

A Last Light Breaking

The beloved places around her, the streets she'd played in as a child, were painted on her heart; they had been her entire world. She saw them and recognised nothing, for the gods had spat on it all.

Herded down the dark alleys to the harbour, slipping on the cobbles slick with winter rain, and jostled by women with children in their arms, she knew only the iron weight she would never lift inside her head: the memory of the hand grabbing her, the man's hand, tearing her apart into unspeakable horror.

They were hurried into one of the big storehouses, lit with smoky torches, and already crammed with people. They were all women; she almost collapsed in relief.

After panic-riddled searching, at last a moment of apple-fragranced gold: the arms of someone she loved around her. Lysarete held onto Sissi, the impossible slimness of her body and the fragile harshness of her ribs, wincing as Sissi's arms pressed on the hurts the man had made.

'Ssh, Lysa. Let her go.' More women she knew prised her arms away. They kissed, hugged and stroked each other's wet hair, thanking the gods they were each alive. One gentle hand touched children's faces; the other clung white-knuckled to their clothing.

'What happened to you?' Patrokleia's voice was needle-sharp with concern.

Lysa couldn't speak. Why voice her shame? She felt it was written right across her face. Her friends looked at each other.

They sat her down on the earth floor of the warehouse amongst a jumble of friends, families and unknown women.

'Your husbands,' she said. 'The men. Where are they?'

Their eyes shifted from hers. Slowly, understanding crawled across her skin, scorching it with an freezing talon.

'They separated us,' whispered Patrokleia, as if others might not have noticed.

So, the Athenians had kept their word. Which had been devouring her from inside since she'd learned it.

In late summer, when their fleet sailed to encircle the brightly coloured rocks and sandy coves of Lysa's home, the Athenian invaders gave the islanders a choice. Surrender, accept this thing called Democracy, pay our tribute, and continue in peace. Or reject us and face war: our mighty thousands against your small island's hundreds. Siege and starvation until you capitulate or are betrayed, and then...

And then, the women and children will be enslaved; the men will be put to death.

The islanders were free people, free for thirty generations. They had fought side by side with the Athenians in the great war against the Persians before the world grew small and mean.

Never.

We will never give in, said the men.

Women weren't consulted; they rarely were, especially young unmarried ones.

Would I have said Never?

Patriotism, heroism: they'd dropped away like a carelessly-hung dress from the washing-line. Long starvation, boredom, despair, then panic and a bloody brutality ripping everything and everyone apart, rounding humans up like goats, looting, blood, and...

Never meant nothing but disaster.

Lysa lay shivering in her damp clothes, trying to sleep, but thoughts still ground their way in, swelling and digging down deep in her belly. Her forehead felt hot and clammy.

She clambered over other women towards the doors, hand over her mouth. Everything hit her again like a charging bull: the smell of the man's breath, the noises he and she had made, the pain of him inside her. Her body jerked over and she threw up, every last scrap of her revolted.

Nothing inside her to vomit, just vile bitter-tasting liquid. Her stomach heaved again; the movement tore at the bruises on her sides. She wiped her mouth and leaned against the wall, cold and shivery, longing to curl into a ball, tighter and tighter and tinier until she was just a pebble. On the shore where the sea might wash, wash, wash it clean.

Waking was like coming round a sheltered corner and into the full force of a winter storm, buffeting so hard you can barely stand upright. Lysarete felt as if she'd been used as an anvil all night. No point in trying to deny what had happened; her body could feel all of it.

She wanted to slip back into oblivion, but her hot eyes seemed to scrape in their sockets and she knew she wouldn't sleep again. Today was going to be different from anything she had ever known and she wasn't sure where the will to live through it could be found.

The warehouse doors were open; the greyness of daybreak spilled in. Inexplicably, the sun was rising. How could sun-god Helios set off on his chariot into the sky on a day like this, without trailing great black clouds of mourning, shedding pestilence on those who'd unleashed such unimagined evil? How could the gods ignore this?

Mutters about food and water began. The mass of women pushed forward: a beakerful of water and a spoonful of something tipped into their mouths. Lysa's stomach churned at the sight of a woman and her three children coming away from the door chewing and wiping their mouths. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten.

She and her friends waited. It was, when she thought about it, what women always did.

There was something else they were waiting for. Lysa had still not got close to the food, when she heard the word smoke.

A woman shrieked, 'It's their pyre. They've killed them, and they're burning them. They've killed my son!'

For one black heartbeat all she heard was the woman screeching My son my son, the cry of a bird of death. Then in a great wave, the warehouse burst into screams. A woman ahead of her dropped on the floor.

All of them, every man on the island, bloodily slaughtered and now burning. Every man she knew with his throat cut or a spear thrust through him. Endless faces smiled then broke into pieces before her.

Lysa raised her hands to her head and wailed. For her calm, stern uncles, her grandfather, his gnarled starvation-weakened hands clinging to his walking staff, her irrepressibly laughing brother. She wailed because words didn't encompass what she felt and never would.

If that foul smoke didn't ascend to the very gates of Olympos, their mourning would. It was the most frightful sound, but she couldn't help but join in the madness of communal grief and its irresistible solace. Each new sob and cry, every woman who beat her breast, every nail that tore cheeks, every hug and every violent struggle away, each confused child screaming in panic, fed a monstrous howl that swept her away and made her part of a force massive, unstoppable. She and her despair were tiny in so vast a shared misery. It was something fashioned by the gods, the old gods of her long-dead ancestors.

They would not die un-mourned; the gods would know their men were loved and bewailed beyond bearing.

When the screaming had dwindled into keening and rocking sobbing, Lysa reached the food. The wooden beaker of water revived her like wine; she got her hands on the bowl as the man tipped it towards her mouth and tried to hold on, fighting to get it all before he took it away. He wrenched, and it hit her on the nose, but her mouth was full. She walked away chomping. It had gone cold but its thick heaviness was a miracle in her mouth. Barley and lentils, salt.

She was still near the front when a man's voice summoned Sosandra wife of Isidoros. She didn't know the name.

More muttering. Lysa soon knew why when she saw the woman making her way toward the front. She was beautiful, with hair tinted copper - artificially, but so well done you couldn't quite be sure. The wife of someone important, she was thin as they all were, but had soft shoes and jewellery. Lysa knew her hands wouldn't be lined and rough like theirs; she had slaves. She didn't wear herself down against the unyielding rocks of hungry family, demanding children and endless chores. She just looked lovely, did a little intricate weaving and pursued the art of captivating her man in bed and getting exactly what she wanted. They all scorned her, and envied her like mad.

I bet her husband isn't dead.

Sosandra seemed unaffected by the hissing and whispering that accompanied her. She drew her cloak over her head with a graceful gesture and stepped forward with two children past the Athenian guards. No life of slavery awaited that aristocratic painted cow.

A man took the little girl at Sosandra's side by the shoulders. And everything changed.

'No!' cried Sosandra.

Then the boy was pulled away too.

Sosandra grabbed at her children. A guard seized her, but she struggled wildly. She struck him in the face, beat her hands against his armour and wrenched herself from him, starting towards the children. He seized her again. Her peplos tore, a great rip down the wool in his hands. Her body was exposed. She continued struggling like a Maenad. The boy and girl were crying; Sosandra was screaming, 'My children, my children!'

Once again, it was what they had been waiting for without realising it. Outrage and dread like a lightning bolt ignited Lysa. Sosandra was not a spoilt she-goat; she was one of them, a mother being dragged away from her children. Suddenly there were women all around her, hissing and making that howling mocking sound they used to shame others. They were pressing forward, shouting.

Cowards! Impotent battle-fleers! Goat-fuckers!

Every insult she had ever heard - and many she hadn't - was spat at the guards. Someone shoved the soldier nearest Lysa. A shape flew overhead; it shattered on the cobbled stones of the harbour.

'Stones!'

Lysa looked down; their surge had brought them onto the cobbles. She grabbed at one of the setted stones, but it wouldn't budge. Her nails scrabbled frantically and it came free. She hurled it. The soldier had his great round shield to one side pushing back a woman who had run forward with her fists raised. There was a loud thud as the stone hit his breastplate. Lysa yowled her mockery and women cheered. Another stone flew out, another guard ducked. The men looked confused.

Murderers! Polluted scum! Sons of whores!

Lysarete's head boiled. She pushed the women around her on. The woman next to her handed her another stone. She threw it wildly. It flew over everyone's heads and clattered on the cobbles. Lysa prised another one out. A big broad-shouldered soldier had his helmet up on the back of his head; the damp, earth-coated stone hit it. He lurched, his helmet coming off. The women gave a whoop of malicious glee and surged again. More women were running out, shoving and hitting the guards. One tried to grab a spear; the man swatted her aside. Lysa fought to join them, to drive the enemy back into the sea and watch them drown.

Suddenly, more soldiers appeared at a run. The others fell back to join them and formed up several men deep. Then they advanced towards the women, beating their spears on their shields, with their helmets down.

The clashing pounded on her ears; their inhuman metal facelessness curdled her rage. The mass of bodies around her faltered. The women who had broken out into the open stopped and looked back, each one isolated, small and vulnerable. The front row of soldiers pointed their spears. It became a crush stumbling backwards; the women were now back inside the warehouse, in shadow, the daylight beyond them.

A soldier stepped forward.

‘Cowards! You fled from us women and you’ll flee from the Spartans,’ cried an elderly woman. ‘You will die like dogs and lie naked and unburied!’

The man stood in front of them, his legs planted apart and his beard jutting out angrily. Lysa longed for a stone to smash straight into his forehead, but she no longer dared reach for one.

‘This clamour and madness will not help you,’ he said slowly. ‘Control yourselves and you will be fed. Start another riot and we will kill you, your children first. The next woman who raises a hand to us or throws anything will be handed over to my soldiers. And then hurled into the sea.’

Lysa clutched convulsively at the arm of the woman next to her, his words icy water running over her back. Had he seen her throwing?

The man glared for a moment longer, his eyes raking the women near the front. Sosandra’s children were bundled back towards the warehouse, where hands reached forward and took them. Sosandra, collapsed on her knees, was pulled upright; she stared after her children, her mouth moving soundlessly. Her leg and side were still exposed. Lysa watched her degradation with a dizzy helplessness.

One of the guards hefted his shield onto his back, and walked forward. He unfastened his cloak and draped it awkwardly across Sosandra. He spoke, and her hands slowly took it and pulled it around herself. Lysa saw the man’s neck under the helmet was a deep pink.

‘The gods bless you!’ called a girl.

Sosandra was taken away towards the quay. The women sank to the floor inside: the swirling gale of fury had blown itself out and left them exhausted. Lysa had split her nail grubbing up the stone. She sucked it, threading her way back into the sheltering gloom of the warehouse. She sat next to her little cousin and, as if they were sitting at home, began to tidy the little girl’s hair.

That one soldier; he had shown mercy. A little little mercy.

All our men, our poets, our leaders are dead. Who’ll be left to sing our songs and tell our tale? Only the enemy. Might that man one day look back and remember? And testify to our extinction: to what he himself has done?

She knew by panic-stricken looks, clutching of children and a massed cowering backwards, long before she heard loud male voices shouting.

Individual women were being pulled out of the crowd, at a gesture from a man standing surveying them as if choosing glistening olives in a bowl.

Not me. Please, all the goddesses, not me.

Her prayers bounced back down off the heavens unheard. Perhaps he saw her thick hair, half-plaited and still half loose around her shoulders, the child’s braiding fingers terrified still as a statue’s. The finger pointed, a quick flick of the hand and like a thrown pot,

her fate was re-made.

Lysa felt blood drain from her face, then burned poppy-scarlet as everyone stared at her.

A soldier in armour gestured impatiently; a woman jabbed her in the back. Sissi hugged her then threw the cloak over Lysa's head, tucking away the treacherous hair. They'd always done that before venturing out: making sure they were respectable and modest. How pointless.

Lysa staggered to her feet.

Now.

Everything I know ends now.

Patrokleia's eyes were on her blood-stained dress, quivering as her leg shook. Her hand was warm on her ankle. "The gods protect you." She nudged Lysa forward.

After a dozen steps, a fluttering like a struggling bird rose up her throat, all feathers choking her. She couldn't bear to leave them. The mass of women and children, skinny as beggars from siege-hunger, dishevelled, some soothing babies, some weeping, some impassive, blankly unseeing, lost.

Lysa loved them. All of them, all the men who died for them, every stone and every breath of salt air of their island home. She couldn't leave without telling them.

So few months since she'd danced in Aphrodite's spring festival. The procession of virgin girls with garlands, long hair rippling, singing, flutes, the sweat and laughter of dancing for their chosen goddess, who loved her own apple of an island. Heedless laughter days, when war was something men discussed, far away. They'd sing the goddess's name and the crowd would reply.

Lysa looked at the huddled defeated figures. "For Aphrodite!" she croaked.

Faces turned.

Then Sissi feebly made the ancient response: "For Melos!"

Lysa summoned her voice from where that Athenian had torn it from her along with her most precious inner self, an awakening bell that rang around the warehouse. "Aphrodite!"

A dozen voices cried, "Melos."

With a dipping dancing step forward, Lysa, bruised, bleeding and no-longer-virgin, spun, flinging her arm up in the gesture every woman there had once performed. Her fingers opened as the spray of sea-foam which birthed Sweetest Aphrodite.

Fifty voices shouted the goddess's name, and the warehouse replied.

Melos!

Lysa turned and walked on to slavery, away from them, though a thousand forces had a rope round her middle pulling her backwards.

Outside, the daylight hit her dazzlingly bright, glaring at her standing on her own, trapped in the open. Weapons. Ships. Men. She forced her head up, straight-backed as if she had a water jar on her head. The cold sea-wind glued the folds of her dress to her legs close as paint. A gust caught her tattered cloak and it billowed out.

Melos!

The word echoed like a sigh from cliffs above, from the rock which for generations the men of her family had mined for precious dark obsidian, the black shining heart in her unbreakable soul.

Lysarete raised her arms. The watching women saw the great wings of a Victory soaring in the doorway.

You think to take everything from us simply because you can. You think to crush us to nothingness and take our long story from us.

I say *Never*.

We will never give in.

We will never be forgotten.

Melos.