



Their end was
the beginning.

WIVES WE
SING TO
THE SEA

SARAH UNDERWOOD

LIES WE
SING TO
THE SEA

SARAH UNDERWOOD

HARPER TEEN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

for mum, for everything



Epigraph



“Death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall bless you. All that I have said will come true.”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*
Translated by Samuel Butler, 1900

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I

Another Feat of Gods and Heroes

Leto

A silent maid braided Leto's hair into an elaborate crown for her execution.

Her knees smarted as she knelt on the rough flagstone floor of the little room. Her arms, pale but for the bruises already blooming there, protested and cramped against the rope that bound them, wrist to wrist, behind her back.

The maid pulled Leto's head sideways and pushed in yet another pin, scraping the sharp metal against her scalp and drawing thick strands of dark hair taut. Leto gritted her teeth and blinked hard, furiously avoiding the gaze of the hulking guard standing watch at the only door. He was fully armored, a sword strapped at his hip and his features obscured by a shining bronze helmet.

Leto fixed her eyes instead on the flickering light of the fireplace. The scent of the burning incense hung in a choking fog and filled the room with a close, oppressive heat. Sweat ran in rivulets down her neck—over the terrible black scales that had risen on the skin there, marking her for slaughter—and disappeared beneath the neckline of her gown. The carefully arranged curls about her face were already damp and frizzy.

Some sacrifice. It was a bitter thought. Perhaps Poseidon would be so disgusted that he would simply send her back.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the maid—her mouth full of pins, brow furrowed—empty a handful of tiny white flowers from a linen-lined basket. She checked each carefully for crushed petals, then began to weave them deftly through the plaits at Leto's brow.

It was the first time someone had done her hair in years.

There was little occasion for intricate hairstyles anyway. Leto's mother had died when she was ten, and since her father had followed a few years later, Leto had been forced to make her own money. The work had not been

hard to come by at first—Ithaca’s common folk still flocked to the house of the last royal oracle—but she did not have her mother’s talent for it, and the few brief snatches of the future that Apollo granted her were infuriatingly ambiguous. Her remaining customers were those that could be satisfied by spectacle, by the theatrical slaughter of a rabbit or the wild rolling of eyes that Leto had soon perfected. There weren’t many of them, but they paid enough silver to keep her from starving.

As for her hair, a ribbon to keep the longer strands from her face normally sufficed, though she supposed it would not stop it getting caught in a hangman’s noose.

This braid, she reasoned, briefly surprised by her own practicality, *will do a much better job*.

A sharp knock on the door broke the near silence of the room. The maid started and snatched her hands away from Leto, glancing nervously toward the guard. He hadn’t moved an inch.

“Quickly.” The guard spoke for the first time since Leto’s arrival. His voice was low, gravelly, and strangely flat. “It is almost time.”

The maid nodded and reached for another handful of flowers.

The hairs on Leto’s arms prickled. Under the smooth material of the ceremonial gown they had dressed her in, her heart quickened and fluttered like a trapped bird. Something heavy and unpleasant settled itself like a great pressure on her chest, squeezing her lungs, hitching her breath.

Shuttered in this unfurnished room, it had been impossible to keep track of time. The sound of birdsong and the first rays of light streaming in through the tiny window had told Leto that the sun had risen, but beyond that, nothing. It might have still been early morning.

Now, though . . . *It is almost time*. She knew exactly what it was almost time for. The sacrifices took place at noon, when the equinox sun had reached its peak in the sky.

It was not dying she was afraid of, for she had long steeled herself against the idea of it, but what lay beyond.

In her seventeen years, she had led a decidedly unremarkable life. Some of the more superstitious townsfolk still whispered of her mystical powers, it was true, but Leto had vanquished no monsters, thwarted no criminals, bested no cheats. She had only been kissed twice. The afterlife waiting for her would not be an unkind one—for there was little to recommend her to damnation—but she would certainly not find herself in the company of brave heroes like