

Euripides' *Alcestis*

Translation by Jeffrey T. Winkle

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

APOLLO	Greek god of poetry, disease, healing, music, sun
DEATH	Greek god, personification
ADMETUS	King of the city of Pherae, northern Greece
ALCESTIS	Wife of Admetus, Queen of Pherae
CHORUS of ELDERS	Citizens of the city of Pherae
SERVANT WOMAN	Attendant of Alcestis
CHILD	Young son of Admetus and Alcestis
HERACLES	Demi-god, son of Zeus, famous for performing his 12 Labors
PERES	Father of Admetus
SERVANT BOY	Attendant of Admetus

PROLOGUE: Apollo introduces the play and spars verbally with Death

[Setting: In front of the well-to-do house of one Admetus, the king of the town of Pherae, Thessaly, a province of north-central Greece renowned for the practice of dark magic and for being on the edge of civilization.]

The god Apollo enters dressed in bright golden robes with a radiant crown on his head. He wears a quiver full of arrows and carries a bow. He approaches the door of the house of Admetus and speaks.]

APOLLO *[addresses the house and then turns to the audience]*

Goodbye, House of Admetus, I'm off. It was here, dear audience, that I put up with living like a mere mortal—a slave even!—even though I'm a god. It wasn't my fault, though. Zeus is to blame. He's the one who blasted my son, Asclepius, with lightning, killing him¹. So I, naturally, slaughtered the Cyclopes in revenge, because they're the ones who forge those bloody thunderbolts for the Olympian.

And so, as a punishment, my dear father sentenced me to cool off and serve as a slave here, in the house of a lowly mortal. But I did my time without complaining. And what's more I made a pretty good herdsman (*if I don't say so myself*) and made sure that this house stayed safe and sound right up to this very moment!

Being "godly" myself, I found in this house here a godly man—the son of Pheres whom—if you can believe it—I have just rescued from death. How, you ask? Well, I tricked the Fates, that's how.

You see, being a god and such I discovered that it was nearly time for Admetus (that's the son of Pheres) to go, if you know what I mean. So I struck a deal with those dread goddesses, arranging it so that

¹ Asclepius, god of healing, had messed with the strictures of Fate by bringing a mortal man—Hippolytus—back from the dead. For breaking this taboo Zeus killed him.

Admetus could escape this impending doom. All *he* had to do, then, was find someone to die in his place. (The Fates require a body, you know. And apparently any “body” will do).

Simple, right? WRONG. Turns out that after going round to all his friends and family, my dear Admetus could only persuade his beloved wife to die in his place and no longer “gaze upon the sunlight”, as they say.

I mention this because today is the *very day* on which all this is fated to go down. His wife, Alcestis, is already swooning in the throes of death. Why am I not sticking around, you ask? Well, while I did enjoy my time here—I really did!—death tends to leave a nasty kind of pollution in its wake and so I’m getting out while the getting is good.

And speaking of “death”, here comes the old bald bastard himself! Right on time, as usual, the vulture eager to pounce upon the carrion.

[Death enters, pale and skeletal, dressed in ragged robes, scowling, ambling along with a rough-hewn walking stick. He dressed as meagerly as Apollo is grandly.]

DEATH

What are you doing here, Phoebus², hanging around like a creep? Messing around in the business and prerogatives of gods and goddesses, no doubt. What, it wasn’t enough for you to pull a fast one on the Fates—*dimwits*—and rescue Admetus from his properly and divinely arranged death? Are you going to use that bow to try to keep me away from his wife, the one who agreed to die for him?

APOLLO

Oh, relax. I am full of nothing but justice and gentle reason.

DEATH

Gentle reason, eh? Then what’s with the bow?

APOLLO

My bow? I carry this everywhere out of habit. It’s how people know that I’m *me*.

DEATH

Habit? Like your “habit” of always favoring *this* house?

APOLLO

What? Admetus is my friend. His troubles I consider my own.

DEATH

So, then, you mean to steal Alcestis away by force too, I presume.

² Commonly used name for Apollo.

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APOLLO

I didn't *steal* Admetus away. Not by force, anyway.

DEATH

Then why is he still alive, walking upright when he should be down below? Where he *belongs*.

APOLLO

What is your problem? He's alive because his wife agreed to die for him. You're coming for *her*.

DEATH

That's right. She's mine. So don't try anything, Apollo. Today I take her below.

APOLLO

Take her, then. But I don't suppose I could persuade you...

DEATH [*interrupting*]

To what? Not fetch the doomed and *not* usher them down into Hades? Don't tell me how to do my job.

APOLLO

I'm just saying...maybe you could, I don't know, *put it off* for a bit.

DEATH [*sarcastic*]

Really. Oh, please, *do* go on.

APOLLO

I mean, come on...just let her live, grow old, et cetera. I'm asking nicely.

DEATH

Not a chance. I have honors due to me just like you do, Apollo. Don't forget—I'm a god too.

APOLLO

All I'm saying is what difference is there if you get her now or later? You'll still *get* her like you do every mortal.

DEATH

Oh, but there is a difference, Apollo. The younger the victim, the greater my honor. "Honor" ...I suppose you've heard of it?

APOLLO

You want to talk honor? Wait till she's old and then her funeral will be rich, splendid affair! Think of all those offerings!

DEATH

Spoken like a rich bastard always looking out for other rich bastards.

APOLLO [*sarcastic*]

Whatever do you mean? Is it possible I've underestimated your intelligence?

DEATH

What I mean is that under your "rules" the well-off could simply buy their way out of death.

APOLLO

So I take it your answer is "no", then.

DEATH

Damn right it's "no". I am who I am.

APOLLO

Yes, indeed—hated by mortals and immortals alike.

DEATH [*shrugs, smiling acidly*]

Oh, well, you can't always get what you want, *dear Apollo*.

APOLLO

Even so, mark my words, *dear Death*—you *will* stop from your hateful ways. In fact, at this very moment there's a man on his way here to the House of Pheres³ to do just that. Eurystheus has sent him up to Thrace to fetch the horses and chariot from the dread king who lives there⁴. He will stop here as a guest and he will accomplish exactly what I want. *He* will take the woman from you. The difference is that this time you'll receive no thanks from me, only hatred. You had your chance.

DEATH

Big talk, big nothing. *At this very moment* the woman is on her way down to Hell. I am going right now to take the ritual cutting of her hair. You know as well as I do that once that happens she belongs to the powers below.

[Death and Apollo exit the stage while the chorus made up of elders of the town of Pherae enters from the side whispering to one another.]

³ i.e. The House of Admetus, referred to here by Admetus' father's name.

⁴ The man referred to here is Heracles who will show up later in the play. As one of his famous twelve labors he was required to go up to Thrace (land north of mainland Greece) and steal away the flesh-eating horses of the barbaric king Diomedes. Thessaly (northern Greece), where Admetus lives, is on the way. Eurystheus is the king of Tiryns and the man for whom Heracles has to perform and give evidence of for all this labors.

PARADOS: the entrance and first song of the chorus

CHORUS

The house of Admetus is unsettlingly still.
The whole town is wrapped in an unsettling chill.

What's more is there's nobody coming outside
To tell us if Pelias' daughter⁵ has died.
Living or dead we all would agree
She's the best of all wives, obviously.

Did you hear a groan (I'm afraid to have asked)
or the rending of clothing to signal she's passed?

No! There's not even a slave at the door!
God of Healing, please save her, this we implore!

There would not be silence if she had died.
They haven't yet brought the body outside.

Well, it may be inside there's a secret they're keeping.

You mean, there's a funeral without any weeping?

I do not see the customary, ritual basin
Which portends that death would quickly now hasten.
Nor do I notice the shorn lock of hair,
No wailing of women polluting the air

And yet we all know that this is the day...

Hush now, what are you trying to say?

...on which our dear lady must go down below.

Stop! It hurts, what I don't want to know!

When death comes around to the nobly high-born
Those who've been loyal, it's their duty to mourn.

There's no place we can sail to or shrine to examine—
Not easterly Lycia or southernly Ammon—
By which we might save our ill-fated queen.
Death rules above and below and between.

If only Asclepius⁶ still were alive!
Deep down into Hades the savior could dive

⁵ i.e. Alcestis, Admetus' wife.

⁶ The god of healing/medicine, the son of Apollo whom Zeus killed because he brought a mortal back to life. This begins the chain of events which leads to the action of this play. See Apollo's opening speech and n.1.

And rescue our mistress with only a word!
But Zeus blew him apart, just as you have heard.

What can we do now? What hope is there left?
This house is now aching, fowly bereft.

FIRST EPISODE: the chorus learns some news from a household servant

[A serving woman comes of out of the front door of the house]

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes someone now! Maybe she can tell us something.

Please, miss, if anything has happened to lady of the house we'd understand if you are too broken up to talk, but can you tell us anything? Is the queen living or has she passed on?

SERVANT *[grimaces]*

You could say...*both*, I guess.

CHORUS LEADER

What do you mean? How can someone be both living *and* dead?

SERVANT

She's alive, so to speak, but she's fading fast.

CHORUS LEADER

So there's no hope, then?

SERVANT

No, I'm afraid not. Fate will have its way.

CHORUS LEADER

All the necessary arrangements have been made, I take it?

SERVANT

Indeed. The beautiful gown in which her husband will bury her is ready.

CHORUS LEADER

Poor man! Such a husband losing such a wife!

SERVANT

Hmmm. Such a husband. He won't *really* know what he's lost until she's gone.

CHORUS LEADER

If you speak to her again please tell her that she dies the noblest woman ever to walk under the sun!

SERVANT

That's the understatement of the year. How is she not the noblest? How could any woman go beyond this—giving her husband the ultimate place of honor by actually being willing *to die* for him? What would we even *call* such a woman?

But the whole town knows this. Lean closer and let me tell you what went on inside this house. You'll be *amazed*.

When she learned that the dread day had arrived, she carefully washed her white skin, opened up her large cedar chest and dressed herself in her most beautiful garments. A sight to behold, let me tell you!

Then she solemnly stood before the hearth, raised up her hands, and offered this prayer to Hestia⁷:

“Dear Lady, today I go below the earth. All I ask is that you watch over my soon-to-be-orphaned children. Find my daughter a good husband and my son a virtuous wife. May they not, like me, come to an untimely end, but let them be happy, living long happy lives in the land which belongs to them.”

Then she went through the house, stopping at every altar, offering a prayer and a sprig of myrtle. Not once did I see her cry or hear her moan! Even her skin remained smooth and white—her face never mottled or flushed not even in the face of looming death, I tell you!

And then, at last she approached her bedroom. She knelt by the bed and *that's* where she began to lose it. There, I swear it, she spoke *to the bed itself*. She said:

“Ah, my marriage-bed...where I left behind my maidenhood. Gave it up to the man for whom I now die. Goodbye. I'm not angry with you, though in a way, this *is* your fault. I could've saved myself and betrayed you and the man who sleeps here, but I couldn't do it. I guess you will soon feel the form of another woman. A luckier woman than me, no doubt. But not more virtuous. *Never.*”

Then she fell on the bed and let it all out. I swear, the bedding, the mattress, *everything* was drenched from her flood of tears! When there were no more tears to give, she shakily wrenched herself up from the bed, but every time she just got out the door, she stumbled back to the bed and the whole thing started all over again. Ghastly. Horrible thing to witness.

And just when it couldn't get any worse, *the kids came in!* Hanging onto mom's gown, wailing. She picked them up and gave them each a final kiss. I had to watch it through my fingers.

Needless to say, me and all the other servants broke down. Sobbing and shaking. Still, she nobly reached out to all of us, one by one. In that darkest of moments it was *she* who blessed *us!* We did our best to bless her back.

So that's how it is inside the House of Admetus right now. Troubles upon troubles. If Admetus had died according to fate he'd be gone by now. But, nope—he's alive. And now he's got to live with this mess.

⁷ Greek goddess of hearth and home

CHORUS LEADER

Well, he must be a wreck. Losing not just a wife, but the best of all wives, no?

SERVANT

Oh, he's a wreck alright. When I last saw him he was holding our mistress in his arms, blubbing. Begging her not to leave him, if you can believe that. Too late—he wants what he cannot have.

You should see her now—the disease has almost finished her off. She's both an empty shell and dead weight in Admetus' arms. She can't sit up, can barely breathe. Twisting her head like she's trying to get one more look at the sun.

Ah, well.

Listen, I will go in and let her know that you're here and I will pass along your good wishes. It's not always the case that subjects wish their rulers well. Your faithfulness is well known to me.

[Servant exits]

FIRST STASIMON⁸

CHORUS

Lord Zeus, come and save us, or is it too late?
How might this family escape from its fate?

What's happening now? Will that servant come back?
Should I tear out my hair? Should I dress all in black?

We know she must suffer, but still, let us pray.

Apollo the Healer, bring healing today!

Yes, find a way! You found one before.
At least keep Admetus from death's darkening door.

Alas, son of Pheres⁹, what's become of your life?
Saved, but bereft of your incomparable wife.

I'd understand if it came down to this—
His head in a noose or a knife to his wrist.

⁸ A *stasimon* is a “stationary song” in which the chorus takes its place in the center of the orchestra (the circular area at the foot of the first row of seats) and sings a song of alternating verses called *strophes* and *antistrophes*.

⁹ i.e. Admetus

We'll forever remember this day when she died.

[Alcestis emerges from the house helped along by servants. A haggard looking Admetus follows along.]

Look! Here she comes! Her man at her side!

Weep, land of Pherae! Weep for this day!
The best of all queens is wasting away.

SECOND EPISODE: Alcestis says goodbye to Admetus and her children

CHORUS

Never again, with my master half-dead,
Will you get me to say that it's better to wed.
To see what she's gone through and what he's doing now,
I suppose he'll survive, but why would he and how?

[The servants lay Alcestis down on a pallet and allow her to be alone with Admetus and her children. She tosses and turns, speaking as if in a feverish dream. The Chorus observes and eavesdrops from a distance.]

ALCESTIS

Sweet sunlight...streaming through whirling clouds

ADMETUS

The god of that sunlight looks down upon us both, my darling. Two innocent people who don't deserve this!

ALCESTIS *[writhing, eyes closed]*

Aaaaaah. My bed! My house! MY HOME!

ADMETUS

Get up, my love. Don't leave me! Please! If some god has his hands on you, beg for mercy!

ALCESTIS

I can see Charon¹⁰, the ferryman in his little boat. He's steering my way and calling, "What's keeping you? I have a job to do!" He compels me. Impatient. Cruel.

ADMETUS

No! Don't say it! Oh, the things we are suffering, dear wife!

¹⁰ According to myth Charon transported souls across the River Styx to their final resting place in Hades.

ALCESTIS

WHAT?! Something's grabbing—no! Don't you...can't you see it? Something's taking me! Ah! It's black-winged Hades...oh, his eyes! No! What are you doing? Let me go! LET ME GO! Where? What path is this?

ADMETUS

You're leaving me. And the children. Don't you see how your loved ones suffer?

ALCESTIS

Let me go. *Let me go.* I can't feel my legs. The Lord of the Dead spreads his darkness over my eyes. Children! Where are my children? Goodbye, my dear children, your mother has to go now. Look upon the sun and rejoice while you can.

ADMETUS

Aaaah, this is worse than death for me! Get up! Get up! I beg you not to go! By your orphaned children, don't do this! Your death is the death of *me*. Get up! Find the strength to do this! Without your love we are all lost.

ALCESTIS [*leans in close to Admetus, suddenly quite lucid*]

Admetus, it's *over*. But before I go I need to tell you what I want. This is my very last request, ok? Listen carefully. I die because of you. I didn't have to do this. I could have easily refused and gone on to marry any noble Thessalian man of my choice. I could've lived with another rich man in another rich house.

But I did not want to live with you dead and with orphaned children clinging to my gown. Even though I am young and loved my life, I gave it up. Your parents—ah, your *parents*—though they are old and have both lived full lives, they left you for dead and refused to take your place. They could've done it, you know. They're too old to have more kids and you're their only son. If they had agreed to die for you, you and I would now be happily living our lives together and you would not now be mourning your dead wife. But, no. Some god deserves the blame for all this, I guess.

So. I hope you are grateful for what I'm doing. Don't worry, I won't ask you for the response my gift deserves—the only truly worthy response is that you give up your life too. I won't ask for that. But I *will* ask for what is right and you *will* grant this to me.

If you love these kids as much as I do and if you are not a madman, make sure they remain the masters of this house. This means you *cannot* remarry. I can't bear the thought of some horrible step-mother lording it over my children, striking them out of jealousy, for how could any other woman live up to my example?

No. *Do not do it.* Step-mothers are vipers and step-children are their prey.

I'm less worried about our son. He'll always have you as a protector. *[turns to her daughter]* But what will become of you, my dear daughter? How will you become a woman without me around? Is some awful step-mother really up to the task? She would only curse you, ruin your reputation, destroy your chances of a good and noble marriage.

[Alcestis reaches for her daughter and takes her hands]

Ah, my little girl. I'll never see you marry. I'll never hold these hands while you writhe in the pain of childbirth. Believe me, that's where a mother's comfort is most needed.

But I must go. Not tomorrow, not the day after, but *now*. Death calls me downward.

Goodbye. Admetus, my husband, you can always say you had the best of all wives. And children, boast that you had the best of all mothers.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't worry, my queen. If Admetus has a brain in his head he will do everything you ask of him.

ADMETUS

Of course, of course, my love. Anything you ask. *Anything*. Dead or living you always be my only wife. There's not another Thessalian woman beautiful, noble, or rich enough to ever take your place. I don't need any more children. I only pray that the gods grant that I can watch them grow up since I cannot grow old with you.

I will mourn you not just for the customary year but for the rest of my days. And what's more I declare my hatred for my so-called father and for that she-wolf who gave birth to me. Their "love" was all talk and no action. But you! You gave up what was most precious of all so that I might live!

[looks up to the sky]

Do I not have the right to mourn when I have lost such a noble wife?

[looks back at Alcestis and grips her hand tightly]

All the music, all the parties, all the revelry for which our house was so famous—all of it is *done*. No more. I'm done playing and singing my music. Your death puts an end to all that. What is left to celebrate?

What's more I will hire the best craftsman I can track down and have him carve a splendid image of you. Then I will place it in my bed and I will hold, kiss, and caress it as if it were you yourself. And I will pretend that I hold my dear wife in my arms. A cold delight, yes, but maybe it will lighten the weight on my heart at least a little bit. Maybe then I'll see you in my dreams. That's something, isn't it?

If only I were Orpheus¹¹—then I could charm Persephone¹² herself with my music and lead you straight up and out of hell! No one could stop me—not Hades' hellhound¹³, not Charon the ferryman¹⁴ standing at his oar! If only.

But wait for me there, Alcestis. Make a home there which we can share once I die and go down below myself. I will make sure that we are buried in the same tomb so that not even in death will I be apart from the only woman who has ever been faithful to me!

CHORUS LEADER

We feel and share your pain, dear friend. Your wife deserves nothing less.

ALCESTIS

Children, you are my witnesses. You heard your father promise never to dishonor me by replacing me with another woman.

ADMETUS

I promise. I do.

ALCESTIS

Ok, then. Take these children from me now.

ADMETUS

I will. A precious gift from a precious woman.

ALCESTIS

You must be their mother now, too.

ADMETUS

I know. Without you, I must do this.

ALCESTIS

Children, I'm going. I should be alive, but I'm going.

[Admetus puts his head in his hands and begins to sob]

ADMETUS

Gods, what am I going to do?

¹¹ Legendary musician of Greek myth. He most famous for charming Hades with his music and winning the chance to lead his own deceased wife—Eurydice—out of Hades. But by looking back at her before they reach the upper world, Orpheus loses her forever.

¹² Queen of the Dead, husband of Hades, daughter of the goddess Demeter

¹³ Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guards the entrance to Hades

¹⁴ See n. 10.

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ALCESTIS

Time will heal you. I can no longer help.

ADMETUS

Take me with you, then! Please!

ALCESTIS

No. One death is enough for now.

ADMETUS

Gods! Look what you've done!

ALCESTIS

My sight is fading. Everything's getting dark.

ADMETUS

I'm completely lost!

ALCESTIS

I'm leaving...leaving...I am...no more.

ADMETUS

No! Get up! Lift your head! Don't leave your children!

ALCESTIS

I don't want to, but I must. Goodbye. Again, goodbye, dear children.

ADMETUS

NO. LOOK AT THEM. OPEN YOUR EYES! LOOK!

ALCESTIS

I...am...gone.

ADMETUS

No! What? You're *LEAVING ME*? What are you *DOING*?

ALCESTIS [*almost inaudibly*]

Goodbye...husband.

ADMETUS

I am utterly ruined.

CHORUS LEADER

It's over. Alcestis is no more.

CHILD *[crying]*

Is mommy dead? Daddy, can she still see? Am I an orphan now? What's wrong with her eyes? With her arms? Mommy, can you hear me? Can you see me? It's me, mommy, *it's me!*

ADMETUS

No, child, she can't see or hear you. Your mother is gone. Now we must suffer this thing together.

CHILD

No! What are we going to do? What about sis and me? Daddy, fix this! Why did you even marry mommy? What did you do? Why did mommy have to die before you? What will happen to us now?

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus, as awful as this is, you must be strong. Death ultimately pays us all a visit. You're not the first one to go through something like this.

ADMETUS

I know. And it's not like I haven't known for quite some time that this day was coming. I've been thinking of nothing else for days. But I need your help now as I prepare the funeral rituals. Please, stay here—sing a hymn and pour the proper libations.

[gathers himself, stands up, and speaks loudly]

Listen! I order that all Thesalians under my command to mourn their queen. Cut your hair and dress in black. If you work with or ride horses, cut their manes as well. And no music will be played in the city for a full year. No flute, no lyre. Today I bury the love of my life—no one was ever kinder to me. This woman died for me and she deserves the highest honors.

[Admetus exits into the house with his children. The body of Alcestis is carried into the palace by a retinue of servants walking behind them]

SECOND STASIMON

CHORUS

Daughter of Pelias, farewell!
Rejoice as you descend to dwell--
 As Hades' prized quarry
 They'll soon know your story
In the far, darkest reaches of hell.

For now every poet aspires
To tune your tale straight to his lyre--

At the Spartan Carnea¹⁵
Performers, purveyors
Of songs, you've set them on fire.

If I could I'd go down to that shore
And ply Cocytus¹⁶ there with my oar—
But that's not in the cards
For the journey's too hard—
May the world know what you did this for!

You willingly gave up your life,
Put your beautiful throat to the knife,
And as you expired
Of your husband required
That he never again take a wife.

Neither father nor mother would deign
To save you and us from this pain—
Such a scandalous crime,
You, cut down in your prime!
They live while we cry out in vain!

[sings directly to the audience]

This is our particular grief
To remind you that life is so brief—
With the gods as my guide
May I find such a bride
To bring my poor lot some relief.

THIRD EPISODE: the arrival of Heracles

[Heracles enters, huge and unshaven, wearing a lion skin like a cape, resting a club on one shoulder and carrying a rumpled travelling bag in the other. He hums happily to himself as he approaches the house and addresses the Chorus. He may be slightly hungover.]

HERACLES

Hey there, strangers! You don't happen to know if Admetus is home, do you?

CHORUS LEADER

Why, hello, Heracles. Yes, he's at home. What brings you to this neck of the woods?

¹⁵ A festival celebrated by the ancient Spartans in honor of the god Apollo.

¹⁶ One of the rivers of Hades.

HERACLES

Oh, I'm up north performing another one of my labors for King Eurystheus of Tiryns¹⁷. Heard of him?

CHORUS LEADER

Do tell. What exactly do you have to do this time?

HERACLES

Well, I'm going all the way up to Thrace. I'm gonna nab the four-horse chariot out from under old King What's-His-Name...uh, "Diomedes". Yep. Him.

CHORUS LEADER

You can't be serious! Surely you've heard about what kind of...um..."host" that man is?

HERACLES

Nope. Not a thing. He lives [*clumsily digs out a crumpled map from his bag and gives it a once over*]...in, um...here it is—Bistonina. Never been there.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, let me just say this: you won't get those horses without a fight.

HERACLES [*shrugs*]

Eh, what am I gonna do? Gotta do these labors.

CHORUS LEADER

I'll venture that either you'll have to kill him or else never return home.

HERACLES [*shrugs again*]

Story of my life.

CHORUS LEADER

Say you do defeat the king and take his horses. What then?

HERACLES

Well, then I gotta find some way of getting them back down to Tiryns.

CHORUS LEADER

Are you actually going to try to put bits in their mouths? Wouldn't want to be in your shoes, friend.

HERACLES [*dismissive*]

Pssh. Unless they happen to breathe fire, what's the big deal?

¹⁷ See n. 4.

CHORUS LEADER

No. No fire, but haven't you heard? These horses are said to tear human flesh apart with their deadly jaws!

HERACLES

Oh, come on. You're talking about something like, uh, mountain lions, not *horses*.

CHORUS LEADER

When you get there, look closely—their feedings troughs will be drenched in human blood.

HERACLES [*skeptical*]

Really? Who is this guy who owns such monsters? This, uh, "Diomedes".

CHORUS LEADER

They say he's a son of Ares himself. King of all Thrace, as rich as he is dangerous.

HERACLES

Figures. Seems I'm fated to fight with all the sons of Ares—first Lycaon, then Cycnus—bloodthirsty pricks, both of 'em! And now a third bastard to tangle with...him and his pets! Oh well. [*puffs his chest*]
You'll never see me, Alcmene's great son, shrink from a fight.

[*Admetus emerges from the house dressed in black, covered in ashes, with his hair cut*]

CHORUS LEADER

Look! Here comes Admetus now.

ADMETUS [*looking surprised, meek, and a bit embarrassed*]

Heracles? Blessings upon you, child of Zeus, born from the bloodline of Perseus.

HERACLES

And upon you, dear friend Admetus, noble King of Thessaly.

ADMETUS

I could use some blessings right now. Thanks for your wishes.

[*The two friends sit next to each other on the steps of the house*]

HERACLES

So what's with the hair and the grubby clothes?

ADMETUS [*sighs*]

Unfortunately I have to conduct a funeral today.

HERACLES

Balls! I'm so sorry! May the gods protect you and your children.

ADMETUS

My children are fine. They're inside the house.

HERACLES

Well, if I remember correctly your dad was getting up there. Are you burying him today?

ADMETUS *[through clenched teeth]*

No. My "father" is very much still alive. My "mother" too.

HERACLES

Surely *Alcestis* has not passed on, has she?

ADMETUS

Well...two ways to answer that question, I guess.

HERACLES

What do you mean? Is *Alcestis* alive or is she dead?

ADMETUS

Well, she is and she isn't. It hurts to even talk about it.

HERACLES

I gotta be honest—you're speaking jibberish.

ADMETUS

Surely you've heard about the fate she has to suffer? Everyone seems to know about it.

HERACLES

Of course. I heard that she agreed to die in your place.

ADMETUS

So what I'm saying is that how can she be "alive" when she's agreed to do such a thing?

HERACLES *[slaps Admetus on the back]*

Oh, buck up, you gloomy bastard! Why would you start mourning before that fated day arrives? Save your blubbering for the event itself.

ADMETUS *[shakes his head]*

No...the one who is doomed to die is already dead. Gone and good as buried.

HERACLES

Hmm. Not following you. In my world “Dead” and “Not Dead” are two very different things.

ADMETUS

We’ll just have to agree to disagree, Heracles.

HERACLES [*irritated and confused*]

Well, who *are* you mourning then exactly? Because clearly one of your kin has died.

ADMETUS

Um, it’s a...woman. In fact, a woman I was just...talking about...

HERACLES [*sighs and mutters*]

So the guessing game continues. Ok, I’ll bite—was she a blood relative?

ADMETUS

No, not related by blood, but she was very close to the family.

HERACLES

How did she wind up dying in your house?

ADMETUS

After her father died she, um, spent her...uh...”orphan years” here.

HERACLES [*sick of the vagueness of the conversation, stands up to leave*]

Well, I’m very sad to find you like this, Admetus.

ADMETUS [*suddenly desperate*]

Wait! What are you doing?

HERACLES

I’m leaving, naturally. Your house is in mourning. I’ll find somewhere else to stay.

ADMETUS

No, no, no. Heaven forbid! You are staying *here*, dear friend.

HERACLES

I can’t ask your servants to put up with entertaining a guest while all this is going on.

ADMETUS

Nonsense. The dead are dead. What do they care? Please, come into the house.

HERACLES [*steps toward the door and then balks*]

But...feasting and drinking at a house mourning a lost loved one...isn't that just bad taste? Not to mention religiously incorrect?

ADMETUS

I've got excellent guest rooms which are set apart from the main house. Most of my household won't even know you're here.

HERACLES *[uncomfortable and indecisive]*

Admetus, please. Just let me go. You'll be doing me a favor.

ADMETUS

Again, nonsense. You will *not* be staying at another man's house. *[addresses a servant standing nearby]* You there! Please show our guest to the rooms behind the palace. And tell the cooks to prepare a feast. Don't forget to close the courtyard doors—we can't have our guest hearing all that moaning and weeping, can we? It's upsetting.

[The servant and Heracles reluctantly enter the house]

CHORUS LEADER

What are you doing, Admetus? Are you crazy? Entertaining a guest while a funeral is going on? Shameful!

ADMETUS

Oh, but if I had rudely sent away from my house a dear friend clearly weary from travel, you would've been fine with that? Sending him away doesn't make me less sad about my wife. In fact, it would've made things worse. Then I'd be in mourning *and* a bad host. And word gets around fast with regard to things like that. Besides, whenever I'm down in Argos Heracles rolls out the red carpet for me.

CHORUS LEADER

If he's such a good friend, why did you lie to him?

ADMETUS

If he knew the truth he would have never come inside. *[pauses as the Chorus looks at him suspiciously]* Look, I know some people will be upset about this, but my house has a reputation to maintain. The House of Admetus does not know how to turn guests away.

[Admetus quickly turns and enters the house]

THIRD STASIMON

CHORUS

This is the house of a generous man, even gods come around here to sleep. Apollo himself, as all of you know, spent a year taking care of his sheep.

He strummed on his lyre in fields where he toiled, sometimes even playing till dawn.
And out came the lynxes, the tawny-skinned lions, and also the light-stepping fawns.

Admetus' house is abundant and rich near the shores of the crystal Boebias¹⁸.
His flocks free to graze to the ends of the earth, so vast you would hardly believe us.

He throws open his doors to a guest from afar even though his dear wife has just perished.
God-fearing and noble, his pity and honor run deep toward those whom he has cherished.

FOURTH EPISODE: Admetus confronts his father

[Admetus emerges from the house. Servants solemnly carry aloft the body of Alcestis as Admetus steps forward to address the crowd of mourners of which one is his father, Pheres]

ADMETUS

Citizens of Pherae! Thank you all for coming and for your many words of kindness. The body is set for burial and is now being carried to the pyre. Let us all remember the proper custom and bid my wife farewell as she sets out upon her final journey.

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus, isn't that your aged father shuffling this way? It looks like he carries some gifts for the dead.

PHERES

Hello, son. I'm here to offer my condolences. You've lost a good woman, and I pray that you find the strength to hold up and go on. Life is often cruel and we do what we must. Here—take these gifts and bury them by her side. I especially feel obligated to show my respect because she died to save you and to keep me from being childless. Every woman everywhere is now more honorable because of what's she's done here.

[Raises a hand toward the departing body and addresses the dead Alcestis]

Goodbye, dear woman! You saved my son and myself as well. May the earth rest lightly upon you!

[Turns back to Admetus]

I have to say—you don't see women like that very often. I hope you know what you had, son. These kinds of women are really the only ones worth marrying. Otherwise, don't bother.

ADMETUS *[venomously]*

Why are you here? I didn't invite you. You're no friend to me, that's for sure. As for your gifts—shove them up your ass. She doesn't need anything from you. You "offer condolences" ...where were you when I was dying? You—*old as dirt*—stepped aside and allowed someone young and vibrant to die. And now you come to *mourn for her*? It's clear to me now that you were never my father and that

¹⁸ A small lake in southern Thessaly, east of Pherae.

woman who claims to have given birth to me is not my mother. Some slave had me and your wife took me as her own.

When it came down to it, *dad*, you showed your true colors. Look at you—so old and decrepit...Death comes knocking at any moment and still you refused to die. Not even for your one and only son! Fucking coward. *She* died for me...you and *mom* let someone who isn't even a blood relative carry this burden! *She's* more of a mother and father to me than you two ever were. And think how noble an act it would have been for you—"aged father dies for doomed son".

And what's more—look at the life you've lived. You've had everything you've ever wanted or needed! You were a king, you had a son to guarantee that your line would go on and your possessions protected.

Did I do something wrong? Did I somehow dishonor you? I was a model son—I did everything you ever asked.

Well, you and *mom* better get together and have some more kids pretty damn quick because there is no way in hell that when you *do* die that I will bury you or accord you any honors. Some other dupe can do that.

You are dead to me.

That woman over there on the pyre is my savior. Everything I ever owed to you I now owe to her.

Hilarious—all these doddering old men who complain about age and pray for death and then when they come face to face with it they suddenly say, "Oh, wait, maybe this isn't so bad after all!"

CHORUS LEADER

Please stop this! There is enough grief here already. Leave your father alone.

PHERES

Zeus almighty. Who exactly do you think you're talking to, boy? Some shit slave from Lydia or Phrygia¹⁹ that you bought with some spare change? You forget you are talking to a freeborn Thessalian man, son of a freeborn Thessalian father. You go way too far with your crass insults and you will not get away with it.

This is how it is—I *am* your father and I raised you to be the master of this house, none of which means that I am obliged to *die for you*. Where did you get this idea—fathers dying for sons? What custom is this that I am not aware of? Certainly not a Greek one.

Whether you are happy or unhappy—that's completely on you. What you deserve from me you already have—wealth, subjects, land—just like I received from my father. Where's the injustice? How exactly have I deprived you?

Tell you what—don't die for me and I won't die for you.

You don't think I like feeling the sunlight on my face just as much as you do? There's an eternity for all of us to live below the earth...what exactly is the rush?

¹⁹ Lands in what is now Turkey.

And I was going to hold my tongue, but could you be any more shameless? Desperately avoiding your own death by...by *killing* her. That's right, I said it. And you call *me* a coward? You're the one who was just surpassed by a *woman*...a woman who died for her delicate little snowflake of a husband.

You may be on to something, son! You'll never have to die! Just keep persuading each new wife to do what she did and—*poof*—you're immortal! Ingenious!

But seriously, how can you stand there and revile your own kin for not being willing to do what you were too much of a bedwetting crybaby to do yourself. Guess what—if you like being alive, chances are pretty much everyone else does too. I recommend that you shut your damn mouth. If you want to continue to trade insults just know that this is a battle *you will lose*.

CHORUS LEADER

Stop! Just stop! I can't listen to this anymore. Sir, please stop cursing your son!

ADMETUS

No, no...please continue. But I'm warning you—if you can't handle hearing the truth, you might want to stop and think about how wrong you are.

PHERES

I'd be a whole lot more “wrong” if I were the one dying on your behalf.

ADMETUS

So you really think that death is the same for both the young and old alike?

PHERES

I'm saying that we should all be happy with the one life we're given. Not two.

ADMETUS [*biting sarcasm*]

Well, in that case, may you live longer than Zeus himself!

PHERES

Son, what is your problem? How exactly have I done you any wrong?

ADMETUS

It's your unseemly lust for a long life—it's sickening.

PHERES

You're the one buying himself a longer life with someone else's corpse!

ADMETUS

Yes—an embarrassing reminder of *your* selfishness, you coward.

PHERES

That word again. I had nothing to do with her death. Nothing.

ADMETUS

Oh, I *can't wait* for the day when you might need my help someday!

PHERES

Just keep on living, my son! Woo a hundred women and kill them off one by one!

ADMETUS

Even if I did that, each one would be an insult to *you*—you refused when you should have died.

PHERES

Of course I refused. Sunlight is sweet.

ADMETUS

You fucking coward! You don't deserve to live!

PHERES [*smiling nastily*]

Ah, but I *am* alive. And you won't be carrying off my body today, son.

ADMETUS

But you *will* die...and you will die dishonored and hated.

PHERES

What do I care what people say or think about me once I'm dead?

ADMETUS

My god, how shameless men get in their old age!

PHERES [*gesturing toward Alcestis' funeral pyre*]

She wasn't shameless though, was she? A little stupid, I guess...to die for you. But not shameless.

ADMETUS

Just go. Let me bury the dead.

PHERES

I'll go. But don't forget that you are both the one who buries her and the one who killed her. You think this ends here? Acastus²⁰ is no man at all if he doesn't avenge his sister in some way. Look over your shoulder, son.

ADMETUS

GET OUT! You and your whore of a wife—go spend the rest of your drooling, doddering years childless, even though your one child still lives. And never come to my house again. I swear it, if right now we were standing in the public square in front of the entire citizenry I would renounce you publicly in a heartbeat!

[Pheres exits. Admetus takes a moment to gather himself and addresses the Chorus]

Come now. It is time to grieve properly and to bury the dead.

CHORUS *[addressing the body of Alcestis]*

Goodbye now, my lady, so noble and generous
May Hermes most gentle grant you his deference

And because of your goodness may Hades decide
To grant you a place at Persephone's side

[Chorus and Admetus exit to attend to the funeral. One of Admetus' servants—a young man—comes out of the palace. He is clearly distressed.]

SERVANT *[speaks directly to the audience]*

Over the years I've served dinner to hundreds of guests here at the House of Admetus. But this guy *[gestures toward the house]* is by far the worst! First of all, he swaggers into town, sees my master all decked out in black, hair cut short—obviously in the depths of mourning—and he makes himself at home anyway. And then! The food we brought him wasn't good enough apparently because he kept bellowing toward the kitchen, demanding this and that. And then he started to *drink*. Good lord, did he drink. Downing bowl after bowl of unmixed wine till he was completely knackered—dancing around, putting garlands in his greasy hair, and belching out song after song horribly out of tune.

There's no way he could *not* have heard the songs of mourning from the other wing of the house. But did he care? I wanted to go in there and give him a piece of my mind, but Admetus' orders were to leave him alone.

I couldn't even attend the funeral of my beloved queen! Instead, I'm forced to bring booze and boar to that asshole in there. Am I out of bounds, people? Do I not have the right to loathe this "guest" who could not have showed up at a worse time?

[Heracles stumbles out of the palace, tipsy and slurring slightly. He addresses the servant]

²⁰ Alcestis' brother, best known in mythology for joining Jason and the Argonauts and participating in the Calydonian Boar Hunt.

HERACLES

Hey, you! Yeah, you! What from the crusty bottom of Poseidon's realm has found its way up your tight Phrygian ass? Dontcha know that yer spos'd ta, you know, greet honored guests—*such as yours truly*—with a smile? But I've been starin' at yer ugly-ass scowling face for hours now. All mopey and shit. *All this blubberin' over some broad who wasn't even part of the family.*

Come here. *Come here.* Lemme tell you a lil sumthin' 'bout how life works—do you know about the, uh, the lot of, uh, the lot of mortal man? *NO?* 'Course not, you're too wet behind the ears.

[Heracles clumsily puts his arm around the servant's neck in a kind of loose headlock. Servant is clearly very uncomfortable]

Listen-a me—we all die and none of us know when it's comin'. That's the Fates for ya. And so, because this is how it is, all you can really do is indulge yourself. Have a drink! Have three! Chase some girls around! The Fates are a bunch-a bitches but...but *Aphrodite!* You know whad I'm sayin'.

So—you *little prick*—come let me pour you a drink *[hands the servant a drinking bowl]*. A few of these and you'll lose that fucking frown. You go 'round pouting and pissy all the time, you're just wasting your life.

[Servant ducks out of Heracles grasp and gently sets the drinking bowl on the ground]

SERVANT

Sir, I know all this. It's just...it's just that given the present circumstances, throwing a party just doesn't seem...proper.

HERACLES

"Present Circumstances". The woman was *no relation*, for god's sake! Why all this *grief*? It's not like the king or queen has died.

SERVANT

What do you mean? Do you not know what has happened here?

HERACLES *[sobering up]*

Course I do. Unless your master's been lying to me.

SERVANT *[shakes his head and sighs]*

My master...my master is far too...*courteous*.

HERACLES

So because some *nobody* kicks the bucket I shouldn't have a good time?

SERVANT

Sir, she was no stranger.

HERACLES *[taken aback]*

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He lied to me, didn't he?

SERVANT

Please, forget I said anything. The concerns of the house belong to the house alone.

HERACLES [*horrified*]

You all really aren't mourning some stranger at all, are you?

SERVANT

Of course not. If we were I would not have been so bothered by your carousing and carrying-on.

HERACLES [*sits down on the steps*]

Good gods, Admetus has done a terrible thing. And now so have I.

SERVANT

Sir, it's just that you happened to come here at a really bad time.

HERACLES

Tell me straight—who died? His father? One of his kids?

SERVANT

No, sir. Admetus' *wife* is dead.

HERACLES [*aghast*]

Are you *serious*? And you all *still* took me in a guest?

SERVANT

He felt he had to. So that his house could maintain its honor.

HERACLES

Ah, Admetus, you poor bastard! What a dear woman you have lost!

SERVANT

Indeed. All of us in the house feel like we've died a little.

HERACLES

Of course I noticed all those things—the clothes, the ashes, the hair, the weeping...but he told me that he was burying someone who wasn't a part of the family. I'm such an ass! I went right into the house and started partying while this man is in his darkest hour! [*rips the garland of ivy off his head and tosses it aside*]

Please, tell me where she is now. Where is the funeral being held?

SERVANT

Take the road out of Pherae toward Larisa. Along the way you'll see a beautiful, newly-sculpted tomb.
Can't miss it.

[Servant goes inside the house. Heracles stands up and delivers a short soliloquy]

HERACLES

Ok, Heracles. Time to show what the son of Tirynthian Alcmene and Olympian Zeus is made of. It's up to me to fix this and bring this woman back. Here's what I'm gonna do: I'm gonna track down that black-robed bugger—Death himself—I'll sneak up on him, put him in a headlock and squeeze his puny neck until he gives me what I want. And I know just where to find him—lurking 'round the tomb, slurping up libation after libation.

But if he's already moved on, then I will go down into Hell itself and request that Persephone and Lord Hades give Alcestis over to me. From there I shall place her back into the arms of my dear friend Admetus. I mean, now that I think about it—*what a guy!* Absolutely *crushed* with grief and he *still* takes me in. Is there anyone in all of Thessaly or even Greece more hospitable than this man? Well, his nobility and respect demand a noble gesture in return. Let no one ever say that Heracles was an ungrateful guest.

[Heracles exits while Admetus emerges with the Chorus returning home from the funeral. They join together in a solemn exchange of song.]

ADMETUS

Ah, the House I once loved, but now I despise.
But what would a life lived outside her comprise?

I wish I were dead, or had never been born!
I envy the dead, their existence forlorn.

I wish it were me haunting Hades' dim halls,
The sun never pierces its roof or its walls.

When my wife passed away and gave in to her doom
It was I who stepped off, down and into the tomb

[Admetus collapses in grief on the steps of his house]

CHORUS LEADER

Come now. Get up. Sir, go inside.

ADMETUS *[sobbing]*

How can I do it when my dear wife has died?

CHORUS LEADER

You've earned your deep sorrow, you grieve honestly.

ADMETUS

My heart and my guts have been ripped out of me!

CHORUS LEADER

I know how you feel.

ADMETUS

HOW COULD YOU KNOW?!

CHORUS LEADER

I do sympathize, sir, but on we must go.

ADMETUS

This PAIN! This *PAIN!* Where does it end?

CHORUS LEADER

Such a burden—you never will see her again.

ADMETUS

This pain is worse than I ever have dreamed--
I now stumble along, alone, unredeemed.

Would that I never had married or fathered
My dear precious children. Why do it? Why bother?

To be single—no children—life's free, fast and full!
Any sorrow that comes is negligible.

But losing one's wife or a child to the grave
Leaves one hopeless and hardened, unfit and unsaved.

CHORUS LEADER

The Fates lay a claim to everyone's spirit.

ADMETUS

Don't say it! Shut up! I don't want to hear it!

CHORUS LEADER

Master, get up, and limit your grief.

ADMETUS

How will I do it? Where comes the relief?

CHORUS LEADER

I know this is awful but you know that you have to...

ADMETUS *[clutching his head]*

THIS PAIN! THIS PAIN!

CHORUS LEADER

You're not the first man to...

ADMETUS

Stop!

CHORUS LEADER

...lose his beloved. We all get our share
Of suffering and loss, of hurt and despair.

ADMETUS

You were wrong when you held me back from that pyre!
I should have thrown myself on it and burned there beside her!

Then Death could have claimed two souls to deliver
And we both could have journeyed across that dark river.

CHORUS LEADER

I once had a cousin who lost his dear boy.
After that he was childless; robbed of his joy.

He was too far along to father another
Still he wore his grief well, both he and the mother.

ADMETUS

My House looms above me, shadowed and dim.

How can I live here?
How can I stay?

My fortunes have changed from glorious to grim.

How can I live here?
How can I stay?

It seems that just yesterday I held in my hand
A Pelion²¹ torch and a gold wedding band.

²¹ Mount Pelion in southern Thessaly. The reference here is to a pine torch used in a traditional wedding procession.

How the throngs of well-wishers followed that day
Shouting and sending their blessings our way!

The mem'ry of her dressed in white ever haunts me,
And the bed-chamber, heavy with emptiness, taunts me.

CHORUS

Everything going well
Has now gone to Hell.
Troubles—once absent—they now will compel

You to accept
A dismal regret
Which has happened to millions, don't ever forget.

ADMETUS

My friends, I believe in the end (*now, don't scoff!*)
My wife is the one who is much better off

Her terrestrial grief has now ended in glory
As for my darkest days—here's the start of the story.

Would I'd never laid such a curse on my spouse!
How can I ever go back in that House?

How can I entertain guests anymore?
The grief, there inside, will drive me outdoors.

When I look at my bed, I'll shake and I'll shudder,
The sad, empty chairs and the gathering clutter.

The servants wail
The children howl
The townsmen scowl
The townswomen frail

Then man takes a bride
A wedding is held
But I am compelled
To quiver inside

For how could I now ever bear to go out
And see brides like my wife and hear men lashing out:

"Look at this man who lives on in disgrace!
Allowing a *woman* to die in his place!

We should have nothing to do with this guy—
Wishing death on his folks while refusing to die."

I suppose I'll endure all this social damnation
Since Fortune has finished off my reputation.

FOURTH STASIMON

CHORUS

I've set my mind to many things—
To life, to love, the pain it brings

And through it all I've come to see
There's nothing but Necessity.

She's stronger than an Orphean²² song
Or Apollo's attempts to right mortal wrongs.

This goddess has no sacred station
Where one might offer her libations.

She will not answer if I pray
But still I beg, "Please, stay away!"

She's brings about what Zeus thinks best,
Iron-bending, merciless.

Admetus, Admetus,
We need you to lead us
Though clearly Necessity's having her way.

Admetus, Admetus,
The dead will not heed us
So look on the sunlight and live for today!

Alcestis, Alcestis,
We'll forever profess this:
That you are the best that we know or have known.

Alcestis, Alcestis,
Who would have guessed this:
That you would have shown us the best we've been shown?

So if some weary traveler should pass by this tomb
May he see not a martyr but someone from whom

We now ask a blessing and seek out a favor
For she died in his place, not as victim, but savior.

²² See n.11.

EXODOS: the reversal of fortunes

[Heracles enters carefully guiding a veiled woman by the hand. They both move very slowly toward the center of the orchestra]

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus, look! Heracles is back, coming this way.

HERACLES

Admetus, I've always thought that it's best to speak frankly especially when talking to friends and not to hold grudges or leave things unsaid. And also, as your friend, I thought it right to stand by you during this very difficult time and to show you what kind of friend I am.

You *lied* to me—you did not tell me that your wife had died and so I went inside your house and proceeded to make a complete ass of myself. You need to know—I'm not happy about this at all. Yet at the same time, I don't want to be a burden to you in your dark hour.

So let me tell you why I've returned. I need a favor—keep this woman here for me until I get back from dealing with Diomedes and his horrible horses. If by some chance I should die up there, I give her to you outright. Make her a servant in your house.

It took a lot of work to win this woman, lemme tell you. You see, in my travels I stumbled across some people holding some athletic contests and—you know me—I can't resist a good competition. Good prizes, too. Even in the small events the winners took home horses. And in the big events, you know, my kinda thing—boxing and wrestling—they were giving away cattle and women. So, *yadda yadda yadda*, I won and here she is.

But, like I said, I need you to take care of her for me. No, no, no—I *see that look on your face*—I did *not* steal her. Won her fair and square. Trust me, you'll thank me for this.

ADMETUS

My intention was not to insult you by not telling you the truth, Heracles. The way I saw it was that it would only compound my pain if I saw you going off to stay someone else's house. One loss was already enough.

As for the woman, dear friend, I beg you to give her to someone else. You have lots of friends in Pherae and I'm sure any of them would be ecstatic to have her. But to me, she'd just be a living reminder of the wife I've lost. I couldn't bear to see her in the house. She would just be trouble added to trouble.

Besides, where would she stay? Clearly she's young and beautiful, and so putting her in the men's quarters would be out of the question, obviously. I'm afraid they'd put their hands all over her—I'm just looking out for *your* interests, Heracles.

I suppose she could stay in my wife's room. But how could I do that? *This* woman in *her* bed? Can't do it. My subjects would be up in arms and howl that this would be an ugly betrayal of my wife's memory. Plus, I made promises to her as well. Serious ones.

[addresses the veiled woman]

Dear lady, whoever you are, I have to say that from here you look just like my late wife! It kills me!

[back to Heracles]

By the gods, Heracles, take her away! This kills me again—she looks just like *her*. Take her away! My heart pounds and my eyes are welling up...I can't do this!

CHORUS LEADER

Whatever Fate is, it is cruel. But we all must accept what the gods send us, whatever it might be.

HERACLES

Ah, Admetus, I only wish that it was within my power to go down into Hell and bring your beloved wife back to you.

ADMETUS

I know you do. But what good is such sentiment? The dead are dead and they stay that way.

HERACLES

Like others have said, dear friend, go easy on yourself and don't be too sorrowful.

ADMETUS

Easier said than done, Heracles.

HERACLES

I know, but seriously, what good will all this excessive lamentation bring you?

ADMETUS

None, but I can't help it.

HERACLES

Of course, of course. When someone you love dies, the tears just come by themselves.

ADMETUS

Heracles, her death has ruined me. More than I can express.

HERACLES

She was a great woman. Everyone knows it.

ADMETUS

And now there is simply no more joy in living.

HERACLES

Ah, time will help heal this. Right now the wound is raw.

ADMETUS

Yes, in that time will one day bring about my death, I suppose.

HERACLES

Oh, I think that in time a new bride, a new wife will ease your suffering.

ADMETUS

How can you say such a thing? I didn't think I'd hear this from you.

HERACLES

What? You're gonna stay a lonely widower your whole life?

ADMETUS

No woman shall ever share my bed.

HERACLES

Ok, but how does this do your late wife any favors? I don't get it.

ADMETUS

It's...it's how I honor her. It's what she deserves.

HERACLES

Commendable, really, but you're acting like a fool.

ADMETUS

I mean it—I will *not* remarry.

HERACLES

And *I* mean it—I admire your loyalty.

ADMETUS

May I die if I ever betray her, even if she's no longer here!

HERACLES

Yes, yes. Now, please, take this woman here into your house.

ADMETUS

No, I beg you, by your father Zeus, do not ask me to do this!

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HERACLES

Trust me—you'll be making a *huge* mistake if you don't do it.

ADMETUS

If I *do* do it will only make things worse.

HERACLES

Mmmmmm...not so sure about that. You might find her to be a, um, rather timely gift.

ADMETUS

I wish you had never won her as a prize!

HERACLES

But when I win, *you* win. That's how friendship works.

ADMETUS

A fine sentiment, but really, she has to go.

HERACLES

She'll go if she has to. But look closely first. Does she *reeeeally* have to?

ADMETUS

She does if you don't want me to become angry with you.

HERACLES

Listen, I have my own reasons for insisting here.

ADMETUS [*sighs*]

Ok. You win. But let the record show that I am not happy about this!

HERACLES [*smiling*]

You'll thank me. You wait and see.

ADMETUS [*to his servants*]

Take her in, I guess. It seems I have no choice.

HERACLES

Oh, no-no-no...I will not hand her off to some servant. *You* must take her inside.

ADMETUS

How about *you* just take her inside, then.

HERACLES

Nope. I promised myself that I would place her in *your* hands and *your* hands alone.

ADMETUS

Listen—it's fine if she goes in the house, ok? But I will not touch her.

HERACLES [*shakes his head vigorously*]

Nope. Has to be you.

ADMETUS [*visibly shaken*]

My Lord, you are forcing me to do something I should not do!

HERACLES

C'mon, grow a pair and reach out your hand to this woman.

ADMETUS [*closes his eyes, turns his head away and gingerly reaches behind himself toward the woman*]

Fine. I'll take her. It's like I'm cutting the head off a Gorgon²³.

HERACLES

Good. You got her?

ADMETUS [*eyes still closed, facing away from the woman*]

Yes, Heracles, I have her.

HERACLES

Now take care of her. One day—I promise you—you'll say that this son of Zeus is the best guest you've ever had.

[*dramatically removes the veil from the woman's head*]

Ta da! Now, look at her! Does she, um, *look like anybody you might know?* Hmmm? Admetus, my friend, put an end to your mourning!

ADMETUS [*turns around, slowly opens his eyes and gapes in astonishment*]

By *ZEUS*, how can this be? Is this really *my wife?* *IS IT?* Or are the gods just playing some horrible trick on me?

HERACLES

It's her and no one else. Your Alcestis is back.

ADMETUS

²³ The reference here is to Perseus' slaying of the Gorgon Medusa. If one looked at Medusa he would turn to stone—Admetus' discomfort here is such that he can't even bring himself to watch what he himself is doing.

Surely this is some phantom from the Underworld.

HERACLES

Hey, give old Herc some credit here. When I bring 'em back, I bring 'em *all the way* back.

ADMETUS

This is really my wife? The one whose very body I burned on the pyre?

HERACLES

Yes and yes! Though I don't blame you for not quite believing it.

ADMETUS

May I touch and hold her?

HERACLES

Go for it. What was lost has been found.

ADMETUS [*throws his arms around her though she stays still, stiff and unresponsive*]

My *love!* My *wife!* I thought I would never see you again!

HERACLES

She's all yours. May the gods bless you!

ADMETUS

And you, Heracles! May your father Zeus always protect you! You have reversed my grim fortunes. But, tell me, how *on earth* did you accomplish this?

HERACLES

Simple. I fought the guy who had her.

ADMETUS

You mean Death himself? Where? How?

HERACLES

I just waited by the tomb and when he showed up I jumped him.

ADMETUS

Amazing. But...why isn't she...saying anything?

HERACLES

Oh, that. She can't speak for three days—that's the amount of time the gods below apparently require for her to be "fully purified". But go on, take her inside. Now your house can continue to serve guests in the righteous way it always has.

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Now, seriously, *I gotta go*. Still haven't done that damn labor for that bastard Eurystheus yet.

ADMETUS

No, stay! At least for dinner.

HERACLES [*laughing, gathering up his stuff*]

Another time, my friend. I'm off!

[*Heracles exits*]

ADMETUS [*calling after him*]

The gods watch over you and bring you safely home!

[*turns to the Chorus*]

Now, everyone! I proclaim a time of celebration and feasting for the whole region! Sing songs, offer prayers, and make sacrifices to the gods! Fortune has blessed me and my life is now better than it was before!

[*Admetus leads Alcestis into the house*]

CHORUS

The gods can seem so disconnected—
They bring about the unexpected.

When men seem weak, the gods prevail—
Such describes and ends this tale.