

THE FURY AT COLONUS

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The only black ambulance in the city stopped in the littered area at the rear of Police HQ. The siren, unsuccessfully repaired many times, sounded like a sobbing infant, one too tired or despairing to cry properly. The dark-cloaked figure of the Fury rolled out of the back and fell to the pavement. Without seeing if his unwelcome passenger had landed safely, the driver gunned the engine, and the ambulance whimpered off.

"Nice to see you back, ma'am," the desk sergeant said from behind his bulletproof glass, scrolling a schematic smile across the LEDs of the overhead announcement board. The Fury peeled a flattened Coca Cola cup from her dark coat and dropped it on the floor. It was a hot day, the sunlight molten on the worn squares of the floor, but the Fury kept her ankle-length coat buttoned up to her neck. Only the ends of her thick fingernails stuck out of the over-long sleeves. Her hair was long and stiff with dried blood.

She walked past the rows of desks and the whispers followed her.

"Back?"

"Long one, this time. Rough. Maybe next time she won't --"

"Shh! Bad luck. Did you hear what happened?"

"Popped Oedipus's head like a watermelon, when she finally caught up to him. Don't know why it took so long, with those bad feet of his...."

"Popped his head?"

"Right between her hands."

"Oh, come on. A watermelon's impossible, much less a skull. Think you could do that?"

"Hey, I don't know. Maybe those empty eye sockets made it easier, gave a pressure release or something. I saw the autopsy photos. Here, I got 'em in my desk."

"You are a swine. Can I see?"

The Fury opened the door to her office. She had already noted the absence of her name on the frosted glass, and so was prepared for the empty room with its cracked plasterboard and Burger King bag crumpled in a corner. Her heavy desk had left gouges in the floor. As she examined the abandoned space, the one fluorescent remaining flickered and went out, leaving a dismal residual glow, like crushed fire flies.

Her new office was five levels down into the substructure of the building, behind a stack of dented filing cabinets with hand-lettered labels, the black ink faded almost to illegibility. There were two windows, which implied a rise in status, but both revealed nothing but twisted layers of bedrock. They were the sides of aquarium tanks, displaying trapped seas of stone.

They'd moved her collection and arranged it in order on her walls: dangling jump ropes, crow bars bent by the frantic force of their homicidal use, pieces of stained cloth, even her favorite, a more-than-man-sized execution device made of two perpendicular wood beams. The drawers of her desk were still full of teeth and finger bones, and racks of organs in jars filled the shelves. The morgue

kept demanding them back, but she always refused to recognize the validity of their paperwork. She was too attached to her souvenirs to let them go. Each was the memory of an avenged wound.

The precise arrangement of the office was all of a piece with the new Director's meticulousness, and indicated that the Fury's effectiveness could, and would, be destroyed without ever violating departmental regulations.

The Fury sniffed her desk. Clean as a looted tomb. A key flick, and Pending files appeared on the computer screen. Nothing flagged for her. Departmental statistics showed that a higher percentage of crimes were being solved. She wasn't interested in solving crimes. That wasn't her territory.

As a final indignity, her In tray held a stack of sheets explaining the Department's new retirement plan. Glossy color photographs showed the green leaves of a place called Kindly Grove, with the legend 'Gracious and Exclusive!' Using her fingernails, she spread them deliberately out on the ancient surface of her desk, tearing and shredding the paper. They would try to wall her in down here, she knew, until she was completely entombed in stone, as she had been before her existence.

As she sat, the trundle of document-laden carts, the flirtatious laughs, the anxious footsteps, the tense discussions, all the sounds of the office, continued, first abashed by her presence behind the door, then unrestrained, as her existence was forgotten.

A drop of liquid fell on the piled sheets, its smack loud in the silence of her office. She turned her head in time to see another blot of crimson appear on the investment options page. Then another, each drop thick, rounded, and shiny. The metallic scent of fresh blood filled the room. A desperate splatter obliterated most of the health benefits. The Fury put her fingernail in a drop, touched it to her tongue -- and was out of the office and down the hall.

"Oh, an oversight, of course," Athena said from behind her garishly painted desk. Her hair was swept up above her head and held in place by rusting metal spikes pulled from some distant battlefield. Her wide gray eyes regarded the Fury calmly.

"You should have been copied on it. An oversight, as I said." Athena snacked on an ox's thigh bone wrapped in fat, but didn't offer the Fury any. There had been a time, the Fury remembered, when sacrifices had been offered her as well. "It's nothing. All taken care of. No need to trouble yourself, it's just a family dispute, a problem stemming from the late war...."

The Fury ran her fingernails across the desk's elaborately painted surface. Ten parallel lines of blood appeared, and began to soak in, ruining the colorful scenes painted there. With a casual air, as if she'd just spilled a little tea, Athena shook out the linen napkin in her lap and wiped up the blood.

Athena was an Olympian, a member of the new administration. A lot of irrevocable changes were being made. But the Fury was a key member of the Old Service. Athena could fiddle with the details of jurisdiction all she wanted, but she could not stop the Fury from acting.

Athena swiveled her chair and stared out of the window. Her office was high up, and looked out over the bronze towers of the city. Their edges were rosy now with what was either dawn or sunset. Abruptly rising mountains held in the sky.

"Well, fine. If you want to go, I can't stop you. As you obviously know. But...well, I do have to mention. There's no free money left in the travel budget. None at all. I don't know how it happened, something to do with how we calculate the quarter --"

The Fury turned and left the office. She could walk.

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Most of the storefronts were boarded up, the fiberboard panels bearing the spray painted names of their suppliers, the only businesses thriving in the neighborhood. Behind the stores were endless rows of apartment blocks, curtains hanging dispiritedly out the windows. Children peered out of the darkness, momentarily distracted from TV screens by the false promise of the world outside. A hand dangled a one-armed doll over a dangerously low sill, as if checking its urge to suicide.

One entire block had been torn down for an optimistic parking lot, now abandoned, grass coming up through the cracks, ailanthus trees growing against the wall of windowless brick next door. The Fury stared across it and imagined it covered with trees. She could see the roots shoving their way through the asphalt, cracking it and revealing the old soil beneath.

The Fury turned away, disturbed by this image of retirement, and crossed the car-tormented street. The funeral home had once been a comfortable mansion, from a time when people had lived here as a choice. It was the only structure preserved from that time. With its white columns and high windows it was solemnly beautiful. Its porch wrapped around two sides. Bright red awnings had been unfurled against the summer sun.

Right next door was a garbage-strewn vacant lot. Men in brightly colored warm-up suits squatted there, injecting drugs through disposable syringes from a pink box stolen from some hospital store room. The fat one in the canary yellow, his sneakers as clean as if he had been carried into the lot by slaves, seemed to be the leader. The others aped his gestures, desperate for his approval. The vacant lot ended in a corroded and half-toppled wrought-iron fence, beyond which was the overgrown cemetery.

Inside, there were no mourners, no sign that anyone knew that Clytemnestra of Argos was dead. After she finally managed to pry the front door open, the Fury found herself there alone. She walked to the rear of the room, undid the catches, and slammed back the lid of the massive bronze coffin.

The embalmer had been careful to restore Clytemnestra to her appearance just before her death. Her gown was fine and looped with silver, jewels glittered around her neck and in her ears, her hands were raised up to ward off the blows, a look of terror deformed her face.

The Fury undid the gown and slid her fingernails into the body through the wounds. It took only a few minutes to determine that all relevant information had already been removed from the body during autopsy and embalming. The liver was a plastic child's purse filled with colored seahorses. The heart was a can of spackling compound. The ovaries, in a cruel joke by one of the male Olympians, were charcoal briquettes.

The actual autopsy results were closed to the Fury by the new regulations. The Olympians meant for her to be stymied, to scream out her impotent rage here, tear this irrelevant place apart.

But the Fury was not entirely without resource. She stood for a moment until the air from her nostrils no longer smelled like burnt hair. She stripped Clytemnestra's dress away completely, to reveal the knife slashes through her sagging skin, so tattered that the embalmer had been forced to attach it to the underlying fat and muscle with safety pins. The attack had been brutal and unrelenting. Her neck was almost severed.

The Fury pushed her lips down on Clytemnestra's and exhaled gently. The wounds cried out in agonized chorus: "Orestes!" The name of her only son was a curse, Clytemnestra's last, and it was that curse that had brought the Fury out from her subterranean imprisonment. The Fury sucked in, tasted death and vengeance, and teased Clytemnestra's tongue out of the nest of her mouth. The taste was bitter, more bitter than the Fury remembered. As she inhaled, the wounds gasped "Oedi --" She pulled her mouth

back, and the wounds fell silent. She yanked Clytemnestra's tongue and flipped it out across the chin. She scraped a bar code across the pale, white-coated flesh, so that Charon would take Clytemnestra across the Styx without argument, payment provided by the Old Service.

"Are you ready?" someone said behind her. It was the leader of the warm-up-suit clad drug addicts from the vacant lot. His belly swelled proudly in his canary yellow. She stepped aside, already feeling the breath of loss. Clumsily, pupils dilated, muscles twitching, they picked up the heavy coffin and hauled it out the rear of the funeral home.

The sun was blinding after the darkness of the house. The Fury preceded the coffin through the cemetery, mourning, weeping desperately, the tears streaming down her face carving paths through the ancient dried secretions on her cheeks. Clytemnestra now lived on within her, and she was sorrowing for her own death.

The pall bearers toppled the coffin off their shoulders. They had not bothered to dig a grave, but the bronze hulk sank down into the earth like a whale diving. Soon the weeds and grasses would grow over the spot, and it would be as if nothing lay beneath. They collapsed amid the weeds, weary with their great effort. Without looking back, the Fury walked out the other end of the cemetery and down the road toward Argos.

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The gate guard hid within his mirrored kiosk and pretended not to see her. The Fury skirted the lowered security gate intended to bar entry into Argos and headed up the winding road that led between the lawns. The houses sat back behind their garages. Beyond them was the white wall, topped with a roof of red tile, that surrounded Argos and protected it from the desert.

An occasional car slid by her, drivers polo-shirt relaxed in their air conditioning, but there was no other sign of life. The planned community centers, one in each quarter of the city, were empty, the bulletin boards devoid of anything but admonitions that notices would be removed after two weeks. A single toppled tricycle on a front walk seemed like a monument to a vanished race.

The Fury stalked to Agamemnon's house. Reporters were clustered around the front, outside the police line tape, waiting for something to happen. Most sat in the back of the video van from a local TV station, crunching empty coffee cups in their hands and staring at the pavement. Some peered anxiously at the half-open front door, desperate for any sign of activity.

A murmur ran through them at the Fury's appearance. Camera and video lenses shifted in her direction, but there was no click-whiz of film advance or whir of videotape, just a breathless piercing through the viewfinder. The Fury kept her power because her image was never reproduced. Aside from vague rumors, the first sight of the Fury was always the first unforgettable sight. This was quite unlike the new Olympians, whose power depended precisely on the excessive reproduction of their externals, on the presence of a hieratic image of Zeus in every temple and automobile showroom, so that the actual appearance of the god was unnecessary.

Well, the Fury still did all her own stunts. The new gods would soon no doubt change this rule. There would be cover stories on the Fury, tabloid TV scenes of her office, Fury posters, Fury drinking cups, all the rest, and her effectiveness would vanish. These reporters would be instruments of that downfall, and they knew it.

That would explain why she was here, at this scene of an irrelevant side show. Clytemnestra had not died at Agamemnon's house. That the roots of her death could be found here should have been irrelevant, but somehow it wasn't. Agamemnon had been murdered by Clytemnestra on his return from the war, but

since Clytemnestra was not his blood, but just his wife, the Fury had not been called to avenge him. A man chooses his wife, and thus cannot find her actions against him incomprehensible.

A nondescript sea scene hung askew on the wall of the living room, an unnecessarily coy symbol of violent events. One of the off-white armchairs, part of a coordinated set that included the curtains, was toppled over, and the vast TV in the walnut cabinet was shattered. The vacuum of the CRT had sucked most of the broken glass into itself, and the oatmeal cut-pile carpet was clean, except for the bloodstains. The victim had died watching TV, perhaps even a local report of his own recent activities.

Aegisthus lay on his back on the living room floor. He wore a steroid-driven paramilitary police uniform, a large holster, and insignia of iridescent tantalum, a subtle sign of his ancestry, and perhaps a claim of legitimacy. That claim had done him little good. After his assistance in the murder of his cousin Agamemnon, Aegisthus had pushed Argos around for years, his power derived from Clytemnestra.

The security walls, the checkpoints, the tire-busting spikes at the entrance -- these kept the outside world at bay, but did nothing to defend against internal tyranny, whose takeover was made easier by isolation. No one had struggled too hard against it. He'd reduced greens fees.

A young police lieutenant, his uniform already stripped of the more egregious insignia, seemed unconcerned by his one-time commander's fate. He knelt by Aegisthus's pulled-in right hand, tilted the wide, sightless face first this way, then that, and talked quietly into a tiny tape recorder. He had not noticed the Fury's entrance. He glanced occasionally at the open front door, to where the reporters stood, one or another of them pointing a camera at the only activity visible: the intent policeman doing his job.

He moved down the body, careful to stay in view of the door. Aegisthus had suffered as many knife blows as Clytemnestra. Orestes was clearly fit, and not a man to make the minimum necessary effort. Aegisthus had damage to every major organ, with an almost mathematical delivery of thrusts. He was a heavy, fleshy man, and it couldn't have been easy to find the pancreas, say. The Fury leaned forward to listen in on the police lieutenant's forensic observations.

"...then, saut, the shallots in the clarified butter," the lieutenant murmured into his tape recorder. "Take the shallots out and deglaze the pan with the white wine. Reduce the sauce by a half, and put the shallots back in, along with the mushrooms. Pour the sauce --"

For the first time, he saw the Fury, and clicked off his recorder. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to step back behind the police line."

The Fury leaned over farther. He blinked, then covered his face in horror, as the pus that came from her eyes dripped down into his face, burning and sending its rank stench into his nostrils.

He crawled to the partial shelter of the overturned armchair and held on to the legs for comfort. "No, no, no...it wasn't my fault, I was loyal, I did my job." His voice was muffled as he rubbed at the ooze on his face. "But now the Olympians are here, it's out of my hands, don't you think I'd do something if I could? Don't take me, I don't deserve it."

The Fury stepped over Aegisthus's outstretched legs and walked down the hall. The master bathroom was the most dramatic part of the house. It was all dark tile, mirrors, gold-plated taps and nozzles. It was here that Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, just as he was stepping into the tub for a long-awaited bath. That case had been hushed up by an earlier administration, and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus had been permitted to run Argos for years. That reign was over. The new Olympians clearly had other deputies in mind.

The images of the blood spattered tile had been widely reproduced, though without comment. No news service had been sure whether Agamemnon's murder was laudable or vile, and so the images had remained just abstract patterns, like a wallpaper design. Every square inch had been photographed before a quick hosing had returned the bathroom to its pristine state. A major advantage of modern bathrooms was their ease of cleaning.

Two workmen with paint-spattered caps were in the bathroom, spreading clear plastic sheets on the walls.

"Over to the left a little bit...no, too far. Now down just a hair...what kind of hair? Don't get me started. Did I tell you what she made me do last week? You wonder why I had to talk like I'd had a root canal all morning? Well --"

He sucked in his breath when the Fury entered, then had to cough.

The plastic sheet bore the pattern of bloodstains from Agamemnon's murder. Attached to the clean black tile, it brought the room back to that day. The other worker, unconcerned with the Fury's presence, calmly taped the top of the sheet. It matched exactly, with the straight lines of blood running just down the white grout between the tiles, forming a red-brown grid at the bottom of the wall.

"So that we can remember why," the gabby one said.

Clytemnestra remembered why. In her head, the Fury bore the entire toxic history of the House of Atreus, a stack of murder and violence so heavy that it would never be moved or sorted out. But the Fury could already see the Olympian solution. They would repaint the structure and turn it into art, a subject to employ television writers, advertisers, and directors. Agamemnon's father, Atreus, had served up his brother Thyestes's own children to him at a feast. Aegisthus, another of Thyestes's sons, had finally killed Atreus, only to be supplanted by Agamemnon. But these were merely the last chapters of an endless bloody tale, stretching back past Pelops to the ancient ancestor Tantalus.

In his last moments, Oedipus had warned her of what would happen. Rather than bloody, still-dripping crimes, these could be turned to stories, with Orestes's murder of Clytemnestra merely the last. But the Fury could taste Clytemnestra's death in the back of her throat. And despite all the Olympians, she would soothe that taste with the sweet flow of Orestes's blood. She had no interest in stories.

She could just see the tips of Aegisthus's polished boots from where she stood. And for the first time in her existence, she asked herself a question. Could a man who murdered the driver of another car in a foolish traffic dispute, as Oedipus had murdered, all unknowing, his father Laius, ever be worthy of worship? She still heard his words.

Disturbed by her musings, and dismayed by her own distraction in coming to Agamemnon's house, she swept back out past the assembled reporters, who were all now clustered around the police lieutenant.

"We have all suffered long enough," he told them. "It was time for a change." The shiny lenses of cameras and videocams repeated countless distorted reflections of his face. A hundred whispered duplicates of his voice recorded themselves on the spinning tapes.

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Clytemnestra had been murdered on the largest of Argos's three golf courses. It was the only real public space in Argos: the community centers were unused, and all the stores where the inhabitants shopped were in the strip malls on outside roads. Clytemnestra had just been teeing off. Typically, she had been at the blue tees, the men's, adding ten yards to her drive.

"It's not as if nothing grows there." A groundskeeper was taking his lunch at the spot, in the shade of an intensively watered sycamore. "Nothing would be okay, we'd just put in a sand trap, move the tee over a bit, difficult but no real problem. No, people say that, but they don't actually come here to look." He vaguely held out a silver thermos, not really wanting her to accept, then poured himself another cup of lemonade. He swirled it in his hand to hear the cold ice click.

The place where Clytemnestra had died was barren, with a few remnants of dead grass around the edges. Extravagantly spiked cacti sprouted from the dry soil. The gray-brown surface was already covered with miniature black stacks of cryptogams, the dry microscopic plants that held the desert soil together. For all the efforts of the green grass to make it seem dead, the desert was deeply alive. That was what made it so frightening.

"A hazard's supposed to be clean sand, not this stuff. It's a reminder they don't need, and no one wants to rip his Sansabelts on a damn Joshua Tree while digging holes with his wedge. And who do they blame? You got it."

The groundskeeper had not gotten up with the Fury's arrival. He was an old man, brown and sagging from years of the desert sun, and wore the trim blue uniform of the Argos Golf Course.

"I served with the old man, you know. In the war. Only saw him from a distance. Never up close. I was at Aulis...." He tried to hurry past the thought. "I always did my duty. So did Agamemnon. That's what got him into all the trouble." He peered up at the Fury. "That's what I like about you. You do your damn job, and don't jaw about it."

The Fury didn't move, and he shifted position so that she gave him a little extra shade, as if she was just some sort of topographic feature. Most people feared the Fury, but there was no reason for it. The Fury was not arbitrary. He had done his duty, lived well, and had nothing to fear.

"The boy had to kill her, you know. He really did. Things couldn't go on the way they were. Not that I don't understand her. Boy, I know why she had to do what she did. Like I told you, I was there." He looked past the Fury at the mountains. "I was there, waiting with everybody else. Aulis AFB was never meant to hold so many troops. We were triple stacked in what barracks there were, camped out in the hangars, piled up all over the place, cooking in the sun. We were getting sick. And mad. We wanted war, not waiting around. Of course, if we'd been given a choice later, we might have changed our minds."

The golf course was also the town graveyard, the Fury now saw. Tiny stone squares were everywhere, almost invisible in the grass. Each one bore a name, a location, and a bar code for inventory control. She looked over the names while the groundskeeper spoke. TROY was the most frequent place of death.

The groundskeeper was almost crying. "We had to go. We had to. The old man knew his job, his responsibilities. The new administration didn't want to take over the useless projects from the old, and Artemis demanded...well, you know what it was." The old man's voice took on the sing-song tones of a long-rehearsed but never-told story. "Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, Clytemnestra's daughter, had to be sacrificed. It's in the regs, how you do it. Eighteen paragraphs of it. They raised her up on the rack in the repair garage, cut her throat. She looked around, meeting each of us in the eyes, and there were hundreds of us there. As her blood fell on the oil-stained concrete, the C-5As were finally able to start their engines. They thundered up into the smoky sky behind us. You shake when those engines go, all the way to your heart. But none of us turned to look. Each of us looked at her, remembering her eyes, the way she'd looked at us. Her hair hung down over the end of the lift, the ends trailed in the oil sump. Then they formed us up, and we went off to the war." He passed a hand in front of his eyes, clearing the scene. "Clytemnestra never forgave any of us for that. I could feel it when she saw me mowing the grass. I was

an Argos employee. She wasn't going to kill me. But when it came to Agamemnon...well, as I said, I know why she did it. Did him."

The groundskeeper looked off across the course at the distant wall.

"He didn't go back, you know. After he killed his mother. Orestes didn't go back into town...."

That was as much as he was going to give her, and it was enough. She walked off across the grass. Behind the club house, an arroyo dug down under the wall, passing through a high concrete culvert. Teenagers had cut through the grating with torches and bent the corrugated iron bars back. The culvert itself was filled with broken bottles and old cans, blackened in ritual fires. Beyond was the eternal desert, sere and serene in the light of late afternoon.

The soft sand left from the last cloudburst was marked by a single line of footprints.

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The mobile homes in the park had been there so long that they were almost invisible under spreading vines, untrimmed shrubs, abandoned leaning bathtubs. Strings of Chinese lanterns hung above picnic tables. The street sides of yards were marked by truck tires painted white, filled with flowers. And everywhere were the mystic silver globes on their stands, sign of the cryptic Orphism of country folk. In each of the trailers a TV glowed, many tuned to the same channel. Some joke on an old sitcom caused a thunder of canned laughter through the trailer park, like a coming storm.

A burly man with a yellow beard sat at a picnic table in work- stained coveralls, several drain pans in front of him on the green-checked plastic tablecloth. He scrubbed carburetor parts with an old toothbrush dipped in solvent, shifting them from one pan into another as he decided they were clean enough.

"If I had known, I never would have let them into the house," he said. He held a needle valve up to the light, shook his head, and discarded it and its housing into a drain pan with a flick of his thumb.

"Oh, your fine house." A woman in a dragon-embroidered house robe appeared in the trailer door. She was beautiful, with bitter lines to her face. Her dark hair was long and wild, and her lipstick was smeared on her lips, probably deliberately, with a thumb. "Orestes and Pylades. Their hands were so...clean. So soft. I noticed it as soon as they arrived. Do you really think they wanted to come in here?"

She leaned against the jamb and crossed her arms under her breasts. She irritably examined the kitchen witch that spun slowly under the lintel. One elegant leg stretched out of her robe. She wore velvet high-heeled house pumps. This was Electra, Orestes's sister, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter. She had been compelled to marry the auto mechanic while Aegisthus and Clytemnestra ruled Argos. His name was Waldemar, and it was clear from the way he looked at her that he loved Electra desperately.

"His hands aren't clean any more, that's for damn sure." Waldemar took a certain gloomy satisfaction in that. He looked up from his work and saw the Fury where she stood, silent in the road. Her presence didn't seem to surprise him. Silently, he gestured her to sit on the bench opposite him. She did not move.

"He's not here, damn you!" Electra teetered in the trailer door on her high heels, but did not quite dare to fly at the Fury.

"True enough," Waldemar said. "Didn't come by this way, far as I know. Only on the way in, on the way to Argos." He shook his head. "If I'd known what those two butt-heads were up to...well, Pylades is in jail now, though he's got a fancy lawyer and will be out pretty soon, smart word says. He was just

helping out a friend, after all. What could anyone do? Want some chili? It's what we're having for dinner. Out of a can, though, I should warn you. Electra's a sweet thing but she's never been much of a cook...."

"Stop chattering with her," Electra said. "You know you're just doing it to bug me."

"Well, you got your chance to talk with those TV guys." For the first time, the Fury noticed the tracks of the media vehicles all over the grass. A shrub had been broken next door by a van backing up, several of the trees had clamp marks on their bark where cameras had been attached, and the flowers were turning back to the glow of the setting sun, having been temporarily seduced by the brighter sun of the TV lights.

"I couldn't get a word in edgewise." Waldemar had finished his carburetor and set the drain pans in a neat row against the side of the trailer.

"Oh!" Electra bit back the retort that he wasn't important enough to be listened to, though it hung, almost visible, in the air.

The TV was on inside. War scenes flickered on the screen: explosions, miles-long lines of refugees, burning cities, tanks roaring across fields and smashing through the corners of farmhouses already tilting with age. Agamemnon was alive again, sitting behind a table and stabbing a pointer at a chart covered with symbols. He was a bland functionary of death, not a warrior, and this made him sad. Somewhere, hidden deep, never reflecting the light of day, was a bronze helmet with a bobbing plume, a helmet he had never been permitted to wear. On the TV he was suddenly a tragic figure, unfairly removed from a life in which he had never really participated. His beseeching eyes looked out toward Electra, Waldemar, and the Fury. In the corner of the screen was the tiny outline of a running figure: the logo of Orestes in Flight, symbol of this news coverage.

The scene cut to a vast traffic interchange crammed with cars, all stalled with their windows shattered, bodies hanging out of the door and dangling over the railings, Agamemnon's great victory in the war, then to a perfume commercial. Beautiful hands with long fingers delicately opened a crystal bottle.

The Fury kept staring at Electra. It was starting to make her nervous. The Fury stood in her long dark coat like a funeral monument, an old one, something ancient, put up because of the real fear that the body beneath might rise up if not held fast by the weight of stone. Flies buzzed in the heavy air.

"It wasn't my fault," Electra gasped. "I didn't have anything..that is, I didn't know, I didn't know what Orestes was going to do!"

Waldemar stood and put himself between the Fury and Electra, though the look on his face revealed that he had no idea of what he could do if the Fury chose to act. The Fury knew that Clytemnestra never truly loved Electra, who was too much Agamemnon's daughter, while she dearly loved Orestes, and Electra knew it too.

"If you had any brains, you'd be able to figure it out for yourself," Electra jeered, as a way of excusing her fear, her betrayal. "And I can tell you because it doesn't matter. He's on his way to Delphi. Good luck with getting him once he's there."

Delphi. Apollo's home base. They weren't making it easy.

"Climb back into your hole!" Electra hooted behind the Fury as she walked off. "You've bitten off more than you can chew."

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Orestes stopped in an ice cream shop for a soda. The place was decorated in a deliberately Olde-Tyme

style, with ceiling fans over the curlicue tables and chairs, and a picture of a gentleman in a straw boater, wearing what looked suspiciously like a butcher's apron.

Orestes was just reaching for the large paper cup when the Fury came up behind him. He tried to be cool, to pretend that her presence didn't matter at all to him, but his hand shook as he tried to pay the bored high school girl behind the counter, and he dropped the change.

"I...I think I'm going to be sick." He ran for the bathrooms in back. There was a door there, leading to the gravel parking lot. The screen door flopped loudly.

The Fury scooped up the change and handed it to the girl behind the counter. "Thanks." As she turned indifferently back to the magazine she had been reading, the Fury recognized where she was. A rack of newspapers displayed to one side said Thebes Advertiser.

Thebes was the home of Oedipus, the Fury's last victim, the one who had come closest to destroying her, and the one whose voice still spoke to her. The counter girl did not recognize the executioner of her great ruler, never having seen her on TV, or in the magazine she had now turned her attention to. Her eyes were as blue and vacant as the sky, and the Fury had the sudden urge to remove her, this innocent and chance-come-upon young woman, as guiltier than Electra, Orestes, Agamemnon, or Clytemnestra, to drag her screaming through the streets and sacrifice her in the main square beneath the monuments to old wars.

The Fury dug her nails into the counter. She had never before thought of killing anyone but the one designated for punishment. Indifference and ignorance were not crimes, not to her. They weren't. The formica peeled off its fiberboard backing with a sound like dry leaves. The girl looked up from her magazine, annoyed.

"Hey, is there something else?" As she looked more closely, fear seized her face. Her skin tightened and her thick pancake makeup seemed about to crack and fall to the floor.

It was that fear that saved her, and saved the Fury from an impossible swerving from duty. Some trace of her old power was still left her.

She left the shop and strolled the streets, seeing the scene of Oedipus's history. Thebes had a pleasant green, and rows of old brick buildings, many of them now gone. The building, she thought, where Jocasta had hanged herself, and Oedipus had put out his eyes with a pin from her dress, was a smooth expanse of improbably white gravel, as was the old hotel at which Tiresias had stayed. Thebes was determined to have no memory of the great. Perhaps the girl was not alone to blame for her ignorance.

The Fury walked past the strip malls and video rental stores at the edge of town, and found the remains of the Sphinx where they lay, on a bluff above the creek, near a railway embankment. The iron-heavy lion paws lay embedded in the soil, their claws extended, as if the Sphinx had grabbed at the sky as she fell. The wings leaned against the trees, most of their feathers gone, the skin beneath shredded into thin strips. The serpent tail was just visible in the brown, tannic water of the creek. The head with its face, austere and beautiful, lay half toppled, kept in its place by tree roots partially washed out of the soil. Soon it would loosen and fall into the water, to be buried in the soft green mud of the creek bottom. The Fury looked at the gently smiling enigma, now disfigured with spray-painted graffiti, and wondered about the true story of her death. For the Sphinx had been, like her, a member of the Old Service.

Surely an answer to that silly riddle about the ages of man had not been enough to cause her suicide. The Sphinx had had an infinite number of riddles, and no man, not even Oedipus, whose entire life was a riddle, could have answered any of them. The Fury looked up into the sky. Afternoon cumulus clouds stacked themselves up until they hit the top of the air and turned into thunderheads. The Sphinx had flown

high up into the clouds, until she was nothing but a speck, then had hurtled downward, screaming, and smashed to the ground here, killing trees and sending stones flying.

Perhaps Oedipus had revealed the future to her, as it was slowly being revealed to the Fury, and the Sphinx had realized that she had no place in it, could have no place in it. So she had, by her own will, ignored the rules of the Old Service and destroyed herself.

And it was Oedipus who had started uncovering that future to the Fury. She remembered the last time she had seen him, at the suburb of Colonus, near Athens. She had stood on a parking lot in front of an old brick warehouse, its former windows gone, sealed with paler, shoddier bricks than those of the elaborate facade. A stretch of green-painted freeway had hemmed them in close, crowded with motionless trucks rumbling and belching smoke, their drivers featureless figures, uncaring of the drama that went on below them.

Oedipus had left his daughter/sister Antigone at the rusted chain-link fence and shuffled forward on his deformed feet, the feet through which his father Laius had put a steel pin when he learned the prophecy that his son would eventually kill him. His blank eye sockets seemed to stare piercingly at the Fury, who had not even had to pursue him. He had, instead, come to her.

"Well," he said, as he felt the tips of her rough fingernails reaching out for him, "I feel myself becoming a story." And thus he lived, long after he should have been dead, and would influence the thoughts of those yet unborn.

Corn fields, vivid green, thriving unnaturally under the hot sun, stretched out on the other side of the creek. Beyond them, on the two-lane blacktop, the Fury could see the figure of Orestes, heading toward Delphi, his shape deformed by the hot air rising from the pavement until he flickered in and out of existence. He was desperate, fearing doom, yet his gait still retained something of the football star's insouciance. The Fury looked at him with Clytemnestra's eyes, with mixed rage and proud love, as an archer might look at a fresh-shot arrow flying heartbreakingly at exactly the wrong target.

The Fury got to her feet.

#

The clouds crashed to earth with the coming of night. Tree branches creaked in the high wind. The Fury walked on the edge of the road, rain sluicing down her coat. Glowing yellow windows floated in the darkness. A spotlit sign on a fake-rustic stone wall said PARNASSUS. For the first time in her memory, she was tired. It was a desperate, terrifying weariness, one that spelled her eventual doom. Cars whipped their headlights across her, then sped on, sliding their wheels on the wet leaves, desperate to leave her behind.

She stepped off the road and waded across a swirling drainage ditch. Apollo's house, Delphi, sat on its impossible width of smooth lawn just the other side of a thin stretch of what was left of the forest. The house was gigantic in the darkness. The Fury walked up on the flagstone patio and peered in through a window. She could see the monitory red blinking of the security system as it waited for her. The rain drove heavily on her, and she felt that she would slip and sink into the patio stones, to be found in the morning as nothing but a few shreds of dark, stinking cloth. Apollo would laugh and rake her into a Hefty bag.

She worked her way along the slope along which the house was built, seeking downward with the water running through the grass.

The Olympians were new, but they always built on the old. They lacked the courage, or perhaps the

imagination, to raise their proud structures on virgin soil. She thought she might...she slid down the mud to the lowest level of the house. Sure enough, Apollo had used a preexisting foundation, massive blocks that had once supported a wooden barn. She pulled the old metal-bound door open and slipped in under the house.

She could smell the animals that had once been kept here, the cattle and sheep, lowing and baaing, knowing that they were bound for sacrifice. The ground was still littered with the rotten remains of the ties and hobbles that had held them.

Moving blindly, the Fury worked her way up the stairs out of the subcellar, into the upper reaches of the house. There was no sound save the gentle whirring of the ventilation system, and the crash of the rain outside. The carpet was soft and silent under her feet.

Orestes slept in an upstairs bedroom, face down on the bed, his arms thrown around a vast pillow. The Fury ran her nails down his back. He muttered and shifted, but did not wake up. Incredibly tired, the Fury lay down on the bed next to him and went to sleep too.

#

"You're asleep?" The Fury stirred and blinked her encrusted eyes. "I didn't even know you could sleep. And what does that leave me? I'm dead, and those I've killed are down here with me. I am dishonored even in the grave. They mock me. My heart is full of holes...look, I can put my fingers right inside of it." The Fury whimpered at the lash of Clytemnestra's voice. "And Orestes is gone already. He's got connections, he knows he won't suffer. Not while you're snoozing. Will you wake up?"

The Fury snorted and jerked, finally coming awake. The bed sheets were bunched up around her, and Orestes had disappeared. The shade of Clytemnestra stood at the foot of the bed, seeping blood. She held the shreds of her skin apart to show her heart. "You lay down right next to him," Clytemnestra shrieked. "You went to sleep. Here in Apollo's house, like it's some sort of rest stop."

The Fury looked down at where her nails protruded from her sleeves. The white tips seemed to glow in the dark bedroom. By now they should have been encrusted with Orestes's blood. She was black and hollow. She no longer understood what it was she was trying to do. Oedipus had cursed her. Her old rules did not compel her any longer.

"Go! Get up, and go. I don't care what gods you have to face. You have my vengeance on your tongue, and you cannot swallow until you have Orestes. Go, you dismal thing, so that I can lie on my stone without feeling the sting of contempt from those other miserable dead, who mock me for the way I died."

The Fury stumbled to her feet. Clytemnestra's shade vanished with a last anguished shriek. Bright sunlight slanted through the window past the carefully tied-back curtains. As softly as she had come, the Fury went back down the stairs.

The house was packed with offerings. Stacks of stereo receivers, microwaves, CD players, computers, Cuisinarts, many in their original packages, piled up to the ceiling. More exotic donations: ion implanters, CAT scanners, auto emission diagnostics, precision gyroscopes from B-1 bombers, high-energy lasers, stood in places of honor under the overhead lights. A stack of VCRs and gigantic color TV sets made up one wall of the living room. Each TV showed a repeating tape loop of an honored donor to Delphi, scenes of domesticity and business, an eternal repetition that earned Apollo's blessing. The Fury ducked under the wheels of the titanium mountain bikes that hung from the ceiling and went out the front door.

Apollo polished a bright-green BMW M5 in the circular driveway in front of the house. He spread wax on it with fierce intensity, then buffed it so that he could admire his own face in the finish.

Apollo saw the Fury, and snapped his polishing cloth at her contemptuously.

"Get out," he said. "And stop persecuting Orestes. He's under my protection. He's only done what's necessary. You operate by primitive rules, like a flatworm, so I don't expect you to understand. Leave it up to us in the new administration to deal with the subtleties."

The Olympian was crisply handsome, with flowing golden hair, bright blue eyes, a cleft chin. He'd had opponents flayed alive and broken a lover's skull with a flung discus, but he now made the law.

"You don't care anything about the life people want to lead, do you? You don't want to understand the reasons they have for what they do. If you looked into their hearts you wouldn't be so obsessed with enforcing your obsolete regulations." The Fury did not respond. The pleading left Apollo's voice and his face grew hard. "You have no idea what you're up against. A heat-seeking missile could take you off the road like a bug. Zeus can hit you with a restraining order and forbid you to come within ten yards of anyone who has murdered a parent or sibling. You'll feel those barriers against your face." The blood flowed close under his pale, perfect skin. "You'll burn like the foul fat drained to the bottom of a crematorium."

The Fury gained strength from Apollo's contempt, though even that was a defeat, for she had never before had to worry about her resolve. She rested her hand on the enameled fender of his BMW. The paint blackened and blistered, the metal beneath corroded in an instant. The car groaned as some strut deep inside failed. The front wheel tilted, loose.

Apollo, one hand on the tire to keep it from falling, shaking with rage, let her walk down his driveway and out of Parnassus.

#

"All right, all right." Orestes stood on the buckled asphalt of the parking lot, raising his voice to be heard above the din of the motionless trucks on the expressway. "I'm here. You're here. Let's get on with it."

He was guilty, ragged, near defeat, but he still bore irritating remnants of his frat-boy arrogance. The Fury stared at him, feeling Clytemnestra's reluctant love for him, her only son, Agamemnon's son, joyful in youth, proud in manhood.

She did not move. Why did the bricked-in windows of the warehouse in Colonus rise up again behind her? Why the green-painted expressway, the trucks apparently still unmoved, their drivers embalmed monarchs untoppled from their thrones? Here, where she now stood, Oedipus had gladly met his end. The dark columns of the expressway stood by her like tree trunks. The smoky sun did not touch her now. She stood in shade, and did not reach out to enfold Orestes. Within her, Clytemnestra gave one last anguished cry.

"You can't touch me, can you?" Orestes was wearily proud. "I did what I had to do. Apollo and Athena recognize that. Their law will take it into account."

The Fury's only argument was herself, tall in her black coat, her hair crunchy with dried blood, her eyes seeping poisonous pus, her fingernails sharp and ready to pull the heart out of Orestes's chest.

But that argument was no longer sufficient. The cool shade of the steel-and-brick grove was banished by the glare of spotlights hoisted up on gantries by cursing, overall-clad grips with TV station logos smeared across their backs. A camera floated serenely by overhead on the end of its crane.

Torn newspapers spun across the pavement in a vicious prop wash. Athena strode into the lot to the

thunder of the helicopters. Over her hair she wore a CBW hood. It was thrown up casually, as if nerve-gas protective wear was in this year. The eyeports gazed lugubriously, like the eyes of a basset hound, and the huge cylinder of the air filter bobbed above her forehead.

"You had your chance," she said sadly to the Fury. "But you thought too much, waited too long. I'm afraid you've finally lost jurisdiction. Here." She gestured with a brochure. "Take this. I think you can use it."

Behind her television vans jockeyed for position along the curb. Police had blocked the ends of the street, and it was criss-crossed with power cables. Workers finished affixing white columns to the facade of the building opposite. Lit from the side, the Areopagus Courthouse looked perfect. TV anchors stood in front of it and talked earnestly into the lenses of their cameras, setting the scene for the viewers sitting in their rooms at home.

The brochure suddenly in the Fury's hand showed a picture of a green shade: the Sacred Grove of the Eumenides, the last home of the Fury tamed. There she could rest, and reassure the Athenians that their world made sense. Human beings were close to inert and not given to transformations for the sake of mere art, save it was backed with gush of fire straight from hell. The Olympians would use her sticky, blood-covered claws, as they had used the willful sin of Oedipus before her, to give their feeble stories weight.

Athena, who had allowed the Fury on this last futile mission precisely in order to finally defeat her, escorted Orestes into the glare of the lights, her arm around his shoulders, and faced the barrage of questions. The Fury turned from the glow of the monitors for fear of seeing herself, though she knew it was worthless. She had met her end when she listened to Oedipus. It had taken this long just to realize that she no longer had a reason to exist.

Orestes ascended the long steps of the white-columned courthouse, accompanied by the gray mass of his lawyers, their briefcases gleaming like polished shields, and disappeared through the high bronze doors.

The Fury turned and crawled her slow way into the deep cellars beneath the bricked-up warehouse, there to lose herself among the foundation stones with Oedipus's shade. The columns of the expressway were to be her Sacred Grove, where those who sought justice, few enough in an age that preferred mercy, could make their way to feel the goddess's sharp nails against their souls.

END

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