

The frozen silence is broken by the hoarse, angry screams of Trojans. My mind startles to life: I am unarmed and alone, and they know I am only Patroclus.

*Run.* I lunge to my feet. A spear flashes out, just a breath too slow. It grazes the skin of my calf, marks it with a line of red. I twist away from a reaching hand, panic loose and banging in my chest. Through the haze of terror I see a man leveling a spear at my face. Somehow I am quick enough, and it passes over me, ruffling my hair like a lover's breath. A spear stabs towards my knees, meant to trip me. I leap it, shocked I am not dead already. I have never been so fast in all my life.

The spear that I do not see comes from behind. It pierces the skin of my back, breaks again to air beneath my ribs. I stumble, driven forward by the blow's force, by the shock of tearing pain and the burning numbness in my belly. I feel a tug, and the spear point is gone. The blood gushes hot on my chilled skin. I think I scream.

The Trojan faces waver, and I fall. My blood runs through my fingers and onto the grass. The crowd parts, and I see a man walking towards me. He seems to come from a great distance, to descend, somehow, as if I lay in the bottom of a deep ravine. I know him. Hip bones like the cornice of a temple, his brow furrowed and stern. He does not look at the men who surround him; he walks as if he were alone on the battlefield. He is coming to kill me. Hector.

My breaths are shallow gasps that feel like new wounds tearing. Remembrance drums in me, like the pulse-beat of blood in my ears. He cannot kill me. He must not. Achilles will not let him live if he does. And Hector must live, always; he must never die,



not even when he is old, not even when he is so withered that his bones slide beneath his skin like loose rocks in a stream. He must live, because his life, I think as I scrape backwards over the grass, is the final dam before Achilles' own blood will flow.

Desperately, I turn to the men around me and scrabble at their knees. Please, I croak. Please.

But they will not look; they are watching their prince, Priam's eldest son, and his inexorable steps towards me. My head jerks back, and I see that he is close now, his spear raised. The only sound I hear is my own heaving lungs, air pumped into my chest and pushed from it. Hector's spear lifts over me, tipping like a pitcher. And then it falls, a spill of bright silver, towards me.

No. My hands flurry in the air like startled birds, trying to halt the spear's relentless movement towards my belly. But I am weak as a baby against Hector's strength, and my palms give way, unspooling in ribbons of red. The spearhead submerges in a sear of pain so great that my breath stops, a boil of agony that bursts over my whole stomach. My head drops back against the ground, and the last image I see is of Hector, leaning seriously over me, twisting his spear inside me as if he is stirring a pot. The last thing I think is: *Achilles*.