

Excerpts from *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller

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CHAPTER ONE

MY FATHER WAS A KING AND THE SON OF KINGS. HE was a short man, as most of us were, and built like a bull, all shoulders. He married my mother when she was fourteen and sworn by the priestess to be fruitful. It was a good match: she was an only child, and her father's fortune would go to her husband.

He did not find out until the wedding that she was simple. Her father had been scrupulous about keeping her veiled until the ceremony, and my father had humored him. If she was ugly, there were always slave girls and serving boys. When at last they pulled off the veil, they say my mother smiled. That is how they knew she was quite stupid. Brides did not smile.

When I was delivered, a boy, he plucked me from her arms and handed me to a nurse. In pity, the midwife gave my mother a pillow to hold instead of me. My mother hugged it. She did not seem to notice a change had been made.

Quickly, I became a disappointment: small, slight. I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing. The best that could be said of me was that I was not sickly. The colds and cramps that seized my peers left me untouched. This only made my father suspicious. Was I a changeling, inhuman? He scowled at me, watching. My

hand shook, feeling his gaze. And there was my mother, dribbling wine on herself.

I AM FIVE when it is my father's turn to host the games. Men gather from as far as Thessaly and Sparta, and our storehouses grow rich with their gold. A hundred servants work for twenty days beating out the racing track and clearing it of stones. My father is determined to have the finest games of his generation.

I remember the runners best, nut-brown bodies slicked with oil, stretching on the track beneath the sun. They mix together, broad-shouldered husbands, beardless youths and boys, their calves all thickly carved with muscle.

The bull has been killed, sweating the last of its blood into dust and dark bronze bowls. It went quietly to its death, a good omen for the games to come.

The runners are gathered before the dais where my father and I sit, surrounded by prizes we will give to the winners. There are golden mixing bowls for wine, beaten bronze tripods, ash-wood spears tipped with precious iron. But the real prize is in my hands: a wreath of dusty-green leaves, freshly clipped, rubbed to a shine by my thumb. My father has given it to me grudgingly. He reassures himself: all I have to do is hold it.

The youngest boys are running first, and they wait, shuffling their feet in the sand for the nod from the priest. They're in their first flush of growth, bones sharp and spindly, poking against taut skin. My eye catches on a light head among dozens of dark, touselled crowns. I lean forward to see. Hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold—the circlet of a prince.

He is shorter than the others, and still plump with childhood in a way they are not. His hair is long and tied back with leather; it burns against the dark, bare skin of his back. His face, when he turns, is serious as a man's.

When the priest strikes the ground, he slips past the thickened bodies of the older boys. He moves easily, his heels flashing pink as licking tongues. He wins.

I stare as my father lifts the garland from my lap and crowns him; the leaves seem almost black against the brightness of his hair. His father, Peleus, comes to claim him, smiling and proud. Peleus' kingdom is smaller than ours, but his wife is rumored to be a goddess, and his people love him. My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me.

"That is what a son should be."

My hands feel empty without the garland. I watch King Peleus embrace his son. I see the boy toss the garland in the air and catch it again. He is laughing, and his face is bright with victory.

BEYOND THIS, I remember little more than scattered images from my life then: my father frowning on his throne, a cunning toy horse I loved, my mother on the beach, her eyes turned towards the Aegean. In this last memory, I am skipping stones for her, *plink, plink, plink*, across the skin of the sea. She seems to like the way the ripples look, dispersing back to glass. Or perhaps it is the sea itself she likes. At her temple a starburst of white gleams like bone, the scar from the time her father hit her with the hilt of a sword. Her toes poke up from the sand where she has buried them,

and I am careful not to disturb them as I search for rocks. I choose one and fling it out, glad to be good at this. It is the only memory I have of my mother and so golden that I am almost sure I have made it up. After all, it was unlikely for my father to have allowed us to be alone together, his simple son and simpler wife. And where are we? I do not recognize the beach, the view of coastline. So much has passed since then.

names of Greek dead. Achilles' jaw grows hard as Odysseus draws forth tablet after tablet, crammed to the margin with marks. Ajax looks down at his hands, scabbed from the splintering of shields and spears.

Then Odysseus tells us news that we do not know yet, that the Trojans are less than a thousand paces from our wall, encamped on newly won plain we could not take back before dusk. Would we like proof? We can probably see their watch-fires from the hill just beyond our camp. They will attack at dawn.

There is silence, a long moment of it, before Achilles speaks. "No," he says, shoving back treasure and guilt. His honor is not such a trifle that it can be returned in a night embassy, in a hand-ful huddled around a campfire. It was taken before the entire host, witnessed by every last man.

The king of Ithaca pokes the fire that sits between them.

"She has not been harmed, you know. Briseis. God knows where Agamemnon found the restraint, but she is well kept and whole. She, and your honor, wait only for you to reclaim them."

"You make it sound as if I have abandoned my honor," Achilles says, his voice tart as raw wine. "Is that what you spin? Are you Agamemnon's spider, catching flies with that tale?"

"Very poetic," Odysseus says. "But tomorrow will not be a bard's song. Tomorrow, the Trojans will break through the wall and burn the ships. Will you stand by and do nothing?"

"That depends on Agamemnon. If he makes right the wrong he has done me, I will chase the Trojans to Persia, if you like."

"Tell me," Odysseus asks, "why is Hector not dead?" He holds up a hand. "I do not seek an answer, I merely repeat what all the

The trio approach us and stand on the other side of the fire, waiting for Achilles to finish. He puts down his lyre and rises.

"Welcome. You will stay for dinner, I hope?" He clasps their hands warmly, smiling through their stiffness.

I know why they have come. "I must see to the meal," I mumble. I feel Odysseus' eyes on my back as I go.

The strips of lamb drip and sear on the brazier's grill. Through the haze of smoke I watch them, seated around the fire as if they are friends. I cannot hear their words, but Achilles is smiling still, pushing past their grimness, pretending he does not see it. Then he calls for me, and I cannot stall any longer. Dutifully I bring the platters and take my seat beside him.

He is making desultory conversation of battles and helmets. While he talks he serves the meal, a fussing host who gives seconds to everyone and thirds to Ajax. They eat and let him talk. When they are finished, they wipe their mouths and put aside their plates. Everyone seems to know it is time. It is Odysseus, of course, who begins.

He talks first of *things*, casual words that he drops into our laps, one at a time. A list really. Twelve swift horses, and seven bronze tripods, and seven pretty girls, ten bars of gold, twenty cauldrons, and more—bowls, and goblets, and armor, and at last, the final gem held before us: Briseis' return. He smiles and spreads his hands with a guileless shrug I recognize from Scyros, from Aulis, and now from Troy.

Then a second list, almost as long as the first: the endless

men wish to know. In the last ten years, you could have killed him a thousand times over. Yet you have not. It makes a man wonder."

His tone tells us that he does not wonder. That he knows of the prophecy. I am glad that there is only Ajax with him, who will not understand the exchange.

"You have eked out ten more years of life, and I am glad for you. But the rest of us—" His mouth twists. "The rest of us are forced to wait for your leisure. You are holding us here, Achilles. You were given a choice and you chose. You must live by it now."

We stare at him. But he is not finished yet.

"You have made a fair run of blocking fate's path. But you cannot do it forever. The gods will not let you." He pauses, to let us hear each word of what he says. "The thread *will* run smooth, whether you choose it or not. I tell you as a friend, it is better to seek it on your own terms, to make it go at your pace, than theirs."

"That is what I am doing."

"Very well," Odysseus says. "I have said what I came to say." Achilles stands. "Then it is time for you to leave."

"Not yet." It is Phoinix. "I, too, have something I wish to say." Slowly, caught between his pride and his respect for the old man, Achilles sits. Phoinix begins.

"When you were a boy, Achilles, your father gave you to me to raise. Your mother was long gone, and I was the only nurse you would have, cutting your meat and teaching you myself. Now you are a man, and still I strive to watch over you, to keep you safe, from spear, and sword, and folly."

My eyes lift to Achilles, and I see that he is tensed, wary. I understand what he fears—being played upon by the gentleness of this old man, being convinced by his words to give something up.

Worse, a sudden doubt—that perhaps, if Phoinix agrees with these men, he is wrong.

The old man holds up a hand, as if to stop the spin of such thoughts. "Whatever you do, I will stand with you, as I always have. But before you decide your course, there is a story you should hear."

He does not give Achilles time to object. "In the days of your father's father, there was a young hero Meleager, whose town of Calydon was besieged by a fierce people called the Curetes."

I know this story, I think. I heard Peleus tell it, long ago, while Achilles grinned at me from the shadows. There was no blood on his hands then, and no death sentence on his head. Another life.

"In the beginning the Curetes were losing, worn down by Meleager's skill in war," Phoinix continues. "Then one day there was an insult, a slight to his honor by his own people, and Meleager refused to fight any further on his city's behalf. The people offered him gifts and apologies, but he would not hear them. He stormed off to his room to lie with his wife, Cleopatra, and be comforted."

When he speaks her name, Phoinix's eyes flicker to me.

"At last, when her city was falling and her friends dying, Cleopatra could bear it no longer. She went to beg her husband to fight again. He loved her above all things and so agreed, and won a mighty victory for his people. But though he had saved them, he came too late. Too many lives had been lost to his pride. And so they gave him no gratitude, no gifts. Only their hatred for not having spared them sooner."

In the silence, I can hear Phoinix's breaths, labored with the exertion of speaking so long. I do not dare to speak or move; I

am afraid that someone will see the thought that is plain on my face. It was not honor that made Meleager fight, or his friends, or victory, or revenge, or even his own life. It was Cleopatra, on her knees before him, her face streaked with tears. Here is Phoinix's craft: Cleopatra, Patroclus. Her name built from the same pieces as mine, only reversed.

If Achilles noticed, he does not show it. His voice is gentle for the old man's sake, but still he refuses. *Not until Agamemnon gives back the honor he has taken from me.* Even in the darkness I can see that Odysseus is not surprised. I can almost hear his report to the others, his hands spread in regret: *I tried.* If Achilles had agreed, all to the good. If he did not, his refusal in the face of prizes and apologies would only seem like madness, like fury or unreasonable pride. They will hate him, just as they hated Meleager.

My chest tightens in panic, in a quick desire to kneel before him and beg. But I do not. For like Phoinix I am declared already, decided. I am no longer to guide the course, merely to be carried, into darkness and beyond, with only Achilles' hands at the helm.

Ajax does not have Odysseus' equanimity—he glares, his face carved with anger. It has cost him much to be here, to beg for his own demotion. With Achilles not fighting, he is *Aristos Achaion*.

When they are gone, I stand and give my arm to Phoinix. He is tired tonight, I can see, and his steps are slow. By the time I leave him—old bones sighing onto his pallet—and return to our tent, Achilles is already asleep.

I am disappointed. I had hoped, perhaps, for conversation, for two bodies in one bed, for reassurance that the Achilles I saw at dinner was not the only one. But I do not rouse him; I slip from the tent and leave him to dream.