

CRESSIDA AMONG THE GREEKS

excerpt

CRESSIDA: *[offstage]* Uncle Pandarus! How nice to see you! Come in! Come in!

[She enters followed by PANDARUS and TROILUS.]

PANDARUS: My dear, may I present—

CRESSIDA: Prince Troilus! But of course everyone knows the young hero of Troy.
How wonderful to meet you at last!

[She offers her hand and he seizes it, gazing at her ardently. She returns his gaze uneasily and extricates her hand.]

Sit down, sit down!

[They sit. A moment's silence.]

Well! Here we are.

TROILUS: *[clearing his throat]* May I—May I say how beautiful my lady is looking today?

CRESSIDA: You may, but it's hardly a proposition I can be expected to elaborate on, and therefore not a very fertile topic for discussion.

[Pause. CRESSIDA pours out the tea.]

TROILUS: What— What would my la— What shall we talk about?

CRESSIDA: You're asking me? I'm just a poor widow. I barely leave my house. You are men of action and endeavor. I count on you to bring me news of the outside world.

PANDARUS: My niece is a woman completely without learning or opinion. Until she disagrees with you. Then she knows everything.

TROILUS: But even—even a dispute from such lovely lips must seem like—like music to...

CRESSIDA: My lips I would also place in the category of unprofitable topics. You're a soldier, Prince Troilus. Tell me something of the war. How does it go?

TROILUS: It goes well. We're on the point of pushing them back to sea.

CRESSIDA: We've been on that point for the last ten years now. Surely they should be, at the very least, damp by now.

TROILUS: The Greek army is a multi-headed beast. So many kings. So many captains. Each time we drive one army back, another moves into the charge. So, yes, of course, it takes time. Ten years even. But in the end we must prevail.

CRESSIDA: Must? Why must?

TROILUS: Why? Because— Because this is Troy. The greatest city in the world. The center of art and beauty and learning. We are a light to the rest of the world—all that is good, all that is civilized is here. How can we not, in the end, prevail against a horde of unwashed barbarians?

PANDARUS: How indeed! And with our gallant Troilus leading the charge—

CRESSIDA: But these unwashed barbarians—and I'll have to take your word for the unwashed part—I've never stood close enough to gauge— But I would think that their barbarity itself would undercut your argument. Wouldn't it be just like a barbarian to trample over what's good and fine—if only from a simple inability to recognize it when he sees it? There's power, as my uncle never tires of telling me, in stupidity— Cake?

PANDARUS: I'm sure I never said anything so—

CRESSIDA: And as for this “barbarian” business, I don't trust it. Ten years of war makes you wary of such distinctions. In these ten years I've seen things I never wished to see. Men—men I know, have talked with, thought I understood—I've seen them marching through the gates after a battle, dripping with gore, holding aloft some trophy of their triumph—a bloody breastplate, a hank of hair, a hand, an ear, or—worse—hacked free and now raised dripping to the sun. And it's not just men. Women, too. How often have you seen this: The enemy's bodies are carted into town, and the women descend, shrieking. Dipping their hands in the warm blood. Glorifying in it. Smearing it on their faces and their clothes.

[Pause.]

TROILUS: My lady...

CRESSIDA: Do you see?—My illusions have suffered some. I love Troy with all my heart, but her heart is dark as all our hearts are dark. Nor do I spare myself. Haven't I looked down, from my secret perch, on those bloodthirsty women, and felt my heart leap with satisfaction?

[Silence.]

PANDARUS: Children, children! Why so grim? Come now. It's a beautiful day in a beautiful garden. War is hell. Of course. Who's denying it? But surely there are nicer things to talk about—

CRESSIDA: *[to TROILUS]* Do you enjoy it?

TROILUS: Enjoy it?

CRESSIDA: War.

TROILUS: [*stops to think*] There is, yes, joy in war.

CRESSIDA: Joy?

TROILUS: Yes. A kind of rapture. Like madness. Set loose. You become pure action—fury—heart and pulse and muscle. As if you were all-powerful, monstrous, and freed from sense.

CRESSIDA: I see. And then...?

TROILUS: [*thoughtfully*] And then—when it's over—there's a distant feeling—like a dream fading. Suddenly you stand there drenched in blood—some of it your own—and it's as if you don't remember how it happened. The fury begins to ebb from your veins, and you're drained—bereft—but somehow—holy...

CRESSIDA: Holy?

TROILUS: As at a sacrifice. No joy or triumph just—awe and dread. I never go back to the city with blood still on my armor. With blood in my hair and on my face. It isn't right. I go to the river. I take off my armor and wash it there, then bathe myself. My servant brings me fresh clothes from town. But before I put them on I pray—or not prayer really. It's as if they come to me. The men I've killed—whose names I don't know—whose faces I couldn't possibly remember from the blur of dust and heat. But they come to me and say, Now we are yours. From this day on we live in you. You are our house, and through your corridors will sound our widows' cries and the bawling of our children and our sad low complaints among the dead. That's what I mean by holy.

[Silence. They gaze at each other. Suddenly CRESSIDA rises and walks away from the table.]

CRESSIDA: Oh dear. My uncle's right. We're too serious. You'll have to forgive me. I've forgotten how to talk in company. But it was lovely to meet you all the same. My most respectful regards to your mother and father. And now I must—

PANDARUS: But my dear, you can't kick us out now. We've only just got here. You two kids have a lot to talk about.

CRESSIDA: Too much, it seems. But you know how quickly I get tired. Thank you so much for coming.

TROILUS: [*seizing her hand*] The privilege was mine. If you could only know—

CRESSIDA: Honestly, I don't want to. You are kindness itself, but please—

TROILUS: May I see you again?

CRESSIDA: Perhaps. Who knows? My seclusion makes room now and then for a visitor, but I really can't say—

TROILUS: Please!

CRESSIDA: Men look so pretty when they plead, don't they, Uncle Pandarus? Now be a good boy and run along. Your mother waits, the palace waits. All the world outside—must miss the glamour of your presence.

TROILUS: You have given me nothing!

[She winces and turns away.]

CRESSIDA: I'm sorry. I have very little to give.

TROILUS: One small thing.

CRESSIDA: What is it?

TROILUS: Let me just—touch your cheek.

[She turns to face him, and he goes to her and places his hand against her cheek. They stand like that for a moment, gazing at each other. Then she closes her eyes.]

CRESSIDA: Now go.

[He backs away from her quietly, then turns to leave. PANDARUS follows him but turns at the door.]

PANDARUS: Cressida...

CRESSIDA: Go.