

Prologue

(AGAMEMNON is in front of his hut, on the sands of the beach at Aulis. Nearby, a huge fleet of warships is anchored. AGAMEMNON is writing on a tablet, by lamplight. He finishes and speaks.)

AGAMEMNON

I am Agamemnon. My wife Klytemnestra was one of three daughters born to Leda, daughter of Thestius, the other two being Phoebe and Helen. As Helen was the most beautiful of the three, she had every young man of any distinction in Achaea vying for her hand. The competition frequently became so violent that some of her suitors came close to murdering each other. Helen's father wasn't sure how he could choose a suitor, and he began to wonder whether he should marry her off at all. Finally, a solution came to him. He made all of Helen's suitors take an unbreakable oath. They joined hands, poured offerings of wine, and burned a sacrifice. "Whoever wins Helen as his wife," they swore, "will have our allegiance. Should any man try to steal Helen away from her husband, we will all join as one to chase him down, whoever he is, whether Achaean or foreign, and we will make war upon his city until it is burned to the ground." Once Helen's father had cleverly engineered this oath, he told his daughter to go wherever love's sweet breath might lead. It led her to my brother, Menelaus, though I dearly wish it hadn't.

After some time, a Trojan man named Paris arrived in Sparta. It was said that Paris had once judged a beauty contest in which Aphrodite herself had taken part. He was dressed in elaborate barbarian robes, covered with jewels and flowers. He declared his love for Helen. She declared her love for him. So, while Menelaus was occupied elsewhere, Paris stole away with Helen, bringing her to Troy. Menelaus was beside himself in fury. He roared through Achaea and demanded that all of Helen's onetime suitors should remember their oath and help him hunt down Paris. Soon all of Achaea was in arms.

And now here we are at the straits of Aulis, with our ships, our troops, our horses, and our armaments. Because Menelaus is my brother, I have been given the honor of being the general. It is an honor I would gladly give away, if I could.

But we cannot move from here. The wind thwarts us. We cannot sail. In despair, we turned to Kalchas, a great prophet, who told us there is only one hope, if we wished to ever leave this place. My daughter, Iphigenia, must be sacrificed to Artemis. Then, and only then, he said, would the wind blow us in the direction of Troy, which would fall beneath our might.

“Sound the trumpet,” I told my herald. “Our war is done. I will not kill my daughter.” But my brother overwhelmed me with his pleas and his demands until I agreed to commit this horror, this unspeakable act. I sent a message to my wife. It told her to bring our daughter here to Aulis. I wrote that Iphigenia would be wed to Achilles, our greatest soldier. I wrote that Achilles would not sail with us unless he was married to my own daughter, unless he could one day go home to her.

It was a lie, a fake marriage, a base trick. Only Kalchas, Odysseus, Menelaus, and I know the truth. And now I realize that I have made a grave error, an error that must immediately be fixed.

Scene 1

AGAMEMNON

Old man! Old man, come here! Here, to me.

OLD SERVANT (OS)

I am coming, King Agamemnon. What has happened?

AGAMEMNON

Come quickly!

OLD SERVANT (OS)

I am coming as quickly as I can.

(AGAMEMNON picks up the tablet, looks at it. The OLD SERVANT enters, unnoticed. AGAMEMNON throws the tablet down and holds his head in his hands. AGAMEMNON picks up the tablet, looks at it and looks at the sky, not noticing the OLD SERVANT until he speaks.)

OLD SERVANT (CONT.)

I was wide awake anyway. At my age, my eyes don't close at night.

AGAMEMNON

What star is that I see?

OLD SERVANT

It is Sirius, the dog star, swiftly pursuing the seven Pleiades.

AGAMEMNON

Everything has become so silent. The birds, the sea, even the wind makes no sound.

OLD SERVANT

Then what has disturbed you from your rest, my king? All is calm and quiet. The guards are as still as statues. Why not go back inside?

AGAMEMNON

I envy you, old man. I envy any man who lives an anonymous life. I have never envied those who are famous or powerful.

OLD SERVANT

But those are the men who live lives of glory.

AGAMEMNON

Yes, but that glory is just a trap. It is sweet for a moment, but painful thereafter. Sometimes it is the gods who destroy you, and sometimes it is vicious hordes of mortal men.

OLD SERVANT

It disturbs me to hear such words from a noble king. Agamemnon, you are the son of Atreus, and he did not bring you into the world to pursue happiness alone. You are a man, and like all men, must experience both joy and sorrow. Whether you wish it or not, it is the will of the gods.

But I notice that you have something in your hand, a tablet, and that your lamp is lit. You've written a message. You take your tablet and you throw it to the ground, you pick it up, and you weep. You are like a man who has lost his reason. My king, please tell what drives you to such despair. I am your loyal servant. I have been with you since your marriage, and I was picked by your bride's father for my honesty. You can trust me.

AGAMEMNON

Yes, you are a loyal servant, loyal to both my wife and me. Go. Take this message. Take it to my wife in Argos.

OLD SERVANT

Tell me what it says. Then if she asks me to repeat it, I will be able to assure her she reads truly.

(AGAMEMNON reads the tablet.)

AGAMEMNON

“Klytemnestra, ignore what I wrote to you in my last message. Listen to this only. Do not bring your daughter here to Aulis. The wind has died, and there is not even a wave that touches the shore. We will find a more auspicious time for her marriage to Achilles.”

OLD SERVANT

What will you do when Achilles learns you have deprived him of his bride? He will be furious with you and Klytemnestra. This is a dangerous decision.

AGAMEMNON

We have used his name, but Achilles knows nothing of this plan, this marriage, nothing of what I have said about giving him my daughter in marriage.

OLD SERVANT

Then your promise to marry Iphigenia to the son of a goddess—

AGAMEMNON

Was merely an excuse to fetch her here, so she could be sacrificed for the good of Achaea.

OLD SERVANT

A bold and terrible deed.

AGAMEMNON

A horror! By all the gods, a horror, I have gone mad. I am heading to my ruin. Go, quickly, as fast as your old legs can manage.

OLD SERVANT

I shall, my king.

AGAMEMNON

Do not pause to drink or rest or sleep.

OLD SERVANT

How could you think it?

AGAMEMNON

Stop at every fork of the road and look to be sure that no carriage rolls past you, carrying my daughter here to the harbor.

OLD SERVANT

I promise you, I will.

AGAMEMNON

If you see them on the way, make them turn back, send them at full speed towards Mycenae, to stay inside the walls that were constructed by the Cyclops.

OLD SERVANT

What will make them trust me when I tell them to turn back?

(AGAMEMNON hands the old servant his ring.)

AGAMEMNON

My seal. They know it. Keep this letter safe. Now go. Already the sun's fire begins to light the sky. Go. I am depending on your help.

(OLD SERVANT exits offstage.)

No mortal can truly live a life of happiness. We are all fated to face misery, given time.

(AGAMEMNON exits into his hut.)

Choral Interlude 1

(CHORUS of women from Chalkis
enters from offstage.)

CHORUS

Here I have arrived,
here on the sandy beaches of Aulis.
Here I stand after crossing the straits of Euripus,
after leaving my city of Chalkis,
home of the famed springs of Arethusa.
Here I stand so that I might behold the Achaean army,
so that I can see the heroes my husband told me of,
see Menelaus, whose hair shines so brightly,
see noble Agamemnon
and see their ships with oars reaching out like wings,
the thousand ships that seek for Helen—
Helen who was taken by the cowherd Paris,
Helen, a gift to Paris from the goddess Aphrodite,
the goddess who once bathed herself in the fountain,
so that Paris could judge her beauty alongside Athena and Hera,
and finally prized her beauty above all.

Here I ran through the grove of Artemis
where I saw the altar, ready for a sacrifice.
Here I saw the soldiers' camp,
their dwellings, their steeds, and their armaments,
and felt my cheeks grow red with youthful modesty.
Here I saw Achilles, speeding swiftly on the sands,
testing his speed against the horses,
four great horses, bringing with them a chariot,
Eumelus their driver pressing his steeds forward with his cries,
two gray stallions whose manes were flecked with white,
and two with hair like flames that bore the golden yoke.
Yet all the while Achilles, in full armor, ran victorious in front.

Here I found the wondrous fleet,
which would fill any woman's eyes with pleasure:
fifty lean ships from Phthia,
bearing statues of the sea god's daughters;
sixty from Athens,
the goddess Athena mounted on the prow,
with her chariot drawn by winged horses;
fifty from Boeotia,
Kadmus holding a dragon of gold aloft in their sterns;
one hundred from Mycenae,
home of the Cyclops,
home of Agamemnon and Menelaus,
bringing vengeance to the bride who abandoned them
to make love to a barbarian.
The galleys followed,
the Aenian ships from Lord Guneus,
the white oared Taphian ships,
commanded by King Meges of the dreaded isles of Echinae,
and the nimble ships led by Ajax,
the pride of the Isle of Salamis,
his ships resting so close to me that I could hear the crew.
I have seen the whole fleet,
and no barbarian who sees it can have hope.
I have seen it all and I will remember it all,
when they tell of it I will remember.