

**“Just like an honest wool-working woman...” (Iliad 12)**

He was never sure if she, like the other pictures he saw reflected in the spring-pool, were his imagination, or real: visions granted by some water-nymph muse. Today, again, the ripples of water stilled and the picture appeared, sharp with life. A straggly dust-brown sheep, rubbing its head against a girl-child’s thin tunic; one hand was combing the fuzzy neck, the other clutched tightly to a tufty fistful, keeping it clear and safe. The woman who squatted in the shelter of the well-spring wall turned, her own small bundle hugged tight against her. The wind tugged a lock of ash-tinged black hair from its covering.

“Here, Aithra.” Her voice sounded sharp; how she needed that wool, every last tuft, safe from the wind. She bent over the well, the water mirroring her cracked, reddened hands; her gaze clung anxiously to the precious, meagre handfuls as she dipped them.

Her eyes met his directly. For a moment, time circled like a child’s spiralling mobile; then he was there, beside the well in the biting wind, the straggly sheep still nuzzling the dusty child. The woman stumbled back in shock, and he reached out to steady her, his grip closing on chapped fingers that clung even then, half-desperately, to the sodden wool.

“Don’t be frightened —”

She broke away and dropped to her knees, pulling her daughter to her.

“Lord, I have nothing for you. There is so little, since my man was taken. I beg you, do not be angry. I will offer when I can, but the children...” Suddenly piteous, “Do not take from what little we still have.”

He had played many roles with his songs, but never before been taken for a god. His mouth opened on a denial; then he thought, how else to explain?

“I am not here to take,” he said. “I only wish to see and know you, a little better.”

“Know — me?” The grey eyes with their spider-lines of care leapt to his, baffled, still afraid. “Why would —”

“I sing songs. And I need the men in them to live, for me, and for those I sing to.”

She reared up, straight-backed. “You are cruel, to mock. I have no place in any song, no story men or gods would want to hear.” She jerked her head sideways, in the direction of the plain. “Down there — the warriors and princes, the mighty walls and great gates — they are what men sing of.”

The sheep, curious, had edged round to him; absently he caressed the rough head. “Mostly, yes. And I have watched them, but one day I thought I should look beyond...” The bitterly accusing gaze made him want to prove his point. “I saw the blacksmith’s son, slipping away from the forge every day to water that sprig of an olive tree, up below the limestone crags. I watched the old man who comes down from the woods to the shadow of the crags, when the sun rises high. He has bread and cheese in a blue cloth, and his eyes keep drifting to them as he comes...” He smiled, indulgently. “And I saw the old donkey who broke into the barley field, digging in his hooves when the boys came to drive him out with sticks...”

Her face suddenly blazed with anger.

“It was hungry. Like the woodcutter. As you would be, with your body aching after labouring since dawn. Are we just pretty pictures, something different when you grow tired of your heroes? In the songs — when I’ve time — that’s how you gods seem. Did you also see the blacksmith’s boy weeping, after the storm when he found his poor tree uprooted and dying? Do you see the woodcutter creeping home to his hut at night to hide away by his fire, bitter and ashamed because his son died fighting another and he could get no blood price? And now his family has almost nothing, and his grandson...” She stood and turned her back, still clinging to the dripping wool.

“Please.” He reached out again, as gently as he could, ashamed. “I did not mean — I am sorry.” It was time for the truth. “I am not a god. Maybe they do think like that, I don’t know. I am — only a man. A singer, like I said...”

She faced him again, still accusing. “Men don’t appear out of wells.”

“I — don’t know how that happened. I have been — seeing things, looking into a spring down by the town. Not from my own time; I doubt you’d recognise the town I know...”

She stared back, uncomprehending. The sheep had slid away and was lapping at the well; the raven-haired child, disturbed by her mother’s anger, slipped across to embrace it. She gave a small cry. “Maia, I can see a little boy! In the well!” She bent further over. “He’s galloping a toy horse along a wall. And there’s a lady, all in black...”

The singer moved to join her. Would he see, too, here...?

They looked together, at the child with the chestnut curls, and his gleaming horse. The lady in black seemed to call, and the boy ran to her with his treasure. Her eyes, brown and sad, lingered on it, before she gathered the child up into her lap. He snuggled there, cradling the horse. There were freckles of sweat on his forehead; a fly landed there, and the lady — his mother — gently brushed it away.

There came a small, stifled sound behind them. Another face appeared, reflected in the water. The singer and the girl twisted round, to see her mother with her clump of wool clamped against her chest and tear-tracks on her cheeks.

“Your son,” said the singer suddenly. “I saw you do the same, once, when he was sleeping...” He looked around, abruptly stricken, “He — did he die?”

She shook her head, dully. “No. But — there was so little to feed us all, after his father... A kinsman, down by the shore, said he could take him, to help with the fishing. So I sent him...”

“I saw your son, playing by the shore, once...”

Her eyes drifted towards the shore far below, where the wind that lifted her loose hair was curling the sea-fringe. He knew what she was remembering: the vivid child solemnly, lovingly, shaping his towers, hands burrowed in the clinging sand. The careless laughter of the two fisher-boys, kicking up the shore-spray, toes clumping his work into shapeless ruin. Her son’s face had crumpled, then he too began to join in the prancing ruin, pretending to share their boisterous fun.

“I don’t know if he plays much now. The work is so hard, and the other boys — they are often — not kind. I — hardly get to see him.” A forlorn gesture with the wool-clump in her hands. She glanced at the well, and with sudden fierce bitterness, “Not like the fine lady and her son. Who is she, that you have made me see? Some princess, whose child can play all day, and never goes hungry, or cries for his father...”

“But the lady was sad,” came her daughter’s voice, timidly.

“Yes,” murmured the singer. “Her husband died — will die — too. It’s — war, you see.”

All those pictures he had seen, long before his time, somewhere in her future. The lady feeding her husband’s horses, beseeching them to bring him home safe. The child tossed lightly up by his laughing father, helmet laid aside. The boy who loved his wooden horse, and the yellow dawn when his father’s body came home, after those other horses... The child who would never play in the sand by the seashore, lined with enemy ships.

“His mother will still have her child,” she retorted after a moment, but less harshly.

There was one more horse; and beyond that one last picture of the child... He didn’t think he could ever sing of that, himself. He certainly couldn’t tell it to this woman, with her own deprivation and her hungry, painful eyes.

“They will suffer, too” he said at last.

“Like us? More than us?”

He hesitated. “I — have no right, to compare. You have shown me the strength of your griefs.”

Two griefs, so different, each so deep. Both of them Troy, he realised. All of them Troy — everything he had seen and heard — part of the story, and the sorrow.

“But it will be theirs you sing of, won’t it?” she challenged him.

And that he couldn’t deny. It was as she said: mostly, those stories were what men wanted to hear. In his day, at least. All the same —

Time shifted and circled again; he was back by the springs, beneath the patched, scorched city walls. They were just reflections, the child, the sheep, the woman, and the wool in her work-worn hands; but sharper still with life. He stood, remembering her, her children, her words.

“I will try, to find a way to sing of you too,” he promised.