstay of our ship of state, the lofty pillar which holds our roof beams high, his father's truly begotten son, for men at sea

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1. King of islands in Western Greece, who entered the war reluctantly, but who served well and devised the stratagem of the Trojan Horse; now lost at sea.

2. A monster with three bodies and three heads.

3. Iphigenia, who was sacrificed at Aulis, Orestes, a toddler, and Electra, a young teen, are the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

4. A region of central Greece.

a land they glimpse beyond their wildest hopes, the fairest dawn after a night of storms, a flowing stream to thirsty travelers. What joy it is to escape necessity! In my opinion, these words of greeting are worthy of him.

So let there be no envy, since in days past we have suffered many ills. And now, my beloved lord, come to me here, climb down from that chariot. But, my king, do not place upon the common ground the foot which stamped out Troy. — You women, don't just stand there. I have told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries, here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! Let his path be covered all in red, so Justice can lead him back into his home, a place he never hoped to see. As for the rest, my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out, with the help of the gods, as fate decrees.

**Serving women lay down a rich red carpet.**

AGAMEMNON. Daughter of Leda,<sup>1</sup> guardian of my home, your speech was, like my absence, far too long. Such praise as I deserve should come from others. Then it is worthwhile. All those things you said — do not puff me up with such female honors, or grovel there before me babbling tributes, like some barbarian. Do not invite envy to cross my path by strewing it with tapestry. That is how we honor gods, not human beings.

For, a mortal man to place his foot like this on rich embroidery is, in my view, not without some risk. So I am telling you, honor me as a man, not as a god. My fame proclaims itself. It needs no foot mats made out of such embroideries. To avoid wrong doing is god's greatest gift. When a man's life ends in great prosperity, only then can we declare that he is a happy man. Thus, if I act, in every circumstance, as I ought to now, there is nothing I need fear.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Do not say that just to spoil my arrangements.

AGAMEMNON. You should know I will not go back on my word.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You must fear something, then, to act this way. You have made some promise to the gods.

AGAMEMNON. I have spoken! I fully understand, as well as any man, just what I am doing.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What do you think Priam would have done, if he had had your success?

AGAMEMNON. That is clear — he would have walked across these tapestries.

CLYTEMNESTRA. So then why fear what men say?

AGAMEMNON. What people say can have great power.

CLYTEMNESTRA. True, but the man who is not envied is not worth envying.

AGAMEMNON. It is not womanly to be so bent on competition.

CLYTEMNESTRA. It is fitting that the happy conqueror should let himself be overcome.

AGAMEMNON. And in this contest, that is the sort of victory you value?

CLYTEMNESTRA. For my sake, be strong and yield to me of your own will.

AGAMEMNON. Well, if it is what you want . . . Quick, someone get these sandals off — they have served my feet so well. (treading on the carpet) As I now walk on these red tapestries dyed in the sea, may no distant god catch sight of me, and, for envy, strike me down. There is much shame when my feet squander assets of my house, wasting wealth and costly woven finery.

(he stops) So much for that.

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1. Clytemnestra and Helen are both daughters of Leda, a Greek princess, but Helen's father was Zeus.

(Indicating Cassandra.) Welcome this foreign girl into our house. And do it graciously. For god, who sees us from far away, looks down with favor on a gentle master. No one freely puts on slavery's yoke, but this girl — Cassandra, Priam's daughter, the finest prize of all we plundered — comes as my army's gift to me. And now, since you have talked me into this, I will proceed into my palace, treading on this crimson pathway as I go.

**He goes into palace.**

CLYTEMNESTRA. There is the sea. Who will drain it dry? It gives us crimson dye in huge amounts, as valuable as silver, inexhaustible. With that we dye our garments. And of these our house has a full store, thanks to the gods. We are rich. We have no sense of poverty. I had vowed to tread on many such cloths, to use what we have stored up in our home, as if an oracle had ordered such a payment to save your life.

If the root still lives, the house can blossom into leaf once more, growing high-arching shade, protection against the Dog Star's scorching season. Your return to your father's hearth and home brings us the summer's heat in winter time. As when Zeus makes wine from bitter grapes, the house immediately grows cool, once its lord strolls through his own halls in complete command. O Zeus, Zeus, who accomplishes all things, answer my prayers. Take care to bring about all things that reach fulfillment through your will.

CHORUS. Why does this sense of dread hover so unceasingly around my heart? My own eyes tell me Agamemnon has returned. For that I need no further witness. But still, here, deep in my heart, the spontaneous song keeps up its tuneless dirge, as the avenging Furies chant. It kills my confidence, my hope. Everything inside me beats against my chest, surging back and forth in tides of grim foreboding. Something is moving to fulfillment. Oh — I pray my premonitions prove false and never come to light.

As we know, boundaries of robust health break down — disease is always pressing hard against the common wall between them. So with the fate of men. It holds to a straight course, then, all at once, can crash upon a hidden rock of grief. But if, as a precaution, men toss overboard some part of their rich cargo at the right time, the house, though grieving, will not completely founder, nor will its hull be swamped.

But once a murdered man's dark blood has soaked the ground, who then can bring him back? Even Aesculapius,<sup>1</sup> whose skill could raise the dead, was stopped by Zeus' thunderbolt. Was that not a warning to us all? If one fate settled by the gods did not prevent another fate securing an advantage, my heart would then outrace my tongue. I would speak out loud and clear. I would cry out my forebodings. But now it mutters in the dark, uneasy, holding little hope for resolution. And still my spirit smoulders.

CLYTEMNESTRA. (To Cassandra.) You should go in, too — I mean you up there, Cassandra, Priam's daughter. Zeus, in his mercy to you, has made you a member of our household, to share its rites. So you can take your place before the altar of the god protecting all our wealth, along with the other slaves. So come down. Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind. Men say even Heracles, Alcmena's son, once long ago was sold in slavery and had to eat its bitter bread. If fate has brought you to the same condition, be very grateful you serve masters, wealthy in honor as well as goods. Certain men, those who have reaped a harvest of riches beyond their dreams, maltreat their slaves. They go too far. But here, with us, you will get treatment that accords with our beneficent traditions.

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1. A Greek physician who became a god of medicine and healing.

CHORUS. (to Cassandra) Our queen is talking to you. Her meaning is clear. Fate has caught you in its nets. Best you obey, unless such action is beyond your power.

CLYTEMNESTRA. If she is not like a swallow, with a song all her own, something barbarously obscure, I will speak so she can understand. She must obey.

CHORUS. Of all your choices now what she says is best. Do as she says.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Come down now! I do not have time to waste on this girl here. Inside, by our central hearth, our victims are already waiting for the sacrifice, a joyful time beyond our fondest hopes. So, if you want to play your part in this, you had better come at once. If what I say means nothing to you, if you cannot understand, at least use your foreign hand to make a sign.

CHORUS. The stranger needs an interpreter. She is like some wild thing, freshly trapped.

CLYTEMNESTRA. She is mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart. She has just left her newly captured city, then come here, without sufficient time to learn to stomach the controlling bit. She will, once her anger's been dissolved in foaming blood. (leaving) But I will waste no more time dealing with her contempt outside the house.

CHORUS. I will not lose my temper. I pity her. You unhappy creature, why not come down? Leave the chariot. Why not accept fate's yoke of your own free will?

CASSANDRA. [screaming] Aieeeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . Apollo . . . Apollo . . . !!

CHORUS. Why cry out your distress in Apollo's name? He is not a god who pays attention to those who mourn like this.

CASSANDRA. Aieeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . Apollo . . . my destroyer . . .

CHORUS. She cried out again. Such ominous words — and to a god who is not to be invoked at times of grieving.

CASSANDRA. Apollo! Apollo! God of the road . . . You are destroying me. Why leave me here beyond all hope a second time?

CHORUS. It looks as if she is going to prophesy, to say something of her unhappiness. She may be a slave, but inside her the god's voice still remains.

CASSANDRA. Apollo! Oh Apollo! God of the road . . . You are obliterating me! Where am I now? Where have you led me? What house is this?

CHORUS. If you do not know where you are, I will tell you — you are at the house of the Atreidae.

CASSANDRA. No . . . no . . . a house that hates the gods . . . house full of death, kinsmen butchered . . . a human slaughterhouse awash in blood . . .

CHORUS. This stranger's like a keen hound on the scent. She is on the trail of blood.

CASSANDRA. . . . I see evidence I trust — young children screaming as they are butchered — then their father eating his own infants' roasted flesh . . .

CHORUS. We've heard about your fame in oracles. But here in Argos no one wants a prophet.

CASSANDRA. O god, what is this she has in mind? What new agony inside the house is she preparing? Something monstrous, barbaric, evil . . . beyond all love, all remedy. And help is far away.

CHORUS. I do not understand what she is saying now. What she first said, that I understood — the whole city talks about it.

CASSANDRA. Oh evil woman, you are going to do it. Your own husband, the man who shares your

bed — once you have washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .

CHORUS. I still do not understand. What she is saying is just too confused.

CASSANDRA. Look! Look over there! What is that apparition? Is that the net of death? No, she is the net, his bed mate, murder's eager proxy. Let those insatiable Furies harrying this clan rise up and scream for joy — another victim has fallen into their hands!

CHORUS. What Fury do you now invoke? to shriek throughout this house? You frighten me.

CHORUS. Drop by drop dark blood flows around my heart — like mortal wounds when life's sun sets and death is near.

CASSANDRA. A trap! He is collapsing in the water! I tell you he is being murdered in the bath!

CHORUS. It takes no skill interpreting oracles to hear disaster in those outcries.

CHORUS. What good ever comes to men from oracles? They predict only evil. All those skilful words encourage men to dread the seer's pronouncements.

CASSANDRA. O god Apollo, I am next! Why have you brought me here in my wretchedness, if not to die, the second victim?

CHORUS. You are possessed. Some god controls your mind. And so you wail aloud about your death, just like some shrill nightingale that sings ceaselessly of her heart's distress, wailing all her life for her dead nestling.

CASSANDRA. Oh to have that — the fate of the singing nightingale! Gods gave her body wings and a sweet life. She does not weep. But murder waits for me — a two-edged sword raised to hack me to death.

CHORUS. You keep repeating that. Where does it end? That is what I cannot see.

CASSANDRA. Then my prophecy will no more veil itself, like some new bride half-veiled. I will teach you no more in cryptic riddles. And you bear witness — run the trail with me, as I sniff out the track of ancient crimes.

Up there on that roof there sits a chorus — it never leaves. They sing in harmony, but the song is harsh, predicting doom. Drinking human blood has made them bold — they dance in celebration through all the rooms. The house's Furies cannot be dislodged. Sitting in the home, they chant their song, the madness that began all this, each in turn cursing that man who defiled his brother's bed.<sup>1</sup>

Have I missed the mark? Or like a fine archer have I hit the beast? Or am I selling lies, a fortune teller babbling door to door? Tell me on your oath how well I know these old stories of this family's crimes.

CHORUS. How could an oath of ours, no matter how sincere, help heal your grief? But I am amazed that you, born overseas, can say so much about a foreign city, as if you had lived here.

CASSANDRA. It was Apollo, god of oracles, who made me what I am.

CHORUS. Surely the god was not in love with you?

CASSANDRA. I used to be ashamed to talk of this .

CHORUS. When all goes well, everyone scruples.

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1. Thyestes, twin brother of Atreus, seduced his sister-in-law. Atreus retaliated by chopping up Thyestes' children and serving them to him at a banquet. Thyestes then placed a curse of the House of Atreus, as Agisthus explains below.

CASSANDRA. Apollo was like a mighty wrestler, panting all over me, in love.

CHORUS. Did you succumb to him — bear him a child?

CASSANDRA. I promised to, but then I broke my word.

CHORUS. Did you already have prophetic skill, inspired by the god?

CASSANDRA. At that time I used to prophesy to all my countrymen. I would foretell disasters.

CHORUS. How did you escape Apollo's anger?

CASSANDRA. I did not escape. Ever since I resisted him, no one believes me.

CHORUS. But to us, at least, what you prophesy seems true enough.

CASSANDRA. Aieeee . . . the pains I feel! The fearful labor pains of true prophecy seize me, confuse me, as they start again, full of foreboding. Look there — see those creatures, young ones, sitting by the house, dark shapes, like something from a dream? They are like children murdered by their loved ones . . . their hands are full, clenching chunks of their own flesh as food . . . it is all so clear . . . that awful meal their own father tasted.

For all that, I say, revenge is on the way, someone is planning it, a craven jackal, a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch, waiting for my master to return. Yes, my master — since I must now bear the yoke of slavery. That lord of war, who led the fleet and ravaged Troy, has no idea what that cur is up to, what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching, as her tongue licks his hands in welcome, like treacherous Ate, goddess who destroys. It is outrageous — the woman kills her man.

What shall I call her? What awful monster suits her? A snake? An amphisbaena<sup>1</sup> with a head at either end? Or perhaps a Scylla<sup>2</sup> living in the rocks, preying on sailors, raging mother of hell, who breathes relentless war on loved ones. How that woman, in her audacity, screamed out in triumph, like a battle cry, pretending to enjoy his safe return! Whether you credit what I say or not — matters little. Why should it? What will come will come. And soon enough, as you stand here full of pity, you will say Cassandra's predictions were all too true.

CHORUS. I understand about Thyestes' meal, and tremble thinking how he ate his children's flesh. Terror grips me as I hear these truths boldly stated. As for the rest, hearing that just makes me lose my way.

CASSANDRA. I tell you, you will see Agamemnon dead.

CHORUS. Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.

CASSANDRA. No — no one can heal what my words foretell.

CHORUS. Not if they are true. But may the gods prevent it!

CASSANDRA. While you pray here, others move in to kill.

CHORUS. What man is going to commit such crimes?

CASSANDRA. What man? You have completely missed the point.

CHORUS. Yes I have — I do not see who has means to do it.

CASSANDRA. Yet I can speak your language well enough.

CHORUS. So does the oracle at Delphi, but understanding what it says is hard.

1. A serpent with two heads and eyes that glow like candles.

2. a man-eating multi-headed sea witch.

CASSANDRA. Oh this fire! His fire comes over me once more! The pain . . . Lycian<sup>1</sup> Apollo . . . burning me . . . That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there with a jackal, once the noble lion is gone . . . she is going to kill me . . . The agony! Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage, vows I too will partake of her revenge, as she whets a sword to kill her king. He brought me here. Now we both die. Her retribution. So why do I bear these ornaments that mock me, this rod, this prophet's wreath around my neck? Let me be rid of you before I die —

**Cassandra breaks her wand and throws off the insignia of her office as a prophet.**

There, an end to you. With you down there, I get revenge. Enrich some other woman! Let someone else preach destruction instead of me.

**She starts tearing off her clothes.**

Look how Apollo now in person strips me, rips my prophetic robes, the god who watched, as my friends in their hatred turned on me, mocked me so savagely in these very clothes — they thought they knew what they were doing. But they were wrong. I heard them call me names, “beggar,” “starving wretch” — I endured them all. And now the prophet god is done with me. He has led his seer to her place of death. No father's altar for me here — instead a chopping block awaits, slaughtered in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice.

But we will not die without the gods' revenge. Another man will come and will avenge us, a son who will slay his mother, paying back his father's death, an exile, a man this country has made a stranger. He will come back and, like a coping stone, bring the ruin of his family to a close. For gods have made a powerful oath — his father's supine corpse will bring him home.

Why then do I lament so piteously? Since I am the one who first saw how Troy would be obliterated, since I see now how those who razed the city are being destroyed in judgment from the gods, I will go to face my destiny. I will dare to die. I greet this doorway as the gates of Death. Once the death blow strikes, I pray I will have a gentle end — no struggle, as my life blood drains away. And then I will close my eyes.

CHORUS. You poor woman, so much pain and wisdom. You have said so much. But if you see your death — see it so clearly — how can you go on so bravely to the altar, like an ox destined by gods for sacrifice?

CASSANDRA. There is no way out. My friends, my time has come.

CHORUS. But there is some benefit in going last.

CASSANDRA. This is the day. It makes no sense to run.

CHORUS. You endure your suffering with courage I admire.

CASSANDRA. No one hearing that has reason to be proud.

CHORUS. But to die well confers some human dignity.

CASSANDRA. I cry for you, my father, your noble children.

CHORUS. What is wrong? Why turn around in fear?

CASSANDRA. This house — It is terrifying!

CHORUS. Why call out in horror? Is there some vision in your mind?

CASSANDRA. It is this house. It reeks of murder, blood slaughter . . .

CHORUS. No, no! That is only the smell of sacrifice, victims at the hearth.

1. Lycia is A region of Asia Minor.

CASSANDRA. That smell — it is like an open grave . . .

CHORUS. The Syrian incense? It burns throughout the house.

CASSANDRA. No. But I must go. I will mourn my death, and Agamemnon's, too, inside there. Enough of living! Ah, my friends, I am not holding back in fear, like some bird trapped in bushes. I want you to witness how I went to meet my death, when for me another woman will be killed, a man will die for one who married evil. This is my last request before I die.

CHORUS. I pity you, poor creature, and your death, which you have prophesied.

CASSANDRA. One last time I feel the urge to speak. Not a dirge about my death, rather I pray to the sun, here in the light of his most recent day, that those who carry out revenge for me will make my enemies pay with their blood for butchering a slave, easy prey. Alas, for human life. When things go well, a mere shadow overturns it all. When badly, a damp sponge wipes every trace away. Of these two, the second is more to be pitied.

**She enters palace.**

CHORUS. To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth is in the nature of all human beings. No one can point and order it away from princely homes by uttering the words “Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!” Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven permitted him to capture Priam's town, to return home honored by the gods. But now — if he must pay the penalty for blood which other men before him shed and die in retribution for the dead he himself has killed — what mortal who hears all this can boast he lives a life unscarred by fate?

**A scream back.**

AGAMEMNON. [*from inside*] Help me! I am hit . . . a deadly blow . . .

CHORUS. Silence! Who cried out?

AGAMEMNON. [*within*] Aaagh! I am hit again . . .

CHORUS. That is the king in there! Those cries, I think, tell us what is going on. Come now, let us decide what is best to do, our safest course of action.

CHORUS B. Summon all the people, call them to bring help up to the palace.

CHORUS C. I say we must attack the house at once, catch them at it, swords still wet with blood.

CHORUS. I agree. But quickly! There is no time to delay.

CHORUS B. This is only their opening move — a sign they are going to tyrannize the city.

CHORUS. We are wasting time..

CHORUS C. It is up to those who can carry out a plan to tell us what to do.

CHORUS. Yes. I do not know how to bring the dead to life with nothing but words.

CHORUS B. But just to stay alive, should we not bow down before these tyrants who desecrate the house?

CHORUS C. No. We cannot do that. Death would be better!

CHORUS. But should we assume, just on the basis of those groans we heard, that Agamemnon is dead?

CHORUS B. Before we act, we must have clearer evidence. To guess like this is not really knowing what is true or not.

CHORUS. That is it then — everyone agrees on this — we need to know more clearly how things

stand with Atreides.

**The palace doors swing open, discovering Clytemnestra, covered with blood, standing over the corpses of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.**

CLYTEMNESTRA. Behold the body of the scourge of Troy beside his lifeless war prize! Before this moment I said many things to suit my ends. I am not ashamed to contradict them now. How else could I act on my hate for such a hateful man, who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets of agony so high no one could jump over them? I have brooded on this struggle many years, the old blood feud. My moment has come at last, though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, where I achieved what I set out to do. *I did all this. I won't deny the fact.*

Round this man I cast my all-embracing net, rich robes of malice, as if catching fish. He had no way out, no eluding fate. I stabbed him twice. He gave out two groans. Then as his limbs went limp, I hit again, a third blow, my prayerful dedication to Zeus, underground protector of the dead. He collapsed, snorting his life away, vomiting blood all over me, drenching me as you see. And I rejoiced — just as the fecund earth rejoices when the heavens send spring rains, and new-born buds burst into bloom.

That is how things stand, old men of Argos. This is my triumph. If it were fitting to pour libations on this corpse, I would pour my curses out — that would be just. He filled the mixing bowls in his own house with such misery, and now he drinks it to the dregs. He is home at last.

CHORUS. What you say I find incredible! How can you exult over your dead husband?

CLYTEMNESTRA. You are testing me, as if I were some silly woman. But my heart is fearless. Let me tell you what you already know — then you can praise or blame me as you like. I do not care. This man, Agamemnon, my husband, is dead, the work of this right hand, a work of justice. That is how matters stand.

CHORUS. Woman, what earth-grown poison have you eaten, what evil drink drawn from the surging sea, that you are so mad as to risk the people's anger? You cast him off. You cut him down. So now you will be thrown out, exiled from the city, as a thing despised by your own people.

CLYTEMNESTRA. So now you would sentence me to banishment, send me from the city a thing accused? Back then you made no accusation against this man lying here. He slaughtered his own child, that girl I bore in pain, to charm the winds from Thrace — and didn't care. To him she was a beast to lay before the altar. He had flocks of them — his farms were full. Shouldn't you have banished him from Argos for that polluting crime? You are strict enough when you pass judgment on what I have done. So let me warn you — I am prepared to fight you head to head. If you win, well then, you can govern me. But if the gods favor me, you will learn, old as you are, how to comport yourselves.

CHORUS. You are too ambitious, far too arrogant. Blood-drenched murder has made you mad. That is plain. Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke you will pay for what you have done. You have lost your friends, you have lost your honor—

CLYTEMNESTRA. (interrupting) Then hear this, too, the force behind my oath. By that Justice I exacted for my child, by Ate, goddess of destruction, by the Fury to whom I offered up this man, I will never walk these halls in fear, so long as Aegisthus<sup>1</sup> stokes the blazing fires in my hearth. And he is as loyal to me now as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.

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1. Her lover, the only surviving son of Thestes.

Here he lies, the man who abused his wife, seduced by every captive girl at Troy — and here she lies, his concubine, his spear prize, the faithful seer who shared his bed. She also knew the rowing benches where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve. He is dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song, then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart. She will bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

CHORUS. May some Fate come, free from sorrow and quick, bringing endless sleep, our last eternal sleep, now our great protector is dead. For a woman's sake he suffered much, and now by a woman's hand he died.

A curse on you, Helen, frantic woman! On your own, beneath Troy's walls, you ended many. Now you wear your final garland — one long remembered for the blood that will never wash away. Back then in this house lived a spirit of strife, a power that broke our king.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Do not torment yourself like this, invoking death and fate, or redirect your rage on Helen, as if she killed those men, all those Achaean lives, all by herself.

CHORUS. O spirit that falls upon this house, on Menelaus, on Agamemnon, descendants of Tantalus,<sup>1</sup> you overpower me through these two sisters, each with power like a man. You consume my heart with grief. Perched on his corpse the hateful raven caws her song, her harsh triumphal crow.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You talk sense when you call on the demon of this house, who has devoured three generations, the one who nurtures bloodlust in our very entrails. And so new blood spurts out before the old wound heals.

CHORUS. You appeal to that huge fiend haunting this house, whose anger weighs it down, to that tale of evil fate inexorably consuming us. Oh, the will of Zeus, the cause of everything, who brings all things about. What can come to mortal men except by the will of Zeus? And in what has happened here, what is not caused by the gods?

My king, my lord — How shall I weep for you? How speak of you with love? To lie entangled in the spider's web, gasping life away — a sacrilege— struck down in treachery, the two-edged sword wielded by your own wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Are you saying this work is mine? That is not so. Do not think of me as Agamemnon's wife. The form of this corpse's wife was taken on by the ancient savage spirit of revenge. For that brutal meal prepared by Atreus, it sacrificed one full-grown man, payment for two butchered children.

CHORUS. Who would ever say you bear no guilt for Agamemnon's murder? How could they? How? Yet that avenging spirit acting on his father's crime could well have spurred you on. Black Ruin moves ahead with force through streams of family blood, meting vengeance for the young served up at a nightmarish feast.

My king, my lord — How shall I weep for you? How speak of you with love? To lie entangled in the spider's web, gasping life away — a sacrilege— struck down in treachery, the two-edged sword wielded by your own wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I do not think the man died wretchedly, like some poor slave. Surely his own deceit brought ruin on this house. His suffering matches exactly what he did himself. Remember my own Iphigeneia, his daughter, that sweet flower who we mourn. So let him not boast out loud

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1. Ancestor of the Atreidae. For his transgressions, Tantalus was condemned in the underworld to have fruit and drink within reach but be never able to obtain it.

in Hades' realm! He was the first to draw his sword, and by the sword he has been repaid.

CHORUS. O Earth, my Earth — how I wish you had swallowed me before I ever saw my king lying low on such bed, a silver-plated bath. Who will now bury him? Who will mourn him?

CLYTEMNESTRA. That is none of your concern. We will bury him. But this house will not weep. No. Iphigeneia will meet him down there, as is fitting — the daughter greets her father happily by that swift stream of sorrow. She will embrace the man with love.

CHORUS. One disgrace exchanged for yet another, the struggle to decide is hard. The man who sins is sinned against, the killer pays the price. Yet while Zeus sits upon his throne, this decree from god remains — the man who acts will suffer. Who can then cast from this house its self-perpetuating curse? This race is wedded to destruction.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Now you are close to the truth. For my part, I am prepared to swear an oath to the demon of the House of Atreus — I will rest content with what has been done, hard though that is, if he will leave this house alone, transferring family murder somewhere else, to some other clan. I do not need much, a small part of our wealth, if I can free these halls entirely of this madness, the urge we have to kill each other.

**Aegisthus arrives with armed men.**

AEGISTHUS. What a glorious day of retribution! Now I can say that once again the gods looking down on men avenge their crimes. How it fills my heart with joy to see this man stretched out here in a robe woven by the Furies, in full payment for deceitful treachery his father's hand devised. For Atreus, king of Argos, was this man's father.

Know you that my father, Thyestes, brother to Atreus, challenged his authority. So Atreus expelled him from his home and city. But Thyestes in his misery returned, a suppliant at his own hearth, praying fate to save him, that he would not be killed, his own blood would not pollute his native soil. Atreus, the godless father of this man here, welcomed him effusively, but not with love.

He arranged what seemed a celebration — a feast with plentiful meat, but served my father flesh of his own children. Thyestes, in total ignorance, took the food he did not recognize, and ate the meal which, as you have witnessed, destroyed the race. When Thyestes learned the abominable thing he had done, he screamed, staggered back, and vomited up the butchered flesh. Then, kicking down the banquet table, called down on the House of Atreus an unbearable curse — “Let them all die, the entire race of Pleisthenes,<sup>1</sup> all die like this.”

That is why you see this man lying here. This murder was my plan for retribution. For Atreus threw my broken father out, and me as well, his third son, still an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. But I grew up in exile. And Justice brought me back. I seized the man who banished me. I planned each detail of this murderous scheme. Now I see him in the nets of Justice, I can face even my own death with joy.

CHORUS. Aegisthus, you are contemptible, getting pleasure from all this agony. You say you killed the king deliberately, and planned the cowardly slaughter on your own. I tell you — remember this — when justice indeed arrives, it will be you who will not escape the people's curse or death by stoning at their hands.

AEGISTHUS. So you say — but you man the lower oars. Your masters on the higher deck control the ship. You will learn how painful it is at your age to be taught your place. Hunger pangs and

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1. Father of Atreus and Thyestes.

chains, two worthy teachers, make excellent teachers, even with old men. Your aged eyes may be dim, but surely you are not totally blind. You should not kick at thorns. You will only hurt yourselves.

CHORUS. You woman! You stayed at home, waiting out the war, until the men came back. You soiled a real man's bed, then planned to kill that man.

AEGISTHUS. This talk of yours going to bring you pain. The tongue of Orpheus<sup>1</sup> was unlike yours — the pleasure of his voice drew all things to him. Your puny squawking merely irritates. But chains will quiet you.

CHORUS B. As if you rule in Argos! You, who plotted Agamemnon's death, but hadn't the courage to kill the man yourself!

AEGISTHUS . Clearly the woman had to do it. I could not get close to him. After all, I am an old enemy. But with his wealth I will rule you people. Those who resist I will strap under the yoke. Then we will see how docile you can be.

CHORUS C. Not if Orestes still sees the light of day. You may yet feel the thrust of his blade!

AEGISTHUS . If that is the way you want to act and speak, you will get your lesson fast. (calling)  
Men, stand ready!

**Guards draw their arms.**

CHORUS . Do not give way! Get your weapons ready.

AEGISTHUS . My hand is on my sword as well. I am not afraid to die.

CHORUS. You say you will welcome death. Good to hear! We are happy to oblige.

CLYTEMNESTRA. No, beloved, no! Let us cause no further trouble. Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough — we have reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed. (to Chorus) You honorable old men, go home. Yield to fate, before you come to harm. What we have done here we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.

AEGISTHUS. What about these men who let their tongues prattle on against me, hurling insults in my face, testing fate?

CHORUS. Men of Argos will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS. I will get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS. Not if fate brings Orestes back.

AEGISTHUS. I understand how exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS . Go on! Fatten yourself on the spoils of your villainy. While you still can, pollute all justice.

AEGISTHUS. You must know you will pay for all your insolence to me.

CHORUS. Hear him boast like a cock beside his hen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Aegisthus, leave them their impotent yelping. You and I control the house. We will put all things in order.

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1. Legendary musician whose songs could charm even the gods.