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Listen to Me

Bryan M. Furuness
Butler University, bfurunes@butler.edu

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LISTEN TO ME

Bryan Furuness

Fiction

hard enough to swamp us (especially frightening for my mother, who depends on a life jacket because she can't swim). He builds a barely functioning sailboat and says that he'll buy us a yacht when his ship comes in. He never realizes how far we've gone without one, or how far is far enough.

My father becomes precariously erratic about work. The city office is a different world from the rural clinic. As I grow into adolescence, one of the most difficult parts of my summer job at the office is covering for his unexplained absences. Sometimes he's away on house or hospital calls, sometimes he just disappears. Although he treats black patients as well as white on a first-come, first-served basis, he's not always there to serve. I placate patients with explanations about emergency house or hospital calls, which often turn out to be true, but some of the emergencies are of his own making. My father's resistance to routine is exacerbated by city life. Whenever stability sets in, he gets restless. What appears to be adventurous in a rustic setting seems bizarre in municipal confines. Usually he rebels by no more than an hour or two, but once we cannot find him for three days. He finally calls from Georgia to say he has been hunting for gold along some stream that a patient told him about. This makes sense to me at the time. We've panned for gold on campings trips, and I know to expect the unexpected from him. Still, his double life infects us all with anxiety. He's involved with another woman again, which makes my mother tense (unaccountably, to us kids). He forgets to bill housecalls and never bothers about people who don't pay him. We never have enough money.

My mother sells her few inherited stocks, one by one, to pay for private schools, since local public school curricula don't include subjects like evolution and foreign languages. When the boys approach college, we prepare for tuitions by subdividing the Chattanooga house

into apartments, shuffling rooms, partitioning, plastering, and painting. In the midst of this, my father drives up in a new yellow convertible with red leather upholstery and sweeps us all away for the first ride. It's a car so impractical, so joyful, I'm torn between the windy bliss it brings, during the hours our family cruises the landscape, and the tight look on my mother's face.

My parents sleep in two hospital beds pushed together. My father says regular beds are too short for him. Although my mother has painted the bars of the bed in an effort to de-institutionalize the bedroom, I do notice, as time goes on, that other parents' bedrooms look cozier. Mostly I attribute the difference to our general oddness, of which I am an inextricable part. Identifying with my parents against convention is easier than identifying with one against the other, but their differences begin to open a chasm wider than I can bridge.

When my mother is fifty-six years old and has shepherded her three children through school, she finally confronts my father, aged sixty, with a choice: leave her or leave the other woman. He looks around the house, seizes the bronze cobra candlesticks on our mantelpiece, and never comes back. These seem to be the only thing he wants to take with him—what's left of his India. The next time I see him is seven years later in a hospital where he lies dying.

My father has always appeared oblivious to pain. He has treated his own wounds with the same objective detachment as he bandages others'. Even now, skeletal and wracked with pain from cancer in his colon, stomach, and spine, he keeps a diary of medical notes on his symptoms. In a barely audible voice, he asks me to administer a lethal injection. I can't do it. He has to die on his own. His ashes are scattered, as he requests, in the woods on the mountaintop where he has made his last wild home. His lover sends me the bronze cobras. ✨



Sinon was a little guy, and pretty useless when it came to war. He wasn't strong like Eurymaches, or superfast like Ajax the Lesser. He was a balding runt with a trick knee whose only real skill was bullshitting—which is why Odysseus recruited him for the attack on Troy.

"Nights on a foreign shore can get tedious," said Odysseus. "We could use some talent around the campfire."

"Would I have to fight?" asked Sinon.

"Not if you don't want to."

Sinon looked around the bare walls of his extended-stay hovel, the sink with four cold coffee mugs in it, which marked the day as Wednesday. On one hand, the offer sounded like a solid, long-running gig. On the other hand, Odysseus had a reputation for being slippery. Was there a catch? "I'm a lover, not a fighter," he said, joking but not joking. "Just so we're clear on that point."

Odysseus gave him a broad smile. "If you were really a lover, you'd know that's the biggest fight of all."

"Good one. Seriously, though. Not a soldier. *Capisce?*"

Still smiling, Odysseus shook his hand. “Not a soldier.”

The siege turned out to be a long, hard slog. The Greeks had superior weaponry and snazzy uniforms—the kind with boar tusks sewn into the leather, which didn’t actually offer any extra protection, but, as big Eurymaches put it, “It’s easier to fight when you look bitchin’”—but none of this helped against the great Trojan wall.

The wall was built from boulders too huge to have been lifted by human hands. Sinon saw evidence of clever engineering, but Odysseus suspected they’d gotten help from the gods. Odysseus saw the world through god-tinted lenses, which could be funny (like when he’d started talking to a short-beaked dolphin following their ship, calling it an “emissary of Poseidon”) but was more often terrifying (like later that evening when someone noticed that Ocytus didn’t show up for dinner, and Odysseus remarked cryptically that “Poseidon demanded a sacrifice,” before asking for a refill on his wine).

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The Trojans called the wall “The Equalizer,” as in *Hey, I like how you’re tapping that battering ram against The Equalizer. Adorable! Or: Look how your spears bounce right off. Pling, plong, pling. Score one for The Equalizer!*

The Trojans were a nation of hecklers and gadflies. Not bold enough to attempt so much as a single advance, they were content to hang out on top of the wall and make fun of those who did. Every day, as the Greeks flung themselves against the boulders, the Trojans counterattacked with cat-calls, jibes, Bronx cheers.

The Greeks built a catapult, but the wall was too high and their fireballs exploded showily against the stones (*Rejected by...The Equalizer!*). Arrows and spears disappeared harmlessly over the parapets until Odysseus told his guys to quit wasting ammunition. They uprooted entire trees to bash against the gate, which led the Trojan guards to speculate loudly about the Greeks’ sexual ineptitude. Whenever the soldiers attempted to scale the wall, the guards poured down a mixture of used cooking oil and raw sewage. They could have boiled the oil, or sent down a hail of spears, but what fun would that have been? It was funnier to see your enemies

fall to the ground, then try to help each other up with slickery, crap-covered hands.

Every night the Greeks trudged back to their camp on the shore, exhausted and reeking, which made a tough crowd for Sinon. But every night he came up with fresh material—observational stuff, mainly, riffing on that day’s battle and news from the home front—and got them to laugh at themselves. “Someone should teach Ajax the Lesser how to throw a spear. Seriously, Jax, you look like you’re trying to fling snot off your hand.”

Another storyteller might have caught a knife in the ribs for that crack, but Less just smirked while the other guys jostled him good-naturedly. These guys loved Sinon. His nightly performance was the best part of their day. And Sinon grew to love them back. These were his guys. He’d never had guys before. Or anyone, really. Since moving out of his boyhood home, his whole life had been a solo act. Which had been fine. Or, not fine, but not terrible, either. A gray life. Nothing like this: On the beach, he did an impression of Lesser throwing a spear, complete with a pratfall on the follow-through, and when his face hit the sand, he heard the roar of laughter that never got old, followed by shouts of *do another, do me, do Eurymaches trying to count past ten.*

After a year, the war settled into a lower gear. Most of the soldiers gave up and went back home to their wives and farms and Senate duties. The ones who stuck around were the single guys who had nothing better to do, and who were, frankly, really enjoying this war. The daily battles had become perfunctory. Out of a sense of duty, the Greeks still went to the wall every morning, but skirmishes were reduced to schoolyard taunting, the Trojans trying to trick them into range of the sewage pots, Odysseus yelling at his guys to “take the battle serious.”

At lunch, guards and soldiers would share techniques for roasting goats, rib each other about their respective tastes in cheese, and occasionally declare a truce to foot-race along the shoreline. The Greeks cleared some land for planting, and the Trojans gave them tips on farming the sandy soil. In exchange, the Greeks taught them how to make columns out of

sheared cypress trees, and, weeks later, the tops of a few clumsy columns were visible inside The Equalizer.

All in all, it was a good war. Casualties were low, morale was high. The only one who still talked about “winning” was Odysseus, who was also the only one still anxious to get home (or so he claimed). For Sinon, the situation was perfect. He was getting paid to bullshit around a campfire with his friends. The ocean hushed him to sleep. He ate fresh fish and took long walks along the shoreline and had to cut about a foot off his rope belt, he’d slimmed down so much. What more could he want? This was before he met Cassandra.

Several years into the siege, the poets and prophets of Troy proposed a “cultural exchange program.” Sinon agreed to bring the idea to Odysseus, though he was sure the big man would nix it on the spot. By this time, the siege was doing terrible things to his mind, and worse things to his mood. He spent his days alone in his tent, slugging down wine and periodically yelling at the gods as though they were nagging him. *Get off my ass!* he could be heard to shout at least once an hour. *I know, I KNOW* was another common one, though what he knew, exactly, no one knew.

But Sinon had promised to ask, so he went to Odysseus’s tent and he asked. Then he waited for his rebuke, trying not to breathe the goaty air as Odysseus, spread-eagle on the ground, stared up at the drooping canopy. His eyes were doing a crazy waterbug dance. “Tell you what,” said Sinon after enough time had passed that he was sure Odysseus had forgotten about him. “I’ll put them off, tell them maybe next year.”

“Now.”

Sinon was already halfway out the tent flap when he heard Odysseus speak. He took a sip of fresh air before turning back around. “What?”

“Now’s good,” said Odysseus to the canopy. His voice was soft and slow with wine. “We’re ready for this.”

“Ready for this,” Sinon repeated carefully. “We’re still talking about the exchange program, right?”

“Exchange program,” echoed Odysseus, as though relaying a message to the ceiling. “That’s it.”

Sinon shifted his weight. Was Odysseus being slippery, or was he just shitfaced? “Okay, I’ve got to know,” said Sinon. “Is this some kind of trick?”

A smile spread across the big man’s face, though his eyes were still spaced-out. It gave Sinon the creeps. “That’s what I should have asked before getting into this mess,” Odysseus said. “You’re so smart, Sinon. You should be me.”

Sinon looked longingly at the tent flap. Would it be rude to run away right now? More to the point: Would Odysseus remember any of this when he sobered up? Sinon forced a chuckle. “Me? I’m no leader.”

“Leader, ha.” Odysseus shook his head, and when it came to rest he was looking at Sinon’s foot. When he spoke again, his voice was even softer. “The guys, they think this is all my doing, but it’s not, it’s not...they push me around, Sinon.”

“They?”

Odysseus closed his mouth, then opened it again like a beached dolphin. Flies tapped against the canvas, searching for a way out, but just then Sinon wanted to stay. Odysseus was practically sleeptalking; Sinon got down on all fours to hear what would come out of his mouth. “Who’s pushing you around?” said Sinon.

Odysseus blinked, unseeing. His breath was terrible, a carcass in the sun. “I’m a plaything of the gods,” he breathed. “A character in someone else’s story.”

His eyes were scuffed with cataracts, full of clouds and pleading. Sinon had never seen such a helpless look in his life. What did Odysseus want from him? Help, friendship, a different story to star in?

Before he could ask, the big man closed his eyes. Sinon checked his pulse—still alive, whew—and then hustled to the gate to pass on the good news about the cultural exchange.

After their campfire gigs were over, the culturati from both sides got together outside the main gate to drink and gossip and steal each other’s stories. Troy was a small town, *tré* provincial, the insiders complained, and they were starving

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for material. “Not that you would understand,” they told Sinon. “Greece is so metropolitan. Plus, you guys attack people. That’s *active*. What do we have? A city that’s always under attack. Try turning that passive shit into an epic poem. Try working with a wall as your protagonist.”

For the first month of the exchange, Sinon stiffened every time a twig snapped, sure that Odysseus was about to storm out of the bushes to lay waste to poets, but that never happened, and eventually his suspicions of trickery died down. By that time the exchange had devolved into bitch sessions, but Sinon kept going anyway because of Cassandra.

She was a prophetess, which would have been sexy enough to drive Sinon wild, even if it hadn’t been for her full lips, her melony breasts, her heavy eyelids, everything about her suggesting a ripe fruit bending the end of a branch. She had this big, throaty laugh that gave Sinon a shivery feeling, like bubbles were fizzing up his ribcage.

She occupied his mind. He couldn’t look at a roasted goat leg without wondering if Cassandra liked goat, and what her thoughts were *vis-à-vis* cooking on a spit, which somehow led him to wonder what she tasted like. He spent more time working up material for the cultural exchange than for his own campfire. He wanted, more than anything, to make her laugh, and then laugh again, a sound he came to think of as his heart going *jackpot, jackpot*. Also he wanted to murder any other man who made her laugh.

But why bother? She was light years out of his league.

He told himself to give up, but doom only magnified his romantic feelings. She caught him staring at least three times a night, and each time he had to pretend he was spacing out, or that there was something interesting just over her shoulder.

Looking at Cassandra was like drinking saltwater: it made you thirstier and thirstier, and then you went insane. Sinon tried skipping the cultural exchange, but it turned out that not being around her made him feel even worse.

During the day he still went for long walks along the shoreline, but slowly now, and when he got far away from camp, he’d scream into his hands, or punch the wet sand until it felt like his

wrists were splintering. Somehow this was more satisfying than masturbating, which he also did on these walks. All it took was one thought of Cassandra unwrapping her gauzy layers of clothing, revealing, little by little, her navel that would be oblong like a tiny boat—and then Sinon lit into the brush for some privacy, hoping that none of the scrub was poisonous, and knowing he wouldn’t be able to stop himself if it was.

Eight years into the siege, Odysseus declared that he wanted to build a wooden horse. Before they could start the project, they had to buy tools from the Trojans, who (of course) scalped them on the deal. Then they had to dismantle one of their ships to get the building materials. Even then, the construction was slow going, because these Greeks were warriors, not carpenters; their craft was destruction, not creation.

They built it in front of the main gate, because that was part of the deal with the Trojans: If at any point it started to look like a mega-weapon, the Trojans could crush it with heavy boulders they had balanced on top of the parapets (How *did* those guys move those boulders?).

“What is that thing?” one of the Trojan poets asked Sinon one night. At that point, it was just a wooden box frame with big wheels.

“Big surprise,” said Sinon, who was frankly a little embarrassed for Odysseus. It was one thing for the Greeks to make fun of him, but he didn’t want the Trojan snark-set knowing that the big man was out of his damn mind. “You’re gonna love it.”

“No, we won’t,” said Cassandra. “This is bad. Really bad.”

One poet rolled his eyes to Sinon. “She’s always saying shit like that. If we made a drinking game out of her warnings, we’d all have cirrhosis.”

“Women be warning, women be *warning*,” said a drunken harpist.

Cassandra shook her head at the fire. “All you jerks are going to die.”

“Yeah. Someday.”

She stomped her foot. “Assholes! You are looking at the machine of your execution.”

A sculptor leaned over to the poet. “That’s the real reason you can’t make a drinking game out of her warnings,” he said. “She’ll kill your buzz every time.”

Sniggering, they exchanged a drunken high five. Cassandra stared at them, then grabbed the cold end of a flaming log. Before anyone could stop her, she flung it onto the wooden chassis—but just as quickly, the poets were kicking sand over the log and yelling that she was as bad as Odysseus with his hard-on for war. “Fucking relax!” the sculptor shouted before drawing back to the campfire. Cassandra stayed by the chassis, frowning at the charred spot. Sinon stayed with her. In the air was a tang of tar and salt and singed cedar. “They never listen,” she said.

“So why bother telling them anything?”

She lifted her chin toward Odysseus’s tent down the beach, the only one blazing with light. “Why does he bother with the siege?”

“Maybe he hopes he’ll wear you guys down.”

“Maybe he can’t help himself,” she said.

“Maybe he can’t stop.”

“He says the gods make him do it.”

Sinon delivered this line like a straight man, hoping she would snort and they could sarcasm-bond over Odysseus’s weird beliefs. But she only pulled her shawl around herself and started back to the campfire. Over her shoulder, she said, “Maybe they do.”

The next night Sinon heard a weary note in Cassandra’s laugh. Was that new, or was he just now noticing it? The weariness made her laugh seem even more precious, like the last few notes a music box plays as it winds down. He wondered if her laugh was a mask that kept people from seeing her as shrill, as nothing more than a worrywart. Or maybe laughter was her shield, one that kept her from breaking down or lashing out at everyone who refused to listen. Either laughter kept her from looking crazy, or it kept her from going crazy.

But once in a while there came a moment, late at night, when she stopped laughing, when she let down her shield and allowed herself to be tired and hurt and hopeful, and for this reason, Sinon began staying at the campfire longer than anyone else. These moments were rare and short, and he didn’t want to miss a single one of them.

One night she asked him to tell her about Greece.

It was late. The fire had died down to winking embers, and the sky was rimmed with red, the dawn of dawn. The only sound was the sea hushing the shore. All the other bards and prophets and lutists and playwrights had either wobbled back inside the gate or passed out under the horse.

Sinon looked at her closely. Was she screwing with him? There wasn’t enough light to see if she was smirking or mock-batting her eyes. If he answered sincerely, she might bray out a laugh, call him a stooge, and push him off the log. He’d seen her punk more than one poet in this way—drawing him out of his shell of irony and lazy cynicism, exposing the tender mollusk of his heart, and then, bam, *Gotcha, dumbass*. Sinon had always laughed with her, thinking of her as a poseur exposer, but what if he was her next victim? He didn’t think his mollusk could take it.

On the other hand, she might be letting down her shield, and how many of those moments would he get?

Sinon took a chance. He told her about his Greece, how he remembered it. With his fingers, he drew a picture on the slate sky, sketching out the wide avenues, the hammered bronze sundials, the harbor that glittered like the eye of Zeus. Every time she said *Hmm* or laughed softly, his soul got the bends. And then Sinon put her in his picture.

All of a sudden he was describing *her* walking down that wide avenue, dust from a passing chariot settling in her hair. Cassandra, buying plums in the marketplace and bringing them to his, Sinon’s, home. And then—he could hardly believe he was saying this, but he was afraid to stop—she came into his home, set down the plums, took Sinon in her arms, ran her fingers into the little curls on the back of his head, and kissed him full on the lips.

In the first ray of dawn, Cassandra looked at him with a serious expression. His stomach turned into a plum pit.

“This is never going to work,” she murmured even as she leaned toward him. Sometimes, apparently, she didn’t listen to herself, either.

When she curled her fingers into his hair, Sinon went blind with ecstasy.

This became their time: the hour before dawn. For a while, it was enough. For a while, the time seemed longer than it really was, because Sinon spent each morning replaying mental highlights from the night before, and in the evenings he visualized how their time would go that night. Sometimes they made out with an intensity that gave Sinon toe cramps; sometimes they just talked. Well, Sinon talked. He told her everything about himself, talking with abandon, holding nothing back. He was amazed at what came out of his mouth, stuff he'd never told anyone, stuff he'd never even admitted to himself. Stuff that was awful, shameful! Stuff you don't tell girls, ever, because they will be repulsed! Like: After his mother died, he wrote letters to her. You're thinking that's sweet, but if you saw the number of scrolls, you would be truly freaked out. And that's not the worst of it. After a while he started mailing those letters to himself so he would have mail. And then—okay, this part made him cringe to remember it—he started writing the letters in his mother's voice. *My dearest boy, I hope you are well and not eating too much cheese, etc.*

Like also: This fantasy he entertained a few months earlier, in which all the soldiers and guards killed each other in one fantastic blood-orge so that the only two people left in the city were him and her, because he figured that was the only way he had a shot with her. ("Well, you can't spell bloodlust without lust," she allowed.)

Or, finally: He was a virgin. *Really* virginal. He wasn't even sure what a vagina looked like, much less how it worked. "What do you think it looks like?" she asked, and when he drew his best guess in the sand with a stick, she toppled over and laughed soundlessly like she was having convulsions. Sinon had never seen anything sexier in his life. "All these years," she gasped, "you've been dreaming about fucking a kraken *in the face*. Boy, are you gonna be disappointed when you see mine."

He jizzed on his own thigh, right then. Spontaneously, like a hiccup. For the next three days that phrase played in his head on a constant loop—*When you see mine, when you see*

mine, when you see mine—keeping him awake and crazy.

Cassandra told him about herself, too, though not as much or as freely. Now and again, she'd reveal a glimpse of her girlhood (tomboy, watercolors, fistfights) or life inside The Equalizer (cliquish, boring: "Honestly, the invasion is the best thing to happen to Troy in years. We think of you guys like a road show.") but if Sinon asked any follow-ups, she clammed right up. He told himself to be patient. Receptive, not probing. After years of talking to people who failed to listen, Cassandra would need some time to trust him, to love him like he loved her.

Yes: love. Why else would his heart ache like a wet knot in his chest? How else to explain the constant clutch in his throat, the urge to declaim poetry? Sometimes during the day he walked into the brush and wept with gratitude until he passed out from exhaustion. Once he got up covered with ants, like a living blanket. As he started back to camp, it felt like a message from the gods, though he had no idea what it could mean. As he got closer to the tents, it felt more like a wondrous joke. Giggling, he broke into a run, eager to show his friends (*Aargh! I'm Ant-man!*), stumbling with giddiness, but then he inhaled a bunch of ants and fell to his knees, hacking, ants rolling off him like water.

Days flew past. The siege went on. The horse took shape: the spine, the blocky head. Sinon and Cassandra kept their relationship secret, being careful not to act too friendly (or to feign too much distance) while anyone else was awake around the campfire. Acting normal turned to be the hardest role. But once the others drifted away and the turret guards slumped over, they had their hour and it was still good, but Sinon wanted more.

"Come to my tent," he said.

"Sinon..."

Getting her to like him had been the hard part, he thought. The next step—breaking through these stupid barriers of war that kept them apart—should be easy for a gifted bull-shitter like Sinon.

"No one has to know," he said, threading his fingers through hers. "If you want, I can make love so that you won't even know."

"You know I can't come to your tent."

Then how am I supposed to see your vagina, he thought fiercely, but had enough presence of mind to keep his mouth shut. A night or two later he snaked a hand into the sleeve of her toga, but she trapped it between her elbow and ribcage, clamping down hard enough to pop a knuckle. "Be happy with what you have," she said through her teeth. If anyone found out about them, they'd call it collusion or treason. "And if Odysseus hears about us? Fan, meet shit."

"Or," Sinon suggested, "maybe it would end the war. Think about it: our, uh, marriage could usher in a new era of peace between our nations."

She shook her head in disbelief. "You're just like all the others, aren't you? Can't listen to a damn thing I say."

That night, Sinon understood something about Odysseus. Of all the men on the beach, only the two of them knew what it was like to stand so close, for so long, to something you desperately wanted, and not to get it. Only the two of them knew the particular madness of Tantalus.

A few months earlier, the siege had been a kind of limbo, and that had seemed like paradise to Sinon. Now the same limbo felt like hell.

Sinon needed a plan. He just didn't imagine that someone else would come up with one for him.

Sinon was under the horse when Eurymaches came for him. He was supposed to be checking the finished structure for loose pegs, but had drifted off in the shade of the belly.

Big E stuck a toe in his ribs. "Odysseus wants to see you." He bent down and took a sharp sniff. "Go dip in the ocean first, man. You stink like campfire. And perfume."

Sinon's gut clenched. "Oh, *that*," he said in what he hoped was a super-casual tone. "Yeah, I was pulling weeds in the garden, and some of them had flowers. Flower juice must have squished out on me. Perfume, ha."

"Pulling weeds?" Eurymaches scratched his neck thoughtfully. "Was that before or after you were necking with that prophetess?"

Sinon's whole body went cold. Eurymaches laughed and slugged his thigh. "Dude, everyone *knows*," he said, wondering out loud how Sinon

thought he could hide anything on this tiny beach. More importantly, he assured Sinon that none of the guys cared, though they were all surprised a hairy gnome like him could land a hot soothsayer. "Is it true what they say about prophetesses?" Eurymaches asked him. "That their vaginas are kind of like a kraken's—"

"Does Odysseus know?"

His heart was floating up. If Odysseus knew, that must mean he was cool with it, in which case Sinon could run to Cassandra right now and—

"No," said Eurymaches, all the teasing gone out of his face. "He hasn't stuck his head outside his tent for weeks. And if you're smart, you'll realize that his ignorance is your bliss." With a wink, Eurymaches cuffed him on the side of the head. "Seriously, go wash up. The big man might be a little distracted, but he's got a nose."

Sinon watched him go, thinking, *What a decent guy*. Then he got up and tripped over his laces that Eurymaches must have tied together before waking him.

The front of Odysseus's tent faced Troy; the rear faced Greece. When Sinon came up, wet from the sea, he saw Odysseus standing at the open back of the tent, gazing across the water, looking directly into the setting sun. Sinon wondered if Odysseus was a little blind, stone crazy, or both. At least he was upright this time.

"We cannot win out here," said Odysseus in a flat voice without looking at Sinon. "We have to get inside those walls."

Sinon grunted. *You and me both, pal*.

The sun touched the sea, setting the horizon on fire. Now Odysseus looked at him. "The horse is hollow," he said. "We're going to fill it with warriors, then let them loose once it's inside the city."

Sinon's mouth fell open. The Trojans would never see that coming. After heckling the construction effort for years, any suspicions they'd had were long forgotten. They considered the horse a folly, another Greek vanity, a hobby to distract the warriors from the futility of their siege.

Still, the plan was missing a step.

"Wait—how are you going to get the horse inside the wall?" said Sinon.

As the sun bled out into the ocean, Odysseus regarded Sinon with his scuffed eyes. “That,” he said, “is where you come in.”

The next morning, Odysseus approached the main gate with a scowl and a fresh tunic, acting more like his old hale self than he had in years. “Congratulations, assholes!” he shouted to the guards and noblemen who had gathered atop the wall to watch the Greeks burn their tents and board their ships. “You did what might the mighty Poseidon could not do with his cruel dolphins, what Zeus could not do with his—”

“What’s the trick?” called one of the guards.

“No trick,” yelled Odysseus. “We’re just done here. Ten years is enough. So, nice job repulsing us. Be proud. You’ll tell your great-grandchildren about this day.”

He spat in the sand, tromped across the beach, boarded the final ship, and, to the Trojans’ amazement, cast off.

But after the ship disappeared around the coast, just as they were all enjoying a chant of *EEE-qua-LI-zer* (*clap-clap, clap-clap-clap*), someone spotted a lone figure trudging up the beach. The crowd went silent, straining to see who it was and what it could mean. As usual, Cassandra was the first to twig. On the parapet, she clucked her tongue. “Sinon.”

When Sinon declared that he loved Cassandra more than his home country, and wished to defect, it touched off a big debate. As usual, the argument broke along class lines. The guards were sure he wanted to infiltrate their defenses and proposed to kill him on the spot, “just to be safe.” The noblemen, who had supported the cultural exchange from the beginning, thought it was the most romantic gesture they’d ever seen, and who were they to stand in the way of love? Besides, even if the guards were right, who cared? The war was over, meatheads. How much damage could one balding runt do?

They argued back and forth, and one of the guards took a pot shot at Sinon with a clumsily thrown spear, and eventually King Priam was summoned to the wall.

Sinon stood back as the main gate opened, and Priam tottered forth with a retinue of guards who didn’t look so cocksure out in the

open. The old man stopped and licked his lips, which Sinon took as an invitation to explain himself. “Your highness,” he said in a voice loud enough to be heard by the crowd, “My body may be outside your walls, but my heart lives in your city. My prayer is that, in your mercy, you will accept all of me. But if not—” Sinon’s voice rose stagily like he’d planned, but he was surprised to find that the emotion behind it felt real “—I ask that you kill me now, because life apart from my beloved is not life at all.”

A nobleman sighed huskily. One of the guards muttered, “My ass.”

Priam licked his lips again. Sinon leaned in.

“That’s a good-looking horse,” Priam said.

“Nice craftsmanship. Your guys just left it behind?”

Cassandra stepped through the gate. “Dad...”

Sinon’s eyes widened. Looking at Cassandra, he mouthed, *Dad?*

Priam said, “It would look nice in the plaza.”

He half-turned to Cassandra. “Wouldn’t it look nice in the plaza?”

She shook her head slowly. “I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“No?” Priam sounded surprised. “Where would you put it?”

This fired up an argument they’d clearly had before. Cassandra said he never listened to her, and Priam wondered why she didn’t want him to be happy. As they flung examples at one another, the underlying pattern became clear: Cassandra warned, Priam said *Bah* and got his way, and *though he was always sorry later, the pattern kept repeating itself.*

Priam was going to get his way again, Sinon realized with a feeling like ants pouring off his body. Odysseus’s stupid plan was going to work. Sinon had not anticipated this. In fact, the only reason he’d agreed to play his part was because he thought there was no way the plan would work. Or, rather, he thought only the *first* part would work—the part where he defected.

But the second part? Where Odysseus told him to claim that the horse was a giant talisman that would protect the owner from any future invasions? Sinon wasn’t even going to try that part. His own plan was to get his ass inside the wall and leave the horse behind. The gates would close, and eventually his friends would

bust out of the horse. Then they could all go back to the stalemate they’d enjoyed for the last decade, only Sinon would be inside, with Cassandra.

“Okay,” said Priam, turning to Sinon. “I’ll take it.”

Inside the horse, something rustled. Sinon yelped a nervous laugh.

Priam’s face darkened. “Son, what’s the problem?”

Besides the fact that you’re inviting destruction into your city? Sinon didn’t say this, of course. If the Trojans caught on that the horse was rigged—well, who knew what could happen? They’d probably feel betrayed that the Greeks were suddenly taking the war seriously, and retaliate by lighting the horse on fire, in which case his friends would be roasted like goats. Sinon was going to need his finest bullshit to get them all out of this mess.

He waited for the right words to rise into his mind.

Any minute now.

“Here’s the deal,” Priam said, taking Sinon by the shoulder. “I get the horse, you get citizenship.” Ducking his head, he spoke out of the side of his mouth. “I make no promises about my daughter.”

Cassandra looked toward the ocean. “You don’t want to do this,” she said, her earrings chiming her disapproval.

Priam didn’t listen to her, of course. And it wasn’t until later that Sinon realized she had been talking to both of them.

“Deal,” said Sinon, because what else could he say? His voice was husky with emotion, which caused the noblemen to clutch at their hearts.

Priam’s deal made more sense once Sinon walked into the city. The columns he’d seen from the beach were the tip of the imitation iceberg. The guards in the king’s retinue had Greekified their helmets by sewing on pieces of boar tusk, but they didn’t quite know how to do it, so the tusky chunks flapped around like hangnails. Window-sill pottery appeared to have been rubbed with ash to give it that distinctive Greek coloration. In the chariot, Priam kept throwing his arm around Sinon as if to say, *Look at my Greek friend!*

Could Odysseus have known how much their siege had warped the Trojans? Sinon dismissed the thought. After spending the last few years holed up in a tent, all the big man knew was how to shout at invisible beings. This was a dash of luck, that was all, and it could still be undone. Even now, Cassandra was trying to talk Priam out of his decision, though she didn’t seem to be trying real hard. “You should really think this through,” she said halfheartedly from the back of the chariot, apparently laying the groundwork for one hell of an *I told you so.*

Priam ignored her. “Check out the frescoes,” he told Sinon, pointing at a passing wall. On the dirty plaster was a crude illustration of a hugely endowed Priam strangling Odysseus. That’s what the caption said, anyway. To Sinon’s eyes, it looked like a watercolor painted by blind children that had been left out in the rain.

“Admit it,” Sinon forced himself to say. “You kidnapped a Greek artist to paint that, didn’t you?” Priam shook his head shyly. Sinon took in all the rickety columns and tombstone pottery. “It’s like I’ve died and gone to Athens!”

“Zeus,” muttered Cassandra. Sinon’s stomach was filled with plum pits.

Their chariot pulled into the plaza at the center of the city, followed by the horse, rumbling over the rutted streets, only some of the groans coming from the wooden joints. “Fucker’s heavy!” complained one of the guards pushing the chassis, and the guy next to him nodded sagely. “That’s how you know it’s quality.”

That night was a hot time in Old Troy. Not only had they repulsed Odysseus—he’d admitted it himself! How awesome was that!—they’d snagged an all-time piece of war booty. “Usually you have to go overseas to do your pillaging,” Priam drolled to the noblemen who lined up to congratulate him. “How considerate of Odysseus to save us a trip.”

The night was warm with a steady salt breeze. The plaza was alive with soldiers and poets and children, everyone drinking wine and making up songs about what pussies the Greeks were. At least twice an hour someone climbed up on the horse and made wild rodeo gestures, thinking he was the first one to come up with such a bold and hilarious idea.

On a balcony overlooking the plaza, Sinon and Cassandra shared a jug of wine and silence. He cleared his throat several times before asking her, "How come you didn't tell me your father was the king?"

She gave him a dark look. "You are not in a position to lecture me about secrets." Then she lobbed the jug at the horse. It exploded against the neck, leaving a dark trail like a wound. A few Trojans backed away, shaking glass out of their hair. *Crazy bitch*, someone muttered.

"Let's run away." Sinon grabbed her hand. "Right now. We'll find a small island and make a home under an olive tree."

She made her hand small and slid it away. "I'm supposed to run away with the guy who's about to slaughter my people?"

He rubbed his forehead fiercely. There had to be a way out of this. There was always a way. Odysseus had known this, which is why he'd waded through a decade of futility and frustration. The difference here was that Sinon only had a few hours.

"I could just...not let them out of the horse," said Sinon. "They can't slaughter anyone from the inside."

"They'd starve or be discovered and burned alive. You'd let that happen to your friends?"

Sinon squeezed his eyes shut, dropped his head back. "How did this happen?" he said to the roof. "How on earth did this happen?"

Cassandra sighed. Her fingers curled into the back of his hair. "Idiot," she said tenderly. "Odysseus knew about us. We were part of his

plan." She paused, her breath warming his ear. "We were his plan."

As dawn came near, the party faded. Revelers slipped back into houses, or into the palace, which Priam had opened for the night. The poets were the last to fall. Blind with wine, most of them passed out in the plaza.

Cassandra and Sinon were awake, of course. It was almost time, but not quite, for him to climb down from the balcony, arms and legs shaking violently. In the belly of the horse was a little door. Sinon would unlock it, then back away to watch the cramped soldiers drop out and crawl away like ants.

Cassandra would find her sleeping father and kiss him on the forehead without waking him—no use alerting him; he would just say *Bah*—before withdrawing to her room to await the invasion she already knew she would survive, though she wished she would not.

Sinon would return to Greece a hero, though he'd wish he were still just a storyteller. "More control," he'd say, but no one would understand.

But all of that was still to come. Just then it was the hour before dawn, the hour that belonged to the two of them. Greek ships were already sailing back to Troy, ready to be let into the city, but for now Sinon was kneeling before Cassandra in a sorrowful siege, begging her to listen, to run with him, refusing to believe her as she tells him, over and over, that it is decided, it is finished, they were characters in Odysseus's story, and now their part is over, all over. ✨

ART FEATURE No Din



EMMY LINGSCHUIT



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