

Most Beloved, Philtatos

Amidst the chaos inside Troy's walls, Achilles raged on, swiftly slaughtering any man who dared face him. In a well-aimed shot, Apollo guided Paris' arrow to Achilles' heel to end his ravage.

I moved forward unafraid, slashing and stroking with every muscle in my body. My eyes were wide and alert with wrath, ready to swing. In my mind, an endless wail of agony played that was louder than the shouted battle cries I unleashed. My body continued to move despite my mental fatigue, now fueled by blind rage and sadness. Then, in a faint whisper, a single arrow flew down from above and pierced the back of my ankle. I stumbled for a moment, the searing pain running through my entire leg and fixing me to the spot. In a heartbeat, another arrow came down and struck my chest. The haunting sounds of metal armour clanking and the roars of soldiers halted as if time had frozen. I lost my footing and crashed onto my knees. I prepared myself for my inevitable mortality. I had known this moment would come since my departure to Troy, yet I stubbornly thought I could cheat the Fates and had so proudly played right into their prophecy that I would die in Troy. There is a notion that says your life flashes before your eyes as you pass, and it became a reality for me. Phthia, Scyros, Troy, and Hector all came to mind so vividly. Then Patroclus, the one person who had ever truly understood me. He was my best friend and my only friend. We grew up together and loved each other dearly. But now he was gone, killed by Hector, and so I had taken revenge and karma was here.

My vision dimmed, and memories of Patroclus played instead.

15 years ago, he was one of many exiles who had taken refuge in my father's kingdom. Only a stranger. From the moment we locked eyes upon his arrival in Phthia, our future unravelled. His rare gray eyes left an impression that sparked curiosity in me. From that day on, we would occasionally exchange awkward yet curious glances between ourselves. Unconsciously, I noticed I would sit at a table closer to him every day. One of these days, eager to catch his attention or just because I felt like it, I decided to show off my juggling skills in the dining hall in front of Patroclus. I saw his eyes flash with remark behind his overgrown brown curls as he turned his gaze upwards at me. Our eyes met yet again, and I impulsively threw a fig I was juggling at him, saying "catch." He caught it, and at that moment, I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, and my stomach felt uneasy. I was giddy.

Somehow, word of Patroclus' exile spread amongst the other boys in the kingdom, including me. I quickly noticed that from then on, he often skipped daily chores and lessons, so in order to prevent him from receiving punishment, I took him with me to my lessons, and they became ours. As long as he was with me, he could not be touched because I would protect him.

Then, we were standing before my father, Peleus, who had just given his blessing to let Patroclus be my brother-in-arms. That night, I invited him to share a room with me. When his eyes were closed, he looked peaceful and serene. In the moonlight, every curve, angle, and line of his face were reflected, and I would sometimes trace my finger along them. Our new friendship came with new privileges. He and I shared meals, rooms, a bed, and worries. He evoked new, inexplicable emotions from within me. Over time I saw his personality grow just for me. He was still timid and reserved around others but when we were alone, his teeth showed, the sides of his eyes wrinkled, and he laughed with his sweet voice.

We never spent a second apart; he was always with me. The ocean that was once cold was warm when I swam with him now, and the tree that once sat still under my light footsteps shook with life under Patroclus'

ungraceful climbs. Patroclus' presence made me feel whole and at peace, anchoring me during turbulent and lonely times.

Our relationship blossomed quickly. We never spoke of our desires for one another, but as adolescence approached, it became more and more difficult to keep our distance. Patroclus had stolen our first kiss. A flurry of emotions overwhelmed me, and I could not stop myself from fleeing in that moment. It was not out of dislike, but a mixture of surprise and guilt. I was to leave Phthia the next day to train with Chiron, a tutor who had taught many Greek heroes before me and helped them harness their full potential. In doing so, I would leave Patroclus behind forever. My heart ached, but I am sure Patroclus ached more when he found out.

The next morning, I quietly woke and dressed to leave with Chiron that day. Patroclus pretended to be asleep, but I saw his lashes flicker and his breathing was different from when he was truly asleep. How could he just watch me leave without saying goodbye? Was it because I fled from his touch the night before?

Days waiting for Patroclus felt like moons. I was so used to things being my way upon demand that I almost deluded myself that he had let me go alone in spite of abandoning him. But he didn't; he traced my steps from Phthia and found his way to me. Reunited, we shared rooms, meals, thoughts, and feelings again. It felt like home once more with him. Thinking back to Mount Pelion, I missed his warm embraces, kisses in the moonlight, and the promises of forever we had whispered to each other.

Now we were 16. A once scrawny, awkward boy stood before me, fully grown, muscled, and taller than me, with eyes that held a striking gaze. That very same face morphed into an expression of anxiety, and tears fell from those compelling grey eyes. It was the day he had borrowed my armor and taken my place on the battlefield in Troy, a desperate act to protect me when I had refused to fight. He had been so brave and so willing to sacrifice himself for my sake. I should have stopped him, held him close and never let him go. But I had let him go, and it had cost him his life. My memories were plagued by regret as I remembered his limp lifeless body lying on the dirt that had been trampled on by hundreds of men before, like worthless dross. *What if we never met? Would he be alive? Would he have run away when word of the reason for his exile got out and never heard or seen him again? Would he be alive, perhaps, running along the beach with another and climbing trees with his own children?* I scoffed at the thought, and it aroused my senses for a moment. I choked on the blood that had gathered in my mouth as I lay, dying on the ground of Troy.

I hope he won't be too mad at me for meeting him so soon. I could still hear his voice in my mind, his laughter, and his words of love. It was as if he was calling for me in the afterlife. Perhaps he was not upset and longing for me as well.

Slowly, images of Patroclus slipped from my grasp and darkness engulfed my vision, which broke my reverie. As the pain in my chest intensified, I knew that my time was running out. I yearned to meet Patroclus again in the afterlife, and at that moment, I felt a numbing sense of peace wash over me. As the world faded away, my final thoughts were of Philtatos, *most beloved*, Patroclus.

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