

The River

The next thing I remember is a shrill piercing ringing in my ear.

Blinking, wincing at brightness.

Why is my back so cold? I try to lift my left arm to shade myself from the glare but only pain shoots through my arm I hiss sharply intake breath blood in my mouth it moves into my throat I'm choking spluttering writhing digging my heels and fists into the water and mud beneath me

the water and mud beneath me –

I am on the riverbank.

Everything smells of muck and manure, earthy and wet, but there's rust in there too. I crane to see the bank and, sharp as the sword that caused it, I feel the wound in my collar and across my shoulder. The cut that should have ended my life. My head and arms and legs ache pulse my head sinks back into the mud can I move my arm I think my ankle might be broken

Broken by that savage, Achilles. I begged him for my life. Pitiful. Why beg an unstoppable force, a furious horse foaming at the mouth as he champs at the bit?

But maybe the gods heard.

Another chance at life. By Apollo.

As quickly as my warm gratitude rises it is dispelled by keener, crueller, louder panic. Where is he? I can hear him now, and another thundering voice I don't recognise. Who is that? What is going on? If he sees me alive, he will hunt me like a boar and skewer his spear into my side as I writhe and groan. My brow crumples. Will anyone hear me die? How far am I from Troy? I twist my neck towards the sound, but the pain is excruciating, and I clamp my eyes shut and stretch my mouth wide into a scream, but the noise is lost. Shallow breaths. As the pain passes, I try to move by placing weight onto my left arm instead.

I can't turn far, but it is enough to see the beast that I fear. Achilles is a way off, he is flashing his spear and leaping the waves of the river as another warrior defends his own. Is it the strain on my muscles or the sight of the man that makes my arm quiver? In the distance I can see the walls of Troy.

I'm holding my breath in so tight my chest aches. Safety is close. I am so close to home, the citadel that can never be breached, if I can just make it back –

Who is the other warrior, will he help me? I turn back and squint into the battle. A towering defiant defender, flowing robes and beard, is bellowing, violently pitching great floods of water

against the shoulders of Achilles, ripping the tides out from under his feet and pushing the water back against his knees so he can barely stand. It can't be a warrior – no human could create such unbroken streams of attack. But Achilles is relentless.

Panic. Panic. My shield, my helmet, my spear, where are they? I slowly spread my fingers through the water beside me, but instead of metal and wood there is something soft beside me. I recoil instantly in fear.

Who is lying next to me which brother whose son I can't bear to look, I can't bear it, my eyes plead to the sun as I reach out tentatively for what has brushed against my hand. A short gasp and slow low whimper escape my lips as my cold hand slips against another. Tears stream delicate ravines through the mud on my face as I turn to look into the open eyes of my friend.

Asteropaeus. Ares give me strength, fix your keen glare fiercely upon my fate and give me strength, I need to know that I am strong enough to dispel this bleak terror from my mind. My eyes sting. "Asteropaeus." A question or a whimper? "It's me, it's Lycaon, come now we must get back," I speak softly and try to shake him, but I already know, "Asteropaeus look at me, we must get back, we have to get away."

Metal rattles against metal and leather.

"Stop," I hiss, "please," the crack in my voice is the sound of a dam breaking, and tears are stinging my eyes. His armour is covered in blood and mud, I can't see his wounds for the dirt and gore, but we're lying in the earth and water together and maybe that's where he was meant to end, back in the river that's in his blood, grandson of a river god.

His open eyes are glaring into the sun.

I try to stretch my good arm to close them, but I can't. The effort is exhausting and frustrating and painful. Why try? Achilles will find me. Why did his sword not find its mark in my heart? I didn't die fighting Achilles like a hero – I grovelled. I begged for a few more moments alive after fearing his cruelty for nine years. I've known nothing but fear for nine years. I don't want to be remembered like this. I'm terrified.

I look up at the broad heavens and salt tears run into the river water as I imagine myself lying by the riverbank without a proper burial, food for dogs and birds. Without a burial, how can I cross the Styx?

Then – I don't know why – I take hold of Asteropaeus' hand.

I need to get back to Troy, if only so that I can return with coins for his eyes.

The water is lapping further up my body now; the fight is moving.

Achilles is screaming to the sky – “Zeus! Father! How has no god brought himself to pity and preserve me from this River!” – and the river starts to rise across the plain. The glints and gleams of the spear catching the sunlight feel like new wounds across my body and I flinch each time I catch movement in the corner of my eye.

I feel Asteropaeus’ body begin to lift. The water is steadily rising.

A flash of lightening splits the trunk of the tallest sycamore –

This is my chance.

The rising water will make moving easier. It’ll lift my body and I can move towards the city. I need to turn myself over again.

Bile rises in my throat and I gag viciously as I slowly flip and drag my floating body through the water with my right forearm pushing against the mud. It’s not a river at this point, it’s the graveyard of my friends. I can’t stop retching. I try not to look around me as every glance away from the city walls leads my sight into the eyes, the bodies, the floating hands and legs of my friends. Mnesus and Thrasius and Thersilochus and Aenius and Mydon and Astypylus and Ophelestes. Only determination will get me through this, Ares, hear me, I will come back for them, the flames of their pyres will be seen for hundreds of miles and fill our enemies’ hearts with fear

everything is so blurry. There is so much blood in the water. I can’t tell what’s mine. There is so much blood. I’m going to be sick. My chest hurts. My foot hurts. Is my body dead already and I’m dragging my corpse home?

High above the high walls, the dazzling sun appears to burn brighter. There is one cloud in the middle of the sky. I can only breathe when I look towards Troy, the only thing bringing me hope.

The cloud is growing across the sun, dimming it gradually like an eclipse, and my eyes don’t wince so much from the glare. Its shadow is growing, moving closer and there is a dark shape in the centre. It’s morphing – is that the form of man? As the cloud comes faster towards me the joy that floods me suddenly swells and surges and lifts me

I am saved

“Aphrodite,” I whisper, “Apollo, Ares, save me.” I close my eyes towards the sun and let my body relax into the water. “Take me home.” Would I feel a warm touch on my shoulder? Would it be a bird that lifts me over the walls of Troy? Should I look into the face of an immortal god?

Curiosity fuels my heart; I open my eyes so slightly. All that is between me and Troy – home and safety and strength – is the murky cloud, blocking the ferocity of the sun. And in the shadow stands a man, a dark glare covers his eyes, and I can’t make out his features beyond a deep brown beard, but I know his gaze does not fall on me. His weight is heavily loaded on one side, and on the other side he carries a smith’s hammer. My gut wrenches. He raises the hammer before him

and flames erupt across the water.