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*To all the teachers over the years
who taught me how to read thoughtfully*

*But though she be my sister's child or nearer
Of kin than all who worship at my hearth,
Nor she nor yet her sister shall escape
The utmost penalty, for both I hold,
As arch-conspirators, of equal guilt.
—Sophocles, Antigone*

1

Antigone

I asked my father, once, why he chose to curse us before we were born. Because to be born as my siblings and I were was to be doomed from the start. We were unique among our people, pieced together from whatever random combination of genes our two parents provided. Table-scrap children.

He didn't say, as my mother had, a year before, "We didn't think it was a curse."

He was far too unsentimental for that.

"We thought," he said to me, "it was a curse worth bearing."

An honest man, and now a dead one.

★ ★ ★

He was in the courtyard, the man who killed my father. Oh, perhaps he hadn't held the blade, but the coup that wrenched political power from my father's hands and then trampled him beneath its boots was Kreon's coup, undergone for Kreon, by Kreon.

He was in the casual version of his uniform, pants tucked into boots, shirt tucked into pants, forehead dotted with sweat, the morning sun already applying pressure. He bent his head to listen to the head of his guard, Nikias. They were too far away for me to hear.

I was on a balcony, nestled in ivy that grew only here, in the High Commander's courtyard, where no amount of water scarcity in other parts of the city could convince Kreon to sacrifice beauty. *People will permit a High Commander his small indulgences*, I had heard him say once. *It is such a difficult job*.

I imagined he was right—it was a difficult job, keeping a tight fist for so long. But I wasn't sure any amount of ivy could make this place beautiful to me.

Nikias moved away from Kreon, no doubt sent on some small mission. My uncle's eyes lifted to mine. He nodded in greeting.

My throat tightened. I disappeared into the leaves.

★ ★ ★

After the fighting had ceased, after we had found our father and mother's bodies in the streets, washed them, prayed over them; after I had Extracted their ichor, too young for

the responsibility and yet the only ones to do it; after we had stored what was left of them in the Archive; after all that, Kreon had summoned us to this house, to that courtyard where the ivy grew and the street spilled in, and, in the presence of all who had ears to hear, told us we were welcome to live with him there. To this day, I'm not sure what prompted this act of generosity. We disgust Kreon, as we disgust many in this city, because of our origins.

Perhaps it was because we were family, and there were rules for family, and Kreon loved rules. Kreon was Oedipus's brother, Oedipus's shadow. A man of the blade instead of a man of the mind. At family gatherings when I was young, he was known for breaking things—glasses, plates, toys—just from handling them too roughly. Once, my mother asked him to brush Ismene's hair for her, and Ismene spent the entire time trying not to cry as he ripped knots out of her head. He didn't know how to be teased; he only laughed at other people, never himself.

Perhaps it wasn't because we were family—perhaps it was because we were children of *Oedipus*, warped though we were by our genes. And Oedipus had almost started a revolution—he was a symbol, and so were we. And what better way to take the power from a symbol than to claim it as your own?

So when Kreon told us we were welcome to live in his house, I knew what the consequences would be: he would let Polyneikes and Eteocles and Ismene and me live, but we would do so at his pleasure. We would live in his house, lending legitimacy to his rule, and he would keep his eye on us.

We thank you for your generosity, I had told him, in the moment.

2

Polyneikes

Been coming here to the Cafe Athena for several years now, ever since I had spend to burn and *she* started working here. It was her dad's shop—had to be, or she wouldn't have been working—but mostly he wasn't there to catch me staring. Figured every woman, from the first one who ever gave me that funny feeling to the one I ultimately got assigned to, would be doing the same equation: add my famous parents, tragic backstory, generational wealth, and winsome smile, and subtract the unsettling reality of my busted genetic code, and what do you get? Someone worth messing around with?

If the waitress at the Athena even bothered with the calculus, she came up decidedly “not interested,” but the coffee tasted less burnt here than in most other places, so I kept coming anyhow.

“This isn't coffee,” Parth said to me after his first sip. “It's liquid shit.”

True, it wasn't coffee—there were just a handful of coffee plants in the greenhouses, so only a lucky few had ever had the real stuff. This was just an approximation of coffee, with a conjecture of sugar stirred into it.

I was sitting at the least rickety of the tables out front, street-side, my toe wedged under one of the table legs to steady it. The seat across from me was empty, but Parth was standing, drinking from a tiny mug that made his hand look comically large. Somebody pedaled past with a bucket of paper flowers hanging off the back of her bicycle; one of them toppled onto the stones. Nabbed right away by a beggar kid with a cup for coin. He stuck it behind his ear.

“You could sit,” I said to Parth. “Tig probably won't be on time.”

“These chairs make me feel like I'm playing teatime with my niece,” he said. Big guy, Parth was. Had the look of a guy who would turn out to be a softie, only he wasn't. Too tricky for that. “Plus, I'm done. You let her come all the way here by herself? Some brother.”

“Tig can handle herself.”

Parth set his mini mug down on the table and eyed me. “You're not gonna tell her nothing, right?”

“Of course not. But you know her, she might figure it out anyway.”

“Just so long as she doesn't interfere.”

“Interfere with what?” a slim, reedy voice asked from behind him. And there she was: my sister, sidling up just as the clock struck 1400 hours.

“Antigone,” Parth said to her, with a head bob that was supposed to be like a bow.

“Parthenopaeus,” she replied. “Will you be joining us?”

“No, gotta run,” he said. “See you later, Pol.”

He dodged the beggar kid and his cup, crossed the street, and disappeared into a crooked alley. A gust of wind came up behind him, blowing dust into the air. Antigone pulled the scarf she wore over her hair across her nose and mouth until it settled. I just held my breath.

The waitress came by, that little bounce in her walk, and brought two cups of coffee, black, and a pile of sweetener cubes stacked neat like a temple. She didn’t look either of us in the eye. Didn’t ask if we’d like anything else.

“Thought you liked the service here,” Antigone said.

“I like the look of it.”

She snorted. “You don’t care who treats you like a pariah, as long as she’s got nice legs?”

“Can’t fault people for learning what they’re taught.”

“Can, too. I do it all the time,” she said. “So what was Parth on about?”

Should have known she wouldn’t let that go.

“Something’s brewing,” I said. “You know that.”

“Something’s *been* brewing,” she said. “You could just tell me what’s going on.”

“No need,” I said. “No help necessary, and it would just put you in a bad spot.”

She frowned at me. Back when we were kids, we went in and out of looking like our parents. Dad said kids were like that, mushy, sculptures still drying in the sun. Now, though, Tig was settled, hardened, and she looked just like Mom. Bend at the bridge of her nose, weak chin, big round eyes.

“I’m already in a bad spot,” she said, sharp as noon sun. “I live in the house of my patricide, and I’m betrothed to his son.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between a bad spot I put you in and a bad spot I didn’t,” I said. “Plus, the others would kill me. No potential mothers allowed at this level of the operation, you know that.”

“Ah, yes.” Sour as, and *this* is nothing like our mom, who could rip you to shreds with a gentle word, if she chose. No subtle streak in Antigone; she’s more like Dad in that way. “Can’t risk me; I’m just a viable womb on stilts.”

“That is the general attitude.”

“Fuck, Pol,” she said, leaning over the table, her scarf almost falling into her coffee. “I’m so tired of that.”

We both looked across at the little shop with its wares spilling out into the street. Stacks of old cookware, tangles of wires, piles of light bulbs still in their boxes, a rack of sunglasses with mostly intact lenses.

“It’s not me, though.” I reached across the table and covered her hand where it clasped the mug. “You know that, right? I know everything would be better if you were involved. It’s just that we’re trying to unite seven districts, and some of them are more ... *traditional* than others. We’re only as strong as our weakest links.”

Her hand trembled a little.

“I know it’s not you,” she said. “Sometimes I just stare into the future and don’t like anything I see.”

I knew her future as well as she knew mine. We would go where Kreon said, do what Kreon decreed. We lived by Kreon’s mercy and we died by Kreon’s might.

“Marrying Haemon won’t be so bad,” I said.

“What do you know?” she said. “You’ll never fear your wife. But every wife fears her husband, even if she doesn’t say so.” She stuck her thumbnail between her teeth and bit down. A moment later, she added, “I don’t give a shit about Haemon anyway. That’s not what I mean.”

“Well, if everything goes right tonight...”

She laughed at me.

I said, “You don’t have faith in me?”

“It’s not you I don’t have faith in,” she said, “it’s ‘things going right.’”

“Well, I need you to find some.” I reached into the bag hanging off the back of the chair and took something out. It was a metal instrument about the size of my hand. Pointed at one end, thick at the other, almost like a syringe. An Extractor. I put it on the table between us.

She recoiled from it like it was a snake.

“Just in case,” I said.

“Get that thing away from me. You’re not dying.”

“Just in case.”

She leaned over the table, her wide eyes fixed on mine.

“Do you have any idea what it would do to me if I lost you?” she said in a harsh whisper.

“Yeah, I kinda do,” I said. “Same as what it would do to me if I lost you. And lately that seems more and more likely.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The thing about her was, nobody could hide from her, but she thought she could hide from everybody. Like she was some great actress. Like I wouldn’t notice my own sister going limp by fractions, all the fight gone out of her.

“Sometimes you stare into the future,” I said, “and you don’t like anything you see.”

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re doing this for me.”

“Not just you. God, how long do you think we can go on this way? Any of us?”

A city of seven districts. Kids chanted about it in the North: *Seven houses crumbling on a Theban street. One’s got no fire, one’s got no heat. One’s got no water; one’s got no*

meat. Saw them once jumping rope to it; got scattered a few minutes later by the police.

Antigone touched the Extractor with just her fingertips.

“What if I don’t believe in this shit?” she said, nodding to the instrument. “What if I don’t think a person can be reborn?”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, doesn’t really matter either way, does it?” I said. “I believe in it. And if I die, I want you to promise to store my ichor in the Archive. I want you to make sure I can be remade. Consider this my will and testament. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Promise?”

“My word is my word,” she said, scowling at me. “But yes, I promise. If you promise not to plan on dying.”

I smiled. “Promise.”

She closed her eyes as another wave of wind swept across us, dusting our coffees. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she wiped them away with her scarf. By the time the air settled again, she looked unaffected. She sipped her coffee, dust and all.

“This coffee is shit,” she said.

“Everybody’s a critic,” I replied, and chugged the rest of mine.