

THE LAST OF HECUBA

Priam and Hecuba are watching the sack of Troy from a high window in the palace.

What do they want? Hecuba muttered.

Want? Priam replied. Truth, justice, beauty...

We don't have those things. What good does it do to tear up the plac looking for them here?

It's because of Hector, I suppose, Priam sighed. He must have given them the idea.

What idea? Hecuba asked, dubious.

Why, that there was something here worth all that cutting and hacking and stomping about. What, Priam pointed out, would they have thought he was defending?

Money, Hecuba grumbled. Power, revenge, blood thrills. Such what not.

I would have thought, Priam said, an opportunity for self-actualization.

Hecuba considered. Yes, she said, I suppose they're tired of camping on the beach by now. Singing those drinking songs.

I'll be glad for an end to that, Priam said.

Hecuba looked more closely at the goings on down below. The little Greeks were swarming up the hillside while the bigger men bided their time, waiting to take for themselves anything interesting turned up. She wouldn't have thought you could burn down a stone building but there it was, going on down there.

Don't lean out so far, cautioned Priam. It isn't safe.

Hecuba stepped back. Achilles was one of those waiting for their prizes. Time to come he would claim Polyxena, her daughter.

The thing is, she said, mystifying Priam, Achilles is dead.

So he is, my dear.

So Xena will have to be dead too. Otherwise how...

It's a mad, bloodthirsty business, isn't it?

They're hungry for it, Hecuba said. Dead, every last one of them.

I suppose, Priam agreed, trying to be kind.

What? Suppose? Don't you know?

Let's not start on that, Hecuba. You know – that is, we've never agreed on what it is possible to know.

You could go down and ask them, Priam. There is such a thing as evidence.

What? Down there? Priam was aghast. I suppose, he went on, an empty head might be easier to cut off. Less resistance.

Harder, Hecuba replied harshly. Why do you think it was empty in the first place?

Cassandra came in with half a buttered bagel from breakfast. She wore a white gauzy thing which Priam believed was called a peignoir which was better not to notice. Matters of this sort probably explained why nobody paid attention to what she said.

You know how this is going to end, don't you? Cassandra said, not quite awake and still irritable.

Oh, yes. Priam took a somewhat macabre pride in this knowledge. We're all going to die, he said. Agamemnon will take you off home where his faithless wife will murder him. You as well, of course. Poison, I believe. Perhaps you could find something else to wear? Less, er, problematic?

Cassandra allowed herself a sour smile. Your attitude is a bit outmoded, Father. We Trojan women are not all complicit in our fates.

That fool Odysseus, Hecuba put in, talks about the wisdom of sucking up to the inevitable. Wear what you want,

I believe I shall go naked, Cassandra said, licking her fingers and glancing toward the window. Terrifying screams

could now be heard. After all, she went on, they do. I've always wondered whether the excitement of it all might get in the way of the hacking and chopping.

Mistakes are made, said Priam dryly.

Yes. And you, Mother. What will you wear when you tear the eyes out of that Poly-whosis. I can never remember their names. It's like a Russian novel.

Hmm, was Priam's only remark to this. He was tiring of the morning's talk. I'd better go and get ready, he said.

When Hecuba and her daughter were alone, Hecuba fell into a more somber mood. We will all be raped, of course.

Oh, indeed.

We're not going to have our arms and legs torn off, I hope, like some of those poor wretches. She moved toward the window and then thought better of it. That's a mercy.

Mercy! Cassandra cried angrily. What's that?

Well, dear, Hecuba said, giving her godstruck daughter a hug. When you know everything there's not much room for illusions, I suppose. Perhaps we should go down. People will be stopping by. Nothing has been right since that idiot Paris decided to buy a yacht. You warned him what comes of adventuring.

Cassandra was silent.

I've been putting up tears and purple lamentations since then, Hecuba went on. There are thousands of bottles in the cellar. It's time we cracked a few, before they turn to vinegar.

With that, Hecuba and Cassandra went down amid shouting and the sound of broken glass.