

Prologue

I once had a name. It was mine and mine alone. Now I fear that it will be forgotten in time, left alone to wither in the remote, unloved corners of recorded time. Kings and queens uttered it in a silence too precious to be heard. An inimitable dread lived in its shadow, in the fading whisper of its last spoken letter. It punctured the airy silence and then went its deep, untrodden, inaudible way. But it remained fixed in the stony interior of every fear-deprived heart, the heart of those who joined me in battle. All Myrmidons spoke it, forging the strength from which to feed their fearless advance toward the enemy. Their memory enshrined it, kissing the unknown behind syllables well-known, as if shedding off layers of untold complexity in a mere moment.

I was the Myrmidon prince, the one that led a mighty contingent into a mass of Trojan infantrymen. Rivers of iron moved through me, streaming through my every vessel as glittering rays shone off an unyielding armor of bronze. I am now forgotten and unloved by both time and timelessness. Forever has fled from me, eluded me. I sit here alone at the edge of nowhere,

feeling the stark cold fact of being no one. History will never remember me. Priam's eyes burn in my memory, reminding me of how the sweet flow of mortality remains unimpeded. I could have died young and be remembered forever. But I lived and doomed myself to anonymity.

Helen appears before me from time to time, springing up from the air. The look in her eyes is always the same. Her beauty is the same. She never speaks, for her presence alone tugs at my heavy heart and tears through the mere thought of becoming as I once was. Now she is before me again. She remains still, but then she turns around and begins to walk into the distance. She wants me to follow her. This has never happened before. I rise and struggle to summon the mere semblance of strength. Helen never glances back to make sure I am following her. She knows I will.

Within moments, I drift behind her, seeing her cut through walls of air as she bestrides a seamless calm. The sound of water enters my thoughts, filling me as though I were a gleaming, transparent vessel. It moves through the whole of what remains of my former self. Helen approaches a river unlike any other. Then I realize this may not be happening. I must be dreaming. Helen trudges on, undaunted by the sight of the large, unrelenting stream that now devours my senses. She moves into the river, her feet becoming submerged by the moving waters. She drifts deeper into the stream now. Then she becomes still. I wait for her to break the uncertainty of this moment, to show me where to go. The thought that I am dreaming returns, eating at my newly-rekindled mind's entrails.

Helen is motionless. She looks to her right, her eyes becoming frozen.

Then she turns her head around and looks at me. I decide to approach her. With every move I make, she grows paler and recedes into her former ghostly radiance. I am about to reach her when she vanishes completely. I look around, but she is nowhere.

The sight of the river consumes me, reminding me that I am powerless against the current. Within moments, my strength diminishes. I find myself falling into the waters. I struggle rise and regain my balance, but to no avail. The movement of the river carries me onward. Darkness enfolds me. I will leave this world unremembered.

Ageless glory once greeted him from afar, but now it recedes from memory and drifts back into the bleakest point on the horizon. The aged Achilles observes the sea once more, waiting for Thetis to rise from the restless waters in order to help immortalize him. But it is too late. His eyes remain fixed on the flawless surface of the ocean, and then he wonders whether Thetis is secretly ensconced in layers of brightness within the unfathomable deep. He waits for Thetis to emerge, but she never comes. Achilles trudges along the beach and sees waves slapping on the sand.

He remembers how his life's moments teemed with the certainty of having his lofty and unblemished name echo through time. And then he remembers how he was spared from glorious death. He survived the Trojan war and watched his former life gradually move into the phantom embrace of anonymity. Now, he is no one. Achilles feels his aching bones more than ever, and he struggles to make his joints relax for a moment. Then he sees

her. The woman who triggered the war stands before him, as elusive as ever to the fingertips of time. Her beauty remains untouched by the years, shining before him as it did in his youth. “Helen,” his inner voice calls out. She remains silent, watching him as he fights fruitlessly against the fact of old age. Achilles imagines her voice, mellifluous and serene, as it rises and restores his youth and glory. He wants her to take him back to the time when his blade tore through a mass of Trojan soldiers. Achilles looks at her with nostalgic yearning. But her eyes are cold, far removed from the flame of his desperate heart.

Helen appears to him from time to time, and he feels as though she is merely a reminder of how his name has long faded from the world's memory. “I once tried to convince myself that you weren't real,” he imagines himself telling her. “But now I know that you appear to me for a reason. You never speak, but I know what your eyes say. Allow my heart to return to glory. Restore my former golden-armored self. Make me immortal again!” But then he feels the voicelessness of his soul fill the air between him and the beautiful woman who now begins to soundlessly retreat into the air. In a moment, she is gone. Achilles covers his face with his half-blistered hands. The air whispers again, but he keeps his eyes shut. The ocean echoes, mirroring memory.

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Oh, time-treading battlefield of Troy, return to me, bathe me in your glory-filled embrace. Destiny, hold me, drain me of anonymity. Scorch the mortal flesh of my heel with the brightness of your blaze. The sound of galloping horses, clashing shields, and blades swirling in a sea of bloodied bodies comes to me, lifting me from the darkness I believe awaits me below. The loud hissing of waves and a wind-swept horizon bursts into chaos. Gleaming, golden dust scatters across my dimmed mind, and then it fades into a rimless ocean. Memory rebels against oblivion. A half-mortal fights off the sulphurous breath of the netherworld. And Helen's blue eyes dissolve the precious white wall between me and the world entire. Horses move again, causing seismic ripples of sound that drift into my intangible ears. The walls of Ilion begin to fade. Helen appears too beautiful to behold now, racing behind the ephemerally white sun of dreaming. My eyes become unkissed by the perfect sight of her, my blade unbloodying itself and allowing me to return inside a celestial womb. Destiny departs, and with it the moment of

being seared into the world's memory. The serenely-flowing river persists.

Helen's voice arises and fills the void in his heart:

“War has claimed you, Achilles. It has abducted your name and reduced you to mere battle-bruised bronze. In this we are one, you and I, children of gods, both unloved and abducted by dauntless destiny. Now you appear to me in the guise of your abductor, destiny. But then I realize that your true abductor is none other than death.

I watch my former life beautifully unspooling before me as you drift onward. Destiny and death move in your every rhythm, each smiling and moving as one, twins with hands spasmodically and organically entwined inside a womb whispering beneath all human shadows. In this we are one, children of high-born Olympians treading upon epochs far beyond our own.

The last of the sky's light bleeds out, and then the night air sweeps over me. You keep marching, and then death and destiny allow the present moment to regain the precious solidity of stone. What you see and what others see no longer matters, for the beauty beholds. I behold.”

His name's echo dies where the streak of sunlight on the sea ends. The old man once dreamed of dying young and strong on the battlefield, before time would irrevocably reduce him to bare bones and erase him from a nameless, glory-deprived existence. He was the greatest warrior, the one who killed his greatest opponent and rose enviously even in the eyes of dust-filled

death. His name echoed in the lips of young and old, becoming firmly emblazoned in the minds of those fallen at his hand. Now, the wind can barely trace the unseen alphabet of his life. He thought he would perish and be remembered forever. Now, he feels the images of glorious youth receding into irrelevance.

When he secretly gathers the strength to do so, he goes out to the sea and waits for his mother to emerge from the waves. He waits, but she does not come. And then he knows why: unlike him, she is immortal. He wants her to appear and complete the last of her immortalizing act, the one she performed on him while he was an infant. A woman clad in bright white slips mysteriously into his field of vision from time to time. It is not his mother. When he steps on the beach and prepares to dip his heel in the churning waters, he sees her standing a short distance away. Her gaze is unmistakably familiar to him. Her beauty has remained while I have lived a long miserable life leading to anonymous death, he tells himself. "Helen," he calls out with his trembling inner voice.

She reminds him that his heart's deepest yearning remains untouched by immortality's unquenchable flame. Then the old man is taken back to the war that returns to haunt his lonely days. Achilles' blade unbloodies itself, his eyes unkissed by the flawless sight of her. Then a mysterious tide causes him to see his life unfold through the eyes of this beautiful woman.

The war echoes. It lets loose a torrent of tears, seemingly misplacing the war ships canted at ominous angles on the otherwise unblemished beach. He

is washed ashore now. All memories of Ilium leave him. There is only the strange noise of an ocean coming to being, a body of water transfixed by the mere fact of its own existence.

I have become a memory. Muse, when I looked into your eyes, I felt myself drifting incessantly toward your eternal memory. Beware the toils of war, my younger self tells me. I have seen it, I have lived it. Those who fought at my side entered the gates of Hades while I remained. The epic tale I was destined to tell let me endure the broad sweep of war. Now, I find myself revisiting my youth, but this time I am a poet from the very beginning. I no longer feel the past, present, and future residing in their separate boundaries. My entire tale unfolds at the same time that my epic poem unfolds. I have been invited to tell my tale in the most glorious city in the world. The Trojan king has ushered me forth to let my tale arise from memory. My tale unfolds as past and present merge and let my life rhyme my epic poem:

Small dots of fiery light merge and separate in dark waters. They converge but then drift apart as ripples of beauty become shadows swallowed whole by other shadows. The beauty shines before unleashing an unsteady current, fading into the moving dark waters. The city of Ilium is engulfed in flames. The bright flames sweep over bloodied soil, slowly devouring the deep dark of night. The gods watch as the Trojans already seem to be

forgotten, and the city of Ilium begins to crumble into an imperishable flame. The Greeks have reduced the city to fire and ashes, allowing the tide of history to shift in their favor. Zeus and Hera argued about the fate of Troy, but now the city is nothing more than a small moving reflection. Ilium has become a memory. The gods observe as the flame consumes everything. A city of gold is reduced to blackness. From Olympus, Ilium appears as a tiny spectacle of human destruction, but the gods know the larger significance of what has transpired: there is no way to cast off destiny's concealing layers. There is no way to rise above what is meant to happen. The gods maintain their focus on the bright flame. The city of Ilium is no more.

The Muse has taken a brief slumber from the wakefulness of eternity, and she cannot begin to sing her story at whatever point she wills. Something has blotted out her divine memory's light. Beginning, middle, and end no longer seem clear and distinct from each other. The entire song behind the story is reduced to the undulations and ripples of an aimless tide. The black mouth of night seems to set a city aflame. Fire. Glory. A city of gold is swept up in a pitiless fashion into an ocean of chaos. Glory, but then fire again. The song is numbed by the city's sheer absence of weight. The glory of kings is left in ashes. Only shadows, flitting shadows, remain.

Up from the lofty heights of Olympus, a secret presence rains down. A point of view rushes down below, savoring its swift descent through a narrow glimpse of everything that surrounds it. It moves swiftly through the moving

mists and swirling night air before descending upon the world of mortals. It cuts through barriers of air, penetrating depths of sight and sound. It slices through a mass of cloud, blowing off the whiteness with the mere whisper of its movement. Then it immerses itself in the lingering traces of the bright moon, glimpsing a broad surface, the visible ocean. This presence is godly, but remains unseen. The sea roars in the distance while a large flame consumes whatever is left of a city. The gods have been watching this moment, and now the presence seems to retreat. The war between the Greeks and Trojans reenacts itself before unseen eyes. Something dark and foreboding lingers between these eyes and what they observe. The images of the war fade back into time, and only the fire remains. The secret presence sees a moving stream in the distance. The stream moves in a dark current showered with the piercing light of stars. Up until this moment, this secret presence has never known itself. Now, it sees itself reflected in the swift-moving stream. The stream reveals a series of images. It then reveals a large shimmering tide, which is golden in its entirety. The aeon tide is moving.

The presence lingers. The point of view expands and becomes one with Hector's final moments. Hector lays bloodied on the stone as a large shadowy figure looms over him. He squints at the sunlight that shines over the figure. It is Achilles. Achilles stands over him, and he appears fully ready to kill him at that moment. "Your time has come, prince of Troy."

Hector remains speechless, feeling the scorching sunlight on his face. Then Achilles obscures the light falling on his face, and Hector can see his

mortality as visibly as Achilles. Hector knows his time has come. In the moment between Achilles thrusting and removing his blade from Ectoras' bowels, the presence can see shadows reflecting on an ocean somewhere. These shadows move between light and darkness, and then the presence watches reflections slowly becoming complete. Ectoras feels Achilles' blade piercing his bowels and then his senses swirl and fade into a numbing oblivion. Hector feels his life draining out from him, filling the horizon behind Achilles. He feels himself reflected onto Ilium, and he feels this city mirroring his incessant drifting towards death. Achilles becomes a shadow that slithers across his field of vision, which becomes narrower and narrower. Darkness begins to cover the sky and then the entire horizon. Whatever he feels reflected is now reduced to the dark mirror of his mortality, which shines invisibly beneath the fading glimmers of self-awareness.

The poet sees a bright light descending on his eyes in swift layers. He disembarks the ship and looks around him curiously. Upon stepping on the soil, he feels that he was always meant to come to Troy. After a few moments, he sees a large opening in the gathering and he sees the city in all its splendor. For a moment, he wonders whether he is in the city of gods. *Am I on Olympus?*

He maintains his eyes on the breathless sight of the shining city. He believes that he is merely a poet, and that witnessing such a glorious sight is something renders him speechless. Suddenly, a woman draped in white

appears from the crowd. The poet is speechless, spellbound by the woman's beauty. She opens her mouth and words form like the sound of silk or receding waves. "Poet, you were brought here to meet the king."

"I know, but who might you be?"

"The king is eager to meet you. As for my name, that has no importance to you at the moment."

She motions for him to follow her. He follows her and looks back at the city before leave the chambers with her. The crowd behind is slowly dispersing.