

LIES
WE
SING
TO THE
SEA

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for mum, for everything



CONTENT WARNING

Please be aware that *Lies We Sing to the Sea* includes content that may be distressing to some readers, including violence, death, graphic injury, non-graphic sexual assault and suicide.

“Death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall bless you. All that I have said will come true.”

Homer, *The Odyssey*
Translated by Samuel Butler, 1900



ONE

ANOTHER FEAT OF GODS AND HEROES

Leto

A SILENT MAID BRAIDED LETO'S hair into an elaborate crown for her execution.

Her knees smarted as she knelt on the rough flagstone floor of the little room. Her arms, pale but for the bruises already blooming there, protested and cramped against the rope that bound them—wrist to wrist—behind her back.

The maid pulled Leto's head sideways and pushed in yet another pin, scraping the sharp metal against her scalp and drawing thick strands of dark hair taut. Leto gritted her teeth and blinked hard, furiously avoiding the gaze of the hulking guard standing watch at the only door. He was fully armoured, a sword strapped at his hip and his features obscured by a shining silver helmet.

Leto fixed her eyes instead on the flickering light of the fireplace. The scent of the burning incense hung in a choking fog and filled the room with a close, oppressive heat. Sweat ran in rivulets down her neck—over the terrible

black scales that had risen on the skin there, marking her for slaughter—and disappeared beneath the neckline of her gown. The carefully arranged curls about her face were already damp and frizzy.

Some sacrifice. It was a bitter thought. Perhaps Poseidon would be so disgusted that he would simply send her back.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the maid—her mouth full of pins, brow furrowed—empty a handful of tiny white flowers from a linen-lined basket. She checked each carefully for crushed petals, then began to weave them deftly through the plaits at Leto's brow.

It was the first time someone had done her hair in years.

There was little occasion for intricate hairstyles, anyway. Leto's mother had died when she was ten and, since her father had followed a few years later, Leto had been forced to make her own money. The work had not been hard to come by at first—Ithaca's common folk still flocked to the house of the last Royal Oracle—but she did not have her mother's talent for it, and the few, brief snatches of the future that Apollo granted her were infuriatingly ambiguous. Her remaining customers were those that could be satisfied by spectacle, by the theatrical slaughter of a rabbit or the wild rolling of eyes that Leto had soon perfected. There weren't many of them, but they paid enough silver to keep her from starving.

As for her hair, a ribbon to keep the longer strands from her face normally sufficed, though she supposed it would not stop it getting caught in a hangman's noose.

This braid, she reasoned, briefly surprised by her own practicality, *will do a much better job.*

A sharp knock on the door broke the near silence of the room. The maid started and snatched her hands away from Leto, glancing nervously towards the guard. He hadn't moved an inch.

"Quickly." The guard spoke for the first time since Leto's arrival. His voice was low, gravelly and strangely flat. "It is almost time."

The maid nodded and reached for another handful of flowers.

The hairs on Leto's arms prickled. Under the smooth material of the ceremonial gown they had dressed her in, her heart quickened and fluttered like a trapped bird. Something heavy and unpleasant settled itself like a great pressure on her chest, squeezing her lungs, hitching her breath.

Shuttered into this unfurnished room, it had been impossible to keep track of time. The sound of birdsong and the first rays of light streaming in through the tiny window had told Leto that the sun had risen, but, beyond that, nothing. It might have still been early morning.

Now, though— *It is almost time*. She knew exactly what it was almost time for. The sacrifices took place at noon, when the equinox sun had reached its peak in the sky.

It was not dying she was afraid of, for she had long steeled herself against the idea of it, but what lay beyond.

In her seventeen years, she had led a decidedly unremarkable life. Some of the more superstitious townsfolk still whispered of her mystical powers, it was true, but Leto had vanquished no monsters, thwarted no criminals, bested no cheats. She had only been kissed *twice*. The afterlife waiting for her would

not be an unkind one—for there was little to recommend her to damnation—but she would certainly not find herself in the company of brave heroes like Perseus, Heracles or Odysseus. She would not see her mother again.

Apollo had not even deigned to grant her a vision of her own demise—the night before the guards had arrived to claim her, she had dreamed of a girl with golden hair and eyes like the sea.

Her thoughts of greatness were vain and stupid, of course. Still, Leto had always hoped, in the way little girls do, listening open-mouthed to tales of heroic deeds, that she would one day be remembered as extraordinary.

She could still feel the prickle of scales round her throat, the mark that had appeared mere days ago and brought it all to a lurching halt. The truth was plain to see; Poseidon had chosen her. There was no escaping it. No one would remember her now.

For a moment, she wondered which of her neighbours had noticed the scales, had sold her to the royal guard. She didn't blame them—her fate was already sealed, and at least the bounty would give them a few more silvers for bread.

The knock came again, louder this time, as the maid forced in a final pin.

“For gods' sake,” snapped the guard. “Are you finished?”

“One last thing,” said the maid. This time, when she reached into the basket, she pulled out a leather cord knotted roughly into a loop. From its centre there dangled a tiny silver coin. The shape was instantly familiar. An obol. “For Charon,” said the maid solemnly.

Leto had been expecting it, but still, the sight of the metal set her stomach rolling. The dead were customarily buried with money; this single obol would serve as payment to the ferryman to bear her soul across the Styx and the Acheron. Her *dead* soul.

The maid carefully eased the necklace over Leto's braids. She felt it fall underneath the gown, to rest in the hollow between her breasts. She bit her lip; the metal was cold, startlingly so, where it lay under the folds of pale fabric.

The guard scoffed as the maid straightened, fumbling with her basket of pins and battered petals. "Organise your things. I will escort you out." Perhaps he wasn't the superstitious type. He eyed the leather cord with disdain and, when he caught Leto watching him, flashed her a sly, mocking grin.

Leto shuddered. As she did so, her eyes caught on a sudden reflection of sunlight. A reflection, she realised, that stemmed from the flat of a shining blade. Obscured from the guard's view by the yellow fabric of the maid's chiton was a pot of dressmaking pins and a great pair of bronze shears.

Leto's pulse surged as she gazed at the shears, hardly daring to believe her luck. How the maid had missed them, she didn't know. But the blades looked new: sharp and shining and perfect for cutting through troublesome restraints. The gods had handed her a lifeline at the eleventh hour.

"Come on, then," grunted the guard to the maid. Leto's head snapped up again. "Is that everything?"

Leto's eyes darted between them. As soon as the maid stepped forward—or, gods forbid, turned back—either she

or the guard would notice the dropped shears.

Leto made a split-second decision.

She pitched herself forward on to the shears, concealing them beneath the masses of her skirts. “Don’t leave me!” she cried out. “Don’t let me die!”

The maid, with distress plastered over her huge, doll-like features, turned and flinched at the sight of Leto on the ground. “I—” she began, reaching towards Leto.

“Please!” shrieked Leto, thrashing her body side to side. If the maid got too close, she would almost certainly spot the forgotten shears. Leto willed wild tears into her eyes and bared her teeth like a cornered dog. “I don’t want to die!”

The maid made a whimpering noise.

“All right. That’s enough.” The guard abandoned his post and covered the distance towards them in two massive strides. “You—” he slapped a heavy hand down on to the maid’s shoulder— “out. Wait in the corridor. I’ll deal with this.”

She didn’t need asking twice. Clasping the basket of flowers to her chest, she fled.

“And you.” The guard regarded Leto dispassionately. “Pull yourself together,” he snapped. “Have some dignity.”

Leto made pointed eye contact and let out another melodramatic howl of sorrow.

The guard made a noise of disgust. “Very well, then,” he said. “Stay like that.” He turned, kicking up a cloud of dust from the half-swept floor, and marched from the room. The door snapped shut behind him, and Leto was left alone.



There had been a time earlier, while the maid had been meticulously tailoring the white ceremonial gown to Leto's hollow frame, when Leto had familiarised herself with her restraints. For some minutes she had occupied herself with rolling her bound elbows and wrists experimentally, searching for a position which didn't set them prickling painfully.

After this time—during which she had succeeded only in contorting herself further—she had resigned herself to discomfort. The ropes were simply too thick, the knots too tight and elaborate.

But now, apologising silently to the maid, who would doubtless be punished for her oversight, she exploded into action. Or, more accurately, though it wasn't quite the daring escape she would have preferred, she shuffled, rolled, and twisted herself painfully into action.

The hardest part was getting the shears into the right place. Her hands were sweaty and clammy. They slipped and fumbled on the handles, sending them clattering to the floor more than once. The slightest of sounds in the corridor beyond the door left her frozen in place, holding her breath and counting down until the footsteps faded or the scurry of mice quieted.

At long last, she managed to ease the blades into position against her bonds. She worked her hands carefully back and forth and felt the ties begin to loosen. The sound of each thread breaking was like music to her ears, the most beautiful she had ever heard.

At last, the thickest part of the rope was sawn through. With more strength than she knew she possessed, Leto tore

the last stray threads apart. The bindings broke with a snap and fell away. They had barely hit the ground before she had staggered upright, almost tripping over the too long gown as it pooled like spilt milk over her bare feet. Her legs, tired from kneeling for so long, shook and nearly buckled underneath her. Disorientated, and completely devoid of a real weapon or plan, she staggered towards the door, then came up short at the sound of footsteps on stone outside.

Right. She turned and lurched towards the window, the light filtering through it beckoning her forward.

It was not yet so far into spring that crops were sprouting and the goats were producing milk by the barrel. The winters always left Leto with a perpetual knot of hunger in her belly, but today she was grateful for it. Had her slight frame been any larger, she would have stuck fast in the narrow window. Instead—twisting and turning and scraping her hips so closely to the stone that blood bloomed on her skirts there—she managed to make it through, depositing herself on a patch of sparse grass and dry soil. She struggled to her feet and peered up at the great mass of stone that had been her prison.

When the Ithacan guard had first come for her, with splintering force on the door of her house in the early hours of the morning, it had been dark outside—and they'd blindfolded her for good measure—so her sleep-addled mind had been unable to follow the many twists and turns they had taken through her home village of Vathi, then out on to the sprawling hills that surrounded it. She had assumed she was being kept in some remote dungeon, some squalid cave

where the rest of Ithaca could forget all about her. But she recognised where she was immediately.

Blinking against the harsh sunlight, Leto looked grimly up at Vathi's northern guard tower. Then, her heart sinking unpleasantly into her stomach at the sound of a muffled clatter, she turned to look at the group of armoured soldiers loitering on the ground in front of her. The soldiers looked back with identical expressions of bewilderment plastered over their faces.

For a moment, they gazed at each other: the prisoner and her jailers. Most of the soldiers had their helmets off, their heavy sword belts discarded at their feet. They had clearly not been expecting company; some of them looked half asleep. Perhaps they *had* been asleep—that would explain why Leto had not heard them from her cell.

How foolish she had been to think that her only escape would not have been guarded. How naively hopeful.

At last, one of the soldiers very slowly retrieved his sword, clambered to his feet, and levelled the blade at Leto. He cleared his throat cautiously. "And where do you think you're going?"

Shit.

The tower stood atop a great hill. Leto could see the brown sloping rooftops of Vathi, so near she could almost have reached out to touch them. Freedom was tantalisingly close; she could not let it escape her. Not when the alternative was to die like an animal for a kingdom and its wretched royal family that deserved nothing from her. Not after they had failed her so badly. Not after they had failed her mother.

So, though she knew she was caught, that she couldn't outrun a soldier on a good day, let alone battered and bruised and dressed in a ridiculous ceremonial gown, Leto gave it a go. Praying to every god she could remember offhand, she spun on her heel, barefooted, and ran.

She had made it barely four paces before a hand caught her by the back of her gown and hurled her to the ground. Her leg twisted underneath her and she fell on it hard. Pain shot up from the impact; as if from a great distance, she heard herself cry out. She tried to pull herself to her feet and had made it on to all fours before something solid hit her across the back. She crumpled again.

"Get her on her feet," barked a familiar voice.

Hands under her armpits hauled Leto upright. Her leg buckled under her weight and she sagged like a rag doll. Dizzy with the pain that thrummed through her leg and ran down the full length of her spine, she squinted at the hazy figure in front of her.

The guard from Leto's room knelt down slowly. His helmet was off now, and he moved his exposed face very close to hers. With deliberate spite, he smiled. It pulled taut the great scar that ran from the middle of his cheek, down and over his chin and neck, and disappeared under the breastplate of his armour.

"Dear me," he purred. His eyes were the blue of a cloudless day and they flashed with malice. "Did you get lost?"

There were several things that Leto had never done in her life, nor dreamed of doing. But given that it seemed near certain that she would be dead by the evening, she

abandoned any sense of self-preservation she had ever had.

“Die,” she snarled, and spat in his face.

His smile vanished. He drew his hand back, then brought it forward with a speed that sent the air whistling around it as he backhanded her across the face. Hard.

Were it not for the two guards flanking Leto, supporting her body between them, she would have gone reeling backwards into the dirt. Her cheek smarted and she tasted the metallic warmth of blood. She debated spitting *that* into his face too, but before she had evaluated whether the brief satisfaction would be worth another beating, the guard had straightened and turned away.

“Take her to the beach,” he said. “I’ll make sure I’m there to watch her die.”