

Ancient Fanfiction: Memnon
By Grace Blaxill

Memnon shivered in the early Mediterranean mist. Days here were warm enough to remind him of home, but even at night the air in his Ethiopia did not chill the skin like this. Burnt skin, as the Greeks would say, but it did not feel warm now. He stood alone in the cold, dewy air as the rest of his company slept, looking out across the Trojan palace and waiting for Dawn. Soon, Meneclus would drag his body, unwilling, to stand by Memnon's side. Until then, Dawn would be his companion.

He wondered if Meneclus had insisted on this room with its Eastern window, or if wise Priam had simply guessed. He turned back to the horizon. It was almost time, now; the chalky black sky was softening into a misty gray. A few more moments and he would see her. Even as he thought it, staring at the light patches spreading over the distant hills, she appeared.

I was worried you wouldn't come.

When have I ever missed your rise, Mother?

As her light danced and brushed feather-light against his face, her voice rang warmly through his head.

Today is not like other days, my son.

He felt his stomach tighten, and braced his hands against the window's ledge. The silence became heavy with their fears. He waited for her to break it.

Please don't go —

No, Mother. I am here. It is done. Let us have this morning, like we have had all the others.

As he watched the morning light turn lavender, he almost heard her sigh.

What worries you, child?

Memnon looked back to where Meneclus lay, curled and twitching in a tight ball, his mind fighting even before the battle began.

I worry for them. Glory awaits the fallen warrior, but I don't know if I am strong enough to lead my men to death, to mourn them after it.

He felt her cup his face in her light embrace.

I can tell you this much, dear one. You will not suffer Achilles' fate, forced to linger on in grief and vengeance for a fallen lover. Now and always, your men will follow you to the ends of the earth, and back home again.

He waited for her to finish, to say the same words she had told him every morning since he was little.

And I, I will be with you every day until your last.

"Memnon?"

"Here."

Stumbling from bed, Meneclus came to his side and looked out upon the sun, now bright and clear in the morning sky.

"What did she say?"

"The same."

Meneclus hesitated, "Nothing... about today?"

As he spoke, as if from Dawn herself, twelve birds rose from sunlight, cresting about the horizon and flying towards the two lovers. As they watched, the birds spun and circled each other, pair on pair struggling and fighting as they formed mesmerizing, intricate patterns in the sky. Twisting, clutched in a dangerous embrace, they danced as if they courted not each other but death.

Meneclus' brow furrowed like the lines drawn by a plow. Memnon's eyes traced the deep lines as he asked,

"My mother answers you herself. What do you think she means?"

Meneclus turned to meet his gaze.

"You will ask her for me tomorrow."

Memnon gazed back at him for a long time without speaking. Finally, he turned back to watch the birds clash and rise again as he replied,

"Yes. Tomorrow."

Context:

The story of the Trojan War is inextricably linked with Homer in the modern reader's mind, but to the Ancient Greeks, it was a tale that was told and retold in what is now called the "Epic Cycle," a series of ancient epics which cover different parts of the 10 year war. One lesser known epic from the Cycle is the Aethiopis, which takes place after the conclusion of the Iliad. In this epic, Memnon, the King of the Ethiopians, arrives to aid the Trojans, is killed in the battle, and is mourned fiercely by his men and his mother Eos ("Dawn," in Ancient Greek). After his death, Memnon's mother transforms his soldiers into a flock of birds, in a beautiful passage from Quintus of Smyrna, the ancient author who writes the fullest extant account of the epic.

For more information about Memnon, check out:

<https://pages.vassar.edu/pharos/2018/05/25/scholars-respond-to-racist-backlash-against-black-achilles-part-3-what-makes-a-homeric-hero-a-hero/>