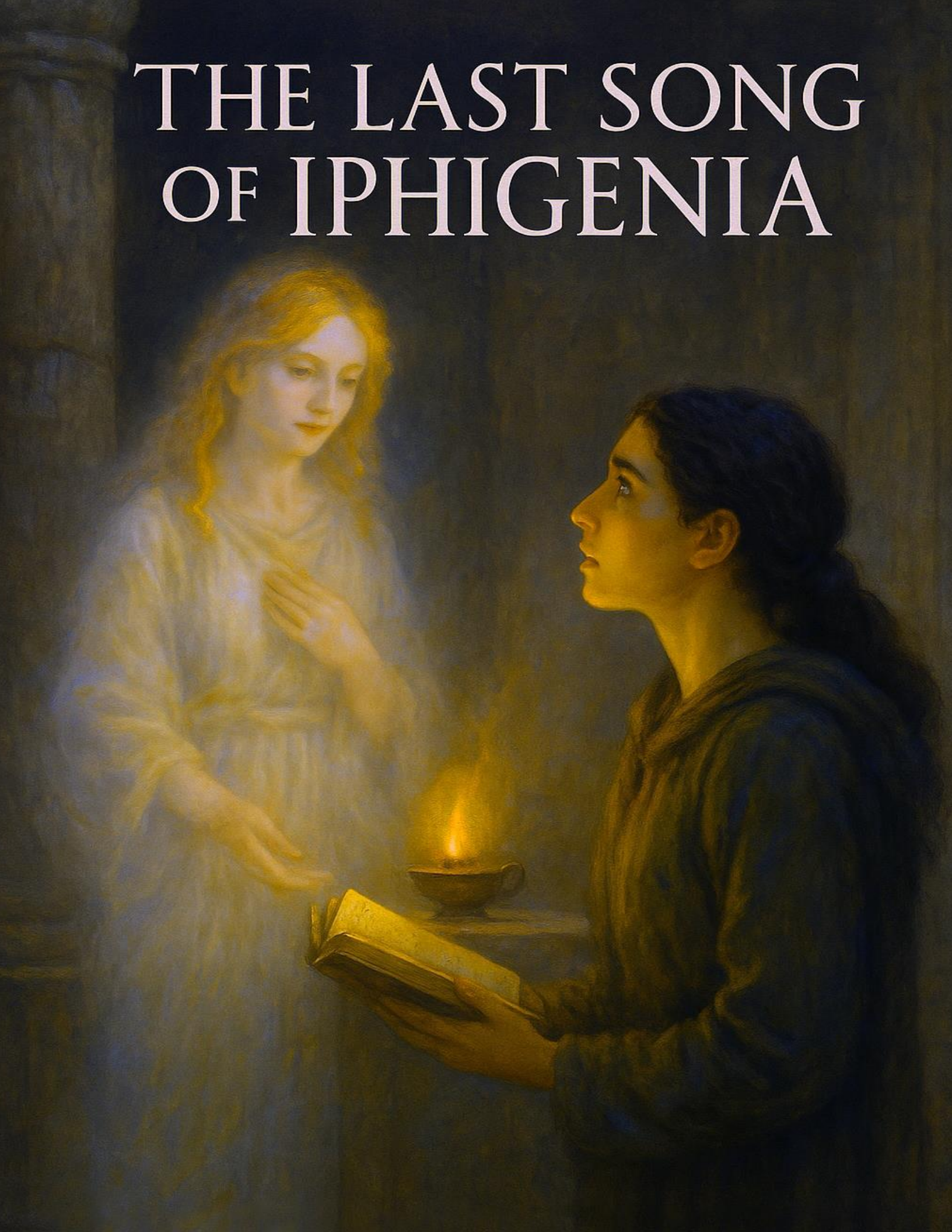


THE LAST SONG OF IPHIGENIA





The Last Song of Iphigenia

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Book and Cover design: Roberte Riche

Artwork: AI, and final design with Corel Paintshop Pro X9

Poem Source: "Iphigeneia and Agamemnon" by Walter Savage Landor

Genre: Fiction / Mythic Fantasy / Retelling

Themes: Fiction / Legends & Mythology

Reading Time: 15 minutes

Prelude:

From my studies of the ancient poem and the tragedies *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, there was more to her story.

Her tale, as the myths record it, ends after her daring rescue of her brother and his companion. What became of her after that? The scrolls grow quiet. The poets grow still. Her final chapter, if it was ever written, has been lost to time.

And yet, I cannot accept that her voice simply vanished. A life marked by sacrifice, silence, and divine cruelty does not end in silence. Not truly. Her last song, I believe, was never sung.

So I set out to find it.

Callista, a mortal scholar and seeker of forgotten truths, journeyed to a place abandoned even by the gods—the crumbling shrine of Artemis at the world’s edge. There, among broken stones and wind-scoured altars, I found what history had buried.

This is the story that followed.

The one the bards never told.

The one Iphigenia kept for herself.

The Poem:

Iphigeneia and Agamemnon

Walter Savage Landor

IPHIGENEIA, when she heard her doom

At Aulis, and when all beside the king

Had gone away, took his right hand, and said,

“O father! I am young and very happy.

I do not think the pious Calchas heard

Distinctly what the goddess spake. Old age

Obscures the senses. If my nurse, who knew

My voice so well, sometimes misunderstood

While I was resting on her knee both arms

And hitting it to make her mind my words,

*And looking in her face, and she in mine,
Might not he also hear one word amiss,
Spoken from so far off, even from Olympos?"*

*The father placed his cheek upon her head,
And tears dropped down it, but the king of men
Replied not. Then the maiden spake once more.*

*"O father! say'st thou nothing? Hear'st thou not
Me, whom thou ever hast, until this hour,
Listened to fondly, and awakened me
To hear my voice amid the voice of birds,
When it was inarticulate as theirs,
And the down deadened it within the nest?"*

*He moved her gently from him, silent still,
And this, and this alone, brought tears from her,
Although she saw fate nearer: then with sighs,
"I thought to have laid down my hair before
Benignant Artemis, and not have dimmed
Her polished altar with my virgin blood;
I thought to have selected the white flowers
To please the Nymphs, and to have asked of each
By name, and with no sorrowful regret,
Whether, since both my parents willed the change,
I might at Hymen's feet bend my clipt brow;
And (after these who mind us girls the most)
Adore our own Athena, that she would
Regard me mildly with her azure eyes.*

*But, father! to see you no more, and see
Your love, O father! go ere I am gone—”
Gently he moved her off, and drew her back,
Bending his lofty head far over hers,
And the dark depths of nature heaved and burst.
He turned away; not far, but silent still.
She now first shuddered; for in him, so nigh,
So long a silence seemed the approach of death,
And like it. Once again she raised her voice.
“O father! if the ships are now detained,
And all your vows move not the gods above,
When the knife strikes me there will be one prayer
The less to them; and purer can there be
Any, or more fervent than the daughter’s prayer
For her dear father’s safety and success?”
A groan that shook him shook not his resolve.
An aged man now entered, and without
One word, stepped slowly on, and took the wrist
Of the pale maiden. She looked up and saw
The fillet of the priest and calm cold eyes.
Then turned she where her parent stood, and cried,
“O father! grieve no more: the ships can sail.”*



Chapter 1

The Temple at the Edge of the Sea

The salt air carried a sharpness that stung the back of my throat as I climbed the final rise. My legs ached, and my cloak stuck to my back where the sea spray had soaked through, but I didn't stop. The temple ruins were just ahead, barely visible through the tangle of wind-sculpted trees and overgrown brush. I had followed the path—if it could still be called one—across half a dozen jagged cliffs, led only by the notes of an ancient scholar I had nearly mistaken for a myth himself. If his transcription was correct, this was the last known place Iphigenia had ever stood.

I brushed a strand of damp hair from my face and tightened my grip on the leather satchel. Inside were the scrolls I'd spent years gathering—pieces of her story scattered across plays and poems, passed down from memory more than ink. They never agreed on what had truly happened. Some claimed she died, others that Artemis had spared her. But none ever told me what came after.

And none had found this place.

The wind shifted, pushing aside a curtain of vines and revealing a shattered marble arch. I paused at its base, looking up at the faint carving worn into its face—a crescent moon—the symbol of Artemis. My heart quickened. I stepped through.

The temple had long since collapsed, but its bones remained—pillars half-buried in sand, mosaic shards glittering faintly between weeds. A single altar stood upright in the center of the space. Time had not taken it. I moved toward it slowly, careful not to disturb the quiet. My boots crunched against stones and shells. There was no birdsong. No movement. Only the steady sound of the sea beyond the cliffs.

I set my satchel down and knelt beside the altar. The stone was smooth, worn by wind and years. A faint stain still darkened its center. I pressed my hand to it, then whispered, more from instinct than belief, "Iphigenia Daughter of Agamemnon, Priestess of Artemis, if you are still here, I've come to listen."

The air didn't change, not at first. But something in the silence shifted. It wasn't louder, just heavier—like a breath held by the earth itself.

I stayed still. I didn't speak again.

When the wind returned, it softly brushed my face and tugged gently at my sleeve. I looked up.

She was standing across from me.

I don't know how I knew it was her. She wore no crown or robe of divinity. She was dressed in a simple white gown stained with sea and time. Her hair was braided loosely as if it had once been ceremonial but had long since come undone. Her eyes were neither kind nor cruel—just tired.

"I have waited," the woman said, her voice distant as if carried through centuries. "And no one came." Her voice was clear but quiet. It didn't echo in the ruins. It didn't need to.

"I did," I said, rising slowly. "I've read your story. But none of them ever finished it."

"They couldn't," she replied. "Because none of them knew the truth."

I looked at her closely. She wasn't a phantom, but she wasn't entirely present either. The light passed through her in places. Her feet left no prints in the sand. But her sorrow... that was solid.

"Then tell me," I said. "Let me hear it."

The woman tilted her head. "And what will you do with it?"

"I will remember it," Callista answered. "And I will let others remember as well."

The ghost—or goddess, or memory—seemed to nod.

Then she said simply, "Then sit. And I will tell you."

She glanced down at the altar between us, then back at me. "Will you believe it?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

She stepped forward, laying her hand gently on the stone. Her fingers did not sink through it.

"I was not sacrificed," she said. "But I was not saved either."

A gust of wind pulled through the ruins then, cold and restless. I felt it settle in my chest like a warning.

"I will tell you what happened," she said, her voice quieting again. "But understand this—being spared by the gods does not mean being untouched by them."

I nodded. My hands tightened around the edges of my journal. I was no longer sure I wanted to write this story.

But I would.

A highly detailed, ornate initial letter 'C' in a classical style. It features intricate scrollwork, acanthus leaves, and a profile of a woman's head with flowing hair, possibly a personification of a muse or deity, integrated into the design.

Chapter 2

The Girl on the Altar

The moon had risen higher, tracing silver lines across the broken marble. Iphigenia sat across from me now, though she cast no shadow. Her voice, when it came, did not echo like a ghost's. It carried weight, like something real, something long-silenced that now chose to speak.

"They say my story begins at Aulis," she said. "But it began before that, in Mycenae, with my mother's lullabies and the weight of my father's name."

I sat still, my notes untouched. She didn't speak like a woman remembering her life. She spoke like someone tired of hearing it told wrong.

"When the Greeks gathered to sail for Troy, the wind would not come. The ships rotted in their harbors. The men grew restless. My father, Agamemnon, their king, went to the priests. And they said Artemis was angry."

Iphigenia's mouth pressed into a thin line.

"They said he had offended the goddess—perhaps by boasting, perhaps by killing one of her sacred deer. It doesn't matter now. The gods do not explain themselves. They only demand."

She drew a hand across the altar beside us. "The priests told him what must be done: his daughter must die. A sacrifice to win the wind."

I wanted to speak and say no one should believe the gods could be so cruel, but I knew better. This was not my story.

"I was summoned under the pretense of marriage. Achilles, they said. A royal match. My mother accompanied me, and I went willingly. I wore white. I smiled."

She paused. The wind stirred her gown.

"I knew something was wrong when I saw the altar. Not the one for marriage rites. The one for offerings. My mother screamed. Achilles looked lost. And my father—he could not meet my eyes."

Callista's throat tightened.

"They say I did not weep," Iphigenia continued. "That I stepped forward without a word. But I did plead in my way. I asked my father if the priest Calchas might have misunderstood the goddess. I told him I was happy—too

young, perhaps, to understand—but hoping he might turn away. And I wept when he did not speak and only moved me gently by the hand toward the altar. Not loudly. Not desperately. But enough for him to know I still hoped he might choose otherwise."

She looked out to the sea. Her eyes seemed to search the distant horizon for a moment as if the scene might reappear—her father, the altar, the hush before the moment. Then she turned, her voice softening with the memory: "O father, grieve no more—the ships can sail."

She looked down then, her expression unreadable. "It was not defiance," she said quietly, "but a farewell. One final gift, so he would carry less guilt. The words stayed with me long after I left that place."

Her voice faltered before she continued. "But the blade never touched me. At the final moment, Artemis took me. They say she replaced me with a deer. All I remember is the blinding light and the sound of wings."

She turned back to me. "And then I woke in Tauris."

The name fell like a stone.

"It is a savage land. Wild cliffs, darker rituals. There, Artemis is worshipped not with hymns but with blood. Foreign men and wayward travelers were brought to me, bound and trembling, and I—" Her voice wavered. "I did what was required."

"You sacrificed them," I whispered.

She nodded once. "At first, I believed it was justice. The gods had spared me, and this was the price. I prepared them—the strangers that were brought to the altar. I bathed them, dressed them in white, and whispered rites I barely remembered. But I never raised the blade. That belonged to others. Still, the line between preparation and participation blurred. I forgot my mother's voice. I forgot my own name sometimes. I became the silence before the knife."

Iphigenia pulled her knees to her chest, the gesture shockingly human. "Do you know what it is to see the knife and forgive before it falls?"

She then continued her story.

"Then, one day, they brought two more strangers. Bound, like the others. But one of them knew me. He called me sister."

"Orestes," I said softly.

"He had come to steal the statue of Artemis. The very idol I had bled for. He and Pylades—brave, foolish men—risked their lives on the word of a god. And I... I helped them."

"Why?" I asked.

Her eyes met mine. "Because I remembered who I was."

She stood slowly and stepped toward the broken archway. The wind tangled her hair around her shoulders. "We escaped. We fled Tauris and returned to Greece. I was a daughter again. A sister. A survivor."

I stood as well, unsure where this story ended—or if it did.

"That is the version they know," she said. "The one they whisper in temples and write in brittle scrolls."

She turned back to me. The moonlight made her eyes seem brighter.

"But there is another truth. One no scroll records. One I have never spoken—until now."

The sea roared in the distance. Something in her voice changed.

"When I returned to Greece, I told my brother and Pylades to say nothing of me. I did not want to be found. I did not want to be remembered."

I stared at her. "Why?"

"Because I still served Artemis. But not as the girl from Aulis. Not as the priestess of Tauris. I chose a new path—one the gods did not give me."

The silence that followed was cold.

"And they did not forgive me for it."



Chapter 3

What the Gods Remember

Iphigenia's eyes held the sea, but her voice no longer drifted like tidewater memory. It was stronger now, steadier—as though what she was about to say had been kept back for so long that speaking required more than breath.

"I feared being remembered," she said. "Not for shame, but for what the gods might still demand. I was no longer a child. No longer innocent. And I was not free."

She looked at me, and this time, I saw the weight of her tale and a need to be known. For someone, anyone, to carry what she could no longer keep to herself.

"I found a temple," she continued. "In the forest hills beyond Argos, overgrown and broken but still standing. The villagers nearby had forgotten its name. They told stories of an old shrine where my goddess once walked, but they hadn't set foot inside in generations. I cleaned the floors with my hands. Cleared the vines from the altar. I made it holy again."

I listened, hardly daring to breathe.

"Why go back to her?" I asked softly. "After all she demanded?"

"Because she saved me," Iphigenia said, the words quick and almost defensive. Then quieter: "Or maybe because I couldn't be anything else. Who would I have become if I let her go?"

We sat together in silence as the wind brushed the long grass around the stones.

"I served there for years. No one knew my name. I spoke the prayers and lit the flame. I blessed births, healed fevers, and guided the mourning. I thought... I thought it might be enough. They would leave me be if I was quiet and faithful."

Her eyes dropped to her hands.

"But the gods do not forget."

She stood slowly, brushing dust from her dress. "One night, I had a dream. The temple burned. Not with fire but with divine silence. The kind that makes your bones cold. I saw Artemis there, her eyes full of wind and moonlight. She said nothing. Behind her were the others. The ones who watched. I tried to speak, to ask what I had done—but I couldn't move my mouth."

Iphigenia's voice lowered. "When I woke, the temple was dark. The sacred flame had gone out. The olive oil had soured. The spring had dried to mud. And the doves who nested in the rafters lay still on the ground."

I drew in a breath but didn't speak.

"I left that place," she said. "But I did not return to the world. I couldn't. I was no longer of it."

She met my gaze. "I am not alive, Callista. But neither am I dead. I walk between. Not as a ghost, but as a reminder."

"A reminder?" I echoed.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as if measuring whether I could carry the answer.

"The gods tasked me to bear witness to every sacrifice in their name. To know each life ended at their altars. I must remember them all so they cannot be forgotten. So the gods cannot pretend they were never offered."

She turned her face to the wind, eyes closed.

"I have stood beside children taken from their mothers. Warriors offered for victory. Innocents, criminals, priests... I see them all. And I remember."

I reached out instinctively. My fingers passed near her hand, and though I felt no warmth, the air shimmered between us.

"Why you?" I asked. "Why not one of the gods themselves?"

She looked at me. "Because the gods do not wish to remember. They wish to be adored."

I felt a chill climb my spine.

"And so," she added, "they chose someone who once gave herself willingly. Who knows the taste of the altar. Who knows what it means to be offered."

She turned back to the altar and placed a hand gently against the stone. "But I am growing tired. The world forgets us faster than ever. My burden grows heavier, and fewer remember my name."

I swallowed. "That's why I came."

She nodded slowly. "Perhaps the gods will see you, Callista. Perhaps they will listen to your voice when mine fades."



Chapter 4

The Shrine of Echoes

The moon climbed steadily above, pulling long and low shadows across the broken temple floor. Iphigenia stood at the far edge of the ruin, her gaze cast into the distant dark as though the past itself might rise from the sea to meet her.

"There was one night I nearly left it all," she said.

"Left what?" I asked.

"The temple. The worship. Artemis. Everything."

She turned back toward me, her expression unreadable. "I was ready to abandon it. To try and live as others lived. But as I crossed the threshold of the shrine, the wind changed direction. The olive trees bowed—not with reverence, but as if warning me. I stepped back, and the feeling passed. I think that was my last chance to leave."

I watched her carefully. "And you stayed because you were afraid?"

"No," she said. "I stayed because I didn't know how to be anything else."

She stepped down into the shallow basin where the old offerings once burned. The moonlight caught on the worn grooves in the stone.

"Some nights," she said, "I heard voices from the woods. Names I didn't know. Pleas for mercy. I thought they were dreams. But now I know—they were sacrifices happening elsewhere. The gods had already given me my duty, and I was beginning to hear it."

I shivered. "You said the gods made you a witness. But what does that mean, really?"

She looked up at me. "It means I see the moment just before. The fear in their eyes. The prayers half-spoken. The silence after."

I sat quietly for a long time, letting her words settle between us. Then I quietly asked, "Do the gods fear anything at all?"

She didn't answer right away. Then, softly, "Oblivion. Not death. But to be forgotten."

Something in her tone shifted. She stepped back up and looked at me with more intensity than before. "But the gods made a mistake."

My heart beat faster. "What do you mean?"

"They gave me too much time."

I stared at her.

"I've seen what they are. I've seen what they've done. And I've learned something: mortals endure more than they do. We love deeper. We break louder. We hope longer. And if I ever do fade, it will not be as their servant—but as the last voice that dared to speak against them."

The wind picked up, rustling through the grass. Her figure shimmered slightly like heat rising off the stone.

"I'm no longer afraid of them," she said.

And in that moment, neither was I.

The dawn began to pale the sky, a wash of gray-blue light stretching across the sea. Iphigenia stood with her back to it, her hair lifting slightly in the wind, her figure still wrapped in that eerie shimmer—almost real, almost gone.

She didn't speak at first. Neither did I. There was a stillness between us now, no longer silence born from hesitation, but something softer, like understanding.

Finally, she turned toward me, her eyes clearer than before.

"I have not told this to anyone—not even the gods who cursed me. But I have wondered, more than once, if what they gave me was not a punishment at all."

I tilted my head. "You don't believe it was?"

She smiled faintly. "It was a burden, yes. But also a freedom. They made me unbound. I see things they cannot. I remember what they forget. And in that remembering, I became something they fear."

I felt that fear ripple through me—sharp and strange.

"You asked before why I stayed loyal to Artemis. But the truth is, I don't think I was. Not fully. Not always."

She sat on the steps of the ruined altar, her fingers resting gently on the carved stone.

"I began leaving tokens for the ones I remembered. Not to the gods, but to the mortals they had claimed. Flowers. Stones. Words. Sometimes, it's just the echo of a name. I made them offerings—small ones. Quiet ones. Mine."

A chill moved through the ruins. Not from wind, but from what she'd said.

"That's when they came to me again. Not Artemis. Not Zeus. Something older. Something deeper."

I waited.

"They told me my task would never end. That I would never find rest until all names were remembered. All sacrifices are known. And that I would walk until memory itself dissolved."

Her voice did not shake. But mine did.

"That isn't mercy," I said.

"No," she agreed. "But it's mine to carry."

I stepped toward her then, slowly, and knelt beside her.

"Then let me carry it too. Even a little. Let me tell the world. Let me write it down."

She looked at me—not with awe, not with hope—but with something more honest: recognition.

"Callista," she said, "you are not like the others."

The wind rose again, stronger now, lifting the edge of her gown.

"I have told you all I can. But this place—this temple—will fade. Soon. When I am gone from here, I will not return."

I stood with her. "Then what happens to you?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Perhaps I become something else. Perhaps I vanish. Perhaps... I finally rest."

The first gold touched the edge of the sky. She began to fade.

"Remember me," she said, her voice already distant.

"I will," I said fiercely. "I will remember everything."

And then she was gone.

I remained at the temple until the sun rose fully.

I would tell her story.

Not as a myth. Not as a tragedy.

But as truth.

As the final offering of Iphigenia.



Chapter 5

The Final Entry

I remained seated near the altar long after Iphigenia's form had dissolved, long after the stars had climbed their silver path across the sky. The oil lamp I'd lit earlier burned low, casting faint, shivering shadows across my open journal. I had not written a word.

How could I? What ink could capture what I had just witnessed?

The temple was quiet again but not empty. The air still hummed with the memory of the woman who had stood where Artemis once demanded blood. A girl led to an altar by the hand of a father she trusted. A priestess made executioner. A voice the world had left behind.

I stared into the dying flame.

This was not the myth I had learned. The bards spoke of glory, fated kings, and righteous wars. Even Iphigenia's "rescue" had been framed as a reward—proof of the goddess's mercy. No one had spoken of what came after. No one had asked what it meant to survive when survival was its own kind of death.

I picked up my journal and finally began to write.

"She was no victim. She was not a figure of pity or purity. She was made to kneel by love and forced to rise by divinity. They call her the girl who was spared. But they do not ask what it cost her."

My hand trembled slightly as I wrote. I forced myself to go on. To describe the sorrow that lingered in Iphigenia's voice. The strength buried in her silence. The terrible dignity of someone who had been both pawn and priestess—and had learned to wear her pain like armor.

When the dawn began to break, I closed my journal and stood. I walked the length of the ruined temple one last time, brushing my fingertips along the altar's edge. No ghost appeared. No final words whispered from the wind.

But I could feel it—the difference. The weight of silence was lighter now. Not gone, but shared.

Outside, the sea crashed softly against the cliffs. The light rising over the horizon was pale gold, warming the stone and drawing long shadows through the broken columns. As I stepped beyond the temple's threshold, I turned back to look at the shrine one more time.

"I will remember you," I said softly. "I will tell them all."

The wind rose behind me, gently pushing against my back as if the temple itself were bidding me farewell.

I descended along the cliff path, every step heavier than the last. Not from sorrow alone—but from the burden of the story I now carried. It was not the burden of tragedy but of truth.

And the truth was always heavy.

As I reached the base of the cliffs and turned toward the path that would take me inland, the call of a seabird pierced the air behind me. I paused, one hand on my chest.

Iphigenia's voice returned to me—not as sound, but as a memory pressed into my bones: *"Do you know what it is to see the knife and forgive before it falls?"*

My throat tightened.

I did now.