

# *The Immortal Lovers*

*by Cindy Rae*

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# *The Immortal Lovers*

## *Dionysus and Ariadne*

*By Cindy Rae*

*Ancient coin depicting Dionysus, the God of the Natural World and of the Vine on one side, and a cluster of grapes on the other.*

*Part One: What You Will for What You Want*

*Or: The Injured Princess and the Dying God*

~~

Poseidon's tide had swept out to sea hours ago, leaving the mayhem sailors regularly left behind when they stayed but for a night near the beach: empty wineskins, overturned bowls of fruit and cheese, broken crockery...

A woman...

No, not just a woman. A princess.

She was fair, and she was injured. And one look at her royal robes and jewelry told Dionysus, God of the Vine, who she was.

Ariadne.

Only the Royal Court of Crete wore that shade of blue and trimmed it with gold thread. The family crest rode the ring on her finger. The bull's sigil was still stitched on her gown, near her shoulder. The part of her gown that remained intact, of course.

She was bleeding on it. Or at least, she was bleeding on the parts of it that weren't torn, and even some of those. The stones on the rocky shoreline were dried of seawater, but they were wet with blood. Her blood.

There were deep scratches to her arms and legs, a gash across her neck and a grievous one, on her face. The gown had been deeply torn across the neckline, and a pin designed to hold it together at her shoulder barely succeeded in sparing her dignity. The crew of Theseus' ship had reveled with no small amount of abandon.

And, it seemed, with no small amount of abandonment. The late autumn tide was long out, the future king of Athens out with it. Theseus had left much behind, either through intention or accident.

She was still alive.

There were no bruises on her thighs to indicate she'd been raped, but a purple one was coming in over her ribs. Had she been assaulted? Fallen on the rocks? She was wedged between two great stones, and seaweed half-covered her calves. It made her look like a mauled Aphrodite, washed in from the ocean. Had they looked for her, and not seen? Had someone... done this to her?

The God of the Natural World did not know. Divination was the realm of his most faithful, as the wine often induced visions. But that was her past, not her future.

Nor her present, which was dire. They had left her.

He cleared away the debris around her, a sharp-nailed hand pulling back the entangling seaweed so that he could reach her shattered form. A spilled wine goblet lay near her hand. Drunk. No, not drunk...

Dionysus held wine as a staple, and could tell every type and vintage. Nothing in this cup had come from a grape. Or at least, something in it hadn't.

Someone had drugged her. He could smell it from the scent on the overturned crockery.

He lifted her as carefully as he could, and wrapped her in his Cloak of Protection, using its enchantment to stave off her mortal life's end.

Hair the color of sun-kissed sand clung to her pale cheeks. She was slight, and she was cold.

It made little sense. She wore a family ring and pearl earrings worth a ransom. Whatever this was, it was not done for money. A silver armband wound around her bicep. Heavy. Gem-set. Minos' wealth was legendary.

Minos' daughter was bleeding to death.

He held her close to his chest, and summoned his chariot, pulled by leopards. Great cats were his sacred totem, and he used their strength now, to bear her to safety.

*The chariot of Dionysus. It is regularly pictured as being pulled by leopards, tigers, lions, panthers, or any combination of great cat. A leopard prowls the foreground.*

"Go!" he commanded them, cradling her close.

It would mean taking her Below. Old Father would not like that. It would mean revealing his most secret palace to her. Revealing more than that, perhaps, and at a dangerous time, too, this close to the cutting of the vines. It didn't matter.

Screaming at the cats and praying for the woman, he transported her through the dawning morn. He had to get her to shelter. Get her down, before Apollo's sun could rise fully, and burn her fair features... or reveal his theft.

Arms that could pull an oak from the ground in high summer carried her Below, through the round doorway few could see, to the deep hallways of stone beneath the island of Naxos.

She moaned as he took her down, and she shifted in his arms. Cradling her with supreme care, he felt her shimmer across his consciousness.

Odd. Though visions and intuitions were common among his worshippers, the God himself rarely experienced such a thing. No gift of prophecy was needed to be Dionysus. No future for him, other than the brief and annual one. He would die, soon, just as the plants most associated with him did. It was his fate. He had no other.

It was her fate that concerned him more. Her skin was nearly white, and he swore he felt her "shift" again, across his consciousness, though she did not do so in his arms. Ariadne. Daughter of a King. Betrayer of one, as well. Savior of a people. Perhaps all people. Minos' stubborn hubris was as legendary as his wealth. But she was not thinking of "wealth," now. She was not "thinking" at all. She was feeling. She was frightened, inside.

He cradled her, suddenly feeling a fierce sense of protectiveness steal across his soul. Offerings left near a beach were implied to be his

Uncle Poseidon's. The Sea God was even sacred amongst her people. In a way, this was thievery. Also, in a way, it was right.

While the rest of his scripted life whispered of his doom, this woman whispered of his destiny. He pushed the idea aside, impatient as he left the chariot and carried her deeper inside his refuge. His long stride chewed the ground.

His destiny was to die, once the hard cold hit the ground. The harvesting was done. He would last a pair of months more, at best. Then he would die.

He could only hope she didn't do that before he did.

She made a low sound of distress in the back of her throat, almost seeming to hear the disquiet of his thoughts. He drew his dark cloak more tightly around her unconscious form. He would save her. By either the power of his cape, the power of the healing medicines at his disposal, or the power of his arm, he would save her. Fight Hades for her, if he had to. She was so frail, and so lovely. And something inside her seemed to call out to him, to call out for help, ever so faintly.

*Do you still have a ball of string to lead you back home, little one?* he wondered. Because she was going to need one.

--

It stung. It was the first thing she thought, as she smelled the medicinal alcohol. It was the chemical made from the first rough harvest of immature grapes. Unfit for drinking, it was processed into the harsh disinfectant that cleaned an object, or cleaned a wound. It stung. And it smelled.

A soft cloth was pressed against an abrasion on her arm. Ariadne winced, and moaned, a little. It hurt. But then, everything did that, right now.

"Gently, Narcissa."

An impossibly deep voice penetrated her discomfort. Had she heard it before, while she slept? She realized she had. A low voice. A kind voice. A voice of salvation, and comfort. There was a bed beneath her back, not the stony beach. There was a rough, yet warm gown upon her body, not her royal silks.

A wet cloth soaked in the alcohol that was not good enough for wine pressed softly against her wrist. It hurt. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. The Princess of Crete forced her eyes to open.

"Where... where am I?" Ariadne asked. Something in her was aware she'd asked it before, but could not remember.

A black woman hovered over her, the eyes were sightless, but her words were friendly enough. "You be in the chambers of my Master, child, and being tended."

It was a singsong voice Ariadne almost remembered. The woman was Nubian, and older. And hers was not "his" voice, but it was a kind voice, nonetheless. She wore a patched tunic similar to Ariadne's own, though more brightly colored, and embroidered with leaf work.

Ariadne sat up slowly, trying to take inventory as she rose. She was wearing a homespun gown, patched as well, in several places. As she herself had been patched in several places. She had indeed been bandaged and tended. She was muscle sore, and the pain in her chest intensified as she tried to draw in deeper breaths. Ow. Headache. An ache almost everywhere else, too.

Nothing about the room looked familiar. She did not need to go back to the beach to know she was marooned.

"They left me?" she both asked and confirmed.

Narcissa dropped her brightly wrapped head, nodding.

"Men. They sometimes...they do evil things," the old woman said.

An older man with a cane stood a bit away from her, putting apothecary bottles away in a bag. He was silent, but his expression was... severe. He checked the medicine bottles. A healer, then? She remembered hearing the tapping of his walking stick, as she struggled in and out of consciousness. Was the deep, comforting voice his? Somehow, that didn't seem right.

He left the chamber wordlessly, the sound of his progress growing increasingly faint, as he did so. What strange place was this? An arc of colored glass was set into a wall. Sunset colors. Or sunrise ones. It gave her no hint.

In a room cluttered with statuary and offerings, he was easy to miss until he moved. From the far side of the room, a cloaked figure came forward, stepping out of the dimly lit area of the chamber. He stood behind the black woman. Well behind. Candlelight flickered softly in the room. This being seemed to wear shadow like clothing, and moved just as silently. Odd, for a big man.

Ariadne's cheek and jaw throbbed with discomfort. She lifted her fingers to both, for a tactile inspection. One side of her face was half-covered, with a bandage.

"I do not think our guest needs to hear about the failings of mortal men, Narcissa."

There. There was The Voice. The cloaked figure moved closer.



He kept his hood drawn up over his head, and low, across his face.

*Mortal men? What was he, then?*

The princess blinked as realization stirred. Even so deeply concealed, Ariadne guessed she was in the presence of something mightier than an average man.

Power radiated from his huge frame, even beneath the cloak. A brown leather vest covered the massive breadth of his chest, figural lions gracing its front. Gloved hands swept the cape back so it cleared his massive shoulders. Shirtless, a wide band of leather encircled his bicep, the design stamped into it vaguely leaf-like, and twining. It nearly matched the embroidery work on the front of Narcissa's long tunic. She was his priestess, then?

He stood a moment, and let Ariadne take in his presence. More than mortal. Yes. Much more. The sound of the deep voice came to her, along with the comfort of his presence. Immortal? Olympian, even? It was possible. Anything was, at this point.

He pulled the hood back, and removed his gloves. Blue eyes. Amazing blue eyes, a color found only in Otherworldly beings. Animus. He was a lion, mostly. A mane of golden hair covered his head, and fell richly over his broad shoulders. Had they left her in Nemea?

"Go and tell Jacob we may have need of more medicine." The impossibly deep voice rumbled in soft, low tones. "He said he was saving something. Something for me, if I should need it. Tell him I want it now. Tell him I want it, for her."

His steady eyes were a little uncanny, and did not seem to shift their gaze from Ariadne's damaged face. He held out his hand for the cloth. His fingers looked amazingly strong. And clawed. Furred, some, as well.

The old woman obeyed, handing him the cleansing rag full of medicine. She inclined her head in a gesture of respect, as she left to do his bidding. He drenched the soft cotton in a bowl beside the bed, and squeezed.

"To live can be a difficult thing," he told her, taking her hand in his, and turning it over. He brushed the medicated cloth across the scrapes on her palms. It burned enough to cause tears, and he took it away precisely before they came. It was as if he could tell exactly how she felt, and just when the discomfort was "too much."

"It hurts," she confessed, trying to brave.

His answer was soft. "We all face hurt. I was born. I lived. I survived. I did. You will."

She nodded, and he continued to clean and dress the wounds across her palms. He could well speak of being brave and being wounded. Survival? Hmm. He was a God. They were immortal. They could barely be hurt, much less killed.

"The grave is a fine, safe place," he told her, being as gentle as he possibly could. "But if we live... we bleed."

He showed her the rag, and dipped it back in the bowl, where the water turned a little pink. She realized they had been helping her for longer than just the last few hours.

"How long?" she asked.

"Two days ago, almost. You were badly injured."

Yes. Two days. She remembered being fed soup, and tended to. Barely.

"Am I in... a hospital?"

He shook his head. The golden hair shifted across his vest, as he did so. "There was no time. I brought you here, instead."

A framing blonde beard hugged his chiseled jaw. When he spoke, she glimpsed fangs.

"Where is 'here?'" She looked around. It was a room of rock and stone, made habitable by its furnishings. She lay on a huge bed, bolstered with pillows. No space of the room was unadorned, but very little of it looked familiar to her. She'd never seen its like.

"A secret place, far below the city streets," he answered. "You are in my palace. Or my prison, depending on the time of year. It is a safe place. There are catacombs beneath us, to honor those who passed to the Underworld, and a cave I will have need of, once we clear the solstice. Do not go to those places, as it is not safe for you. The rest of my home is yours to wander in, if you wish."

She tried to nod, and thought the better of it, thanks to the pain in her jaw.

"My ribs are sore, and I am cut. From the rocks on the shore?" she asked, looking at the soft, loose wrappings on her arms and legs. He inclined his head, a subtle gesture of affirmation.

"They will heal. My servants know something of medicine. Jacob, Mary and Narcissa have tended most of your hurts."

Perhaps they had, but it was his voice she remembered, in the isolation of her pain. His voice that had comforted her, and guided her softly through the dark veil of agony that had seemed to cover her sight like a gauze bandage.

Her fingertips touched the thick cotton bandage on her cheek. "And my face?" She hated to ask it. It sounded vain. But she had to.

Blue eyes Poseidon would have envied flickered and looked away for a second, not wanting to meet hers, out of pity.

"That wound will also heal," was all he said.

But she could feel the damage, and guess at its extent. It would heal. It would also scar. Ariadne accepted the hard truth. Her value as a marriage partner had just declined, catastrophically. Perhaps that did not matter. Not anymore. Much of her life as she knew it, was over. Of that, she was certain.

Still, she held out her small, regal hand. She regained her royal manners. "I owe you my thanks, then."

He touched his fingertips to hers, and she felt a frisson of... *something* leap between them. So did he.

"Do you have a name, my Lord?" she asked. He had not revealed his identity to her. But the alcohol made from grapes was an obvious clue, as were the vine work and his animal features. Big cats were sacred to only a few of the Immortals.

"My name? Dionysus. Or Bacchus, if you prefer."

His voice was a rasp of seductive sound. He confirmed what she already knew. He said it while he was pulling a soft blanket up over her form, a form which looked nearly shapeless, beneath the homespun. The quilts were soft. Fit for divinity. She was in his bed, then.

"Dionysus." Lord of the Vine, of Nature, and almost all it had to offer. She looked around the room, casting a careful eye at the furnishings. It was an odd dwelling for a deity. Painted glass. Pottery cups and earthenware. Large statuary. Tiny figurines. A little carved elephant, inexplicably placed on a shelf. He was loved in India, and had lived there for a time, so the stories said. Perhaps the elephant was an

offering from there? She was ignorant of his particulars, but knew who this was.

Her eyes continued to sweep a room that looked like a drunkard's jumble. Rugs covered the floor, some of them vaguely Eastern-looking in pattern. There were scrolls everywhere, in bins, baskets and on shelves. Clearly, he loved to read. Wooden bowls sat on a broad table that had seen much use. A set for tea, as well. Goblets. Goblets, for wine. Of course there were. A battered wardrobe, heavy with old carvings. A trunk that looked as if it had spent many years at sea. Candles, everywhere, and a brazier for heat. The room had a look that was somehow shabby, yet elegant at the same time.

Her soft green eyes went back to his unusual face.

"I'm... frightened, Dionysus."

Her worried gaze held his, and he felt his heart twist. Alone. Adrift. Injured. Waking up in the bed of a God. She'd be a fool not to be.

His voice was as gentle-sounding as an autumn breeze through the leafy vines. "Try not to be," he said. His voice was a soothing call to comfort. "Try not to be afraid."

He passed a clawed hand over her weary, frightened eyes. His touch was strangely delicate, in spite of the look of his hand. The God of wine could induce sleep, of course. She felt herself slip back into a soft sort of slumber.

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A man's voice. Not Dionysus,' and certainly not Theseus.' Something about the medicine they were giving her, and the foolishness of bringing her here. A warning, of sorts, though a strange one. "This act

of kindness... try not to let it destroy you." No answer had been given to that.

Other voices. A youth, who babbled strangely, and quickly, almost backwards at times, calling himself a "mouse." A woman, who sounded older, and kind. A woman Dionysus spoke to, who said nothing back with her voice, yet he continued speaking with her as if she had. He called her "Laura." He called one of the other women "Mary." Ariadne had the sensation of being tended again, and being helped. And astonishingly, of being read to.

Scrolls of poetry, sometimes, and only his mellifluous voice, for those. Then other things, and his voice again. The old stories. Stories of love, and chance meetings, of longing, and strange benefactors. She listened, even when she only half heard. The healing sleep helped. The voice of the God seemed to help, more.

By the time she woke fully again, she knew some time had passed, but she didn't know how much. Several days, at least. And as much as she wished all this had been a nightmare, it wasn't.

Dionysus stayed in the chamber, stayed near her. An older woman brought a tray with a bowl of soup, and some other food. Not Narcissa. Slight. Tender. Brown hair and eyes. Fair-skinned. This was Mary, then. She looked a touch arthritic, and a little frail, her hair gathered up on top of her head. But there was a quiet strength in her. One that spoke of compassion, and hardships that had been endured. Dionysus was picking up the spoon on the tray she set down. It was clear he intended to continue to nurse his patient. The elderly woman inclined her head, and left as quietly as she'd come in.

"Eat. You'll need your strength. For whatever happens, whatever comes. You cannot face it... weakened," he prompted.

She tasted the proffered soup, wanting none of it, but knowing he was right. Leeks and potatoes, cooked with butter and a little white wine.

"It's good soup," she admitted, liking the taste.

He nodded, approving. A cluster of grapes sat on the tray beside the bowl. Red ones. Full and ripe. He offered her one. She shook her head.

"I think I've had enough of grapes." She referred to wine.

He gave her a half-smile, and ate it, himself. Canines flashed, as he popped it into his mouth.

"It was not the wine they gave you. It was something else. Something grown very far down in the earth, far past where my people go. Whatever befell you, lovely, it was not of my making."

Ariadne nodded at that. There had been an alchemist on board the ship. A narrow, feral-looking man, with a taste for gold and of questionable intentions. Ariadne had no idea why he would do such a thing to her. But then, Ariadne had never pretended to understand the evil methods some people used for their own ends.

Perhaps she might want to start, she thought dejectedly.

"I don't even know where we are," she confessed.

Carefully settling her feet on his floor, she declined to be fed any more.

He moved the tray to a nearby table, watching her as she stubbornly rose. There was strength in her. He could see it. She was ready to be quit of the bed.

The battered table was stacked with paper and quills, though the scrolls were closed. He wrote, here? Was he keeping a journal, of sorts? She didn't know, and prayed she wouldn't need to grab the

corner of the table, just to keep herself erect. Heavy wood furniture dominated the space, from the table to his huge chair. A braided rug richly decorated the floor near the bed, keeping her feet from the hard stones. She willed herself steady as her feet tested the ground. Her slippers were intact, at least.

She found she was surprisingly stable, for all she'd undergone. Good. It felt good to be out of bed, at least.

"Where we are?" His home, yes. But where?

"The brightest gem in the crown of the Dia," he said, giving her the nickname for the Cyclades island group. They were called "the Dia," for their beauty. And for their current resident: him. The name meant "divinity."

"We're on the island of Naxos, north of Crete, a few days by sail. Less, if the wind is good and Poseidon is not in a mood," he clarified. "When you wish, I will show you the path to Above, to the city."

"There is a city?" It was hard to believe that an entire city existed over their heads.

"Better than that, for you. There is a port. Large. Impressive, even by Cretan standards," he inclined his head at her, "or Athenian, though lovelier."

Naxos was nearly half-way between Athens and Crete, shimmering in the Aegean Sea. That made it a natural trade destination, and a place for ships to stop and take on supplies. It was why Theseus had used it. Why others did, as well.





She turned around the room a moment, looking. Dionysus learned about her, as she took in his chamber, again. Her eyes rested longest on the profusion of poetry scrolls, but brushed lightly over the silver of the goblets. She was accustomed to wealth, and therefore unimpressed by its trappings. Her green eyes were curious, and intelligent. Perhaps even a little stubborn. They bespoke years of good tutors, at the least. Fine. She was intelligent, then. That would be a plus. She would need every advantage she could muster, for the path that lay before her.

Gloved hands that wanted to touch her face again, refrained. He knew she could not be his, and it would not do to frighten her. He did not want her to think he'd brought her here to molest her. And no matter what he felt, he knew he had to give her back to the world.

"There are some scattered villages around the mountains, smaller as you travel farther inland. Zeus was born in the caves here, if you believe such things." He paused. "You can book passage home, once you've recovered your strength." There. The way out. Open, and obvious.

Her green eyes cast down. "I'm not sure if I have anywhere else to go, yet," she said honestly. "I... do not think I can go back to Crete. My father will view me as a betrayer. I... I disobeyed his wishes, and helped his rival. I did not want the life he had chosen for me." She dropped her head a little more, the gesture one of humility.

Dionysus rose to stand before her. Unseated, and close, she realized just how very tall he was. Taller than a mortal by nearly half a foot, if not more. Mightier, judging by his form. Drawing himself up to his full height caused her to do the same, reflexively. She lifted her eyes to his, and found herself almost immediately ensnared by his blue gaze.

His words were soft, but sure. "You are Ariadne. The Beautiful Jewel of Crete, Emerald of the palace at Knossos, and Princess of Royal Blood. First born. Intelligent. Changer of fates. You go where you wish, and when. Your fate is your own."

She blinked at his description of herself, not to mention at the fact that he knew her name. For a moment, she'd considered trying to conceal her identity. After all, she was now a traitor in her homeland. She realized the trappings of her wealth must have given her away. Those trappings always seemed to bind her to something she didn't want, one way or another. Her mother's misfortune. Her father's plans. Theseus' ambitions.

Her voice was steady, trying to convey a bravery she was not sure she felt. "I think I am not so much a princess, anymore. Nor so much a

beauty." She touched her fingers to the bandaging. The wound hurt, still. That was how she knew it was deep. Most of her other aches had vanished, thanks to his ministrations.

His ministrations. She'd been tended by a God. She owed for that, and was suddenly very aware of the debt. Dionysian followers had a reputation for certain... appetites. At least they did in Knossos. It was why her Father did not favor worship of him there, though he was not fool enough to forbid it. Crete belonged to Poseidon, for the most part. She knew little about Dionysus' particulars. And what she did know made her cautious.

"I am indebted to you for my care." She realized a fitting token was expected. She was royalty, even if she was fallen royalty. Payment was owed. She removed the pearls from her ears. They were large, and worth a huge sum. "Please accept these, as tribute."

She dropped them onto the tray that had borne her lunch. At the moment, her pearls were almost half her wealth. She could still use the ring, her brooch, and the silver band she wore on her arm to barter for passage. Or food. The brooch was damaged, the metal pin broken. It was all but useless. But the rest would sustain her.

"Pearls." He rolled them in his left palm. He removed his gloves, then handled them some more. The vaguely furred, claw-tipped hands came into view, once again. Like his face, these were somewhat as a lion's would be. He measured her offering. She knew it was more than acceptable. It surprised her, then, when he rejected it.

"These are a gift for Poseidon, Beauty. Not for me. I am a God of the land, not the ocean."

She feared she'd insulted him.

"A God of the land?" she queried. Vine work, on the cup, and stitched to the linens on the table. She knew who he was, and what he fostered. But she'd never heard that description, as such.

Poseidon was The Lord of Oceans, and he held sway in Knossos, since her people were sailors, and merchants. Crete's navy knew few equals and its ships sailed with brass affixed to the bow, that they might glint in the sun. They were ocean worshippers, even though their God had turned from them, from time to time. Poseidon could be as changeable as the water he ruled. But a god of the land?

Zeus was known on Crete, of course, as he was known everywhere. But the Sky Father was lord of lightning, and not a "God of the land," either.

Ariadne had been raised with the God of the Ocean and the God of the Sky. She did not know the customs of the land deities. Had her gift truly committed some offense?

"Land," his voice intoned. "The solid ground. The thing beneath your feet, and above it, from here. The firmament made Heaven. The good earth." His tone was reverent. He looked to the stone walls and the roof, over her head.

"Roots sink themselves deep into it. Roots of everything, from grass to oak to the dreams of men, for a good harvest or a great kingdom. In the stoniest crags, and harshest soil, you'll find the vines. I am a God of the Earth, of the strength beneath the surface." He held her eyes. "I am the God of the long and patient plan. The longer way. The God of root and vine. A time for everything, and everything to its time: Plant in spring, grow in summer. Harvest is for the fall."

He dropped the pearls back into her hand, returning them.

"Cut down, in winter."

Winter was close at hand.

He stepped away from her a bit, and moved toward the doorway. His midnight cloak, dark as the blackest grape, shimmered with magic.

"Rest. Heal some more." His voice was a little terse. "When you feel you have the strength, you may return Above."

His movements toward the door seemed abrupt, and almost ungraceful. Odd for him. She *had* insulted him then, with her offer to pay him with pearls. At least mildly.

When he turned back to her, his voice was firm, and low. "Barter what you will, for what you want. But do not barter with me." He folded his arms across a chest that would have looked at home on a Titan.

His meaning was clear. She could sell her jewelry. She could trade on her name, if it still held any value. She could sell herself, if she wanted to. But not to him. He was... apart, somehow. Separate.

Whatever bargain she'd been prepared to make with Theseus, she would not make it here, with him. He would not take her to his bed for payment, nor would he accept anything else. And he would not accept her money.

Ariadne touched her cheek, remembering the injury there. Thanks to the damage to her face, if not her reputation, he obviously would not offer to make her his queen or even his consort, she concluded. She was too... damaged. She dropped her head, nodding her understanding.

He felt her regret as if it were his own. Felt her wistfulness for her lost life, and her sense of abandonment. He should not be able to. He should be able to *see* those things, yes, and certainly intuit them, but not to *feel* them as if they were his own emotions.

Ariadne struggled to understand her options. Her royal gems made her a rich woman still, by most standards, and she could use that wealth for her own care.

But what then? Ariadne understood all too well the role “beauty” played in the role of a woman, especially a princess. And a beautiful princess was really all she had ever been.

Before her marring, her beauty had drawn others, and that had been both her blessing and her curse. She wondered if Theseus would have sought her out, had she been plain, and realized he wouldn't have.

She wondered if the gash to her face was why he'd left her on the beach. It probably was. Perhaps the Alchemist had marred her intentionally, knowing it would remove Theseus from her influence. Perhaps someone else had injured her, either accidentally or with malice. She didn't know. Perhaps misfortune simply continued to dog the House of Minos.

Either way, the Fates had certainly conspired to divide her from the intentions she'd had when she left Crete. Though Theseus was bold, there was a certain vanity to the future king of Athens. She realized she would not be his queen, and though she also realized that was a good thing, it did not mean she knew what she would do, now. The God clearly did not want her.

It would not do to have a marred mistress. Even when men shopped for prostitutes, they could afford to be more particular. Ariadne kept her head down, and her hands clasped before her, rebuked by her circumstances, as much as anything else.

He saw, felt, and took pity.

Dionysus' parting words then came to her. There was a gentleness to them she did not expect, considering.

"Once the mortal medicine has healed your face all it will, there may be something I can do," he said. He could make her no promises. Healing was Apollo's art, and beautiful women were Apollo's vice. But the vines and some of the plants had healing properties, too. If he had to, he could always bargain away a keg of his finest brandy for whatever elixir it was Apollo cared to trade for. Perhaps he'd ask Mercury to ferry the brandy, and the message. He'd have to see. Much depended on how much time he had left, and how much her face healed on its own.

Dionysus left the room, and left her standing in it, alone. It was lonely here when he was gone, Ariadne realized. Lonely and... peculiar. For a palace, it was remarkably lacking in palatial trappings. There were no courtesans or even nymphs, ducking in and out of the chambers, for instance, at least none that she'd seen. And many of the residents were elderly, and seemed conservative. Odd for a God of the Vine. Or the residents were young and... singular, in some way. This was the god of drunken revelry? He seemed sober as a judge. Her judge.

Clutching the expensive jewelry in her hand, she wondered about her rescuer. Wondered why he seemed to want so little, either of her, or of anyone else.

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The place he called his "home" turned out to be massive. Far more huge than anything Ariadne had originally been able to picture, from her vantage point in his chamber. Rooms led to other rooms, and pathways to pathways. She explored, and was enchanted. A bridge whispered. A chamber housed the Four Winds. A pool was a mirror,

and a cataract tumbled, indoors. A pitcher on his table always seemed to hold either water or wine, no matter how many servings it poured. Grapes filled the bowls. Of course they did.

His servants bustled about almost constantly, everyone seeming to have a point and a purpose. Things Ariadne knew she lacked, at the moment.

He continued to read to her, while she continued to heal. At times, she read to him, as well. He watched her regain her strength, knowing that each day brought her closer to leaving his home, and ultimately, leaving him.

She met many of his servants, and tried to ease their burdens. She considered herself more like one of them, now, than a royal. These good people owed her nothing, yet had treated her well. She would care for herself all she could, at least while she stayed here. It was time she learned to do that, to take care of herself. It was time her outlook on such things changed. It was time many of those did.

The household already had a king, and it was clear that it had no queen. Loss of rank was a great equalizer, Ariadne realized. She felt like she was making herself over, from the beginning. Or, as he would say, "From the ground up." It was an odd sensation.

Mary tried to teach her some sewing. Ariadne was terrible at it, but she tried. And since Dionysus regularly called her "Princess," the others followed suit. She shrugged at the title, considering herself disenfranchised royalty, at best.

His servants loved him, and were utterly devoted, even if some of them were less than able. His closest advisor, the man he'd called Jacob, or sometimes Old Father, was often gruff. He did not care for her,



Ariadne knew. Yet, she also knew his medicines had saved her life, and Dionysus valued this man as he valued few others. The Mouse-boy was shy, and though brilliant, too odd to survive in the normal world. Laura was a dark pixie of a woman who could not hear, but whose hands danced in conversation. They'd have left her to perish, in Sparta. Maybe even in Athens. Mary was old, but loving, for all of that. She'd lost a child many years ago, and her heart had never recovered. Now she midwived, when that was needed. There were a few others. All had a tale to tell. Like Ariadne. They were an underground castle of cast-offs.

The day came for him to take her back Above. He offered her his arm, as they made their way through the circular hallways. His Mouse of a servant scurried about. Mary had given her a bag with some few clothes to wear. The more they walked, the more people Ariadne saw.

People working, sewing, tending children... there were more people in his strange kingdom than she'd previously realized. The outreaches of his home seemed to shelter many, while his most trusted servants stayed with him, deeper inside the recesses of this strange warren of chambers.

"You shelter them? All of them?" she asked. Some seemed to live here, in the maze of rooms. Others did not.

"Many of them," he nodded. "It keeps them safe from hate. From harm. Some live Above, in the city. They are helpers, to me. They send others down, sometimes. Those who cannot easily bear a life Above. Not everyone loves the sun," he replied. "Some need the safety of shelter. Here, they care for each other, and live as best they can."

The deaf girl, the half-blind black woman, the odd Mouse, the very old, the very infirm, or even the very shy. Some had wounds that were not visible. Others were not so fortunate.

"These are odd servants, for a God," she observed honestly.

"Meaning I should take in only the strongest, and most able? Hmmm. Sounds to me like I'd have your prince, then, doesn't it?" His sarcasm was unsubtle. So was her reply.

"Yes, it does. And he's not 'my' prince. He never was. And that's not what I meant to imply."

"I value character over charm." He shrugged.

Her temper crackled then, a bit.

"That does not make you unique, my Lord." Even though he was, of course.

"No," he responded, proceeding with her to a spiral staircase. "But you would be surprised how often it makes me ... alone."

She digested his words. Alone? If anything, the closer they came to the exit, the more crowded it became.

"But you are a God," she reasoned. "You can have anything you want. Your wealth is untold."

He eyed her then, and once they reached the top of the stairs he took her down a winding, low hallway to a room with a heavy door.

"You come from wealth. I would think you know better," he said. He passed his hand over a lock, and she heard the tumblers fall into place. He pushed the door open, with his broad palm.

The room was so full of treasure, she could have sunk a ship inside it.

"Do you see that? All of that?" he asked.

She nodded, mutely.

"I keep this room locked and secret, because the treasure in it makes men mad. Some say I am the god of madness, and if I am, this is why. This." He indicated the contents of the room, as he pulled a diamond necklace out of the folds of his cape and threw it on the pile. It had obviously been an offering. Someone seeking his favor.

"Even my servants do not know of this room. I keep it from them, so that they do not fall ill with Fever."

She nodded, understanding the damage gold lust could cause. Her father had a vault chamber not nearly so grand, in Knossos. But still. A fortune in gold and precious gems was a fortune in gold and precious gems. He had no use for wealth, then?

His voice continued. "Do you see a cure for Laura in there, or one for Mouse? Will it restore Mary's son, or her youth? Mend the break in Old Father's heart? Is happiness there? Immortality in there, real immortality? The kindness of a good heart? Or even the end of aloneness?" he asked. His tone did not mean to be harsh. He tried to keep the bitterness from his words.

She saw a fortune, yes. But she did not see anything he asked her about. She shook her head, with understanding. Some understanding, at least.

He shut up the door, and passed his hand over it so that she knew it locked.

"Neither do I," he finished. "Come. It is time for you to go."

He took her up a winding stair, then past a tumbledown brick wall.

She stood before a shimmering bath of light, knowing the ladder bolted to the wall would lead her back Above. She was sorry for her hastily spoken words. And... afraid, a little, to leave him. Even though she knew she must.

"I will not betray the secret of where this place is. Or what it is," she assured him.

He thought he perhaps fell in love with her a little, right then, if he hadn't before.

"The ways change. It might not matter if you did. But I accept your oath anyway, Lady. I knew you would not speak of this place before I brought you here. Those who live below depend on it, for shelter. As do I, at times. I know you will keep our secret. Be well."

She was leaving for the mortal world. He would... miss her. Hard. But he knew he had to let her go. Her life was meant to be lived in the sun.

And his was meant to be over. He had to be quit of her. Before loneliness drove him to take her, and bind her to him. Bond. He could already feel that force, that tying force, reaching for her, inside him. He pushed it down, and forced it to a place he could control.

It was time for her to go. Past time. She'd stayed ten days longer than she should have, already.

She put a hand to his shoulder, and she heard his sharp intake of breath. Before she could decide what that meant, he gently nudged her toward the ladder and the light.

She took a few steps forward. Paused. Should she do this? Of course she should. Yet, some small voice inside her protested.

When she turned around to express her fears and her worries, it was then she realized that he was gone.

She made her way up, alone.

Away from the light, leaning against the shattered wall of brick, he felt her pass away from him as she reclaimed her life in the world Above.

It felt like a javelin had pierced his heart. He would bear it. He had no choice.

End of Part One.

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## *Part Two*

*“Providence is when something is meant to be.”*



*A row of vineyards*

The Island of Naxos, she discovered, was almost half vineyards. Hilly areas served to terrace the vines and valleys collected water. Deep forests dotted the landscape and the caves he had alluded to. The

water was deeply blue, and the island was cross-cut with gorges and waterfalls, some of which flowed both above and under the ground. It was a lovely and varied place.

Though the port city itself was busy and large, the island was dotted with smaller settlements. Some were almost large enough to be called villages. Isolated cabins scattered themselves across the countryside. It was a habitable place. More than that, it was beautiful.

The vineyards and scattered farms kept it fed. The port, the docks, and trading kept it prosperous. The ships came and went to their distant shores every few days or so, as tide and weather permitted. In its way, the island was a kingdom by the sea. The Aegean Sea.

She rented a small set of rooms near a great, open park. It would only be for a short while, as she sorted through what to do with her life. She inquired about a reputable ship, for passage. The *Providence* was well thought of, though the *Ozymandias* was more comfortable. Neither were due in port for a few weeks, yet. Fair enough.

That gave her time to think.

Time to think about what changes she would make, and when. Time to determine her direction, both literally and figuratively. She felt the forces of her fate begin to bear her away, but had no clear idea where. The changing of a life was hard work.

Ariadne wished she knew what point on the compass would lead her to a happy life. To that end, the map was little more than a puzzle. She had a life to repair. It seemed she needed the rooms above the ground for that, and more time. Again, fair enough. Her earrings alone would buy a small farm if she wanted one, or a forested cabin, near the deer.

The thought of either only held so much appeal, for so long. She knew she needed a deeper, more meaningful purpose. She needed the roots he'd spoken of, when she'd been with him.

He visited her in her temporary rooms, now and then. He came infrequently and stayed briefly. It was just as likely that he would disappear completely for days on end, with no explanation. He was a changeable god, she realized. As changeable as the fruit most associated with him.

She reasonably figured she could expect no better, from the God of Wine. But secretly, she also wished he would come to see her more often.

She did not stop to ask herself, "Why?"

The cut beneath her bandage was indeed deep, though it continued to heal. Ariadne realized the scar would be a long one, even as she began to discount that as unimportant. Whatever her life became, she did not want her appearance to be the determining factor in that. Nor her title, even if she still had one. She was Ariadne. She was learning who that was.

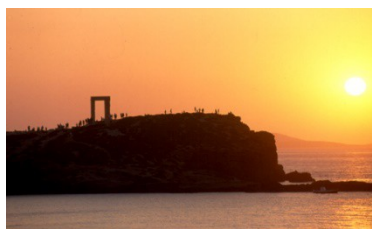
She used some of her coins to buy food for those Below, and left it where they would find it. It seemed his secret place had many entrances, if one knew where to look. Many were hidden, either by magic or artifice, and they were often locked. But she enjoyed the greetings she received from the inhabitants when she saw them, whether he was nearby or no.

Narcissa, old diviner that she was, could see nothing of her fate. Ariadne had asked, and even had offered some coins, for the telling. The seeress had refused her money with much the same aplomb as her master had. There could be no short cuts in the remaking of a life, it

seemed. The old black woman would only say that her future was as shrouded as a deep cloak, and would reveal nothing more to her than that.

Ships came and went, and even Ariadne noticed the number of those decreasing. The autumn harvest was well over. Winter's chill was moving in, even though it was a mild one, this far south. Trade was always less, in the cooler months. Still, ships made their way through Naxos for the last frantic flurry of bartering, before the island nation all but shuttered its port, for winter.

A wide outcropping of rocks overlooked the ocean, at one end of the island. A terrace of stone, and an arch to mark the spot. She liked to either sit there, or pace there. It was not far from the vineyards near the park, and something about the height and the view gave her peace. She liked being there, and often came there to think, if nothing else.



*Sunset over Naxos*

As the ships sailed in and out, she did not imagine she would find Theseus among their crew, even though she knew many of the boats came from Athens.

"Do you miss him?" Dionysus asked her one time as she looked out over the ocean. He'd appeared suddenly, a thing he seemed to do, often.



"I wonder if I'll ever not be surprised to see you standing there," she told him, as he kept himself to the side, and a bit apart. She shook her head in the negative, to answer his question.

South was back toward Crete. North was farther on. She looked north, mostly. The way her fatally flawed hero had gone. She could well understand why Dionysus thought she might be wondering after the prince of Athens.

Still, Dionysus did that sometimes, she realized. He would ask her questions about something that had made her pensive. Questions that sometimes challenged her. Now and then, he seemed to come from out of nowhere to ask her about something she'd just been feeling. She'd been feeling wistful, and looking toward the ships. So he'd asked her about Theseus.

"I think I miss... certain pieces of the life I thought I would have, more," she answered honestly. There was no sense pretending she had not been raised with wealth. The future king of Athens could have given her status, riches, and comfort. All the things she was used to.

Dionysius watched her, realizing that she spoke truly. That made sense. Theseus was a prince, in her world. Flawed, perhaps, but a prince nonetheless. And though he might be destined never to find the grail of true love, his power was not inconsiderable. Toasts were being drunk to him all through Athens. He was considered their greatest knight of all, in his way. Had she remained at his side, she'd have kept her rank. Been a queen, even, had they married. One day.

"I am sorry he betrayed you. Betrayed your trust." Dionysus meant it. He did not like Theseus, for his actions, but he felt sympathy for her.

Her words were pragmatic. "Men do... strange things, when they drink. No one should know that more than you. You are its God, after

all." She tried to keep the censure from her voice, as well as the confusion.

She must have failed.

"I am the God of Nature, the God of the Vine. I am not the God of drunken asininity." He spat the words with obvious distaste. They'd discovered they could disagree, without rancor between them. She liked that.

"Some of your adherents might not agree," she said, fingering the bandage on her cheek. It was small, now. She would remove it, once she built up the courage to face the long scar that lay beneath it.

His words were gentle. Almost wistful. "Where the vines are concerned, I tend to do better with the very young or very old. Those who love cold juice, on a hot day, or children, who never forget their first taste of jam. The old, who sip the wine, or the brandy, later. Those are the ones I like to claim." He paused.

"It's the others who like to claim me, unfortunately. Fortunately, however," he stroked her marred cheek with the back of his furred fingers, "neither one of us is responsible for the opinion of fools." His eyes were more blue than the Aegean in front of her.

"This new life you are making... It is not easy to be something you have never been. Your journey is just beginning. You must go with caution, and go with care."

All of this was a thing the God who was like no other was well acquainted with. His "journey" began again each spring. He was hardly unfamiliar with the idea of starting over. Or ending.

The words were tender. And there was a lonely place in him she sensed, as much as felt. She also knew he was helping her to leave, in

his own indiscernible way. Several reputable captains had been informed of her plight. The one she chose would bear her hence, when she reached her decision as to where she might go. "*The Gypsy*" would come, if she bid it to. There was even a ship bound for China. She had only to decide.

"I've sent some letters out," she said. "I know I need to leave, and I need to know what it is I am to do after that. I'm just... not sure what that is." She stood on the high ledge, as the sun dipped low over the water. The balcony of stone seemed to suit her. It radiated peace like a gateway between two worlds: the one of her past, and the one of her future.

"You can go back. Back to your life," he said. "Do not underestimate the power of forgiveness, Ariadne," his sand-on-velvet voice assured her.

"I do not think my father will forgive me," she told him, shaking her head. She didn't. She also wasn't certain that a Minoan life was for her, any longer.

"I meant your ability to forgive him, Princess. Not his for you. It is Minos who owes you, not the other way around."

She laughed a little, and shook her head, wryly. "I do not think my family will see it that way. Or the rest of the world, for that matter."

His low voice became very earnest, and very serious. "The Minotaur was an unnatural thing. You helped cleanse the world of Minos' shame and Pasiphae's sin. Or the queen's shame and the king's sin.

Whichever. Now they must live their lives as people, again, and not as victims of Poseidon's wrath. The rest of the world can stop paying for your father's humiliation. So can he, if he wishes." His eyes followed hers, to the distant ships.

"Whatever they do, or do not do... they will have no one to blame but themselves," he concluded, taking in her expression.

She was not aware of what her act of courage had done, then, not really. She knew she'd saved the youths of Athens; the fourteen young men and women meant as sacrifices to the monster were how home in their city. But she'd not realized all she'd done for the rest of them. She did not see herself as courageous.

Interesting. He wished he had time to show her all she was, all she was capable of being, before his time ran out. It was as if he wished he could hold up a mirror to her soul, and show her herself. Even if the mirror was somehow warped, and flawed, the reflection would shine true. He wanted to show her what she was, even if she threw the mirror back at him, not wanting to see. Mirrors. Such strange things. He avoided them, for the most part, though he understood their uses. Hers would shine brightly, in spite of her scar.

It was his that would shine with a darker reflection, as the days wore on.

Her request was tentative, and he'd feared it from the first.

"I admit I have lost much. My home, my connection to my family... Might I not stay here, with you?"

Ah, that was a fine, mad path to take, for all of them. No. Decidedly, no. Her life was meant to be lived elsewhere. And with someone else. As an Oracle, perhaps, or a lawgiver. She had the intelligence for such pursuits. She had the heart.

No, her life was meant for the world Above. He shook his great head in the negative, but this time, she did not drop her eyes at his refusal. Bravery. She was learning to find hers, even in the midst of grief.

His life was increasingly meant to be lived Below. He would not ask her to share that dismal fate. Already, he was showing a marked preference for the night over the day. It was an indication of what was to come, for him.

While her life was meant to be lived Above, ultimately, his was not meant to be "lived" at all. And he did not want her to see the things that were about to happen to him.

"Your life is meant to be a thing of the sun, Beauty, and not tied to mine. I am but a lesser God, and a... a weakening one, at that. We need to find you something better." He tossed a stone out. It went a long way. "Some Apollo, to grace your days in the light. Some rich Ozymandias. Someone to be a part of." He swept his arm out, to incorporate the landscape. "Some fair and perfect knight, somewhere." His eyes saw distant rivals, and he knew he would lose her to one of them. Already, he felt his strength diminishing, slowly. He rejected her as gently as he could, even if it caused his mighty heart to crack.

Her voice was steady. Whether she knew it or not, she was healing in more ways than one. "I think I had one of those. They are not as reliable as you might think." She whispered the words softly.

"They never are, little beauty. They never are."

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She accepted his refusal with an almost queenly grace. If he did not want her to remain, she would indeed have to go. Days slipped past, and the cooler weather seemed more persistent. The days were growing shorter. She paced her stone terrace almost every evening. He watched her as she struggled, internally.

She'd done a hard thing because it was the right thing to do. He wondered if she understood what a difficult and therefore rare thing that was. How seldom it happened, for some, and how ennobling, when it did. What an excellent lawgiver she would make, for that seemed the direction she was turning toward. The truth was becoming her beacon. He wondered if she'd travel to Delphi, or some other Apollonian, distant shore.

"The Bull from the Sea. It was a test, wasn't it? A test of faith. One my father failed," she asked him one evening. She was struggling with something.

His words were soft, but sure. Emphatic, in the quiet half-light of an increasingly winter sun. He whispered his wisdom. "The Bull from the Sea was meant as a sacrifice. There is a steep price for defying the will of Poseidon. You should not have had to pay it. It is not justice when innocents suffer." He looked toward the direction of the place where he'd found her, and past it, to the ocean

Perhaps they were all finally done paying for Minos' hubris. Perhaps Minos' daughter was the last to have to feel pain, for that debt. She added his wisdom to her increasingly strong sense of justice. *Innocents should not suffer*. Not her, not those Below, not the youths of Athens. It was hardly a "new" concept. But something about it finally rang true for her.

Very well, then. There were worse causes to dedicate a life to.

She watched the sun sink fast, as he stood close behind her. She felt his warmth at her back. Felt his breath near her neck. His words were a benediction.

"They may not sing your praises as they will sing Theseus'," Dionysus intoned, the depth of his voice sending shivers up and down her spine,

"but the world owes you a debt, princess. The wisest among them will remember it, some day. You gave them back justice, when they were slaves to tyranny."

She shook her head, and a tear for her lost life trailed down her cheek, still. Her lost life. Not her lost love. The God in him knew how to recognize the difference, and so did the woman in her. As she turned to face him, he longed to kiss the tear away, and knew he wouldn't.

He sighed heavily, enfolding her, loving the feel of her in his arms. It was going to be so... wrenching a thing, to let her go. "You are braver than you think you are. There is strength in you, Ariadne. I feel it." He did.

She shook her head again. Of all the truths he'd uttered, that was the one she was least sure of.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "It seems so... hard. I think I want to help people who have been treated unfairly. I think whatever direction my life takes, it will be that way."

He took a step back from her. "You did the right thing. You will continue to do that. The world may destroy our beauties and our certainties. But it always leaves something behind. Art. Hope. Love is everything. And everything is everything. You gave them their life back, Princess," he confirmed. She had. She'd saved fourteen people, and the dozens, perhaps hundreds more who would have come after. Saved her family, even. Stopped an injustice, and paid for doing that with... everything.

"This is no reward for doing the right thing," she said of her current situation. Her voice was somewhere between wry and sorrowful.

She was right, of course. Beauty, warmth and courage should be better rewarded. But perhaps there was “reward” in all of this for her, yet. After all, once away from here, her life was her own.

"No, it isn't fair," he agreed. The only God who suffered a mortal life knew well what it was to be singled out and set apart for what he was. "Only a fool would say you were treated justly. But it is a way to seize your fate and make it your own, if you have the will to do it. Be more than Pasiphae's embarrassment at having borne a daughter who thrived, while her sons struggled, and even died. Or not having borne aught but a monster."

Ariadne considered his words. She was very aware that she'd been born a princess, and not a prince. Very aware. Her brothers were valued. She was... currency, for lack of a better word. Minos had considered bartering her away on several occasions. She knew her worth, at court. It was what her father said it was. It was part of why she'd agreed to go with Theseus, when he'd offered her passage.

Could she do as Dionysus said? Seize her own fate and be her own person? The task seemed enormous. It also seemed the only one worth doing.

Unintentionally, her actions had brought her to the very place she'd always claimed to want. A place where she could be more than her parents intended, and be what she chose, in the bargain. Very well, then. A happy life. It was what she'd longed for, back in the great Minoan palace of Knossos. What she might be able to find, if her courage did not falter. If she went with courage, and went with care.

"There is a wisdom in you not found in scrolls," she told her huge companion. He inclined his head as she turned away from the sea and



made her way back down the steep hillside. He watched her go, the last of the light caressing her honey-colored hair like a benediction.

"Death gives one that perspective, Little Princess," he said, softly, once he knew she could not hear him. The days were growing even shorter.

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The beautiful park on the island served as a common meeting place for many of the people, as well as its many visitors. Though the people often strolled, bartered, sang, danced, and even drank there, Ariadne noticed that he stayed back and held himself apart from most of the revels. Often, the cloak even made him invisible to the throng, especially if he stood in the shadows made by the deeper trees.

"You do not join the crowd?" she asked him one afternoon, as the merriment was in full swing.

"I like the park better at full dark," he said, sipping from his cup.

"There is a Great Hall in my tunnels where the minstrels play sweet music only I can hear. It is better than this." The criticism was blunt.

It would have to be. Though minstrels played, they played only adequately, at best. The lap harp was out of tune, and the reed flute was too shrill. The violinist who tottered by her was a little drunk. The man playing the cymbals wasn't drunk enough. He kept hitting them together.

She wondered what kind of music Dionysus liked, when he sat where only he could hear it.

"Do not tell *them* you are not the God of debauchery," she teased him.

"Half your temples would need to change their art." He knew the temples she mentioned. Images of revelry, of sexuality, occasionally

even of satyrs and nymphs, adorned them. Some of the art was... graphic.

"There may have been a time or two, in my youth," he allowed, sipping cold white wine from the silver goblet that never seemed far from his hand. More magic. It stayed full, and cold. She raised an eyebrow at him. A perfect eyebrow. Her hair was styled a bit down, to cover the white of her bandage. She had healed all she was going to, beneath it. When it came off was now up to her.

She watched the various celebrations not far from his temple. The altar was always the focal point of anything having to do with him. Offerings of food and treasure were piled on the stones, but he seemed disinterested, for the most part.

He was "blended," again, she realized, using the magic of the cape to keep himself hidden from the onlookers. He seemed to be separating himself from people, increasingly. Ariadne wondered why.

She simply stood near him, soaking in his presence, wondering about this strange being who had so suddenly graced her life. Whispers among the people said he'd loved a dancer, once. A devotee of the muse Terpsichore. That she had been beautiful, and they had been brief. Ariadne shrugged at the knowledge, inwardly.

"Then again, there is a time or two in everyone's youth," he said, nudging her. Again, her eyebrow rose at him. Clearly, she distinguished between her failed forays into romance, and his.

"Oh?" With one word, she could skewer him. He liked her for it.

"I was not to blame," he said, as if reading her mind again. "She was a dancer, and I was... charmed." He smiled into the cup, remembering a long-ago fascination. She'd proved fickle. As fickle as Ariadne's prince had been. It didn't matter. The lesson of it lingered.

The dancer had left when she'd discovered she could not bear to stay Below, with him. He'd expected no better, though it had stung at the time. Now the memory was nothing more than that; it was a memory. But it was still a lesson, as well.

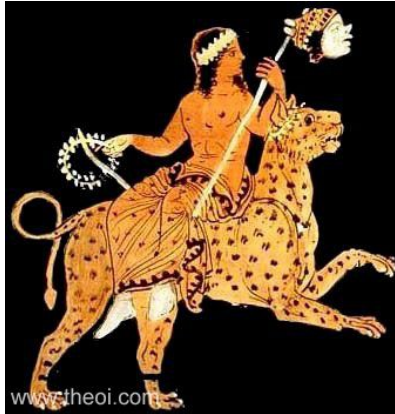
"And you... desired her." It was not a question, neither was it a charge. She was not jealous, and for that, he was not certain if he was grateful or chagrined. Still, it felt good to speak of it with someone who understood. He loved her compassion. It was one of many things he was learning to love about her.

"I was young," he said, as if that explained everything, which it did. "And she would dance. For herself. For me. In the end, she discovered that my world Below made an excellent refuge, but a poor stage. It was the stage she wanted." He shrugged over the long-ago event.

"I'm sorry. It seems we both were left behind, then," she said. She wanted to give comfort to what had clearly been a sore spot, for his ego.

"It seems we were," he allowed.

She strolled away from him, a little, to the altar. It was full of offerings. Bowls of grapes, jars of preserves, bread, flagons of juice and wine... that and more spilled over the offering stones. The harvest had been an abundant one, and the people were grateful. The island wineries were hard at work already, and would be, for some time yet. A painted plate sat propped up on an easel. One of the many depictions of him, of course. In this one, he was riding a leopard.



She'd seen the image before, on vases and frescoes. He seemed to favor big cats as companions. A painting on a wine pitcher depicted him riding a tiger, as an infant.

"Your face. You always seem to carry part of some animal with you. Your art is full of that, as well."

"You do not care for it?" He smiled, and the grin was both attractive and fanged.

Careful. Understanding though he could be, it would not do to insult a God, here. She'd already irritated him at least once, back in his chambers.

"It's just... when they draw you as part animal, I'm more accustomed to seeing ..." She faltered.

"A goat? Or a ram?" He knew it was true. In many of his incarnations he was pictured with ram's horns. "Why don't we leave that look to the satyrs?" he replied, well understanding that he was often drawn or carved with certain animalistic features. Goat, hind, lion, bear or boar. It was all much the same, to the god associated with wildness.

"All the great cats are sacred to me," he said, explaining his features. "They are the lords of the wilderness, as am I. My chariot is pulled by such beasts, when I travel." *Or when I saved you. I owed them an apology for the night I found your form. I ran them hard. Very hard.*

"Leopards, panthers, lions. Tigers, when it suits me. All have their own power." He indicated his rather leonine form with a gesture of his clawed hand. "In Naxos they love the sphinx, though I find the wings cumbersome when I walk through halls of stone."



*The great sphinx at Naxos*

"You can have wings?" She blinked in surprise.

He chuckled at her. "When it pleases me to, little one. They are useless for where I am going, however."

"Where you are going?" She was aware she sounded not unlike a parrot.

He found he could not bear to tell her the truth. So he told her only part of it. "Below. Deep Below. Past the catacombs." He knelt, and set his hand to the ground, almost as if he were caressing it. The earth

could not hold the sun's heat as it once did, now that the days were shorter. "It will not be so long, now."

Even in the Dia, the mild, Mediterranean climate knew change. She could feel the loss of warmth as the sun set sooner. Much sooner. The evenings were cool. Cool enough to need the soft wrap Mary had given her. He would have need of the great dark cape he kept around his kingly form, she thought. For warmth, if nothing else.

He rose and walked next to her for a while, and then he seemed to reach a decision.

"The days shorten," he said. "Would you like to accompany me up to the vineyard, and to your terrace?" he asked.

She nodded that she would, and was surprised by how easy conversation between them was becoming. As they walked, she asked about his servants, and he admitted inwardly to being a little surprised that she did. Not every princess remembered the names of the less...aristocratic.

She seemed to want to hear their stories. She seemed to truly care. An odd stance, for one who'd been raised many stations above. She was learning. That was good, at least.

All were well in the world Below, he told her. Mouse had brought down a raccoon as a pet, and Jacob was having fits over that. Laura was preparing herself for days to come, when she would try to live Above. Mary had been Hera's priestess before she'd been his servant, and she still midwived in the more remote villages. Narcissa had gone to some of the deeper reaches inside the palace, doing Gods knew what.

Ariadne listened attentively, and asked questions as they strolled. Everyone had been kind to her, in their way. Even Jacob, who had

helped tend her when she'd first been injured, and then had checked on her progress, some, after.

She meant to leave them each a small gift of some sort, when she departed. Something that suited them. Something they liked, or could use. Something she'd removed the price from, so they would not feel beholden.

After a while, Ariadne found them drawing closer to the top of the vineyards. He seemed to always want to be near his vines, even though most of them were well past harvesting. The leaves were yellowing as they began to turn.

"It is beautiful here," she said. She liked this high, terraced land. Liked the view from the rocky slopes.

"Above, it is," he replied, looking at a stony gorge which framed the other side of the vineyard. Terraced land sloped downward, as well, excellent drainage for the vines. A waterfall tumbled its bounty into a misted pool, below.

"All of this... it's important to you, isn't it? Important to you in a way that makes you different from the other Olympians?" He sensed a question she could not quite frame. He didn't need her to.

It was important. He could not explain to her how the dying affected him. That of all the Gods, he had to trust something to happen which he could not direct. The deepest part of winter could either be a wakeless death or a somnolent haze of sleeping and waking for him, but he could not "direct" the spring. He could only participate in it, once it happened. Apollo never left the sun to another's direction, and it was rare that Hades left the Underworld. But for several months each year, Dionysus had to "leave" the realm of the world, and go to

the caverns Below. He would go mad. He would die. What happened after that, and when, was up to the magic.

He realized he had not answered her question, as his eyes drank in the view, hungrily. He turned to her, and that same hungry view took her in, as well.

"I am Nature's God, Beauty, and the Ancients called me thus. The trees, the vines, the animals... all were mine, once. They still are, in a way." He looked out on Naxos. "The world tends itself. Or it does if my magic has been true."

She looked at the deep landscape. The falls, the forest, the vineyards.... He had built a world, then. *The* world, for all practical purposes. A world which knew balance, and *lived* in that balance, in that harmony.

"But by that reckoning... if your magic is true... you are not needed, any longer." She looked at him quizzically. Of all the Gods, that would make him unique.

All the other deities swore their powers were necessary for the universe to function. Apollo drove the chariot of the sun. Zeus brought down the lightning. Aphrodite caused men and women to fall in love. They were the truths many lived by.

"A woman will bring forth a babe, whether Hera's blessing is present or no," he said, naming the Goddess of Marriage and Childbirth. "Ask any of Zeus'... amours." He said it without rancor, as he viewed the balance of the landscape. His words were true.

So, he was not the only God who now ruled things which effectively "ruled" themselves. Ariadne wondered if Hera had faced that, about herself, as Dionysus had. And how many more gods there were for which that was true, or would become true, over time.



He dropped back to the ground, as he'd done in the park, and re-staked a faltering plant.

Perhaps Nature had her hand in almost everything. Perhaps his magic was more powerful than even he realized, or took credit for.

Why then, did he look so... drained?

Though vigorous by any measure, she would have sworn he looked somehow... less. Somehow diminished, from when she'd first met him. He was... tiring, somehow. She sensed it as much as saw it. Not always, but in... glimpses. Sometimes.

When he was done staking the vine, he set his clawed hand to the soil. It almost glowed, for a moment, and Ariadne swore she could see the path of the roots beneath the ground. They seemed to stretch a little, and grow. He nodded at the results, pleased.

"I will see you come spring, if all goes well," he murmured to the old vine. The thickness of the wood told her that this was one of the grandfather vines, one of the oldest plants on the hillside.

"They'll take the cuttings, soon," he said. "Wrap the twigs in damp cloth, and store them in the dark for the deepest part of winter. My strength will be almost mortal, then." The large leaves were fading, losing their green, and their vigor. They would need to be cleared so they did not drop to the ground and trap the moisture, causing rot for the roots and stem.

Ariadne heard him, and felt a pang of sorrow. When spring came, she would be somewhere else. She would not be here to see it.

"It's time for me to decide, isn't it?" she asked.

He kept his head down, not wanting to make it appear as if he were forcing her decision. He seemed to study the plant a moment, as he carefully considered his next words to her.

"One either moves toward the person they want to be, or away from it. Towards that love, or away from it. There is no other direction." He drew the gravelly soil around the plant, helping to steady it. He let her take in his words, and internalize them. She'd said this change in her life would be hard, and she was right. She was also not done, yet.

She climbed the hill a little more and paced on the high ground as he watched her decide. He was going to have to build a railing for this terraced rock, if she was going to keep using it as a balcony. He stepped up behind her, his long legs easily covering the distance. He loved to climb. His powerful legs were built for it, for moving over this hilly land and countryside. Even as he felt his strength lessen, he still loved the hills.

She was pensive, and he watched her think out loud.

"If I go back...I'll be what I was. A pawn on a chessboard. Useless. Someone for my father to bargain away, when he wishes."

She drew her fingers back through the soft fall of bangs on her forehead. "I'd be bartered as a pretty face. And I don't even have that anymore." Her fingers went to her cheek, and she hooked her hair behind her ear. The scar was deep, he knew. So did she.

She settled herself on the rock, and seemed to reach a decision about that, at least. Carefully, she peeled the bandage away, taking it off, exposing her face to the crisp air and to the gaze of anyone who happened to look. Him, for the moment

The cut was indeed deep. Very. And it was long. It had taken all Narcissa and Old Father knew just to close it, without costing her part of the skin by her ear.

"I don't want this, anymore," she told him of the bandage. "I am who I am, now. The world can either take that for what it is worth, or reject me. But I don't think I feel like hiding that, any longer." She tucked the bandage inside a slim pocket in her gown. The injured skin on her cheek was still a bit raw-looking, still pink. He knew she was very aware of her appearance. She'd been bandaging herself for days, now. She had seen her own reflection, and what it revealed.

He admired her courage at showing her true face. It was a thing he knew a little about. Not all his animal faces were artifice, and very few knew this was the one he considered "his."

"You are right that Minos will try to make you what he wants you to be, if you return," he confirmed for her, seeing the breeze tease her hair loose from its silken cord. Tendrils of honey played around her cheeks. She looked freer already. *That's it. That's it... my love.* He could not say the words aloud. But he could feel them.

She shook her head, looking south toward Crete.

"I know. I won't go there, then." She turned back toward the opposite horizon. "Wherever my fate lies, then, it lies north. The *Ozymandias* sails west. I need the *Providence*, then."

He inclined his head, respecting her choice. "You did not come this far to turn back now." He said it with a strange mix of pride and sorrow.

She would go north. Possibly reunite with her scabby prince. By spring, when Dionysus arose from the ground, she might even have a child in her belly. It could happen. The thought was a twisting dagger in his gut. But he knew he could not interfere with her choice.

“Beyond my tunnels, beyond the city... there is a world of possibilities and wonders... and things calling out to be done. You must go. You must see. You must do... everything you were meant to do.”

There was no selfishness in him. She closed her eyes and accepted the wisdom of his words. She was unable to do anything else.

Escorting her back down the hill, he did not like to admit what the thought of her leaving did to his insides. He was helping her to a path that would bear her away. He felt his life bleed out a little more.

Or perhaps that was just his heart.

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Nearly two weeks went by, and she did not see him.

A few days before her ship was due at port, she visited the temple in the park again. The crowd was large. A team of ponies had been harnessed in a circle, giving rides to the children. It was a living carousel, and they were delighted. A magician performed sleight of hand tricks, both for small coins, and for the look of amazement on the children's faces. A big man sold sweet buns. A young man strolled with charcoal and good paper, sketching as he chattered, wearing his silly hat, backward. The air was cooling, even more. Spring felt far away. *A long time until the bluebird sings again*, she thought.

She would sail with the equinox. Only a few more days here, and there was yet a debt she had to pay.

His altar was full of offerings, both great and humble. His acolytes and helpers assisted the needy with much of the bounty, and always sent some of it to the world Below, as was the custom.

She did not tell them she knew where their treasure that was not food would go, did not tell them she knew he considered wealth a necessary evil in the world, and avoided it as much as he could. Did not tell them that his room was a strange assortment of objects he considered precious, for reasons known only to him. Or that he had an even more eclectic collection of people, in his secret palace.

The harvest had been bountiful this year, and not just on Naxos. The ships that came and went from the port did a brisk trade, and many came to gift him with tokens of their good fortune.

The *Providence* was due by the end of the week. It would sail for Corinth. From there, she could make her way as she chose. To her sister Phaedra, rumored to be still in the company of Theseus, perhaps. Mayhap to distant friends, or other family. Her future began to spool out, in front of her.

It was her present that needed tending.

Face unbandaged, Ariadne waited near the temple until most of the adherents were gone. She wanted quiet, for this. He had helped her, and been kind. But fate, or at least *Providence*, was taking her away. She had yet to even things between them. She was a rich woman, or she had been. She did not like the idea of leaving a debt behind her.

She also did not like the idea of leaving him. But it seemed to be what he wanted, and it also seemed right. She'd not chosen this place. She'd been left to it. It was time to get on with her life, to embrace it as much as she could, and do all the good she could, in whatever time the Gods had given her. She understood that, now. She hadn't, before.

In spite of now having some others, Ariadne wore the soft gown Mary had lent her. She approached the altar as the servant she was.

She said her prayers in a whisper, hoping she would not attract the attention of any of the priests or acolytes. "You were kind to me." She kept her voice low. "Kind when you had no reason to be, and I... I had done nothing to deserve it," she said, praying to a statue that looked only a little like him. The artist had captured some of his look, but had failed to capture his splendor. He held a cluster of grapes, and struck an almost indolent pose.

"You helped me find hope when I had none, and shelter, when I needed it. When I was not sure which direction my life faced, you showed me 'forward,' so that I would not go back. I pray you accept this offering of...."

"You aren't going to lay the earrings down in the plate again, are you?" Startled, she whirled to face him.

"You!" The fact that she had not seen him for many days, rankled.

"It is my temple, Lady."

"Do you hear all our prayers?" she whispered, leaning forward. Her eyes looked left and right. She thought the notion that the Gods heard all prayers might be something made up for children.

"I seem to hear all yours," he replied, taking her in. He could sense her. Keenly, now. That was a new development, for him. At first, he thought he'd imagined it, imagined its depth. Then he knew he hadn't. Now... He could definitely feel what she was feeling, regardless of whether she stood near to him or no. It was how he knew she was here.

It had been almost two weeks since he had allowed his eyes the luxury of taking in her form. He'd been trying to distance himself from her. Damn. Two weeks of misery, all for nothing. She looked more beautiful than ever, even in her homespun. Perhaps especially in her homespun. Lovely.

And somewhat... unadorned.

"Where is the rest of your jewelry, Princess?" he asked, even though he feared he knew.

"I gave it up to book passage. Other than the change in my pouch... what if I told you I was poor as a church mouse? She was teasing him. Both of them were aware she still had wealth.

"My temple is the church, here, and I already have one Mouse." He eyed her.

"I... set sail. At the end of the week. The *Providence* is due at port."

Her green eyes held ... something. Something he could not quite define. Sorrow? Resignation? Bravery? All three?

Corinth, then. It made sense. She could make her way any number of places, from there.

"Providence is when something is meant to be," he said.

*Ask me to stay. Ask me to stay*, her heart begged in her chest.

But he didn't.

"The *Providence* will take you safely to where you want to go. Her captain is called Devin. I have known him a long time. Believe nothing of what he says and all of what he does, and you will get by, rightly enough. He travels where he will, and does no harm. Well. At least not much of it."

She nodded at that. She could do little else.

"Where is the pouch for your coins?" he asked. She showed him the rough-sewn leather bag. He recognized it as one Mary had helped her to make back when Ariadne wanted to learn to sew. He shook out the coins from it, until the purse was empty. She had a tidy sum.

"I still owe you tribute. Will you take the gold?" He gave her a look. She gave him one right back.

Tribute, again. Offerings, sacrificial or otherwise. His little one had a need to feel she had paid her debts.

"You will need it. Show me all you have left, besides the money."

"I sold my ring and bracelet for rent, and for passage to Corinth. There are the pearls you don't want. The gold from what was left. Oh, and this." She set it down. "It's just the pin that held my dress aloft, at the shoulder. But the..."

She blushed, remembering the rents in her dress, and the damage to the small bit of jewelry.

"But the dress was so badly damaged, the brooch is not usable."

He looked at the pretty pin, shaped like a carved rose. It was old, and had known an artist's hand. It was of decent size, nearly the circumference of a large Roman coin. Of all her treasures, this was worth the least. It had not the bail for a necklace, and the pin that made it useful to hold fabric together had been bent beyond repair. It was worth a few coppers. Maybe a silver. Little more.

"I'll take this, then, and consider us even." He slid it into the bag.

"That is a ridiculous treasure. You've taken the least of what I have to offer!"



"Did you like it?"

"I... I don't know. I suppose I did. I think it was a gift."

"From a man?" His eyes pinned her.

Jealous? Surely not.

"No. A... a silly gift. To help me not be afraid of the dark. From my sister, perhaps. No. Not my sister. My mother."

"Did you love your mother, little one? There are many who would not have." His voice held that soft tone that always invited confidences.

A tear came to Ariadne's eye. "She was used. A tool for Poseidon's rage. Yes, I loved her."

She spoke of Pasiphae as if she were dead, though Dionysus knew the Queen of Crete still lived. Perhaps for Ariadne, she was gone. Poseidon's wrath had hurt Minos' wife, most of all.

"I was young when... when it all happened. But I loved her."

In a way, she'd lost her mother the day Minos had lost his faith. Queen Pasiphae was almost a shadow figure, in the royal palace of Knossos. For Minos, the queen had died a long time ago. For others, as well.

Dionysus inclined his head, accepting her offer of "tribute." She'd need the gold more. Or she would when she got where she was going. And she still had the pearls, which were large. She could trade them for a tidy sum, once she reached her destination. She had no use for this trinket any longer. Knossos and all that went with it were clearly a part of her past, now.

"I may have this, then? You will gift it to me?" It had held her dignity aloft, when little else could do that.

She inclined her head, aware he'd made a poor deal for himself. Also aware that it was one he would honor, as a God.

"Tell Mary you need another bag for your coins. I like this one."

He walked out of the temple, content with his bargain.

She wondered if her brooch would find its way into his treasure pile, along with all the other offerings he had no use for.

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She was that much closer to leaving him.

He brooded over it, as he accepted it. The days were growing much more brief. He could now definitely feel his strength beginning to wane. They were beginning to prune the vines in earnest.

Deep in his caverns of stone, the God of the Vine pretended his heart was not breaking in his chest, as he slipped the simple leather pouch over his head, letting the long leather ties of the bag serve as a necklace.

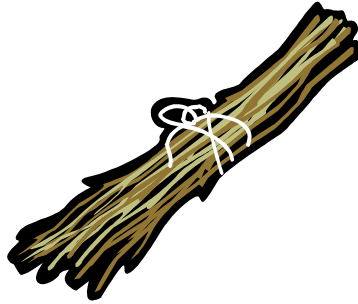
A rose. Love's flower. Aphrodite's token. At least he would die with part of her heart next to his, even if it was only a carved figure of the blossom that represented it.

End of Part Two

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*Part Three*

*The Mortal Coil*



The night before she was to leave, she sat in her little rented rooms and wept. She knew she did not want to go. She also knew she couldn't stay.

When the rapping sound came at her door, she dared to hope, and her heart skipped a beat when she thought it was him. But he never used the door, preferring instead to simply appear, from time to time, on the entry to her tiny stone patio.

Ariadne opened the door to Jamie, a young girl who served him.

Warlike and young, Jamie was another of his misfits. Somehow, she'd been left behind by an Amazon. Determined, though small, she always carried a bow.

"You have to come," Jamie told her, full of impatience.

"Did he send you to me? Send you to fetch me?" There was hope in Ariadne's eyes.

Jamie shrugged. "No," she replied. "But you have to come, anyway."

"Why?" Ariadne asked.

"Because he's trapped, in his way. And will never come to you."

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Torches guttered low in their wall sconces. The halls seemed half-empty.

When she reached his bedchamber, she saw where many of those most faithful to him stood, worrying.

He was in the bed, but he was not well. Jacob stood back, looking... impotent, for lack of a better word. Whatever this was, he'd seen it before; he clearly felt he could do nothing, or at least, nothing much.

Eyes closed, the God who had saved her moaned, and his great body jerked subtly, fighting something he saw behind his closed eyelids.

This was not exactly dreaming, however, or even nightmare. This was something else. Something singular to him. It was as if he fought a monster only he could see. Some shadow that stalked him, behind his eyes.

He spoke to no one, thrashed a bit more, then fell into a fitful sleep. His closed, shadowed eyes looked exhausted. No, more than exhausted. Something she could not name. Ariadne was beyond frightened, for him.

"Why does he weaken? Why does he falter?" Ariadne was as alarmed as they were resigned. She liked nothing she saw. His color was high. He was feverish. Beyond it. He was burning up. He moaned again in his discomfort, though she wasn't sure the discomfort was entirely physical. How could a God be ill?

Narcissa sponged her master's forehead.

"The visions come. It is time. They are beginning to cut down all that is left of the vines."

"Cut down the vines, but... why?"

Mary spoke softly. "Things are born. They live. They die. No one knows this better than my poor, poor Master." She shook her head, as a tear traced her papery cheek.

"You mean when they... when they cut down the vines..." tears came to Ariadne's eyes. Tears of realization. "It hurts him!"

"Sometimes." The black woman nodded. "Sometimes it hurts to die, little Princess."

"But... but he is a God! He doesn't really... He can't really be...."

"He is, and he must." Jacob's words were sad.

"But that's not possible!" She knew she was arguing. She couldn't help it.

Jacob remained solemn. "It is part of his magic. It is as it must be. If you care for him at all, you will help him through it. It is all we can do." The old man knew he was beaten. Knew they all were.

"Help him.... She looked at him on the wide bed. The bed he'd given up for her, when she'd been brought down. Now the bright, patterned window made a kind of sense. He'd brought a bit of the image of a sunrise down to this harsh, dark world. The world he would die in. The one he'd be reborn from. Sunrise and sunset, framing the place he slept.

"Will he really die?" she asked in a terrified whisper.

"He has to," Mary replied, drawing up the sheet. "It will be hard. He will rage, first. Be in and out of fever."

Tears fell freely down Ariadne's cheeks. "It isn't fair. It isn't fair! He's been so kind to me...."

Mary's voice held a world of sorrow. "Of all the Gods, Dionysus is the one who must die at the end of each harvest season; then he must be reborn, come spring." She tried to cushion the hard news, for the younger woman.

But Ariadne knew what Mary had not. He'd arranged his magic so that it no longer needed him. But that might mean....

"But... but he told me only that his strength would grow closer to mortal!"

"And what do mortals do, Lady?" Narcissa asked.

Realization tumbled over realization. They died. All mortals died. All plants, all animals.... He'd not wanted to say it, not wanted her to know. Not even wanted her to be here when it happened. But she was.

Mary nodded her understanding. "It is all true. You should go, Lady. He would not want you to see him, like this."

It surprised her that it was Mary with that admonition, and not Jacob. Mary shot Jamie a disapproving look. The little Amazon seemed not to care.

"No," Ariadne protested. "There must be... must be help. Help for this. We *can* help him. How?" She stared at the assembled group of adults. All his healers. And they were powerless, against this.

Narcissa shook her head. "There be nothing but de words of de sages, Princess, and that be only for his comfort. A cold cloth for his head. Water, when he will take it; tea, if he wants." She smoothed the quilt over his huge form.

Jacob's hazel eyes looked worried as he rose from a seat beside the bed and put things away in his bag. "It isn't a question of stopping it.

It's just a question of making him more comfortable, while it happens. He likes to have someone near. Likes to be read to. The same stories, the same poems. The words seem to bring him comfort, somehow."

Ariadne moved nearer to the bed, and sat on the stool Jacob had just vacated. She arranged her borrowed gown around her.

Jacob's voice continued. "We must be careful. He sometimes becomes violent. He sometimes goes... mad." The old man's eyes were full of sympathy, and mixed with caution.

"He will not hurt me." Ariadne was positive of that fact.

Her voice held a trace of her old authority. "Bring me a fresh bowl of water, Narcissa. Please. This one has gone warm."

Narcissa and Mary exchanged looks. The seeress had seen visions of Ariadne's love for her master, but nothing was certain. The black woman nodded, and left to obey.

"He wakens off and on, but he likes it when he's read to, then?" Ariadne asked.

Jacob nodded.

"Shall I bring you some of his favorites?" Jacob asked.

"Please," Ariadne told him.

"I know what he likes better than anyone. I'll bring you some of them."

They were indeed at a dire pass if Jacob was accepting her help.

"Thank you."

"Keep his cape near him," Jacob instructed. "It seems to be a comfort to him. And... he always seems to need it... at the end."

At the end? Ariadne didn't even want to ask. Then she had to. "He uses it... as a shroud of sorts, doesn't he?" The words were a whispered dread.

"A shroud. A protection. There is magic in it, for him. We always pray there is just enough."

"Just enough?"

Mary bowed her head. Jacob could not continue, so Mary had to.

"His spirit is dying also, princess, not just his body. All of him must fade. The magic of the tunnels will see he is restored, ultimately, but...." her sigh was deep, and long. "It is so hard for him, and so tragic. Those of us who know him fear for him. It takes a powerful magic to return from the dead. One year... he might not have enough."

Tears ran unchecked even down Jamie's face.

"Are you saying he wants to die?" Ariadne was horrified.

Mary shook her head. "I'm saying there is a loneliness in him. And it is killing him as certainly as what they are doing to the vines, up above." Mary inclined her head also, and left them, able to bear no more. After a few minutes, the others followed.

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Ariadne read to him for hours. He barely roused, but when he did, he drank, then returned back to either black unconsciousness, or a fitful kind of sleep that brought little peace. He recited poetry back to her, mostly seeming unaware of it, and lost inside the words. Virgil, Pindar... He sometimes liked Sophocles. He sometimes simply raged, or cried out, in pain.

Then the blackness would claim him again.



She'd been reading to him from Jacob's bedside stool, and her back grew stiff. Jacob had finally drawn her away, while the other servants had tended the bedding. Mouse offered to bring her a more comfortable chair.

She'd resisted leaving his side at first. But Jacob made it clear that they needed her to leave the room so the others could work. He even offered to accompany her, Above. He wanted to see how far along they were with the cutting, and wanted her to understand, as much as she could.

Devastation. It looked like devastation. From a few hundred yards away from the entrance to his home, to the path all the way up the mountain, the vines had been severely cut back. No trace of green remained. They were staked, ugly sticks, poking out of the ground; their bounty, both fruit and twig, removed. The hillside looked dead. The air was cold.

"It isn't fair." A tear traced down her fair cheek. "This shouldn't be happening to him. They should just leave the vines alone!" Silent tears dampened her face as she beheld the deeply pruned fields. They were beginning to pack the base of the vines with straw. There was very little cutting left to be done.

Jacob shook his head. "It's not just here. It's everywhere. They have to do as they are. If they don't, the vine will labor and struggle. It will survive, perhaps, but it will be weak, or disease will take it all. If the vines are not tended, they will tangle, and become wild. Perhaps even bear no fruit. Then he would suffer from that. No, Lady. It would do no good to leave it wild. Cutting the vine lets it rest, lets it gather strength from the ground for what it must do, come spring."

"I am a God of the Earth, the God of the strength beneath the surface. The God of the long and patient plan," she quoted Dionysus. The earth was spread out before her. And though it looked barren, Ariadne knew there was strength there, yet.

"Pardon?"

"Something Dionysus said to me. Before I understood. 'I am a God of the earth. Of the root and the vine and the deep, low places. The longer way.' I didn't understand, yet. Not then."

Jacob chose his next words carefully. "When you leave him... do it quickly."

"I think I am falling in love with him."

Jacob shook his head in swift denial.

"You mustn't let that happen, Princess. You mustn't."

"You have not favored my being here since the beginning. You must know I would never hurt him."

"If that is true, then you must know that you can only bring him unhappiness." Jacob's voice was resigned. Ariadne could almost see some distant sorrow, nipping at his old heels.

"Why? Why do you say that?" She sensed this was not a vindictive man. Indeed, he was a healer, and he loved Dionysus.

He looked out toward the dying vines.

"Because of all the Gods, he is the only one that can suffer. Can die. He becomes mortal, until he shares a mortal fate. Of all the Gods, he is the only one for whom... part of him is a man."

It was said with sorrow, not reproof. His old, hazel eyes were grief struck as he turned from her, and went down Below.

Ariadne got the feeling he did not come above the ground, often.

She looked back at the barren landscape one more time, then followed him Below.

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Soft candlelight lit the room, both from behind the window and around its niches. Low light. Comforting.

The next time he awoke, he was more lucid. "How long?" he asked, weakly.

"You've been asleep for a few hours," she replied, sponging his forehead.

"No, I mean how long until you go?"

"Oh. Don't worry. We have a long time, yet. Days and days."

"Liar. My little liar."

She said nothing to that, lifting his head for a drink from his cup. Water, this time, not wine.

"Perhaps the worst is past."

He lay his head back down on a linen pillowcase. "Perhaps," he said, though neither of them believed it. He took her hand in his, careful of his claws.

"Whatever happens... Whatever comes... I love you. I cannot use that to change your fate, or mine... but that doesn't mean it isn't true," he whispered to her, needing to say it even if it meant nothing, now.

A spasm seized him, and he arched his back from the pain. "Gods," he swore through clenched teeth. "Gods, it hurts." He panted through the latest discomfort, then quieted.

"It is a hard and hateful thing to feel the strength of your life bleed out of you," he said. "I would have spared you this."

"This isn't fair," she said, not for the first time.

"It was a good harvest, and a good year." He gritted his teeth against the next wave of pain, trying to hold in his torment. He had not wanted her to see this, to see him this way. Not ever. She saw his fangs, as he breathed shallowly through an abdominal cramp.

Her beloved voice was full of distress. "Why does it hurt so much then, if the year was good?" Her sympathetic eyes beheld his, as she tried to wipe his forehead with the cloth. She was determined not to cry.

"There is that much more strength to bleed," he answered, once the wrenching pain had lessened to bearable levels. There. That was better. He sensed the pain moving off. Perhaps this part, at least, was done with him.

Grateful that his pain was lessening, Ariadne sat with him while he marshalled what was left of his strength.

"Ariadne you must listen. The ship, when it comes. You must be on it. You cannot stay here."

"Of course. I..."

"Do not humor me, and do not disobey me. I may go mad soon, and when that happens, I need you to be away," he insisted.

There was more to this hell than this? Ariadne was stunned, even though the servants had spoken of this, before.

"This is why they call you the God of Madness sometimes, too, isn't it?"

He nodded, a world of regret in his blue eyes. "The strength of the mind is strength, too, Little One. It is like feeling myself become..."

ripped away. Swallowed. Tormented, by a lesser being. I send my servants away before it happens, and you must be away, as well. I become violent. Inhuman. But still with enough strength to..."

He did not finish the sentence. She knew what he meant. The strength of madness was an unholy thing, and it certainly had been known to kill.

"You must be clear of this place, when that happens. Safe on a ship. Safe on your way to a new life. With a man who doesn't die every year, for a husband."

So it was the limits of his life which he feared. Feared for her, not for himself. For himself, he'd accepted what he was, all that he was. But for her, he wanted... different.

"I spoke to Narcissa while you slept," she told him. "She said you used to be stronger. That when the death came, you only slept for a while, and then awoke. Stayed here, Below, during the winter months."

"Imprisoned in stone and loneliness. For months." He wanted her to understand that such a life was not for her. Not for anyone.

"Most of my servants go Above, when the end is near. They have to. A winter of isolation at best, and shame at worst. I am dangerous, at the end. They know. They will tell you. I make my way to the cave but... I fight death down every hall. I wrestle with it and snap, and snarl. It is like a shadow self tries to possess me. I... hurt someone, once. I will not risk it again. They all go away. You must promise me."

She understood the vow he was attempting to extract. She sidestepped him.

"The world is quiet, Above. They've stopped cutting." He was lucid, and the pain was less. Surely, that was a good sign?

"They've stopped because they are sleeping, Ariadne. Not because they are done. If they do not do as they must, I will only suffer all the longer. There is no escaping from this place during the winter, Princess. None. The magic disguises it so it cannot be found. As long as I stay below the earth, I cannot be killed the way you can, not forever. I'm like the old vine, that way. But once I pass over, anything inside these halls is trapped with me. Trapped, until spring. A stone prison, for months." He was emphatic.

He sighed, and she listened. At least the pain seemed over.

"In youth I was stronger, and more a fool. I thought I could manage the winters awake, awake like a mortal, for the most part. But... that way is terrible, in its solitude, and the madness snaps at my heels." He shook his head.

"Sometimes I rise, for a while. But mostly, I just try to... sleep through it. To force myself down. But it is not sleep. I am... gone, Princess. I am not here. Not until spring. Anything down here with me is as cut off as I am. It is not a life I would wish for you. For anyone. There is a reason why am alive so long, yet unmarried."

"There is food. There is shelter." She referred to the basket of grapes that never stayed empty and the flagons of wine and juice that were always full. There was fresh water, Below. She'd seen it.

"There is food. There is shelter. And more loneliness than a mortal heart can bear. You do not owe me anything, Princess. Or if you think you do, you can leave me your pearls."

"I thought you said they were fit only for Poseidon."

"I say many stupid things, when I'm being gallant." He seemed to tire, and turned his head to the side.

"Will you go to Lord Hades, then?" She named the realm of the dead.  
"To the Elysian Fields?" At least there was hope and beauty, in that.

He almost chuckled, and shook his head. "Me, in Tartarus, or Elysium? Oh, Gods, would that not be a sight. Hades would have a fit, even if Persephone wouldn't mind. No, Beauty. Every God to his realm, as I am to mine. Hades holds the Underworld, Zeus holds the sky. Poseidon, who can be an ass, rules the ocean. I am a God of the Earth, remember? It is there I dwell. Either on it or inside it, waiting for spring."

"Don't... don't die." Her green eyes held fear, mixed with her hope. She knew the answer, but she needed to hear it from him, needed to understand. She had a feeling none of his servants did, fully, even though they loved him. Narcissa might. Ariadne wasn't sure about the others.

He did not make this easier for her. He couldn't. She had to go. Providence awaited her, both the ship and the word. Or it would, when the hour came.

"In a way, I must. My strength diminishes, as I fade. I will know some times where my strength feels like it is more, but those are false times. By the time they finish cutting the vines, over the mountain, I will be barely more than mortal. Able to be hurt. Able to bleed." He turned from her.

"My... self... divides, at the end. I'm on a dark path with no way back, with only a tormentor for company. I hate dying. It is such a ... lonely thing."

He sighed, deeply.

"Sometimes... when it happens... it feels like I will never revive." He gave a long pause, lost in thought somewhere. "Part of me rages, and fights to stay. The part the idiots drink to, probably."

She squeezed his hand. His clawed, dear hand. A hand she wished was hers.

"If I dream, the nightmares are --epic. If I wake, I am tired. My strength hardly there. Aloneness is such a burden for me, Ariadne; because I know it will never lessen. Not this year, or the next, or the one after that. Easier to sleep in death then, face limbo and fight the monster in my dreams. As terrible as the company of a nightmare demon is, at least then I am not hurting anyone. At least then I am not ..."

He cut the word off, and she knew what he'd been about to say. *"At least then, I am not alone."*

Suddenly the dancer made sense, and the few before or after. He had tried to seize love in the heady times of spring or summer, or even the revelry of the autumn harvest. But the affairs would not last, could not last. Few women are content to be temporary widows, or be locked away in a palace of rough stone, for months on end. There was a reason his servants were mostly old, or somehow infirm.

"I just... stay. Here." He finished the description. He looked at the high stone walls, and the vaulted ceiling. "As palaces go, it is no doubt the most humble. But considering what it is for... one tomb is as good as another."

"Could you wake, if you wanted?" she asked.

"It has been a long time since I endured that. The magic holds me here. I cannot go Above, however. And my strength is barely more than mortal. I told you. Remember?"



She did.

"It's a maze and a prison, Lady. Few would understand it."

Ariadne also remembered her beautiful "prison," at Knossos, and the labyrinthine tomb beneath it. So he was trapped in one of those, as well. "I think I know what you mean," she confided.

"I think you do, too, Princess. And that is why you must go; or you will be trading one palace prison for another." He settled and sighed.

Kissed her fingertips, and let her go.

He knew the ship would not try to leave before the tide turned. They had a few hours, yet. "Read to me, Ariadne, while there is still a little night left. I love the sound of your voice."

And so she read to him, finding the scroll he'd read to her, when she'd been convalescing. The last chapter of the Aeneid, and about all the great expectations of the Romans.

--

Even though he'd warned her, when the first outburst of madness came, it was frightening. He rose, and seemed to see something in a reflective surface he didn't like. He threw the makeshift mirror across the room. He then smashed crockery, and scattered his scrolls around the chamber, looking for a particular one. He dropped to his knees, looking for the poem he wanted, repeating the same few verses, over and over. Something about a lost love.

In a clear moment, he ordered her not just from the chamber, but from the world Below. He commanded his servants to bear her to her apartments. Her ship was waiting. It was time to send her to someone else, to send her to her fate. Time to admit all was done, between them.

She tried to stay, tried to argue, but he would have none of it. Just to make sure she went Above, he accompanied her himself.

"You have to go. You have so much to do with your life. Let it be an example of what love can create. Do not be afraid to embrace your fate, Ariadne, to embrace your freedom. You always knew we had limits. You deserve a life free of those."

He shut the round door behind her himself, and locked it. She felt the pangs of her sorrow, as she was forced into the world Above. Her world. A world apart from his. Especially now.

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Knowing the grip on his sanity would not last much longer, he realized that it was time to say good-bye to his servants and friends, Below. Another unique quality his mortal life had given him. He truly could feel friendship for those he cared about.

Something inside him feared he was saying good-bye for the last time, just as something else almost welcomed that.

She was leaving.

He gathered all his loved ones into a large room, and sat heavily on the great chair that he refused to call a throne, even though it was one. Thrones were for other Olympians. For Zeus, or Queen Hera, or vain Apollo, perhaps. King Minos, even. They were not for him.

But he sat in his anyway, knowing it was time.

She was going. He could feel her, as she made her way to the docks, to the *Providence*. He could feel her go.

"I cannot control it. I feel myself... slipping away, and I fight to hold off the specter we all know will have his way with me, soon. Jacob, Mary,

take yourselves to safety, either well-hidden, down in the lowest reaches, or to one of the villages, if you wish. Narcissa, will you go?"

The old black woman shook her head. She not only never went Above, her cataracts made going deeper and lower of no consequence. She knew the caverns by touch. A lantern was enough to light her path. She knew to avoid the cave. They all did.

"Take Mouse, then, unless he chooses to stay with Jacob. Take care of yourselves. Take care of each other. You know how I feel about this. Please don't forget that I love you all." He confessed it almost brokenly. One more time of this hell. Just one more.

Mary's face was stricken, and Mouse's was solemn. Jacob's was just plain sad. Jamie's was blank, her youth forbidding her to accept what her eyes told her. Narcissa, resigned as ever, inclined her head obediently. The master was dying. The master would be obeyed.

When the others filed out of the room, it was Narcissa's black hand that grabbed at his sleeve.

"Will you return, come the spring?"

It was the question. Always the same question. And for the first time, a different answer. Not "Yes," or "Certainly," or even the answer he'd given the last couple of years, "I will try." Not even that. And not "No." Something far more heart rending.

"Would it really matter whether or not I did?"

Even blind eyes could hold distress. They did so, now.

"Master..."

"Half the Egyptian Gods are dead, they say, and the ones from the Oldest of the Ancients blow like leaves on the wind. Like grape leaves.

Peace to it, Narcissa. The vines will grow without me. I no longer give them the spark of life. It is they who "grow" me. I do not "grow" them. If I am gone, the world will not notice. Just one more Ancient God the world isn't sure it needed. Just one more fairy tale we all grew out of, past its time."

He squeezed her broad, veined hand. "Go in peace, my faithful friend. If the spring comes and you see me not, in these halls.... " He pulled on the cord that drew a soft pouch free of the confines of his vest, and clutched it in his otherworldly hands. He cradled the love token in his great palm. "Tell them the God of the Vine knew what Love was, in the end. If that pleases no one else, it will at least please my sister, Aphrodite." He dropped the makeshift necklace and pulled on his cape.

Narcissa bowed her head, tears making her dark skin shine in the candlelight. He was going to die. And this time, he did not care if that death was forever.

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They were about to put her few things on the ship. She had so little, it took no time. The shawl Mary had gifted her kept her warm. A few changes of clothes, both Below-wrought and finer, for when she disembarked. What remained of her jewelry and her money, in a soft pouch Mary had indeed fashioned for her.

"You didn't bring much," the captain observed as he hefted her bag. He was young, with a devil-may-care attitude. "Travelling light?"

She nodded. He was handsome, in a dark-haired kind of way. His face was scarred. More than hers was, even. It lent him a rakish air. The people Below said he was trustworthy, to an extent, and he would not

ask her for anything other than the price of her passage. Ariadne sensed a scoundrel in him, but if he was, he was a good scoundrel, so that was fair enough. It didn't matter. Her heart was in pieces, at having to leave Dionysus.

It was how she knew she loved him. And how she wept for that fact, since it could bring her no joy.

"Yes. Travelling... light," she answered, wiping a tear, as she watched him settle her bag on the deck. Devin was accustomed to weepy travelers. Leaving was a hard thing, for some. It was a sentiment he never shared, even though he understood it.

"Travelling light is a thing I recommend. Makes the journey easier," he tried to cheer her.

"Easier?" she asked, aware she was barely listening.

"Sure. It makes the ship faster. You can go more places. Not have to worry about the weight limit."

The weight limit. The limits.

*You deserve a life without limits.*

Her green eyes flared open, comprehension in their depths.

"We don't know what the limits are. But there is no life without limits."

As she said it, she turned away from the ship and back toward the way she'd come. She took off at a dead run, not caring if he kept her bag or not.

There was a God she had to find. No matter where he was, or where he wasn't.

"Lady, wait. Wait!" Devin sprinted, and caught up with her, her bag in his hand.

"I'm not going." She didn't pause in her flight.

"Fine. Do you know where you *are* going? Are you going to him? Or trying to?"

Devin knew about the world Below? He did not seem like the type.

She paused only long enough to acknowledge him, and kept going in the direction of the tunnels.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I'm not a God. We're not even related by blood. But we're brothers of a sort." He touched his cheek, the one with the scar. "I grew up down there."

Ariadne's eyes widened. "He did that to you?"

"It was a long time ago, and I was stupid. My fault, as much as his."

Of course, Dionysus would not see it that way.

"Do you know how to get in? I think he's locked all the doors against me," Ariadne confided.

He flashed her a devilish grin, and produced a pocketknife.

"Lady, I have been picking that lock since I was twelve years old."

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She ran. Again. Once clear of the doorway, her bag on the ground, she ran through the circular halls. It was all she knew to do.

And as quickly as she ran, Dionysus stayed ahead of her.

A room full of weeping servants had pointed the way down. Mouse and Jacob guided her, for part of it. She raced through the round hallways and into the deeper caverns. She did not know these places. She knew only that she could easily become lost.

Mouse took her as far as he knew. But the sounds of roaring and terrible struggle reached both of them, and even her brash young friend grew afraid.

Ariadne pushed all fear aside. She'd been to a maze before, seeking a different kind of monster. Her fate always seemed decided in labyrinthine halls of stone and secrets.

A cave loomed in front of her, as did her destiny.

With the courage of a princess, Ariadne of Crete, the Emerald of Knossos, the liberator of Athens and the beloved of a dying God, went inside.

Too late.

He was collapsed on the floor. Unmoving. Unbreathing.

"No. No!" She pressed her head to his chest.

"Not without me! Not without me!" She shook him and wept. Hard, bitter tears. Tears to tell the rage of a breaking heart.

And tears to mend one.

She kissed him. Hands full of cape and her tears on his face, she kissed him. Wept. Prayed.

Prayed. He had heard her prayer before. Heard her in his temple.

*Not without me. Not without me!* She repeated it with her praying mind.

She saw herself, walking down a trail to a shadow world. Felt the harsh cold of death's night, as it enveloped her, on the path. Saw the faint glimmer of a grey, ugly kind of light in the distance. Then she saw him, moving toward it.

His noble head was down. He had the dejected look of a man who'd walked this particular path a hundred too many times. Wrapped in his cape and ragged, he was the picture of a being without strength. A dark figure sometimes seemed to appear menacingly at his side, and taunt him. A figure who looked like him, but night-cast, and more malevolent. The Nightcast One looked as if it had swum in this shadow dark for far, far too long.

Sometimes it was on the path with him, pushing him toward his death; sometimes he was alone.

Mostly alone.

There was no one waiting inside the dusky light for him. Even in death, he was alone, save for his torment. If he reached the grey light of the limbo place in front of him, he would have only the feral thing at his side, for a companion.

Ariadne knew if she did not catch him that she would never see him again, nor would anyone else this side of Hades realm. And he'd already told her he couldn't stay with Hades. He would become Nothing.

The Negative light of limbo glowed dully, before him.

"No!" her voice was strong and her voice was sure, and she grabbed his hand and pulled, yanking with all her might. *"Not without me! Then, I love you."*



He turned on the path, surprised. She grabbed for the fabric of his cloak, and he felt himself pulled upward, and backward. Suddenly, he was moving toward Life.

She held onto handfuls of his cape, the Cape of his Protection, and he felt her strength flow through it, through to him, through their bond. His shadow self came forward, but it was she who hissed and growled at it, she who told it, "*No!*"

It would not have him. Not today. Not any day, not ever again. His love was fierce as a tigress. Of course she was. She pulled him back up the broken path. Back up toward a better light. When the demon grabbed at his cape, trying to snatch it away, she simply held on, shifted her grip, and encountered...

His necklace. The leather thong held her rose over his heart.

Tears of understanding mixed with her determination. He loved her, loved her truly. They were stronger than this dark place, and its lonely demon. For that's what the demon was, his loneliness given form.

The bond surged through them, and she felt it, felt its strength, felt their strength, together. They were stronger than loneliness, or death, or madness. She kissed him. Hard. Fully. The rose pressed between them.

The vision of lonely death shrank, and then it faded.

Her mouth was on his, and her cheeks were wet. Her hands were full of his cape, and her soul was reaching through their bond, for his.

There was a floor beneath his back.

There was a woman, his woman, on his chest, and she was kissing him.

Her mouth was on his, and then... his moved beneath hers.

Dionysus struggled to feel where he was. On the road to limbo or the one to salvation? He reached up a clawed hand and entwined it in her amber hair. She was warm and sure and good. The stones beneath him began to feel more solid. As did her kiss. As did his.

She had braved death to find him. She was alive, as was he. And she was here, with him.

The kiss went on and on. It banished the death and it even banished the weakness. And suddenly the God felt it was all right to have only the strength of several men, and not necessarily the strength of a God, as long as she was with him.

She placed her hand on his chest, and felt the pouch.

"You kept it. Near your heart, you kept it."

He had.

"Kiss me, again," he answered with a non-answer, as he pulled her head back down for another long kiss.

He stood up, slowly, looking around. The cave. Of course.

"Wait. The ship." He shook his head. "We must get you to the ship, my Beauty. Get you to *'Providence.'*"

"You are my Providence," she told him, settling herself right down in the sand. She was clearly not going to budge. "You are what is meant to be, for me," she clarified, giving him a mutinous look. One so full of love, he had no choice but to sit down in the soft earth beside her. Next time he had to die, he realized he needed to find someplace cleaner.

"It is not gratitude that keeps you here?"

She tugged on his hands, and kissed them. "These are my hands. And so they belong with me." She held him a while, then set one of his hands, now declared hers, on her marred cheek.

Her steady voice washed over him like a soft tide. "No. It is not gratitude, or friendship. I think it is even more than love, though it's 'love' the poets call it, so that will do for me. It is love, my love. It is love."

He held her sweet face realizing he'd never gotten around to bargaining for the repair of her scar. Since she'd accepted it, so had he. A pang of guilt shot through him.

"Your face. I... forgot." He had. He'd become so accustomed to seeing her with the imperfection, he'd forgotten the urgency of helping her to be rid of it so she could go forward with her happy life. Her happy life, without him.

Feeling a little weak, still, he brushed the damaged skin with his thumb. He would miss the scar, when it was gone. But he had promised.

He was Nature's God, and nature was a healing thing, when it was at its best.

"The water in the mirror pool heals the heartache of a mortal passing," he confided. "But there is a river, deep and low. Deep, and low, and Nameless. The water may heal this, with Apollo's blessing. Make you the way you were. We should go there, when I feel stronger. Any time you wish. There is so much here, Ariadne. So much I want to show you."

She kept his hand where it was, loving the feel of it when he traced her cheek, traced her scar.

"I know this sounds strange, but if it is all the same, my Lord, I... I think I would rather keep it."

*She would rather...*

"I love you." He swore it, feeling the strength of what lay between them flow and gather inside him. He did love her. And she loved him. He could feel it, now. Now that he allowed himself to feel anything. He allowed this now. And he felt not just "anything," but "everything." And Everything was Everything.

He brushed the scar with a loving kiss. "You may do as you wish," he allowed, rising, and tugging her with him. "Do you know what that is?"

She inclined her head, giving him her arm for support. "I do. It took me a long time to come to it. But I do. I wish to study the law. Be an arbiter of what is right and good, when I can. Help those like Laura, or the others. Those who need protection, or help." She squeezed his hand, again. "And you will be my Providence."

She gave him her best smile. The one that melted his heart. He nodded, accepting. Gods, how he loved her. As impossible as it sounded, even in the dead of winter, he could feel his strength increasing. Love. What an amazing power it was.

"Anything else? Anything else you wish to do, or be, my love? After you become my bride, that is." He nuzzled her soft hair with an insistent touch that told her he would not be accepting "no" for an answer. It seemed he had an offering to make to Hera. She would be beyond smug.

Ariadne's eyes were as green as a spring leaf, and he saw his fate in them.

"I? Why, I thought that was obvious, my Lord."

She drew his head down to hers, and gave him a kiss that made him shiver with want. "I will be what I was destined to be since the night you found me on the beach. I will be the end of your aloneness."

And she was.

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*The Immortal Lovers:  
Vincent and Catherine  
Eros and Psyche*

By Cindy Rae



*For JoAnn, who championed Catherine, and just knew they fell in love,  
ten days in April.*

*But... he was beautiful!*

As Psyche beheld her sleeping lover, the mysterious adored one who would be her husband, as her eyes took in the beastly form of the paramour who had dominated her days and filled her nights with splendor... it was all she could think.

Yes, he was a beast. That much she knew, even before the light of the single candle illuminated his leonine form. She'd felt the careful claws against her skin, felt the line of fangs in his kiss, and the silky hair that covered his body, as it so lovingly covered hers.

She'd tried to trace his face once, in the magical dark. Tried to “feel” the high cheekbones and the brow that sloped into a muzzle. But he'd taken her hands away, and chained them over her head, as he'd given his magnificent body to hers. Psyche had been loved thoroughly, as she was thoroughly loved.

*But he was beautiful!*

The words would not stop playing themselves in her mind as she stared at him in wonder.

Sprawled on his stomach, in the deep sleep of the sated, Eros, her husband in every way but for the ceremony, lay dreaming. Nude but for a sheet, magnificent but for ... nothing, there was no exception to that, his powerful, hirsute arms spread across a bed that had held them both for loving, an hour ago.

There was a mane on his head. There was a thinner one down his backbone. As her eyes went to that bisecting line, her lips lifted in a smile. She'd touched it. She'd touched it, in the dark. It was immensely satisfying to touch it with her green eyes, now.

And colors! His colors. Colors, now, and for the first time! Muted, in the low light, but still, glorious! His hair was red and golden, every shade of “golden” that there was: from sunlight to near honey, at the nape of his turned neck. The hair on his back was thinner than the hair on his chest, she knew. It arched toward his spine in a soft, laying pattern. His skin looked warm, a beautiful shade of bronze. Her love was a lion. Her love was a God.



Her love was a monster, and her monster was gorgeous.

She knelt near the bed, remembering how it all began...

---

Psyche of Greece was from Miletus, a city abundant with beautiful women. Known for them, in fact and receiving what benefits that incurred. The inhabitants were remarkably fair. As such, the city was sacred to Venus, the Goddess of Love and Beauty. And as such, those who sought those two things (either great love, or great beauty) flocked to her temples, there. Money and graces flowed inside the gates of the teaming metropolis. Psyche's kingly father was wealthy. Almost as wealthy as she was fair.

A princess, Psyche's royal beauty outshined all others.

For even in a place known for beautiful women, Psyche's bright loveliness was remarkable.

Fairer by a bit, and kinder by a good bit more, the young woman was known. Her beauty, her warmth, and her courage preceded her, and her reputation did the same. No man could say of her beauty that it was "just her face," "just her form," or "just the way she had with others." It was some strange and blessed confluence of all those things, and more. She simply "was," as a soul "was."

Even women could not bring themselves to be jealous, for the lady whose royal parents adored her was too kind to inspire such base thoughts.

As her legend grew, so did the crowds.

Masses of admirers formed outside the palace. Crowds came to simply catch sight of the lovely young woman on her balcony. While at first this seemed attractive, or even flattering, it became the opposite for its

isolating effect. What was good for trade and barter was not necessarily good for the human heart. Her father worried, even as his wealth increased.

Psyche the lovely knew loneliness, in its way, and a separation from others. Stories of her beauty grew in both scope and distance. Those with wealth came to her city to seek her hand, having barely met her, or worse, having not met her at all.

She became a prize rather than a person, and felt its difference.

Even more dangerous for her, however, was the change her legend wrought on the temples of Aphrodite. People who came to see the cold stone temples of the Goddess, began to come to see warm Psyche, instead.

Bards wrote poems about her beauty, while minstrels wrote songs. The Great Kristopher was said to be working on her likeness in oils, and Pygmalion was said to be carving her beauty into marble. Marble so lifelike it seemed to breathe with enchantment.

She deflected such attentions as politely as she could, though her father worried some more.

There was good reason for his concern.

As Aphrodite's temples became increasingly untended and unvisited, the furious Goddess sent down her edict. The girl with an angel's face and a benefactress' soul would be sacrificed to a monster. It was commanded. There was no denying the terrible demand.

Both sad and terrified, Psyche remembered going to her doom, determined to spare her father and her city the rage of the Goddess of Love and Beauty. She'd climbed the mountain Aphrodite ordered,

aware that a deadly dragon waited to consume her. Fear gripped her heart.

In despair, hearing the monster prowl close, she poised herself on one of the mountain's many deadly ledges, prepared to offer herself as a sacrifice... and jumped.

And did not die. She did not even fall, as a matter of fact.

A Great Zephyr Wind bore her up, enshrouded her, and carried her away. Inside a dark cloud, the beautiful girl felt herself rising, then sinking, then moving she did not know which way. She slept, and was transported. The Great Wind bore her to safety, to a palace of stone seemingly buried deep inside the earth. She awoke in a Chamber full of Winds and full of shadow.

She was afraid. Was it here the monster would consume her?

The wind howled around her, and the way was dark. She was afraid to move.

"Shall I lead you through the darkness, Psyche?" a voice asked. A gloved hand extended itself, seemingly from nowhere. She could barely see the arm, much less the large, deeply shadowed form attached to it.

The voice was deep, and rich, and soothing. Human. A voice befitting a bard. In her blindness, Psyche dared to hope. Something had saved her. Something had altered her fate. Though she "saw" the darkness, it seemed benign, like a vision through a gauze bandage. She did not feel the fear of it in her heart, and she knew, whoever this being was, he was responsible for her feeling of steady comfort.

"I think that there must be no darkness, when you are with me," Psyche had answered, taking the outstretched hand. Here was no

dragon, but what he was, exactly, she was not certain. She wasn't sure of anything, at the moment.

The gloved hand had taken hers, and walked her through great caverns of stone. He wore a cape, the hood kept up, to hide his face. But there was more to it than that. An almost magical darkness seemed to envelop him, and shift, as they moved. A darkness which kept her from seeing his features clearly. As they passed near lantern and candle light, she could discern only his tall shape, and barely more.

"Where are we?" she asked him, timidly.

"Somewhere secret. Somewhere safe," he replied. The dark folds of the cape seemed to shimmer with magic.

"A Temple?" Had he taken her to one of Aphrodite's temples, for sacrifice? Or one of Zeus' to beg for mercy?

"No, not a temple. A secret place. Some of it is far below your city's streets. Somewhere Aphrodite in her fury cannot find you." He sat her at a great table, and a bowl of soup was brought.

She ate, hesitantly. Torchlight illuminated the granite. Nothing illuminated his face, inside his hood.

"It is good soup," she told him, trying to make conversation, not sure if she should.

"I'm glad you like it," he returned, not eating.

"What is your name?" she asked, curious. She could at least know the name of her benefactor. Couldn't she?

He hesitated. Miletus was an Ionian city, and his Latin name was favored there. She would know who he was, if he called himself "Cupid." But he had many names. Amor. Erato. Aphrodite's son was

only slightly less famous than his beautiful mother. "My name... is Eros," he said, giving her the Greek name he was less known by, in her part of the world.

"I'm frightened, Eros." She did not know who he was. She only knew she was afraid, and was trying not to show it.

He was already half in love with her. More than half, and the fault was his own, for he'd been caught by his own magic.

Aphrodite, not just content to kill the girl, had decided upon an even crueler fate. She'd ordered Eros to shoot her with an arrow of love, that she might desire her attacker, just before she was destroyed. It was to be a final, humiliating insult, sent by an infuriated Goddess.

He'd erred. For the first time in his life, he'd erred with his bow.

Having her in his sites, her beautiful form before him, he'd wavered. His hand had trembled at the sight of her, a golden arrow notched and set to let fly. He'd seen her beauty, and trembled, just a little. Just enough.

The God of the Steady Aim, the God of Fire in the Blood, had cut his hand on his own arrow shaft, causing the magic to own him, instead of her.

He'd seen her, and then he'd lost his heart. From the moment he saw her, almost. She'd captured it, unwitting. But she'd captured it, just the same.

It had left him unsure what to do. With no time to make plans, he'd called up the Zephyr to catch her as she leapt, and carried her to a subterfuge. One that required his form to change, as well as his intentions.

Aphrodite must not see him. He knew he must take on the face of something so unlike himself, his own mother would have trouble discerning his godhood, as he sheltered her.

With passion's fire directing his choices, he'd changed his form.

Then, despairing that she could ever love him thus, he'd pulled the cloak of disguise around himself, hiding in its folds. Both from his mother's eyes, and from hers.

It was a desperate gamble, as all such gambles were. He had no clear plan, and at this point, barely a goal, other than to keep her safe. It had been an accident. One that had changed his life, perhaps forever. He burned with passion's fire, and waited for it to fade. It would. It always did. At least, it always had, before.

He watched her eat, knowing he'd thwarted Aphrodite's will, taken her here, disguised himself... all as a way to avoid her doom, and his livid mother's wrath.

It was a dangerous game he played.

He gave no care for the danger to himself, and there was some. For his heart was at her feet, even now. Desire's hard thrum was in him, so he kept his distance, knowing he needed to. It was good he wore a monster's form. It kept him from reaching for her.

"Try not to be afraid, beautiful Psyche. Please try not to be afraid," his gentle voice urged. He could not stay near. Not now. Not now, when the fire burned new.

He left her with her thoughts, and a little with her fears, which he could not ease entirely.

In the days to come, he shared the former all he could, and worked to dispel the latter.

--

Of all his secret homes, this one was his favorite. A gift from his stepfather Hephaestus, the Enchanted Underground held marvels for the senses, and he shared them all gladly with her.

For her eyes, the intricate beauty of stained glass. For her ears, the sound of voices, and wind that both whispered and keened on a lost bridge. For her skin, the soft warmth of homespun and raw silk. For her sense of taste, delicacies from a basket that never seemed empty. For her sense of smell, deep bowls full of roses, some red, some white. He wanted to gift her with all he had, as he was forbid to tell her exactly what he was.

He took her to see wonders beyond compare, and bestowed upon her the treasures of his home. A crystal, set in wire, imbued with shining magic, a bit of his love whispered into its hard form, that she might always carry that with her. Music, which seemed to come from an invisible orchestra, through a great hole in the ceiling. A table which was always set with fine food, and a special kind of tea which she favored. Treats, great and small, meant to soothe, lure, and beguile.

There was all that and so much more, for her senses. A library of magnificent scrolls, an underground waterfall, secret passageways which led to secret caverns so deep even he didn't know where they all went.

A pool was a mirror. A stair was a spiral. A trapped ship was a treasure trove, and his Mouse servant, smitten by her beauty, offered her a necklace of gold. She thanked him prettily, and ruffled his ears. Eros was amused. Not everyone was kind to the small and open-hearted. She was.

His home was like being in a labyrinth built by Daedalus. But a maze of wonder, more than anything else. He cautioned her that they must stay below, stay out of Aphrodite's sight. Other than that, his realm was hers.

He showed her wonderful places. Places leading up, down, around and through. Circular halls and hidden doorways. Deep places, both within his world... and within himself.

She accepted him graciously. And graciously, she began to fall in love.

"Beauty is a blessing. Do you not think so? Many pray to the Goddess, for your looks," he'd mentioned, one evening by the fire.

She'd tilted her head thoughtfully. "Perhaps beauty and ugliness are on the same coin. Both carry burdens, my Lord," she'd told him, sipping the tea he'd brought especially for her.

He knew what she was seeing: the shallowness of those who loved without understanding. A shallowness he himself had helped to foster, sometimes.

"Perhaps... the heart, then, is what is important?" he queried, desperately hoping she would think it so. Considering his form, she would have to.

"I believe it to be," she answered. Her head dropped, a bit shyly. "Perhaps even more now than I did when I first came."

Ah. She was learning, then. Or to be more precise, he thought, she was learning, too.

"Ovid says 'Beauty is a fragile gift,'" she quoted, offering him a scroll on the subject.

The smile inside the hood was soft.



Later that night, after he'd taken her for a visit to the mirror pool, she found the scroll on her bedside table with an odd note attached to it.

"Ovid knew everything," it said, in a left-handed scrawl.

--

Her mind was curious, and her wit was sharp. Eros quickly realized that those who had looked upon her and had seen only a fair face had indeed done her a disservice. In a way, she was sacrificed long before they'd sent her to the monster. She was a slave to the vanity of men, as much as anything else.

He'd seen her, and been almost as guilty as they. He'd fallen in love with her almost from the first. But that was from his own magic.

This was different. This was from hers. Did a mortal have magic? She must have. He truly *did* love her, and not just with the love born of desire, which was his own.

This was a deeper thing, a richer thing. It grew. It shifted and changed, inside his monster's chest. It tied him to her in ways he was only just beginning to suspect. He felt it more every day he spent with her.

His own magic burned hot and short, by comparison.

This was love of a different kind, and it was owning him.

The God whose name meant "desire" was bowing to forces he barely understood.

Knowing her made it worse, and knowing her even better made it worse still. He warmed near her, feeling a romantic, almost chaste kind of love. He wanted her happiness more than his own. He wanted her smiles, and missed her company when he was busy with something, or she was. He both longed to see her naked form, and

despaired of his own hungers, and of his own form, as the days began to run into each other.

And then “hunger” acquired an edge, and the edge felt like a constant. A sharp feeling of need was twisting inside him, and he felt its pain. It was difficult to hide this more passionate version of love, as he struggled to encourage the more innocent kind. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have sworn he’d injured himself, again, as the feeling grew.

But he knew this was not that. This was not the magic of the Arrow. This was the magic of the heart. His heart. And some days, it felt as if it might burst, inside his great chest. She was lovely, yes. But she was now lovely in a way that had nothing to do with her looks. Every discovery about her enchanted him. Completely.

He discovered that she was a little shy, but with a stubborn streak. Her heart had been bruised, a time or two, by this callous youth or that, but no permanent damage had been done. She was brave - brave enough to question him, not having seen his face. Brave enough to explore with him, places in his world even he didn't know. Bold enough to pluck some scroll or other he’d never read but she had, and offer it as a gift, thinking he would see its beauty with her, and remember it for that.

She loved it when he read the great poets to her, or the great storytellers. She loved the epics and the parables, the philosophers and the muses. He read to her often, as the week spooled out between them. He hoped he could charm her with those borrowed words, since he could not do that with his face.

For it was his handsome face that usually charmed a woman. A face that was past striking in its good looks, combined with a body that

eclipsed the word "perfect." In his other form, he had a God's beauty. In this one... he had only his ... his "self," to fall back on, to lure her with. And it was his inner self, at that. Could she fall in love with that?

He was as confused as he was caught.

Could she learn to love his heart, regardless of his form? He prayed that she could, while he worried that she couldn't. He'd had no experience with this kind of loving, before.

--

When he thought he could fall in love with her no more, she proved him wrong. For among her other virtues, she was kind. Kind to his few servants, especially to Mouse, and kind to him, since he'd told her he was deformed beneath his disguise.

It was fair enough that she knew that, even though she hadn't seen it, owing to his insecurity, and his need to keep his face hidden. The deception must continue. Aphrodite might be able to pierce his disguise, outside the cape. Subterfuge was a thing she knew a thing or three about.

"Your face... You... must keep it hidden?" She'd asked him one evening.

"Yes. My visage is... most terrible," he said. It was the truth. In his rush to disguise, he'd thrown off his normally handsome face and adopted one of extreme deformity. His clawed hands stayed covered by gloves. His form was dressed crown to booted foot in layers of clothing, to hide the copious body hair he now sported.

The layered clothing was heavy. It was like wearing a mobile cage, and he was painfully aware he needed it, for this.

She could not be allowed to see him.

And even if she could, his Mother couldn't. Aphrodite might know him, even in his altered form, by this time. Surely, by now, she was looking. Her wrath would be legendary, against both of them. Mostly Psyche.

Eros realized too late that he had put them in an impossible situation. How could he touch her, thus?

A worry line formed between her soft brows. Her green eyes were so beautiful.

"You say your face is terrible. But... your hood protects you? Keeps you safe? Safe from hate?" Psyche knew only too well the prejudices "looks" could foster. She'd endured them all her life, though in a different way.

"Safe from hate. Safe from harm," he answered, sipping from a cup. *Safe from love*, his mind added.

She inclined her head. "You should keep it, then. Keep what keeps you safe," she reasoned.

She was dying with curiosity about him, it was true. But she would do nothing to risk him. He had been kind to her, had saved her. She would not repay that with anything less than kindness. Whatever his secret was, she would keep it.

"Eros," she began, carefully.

"Yes, my Beauty?" he asked. He had been calling her that a lot more often, lately. Even in front of the servants, of which there were at least a few.

"You... you are not the monster they sent to devour me... are you?" she asked. It had taken her a long time to work up the courage to ask that.

The hood shook, subtly, in the negative.

"No, my Beautiful One. I am not the dragon."

*But love for you is devouring me as surely as if I were.*

Her smile was soft. *Perhaps you are a prince. Both beautiful and brave.* She thought.

His head lifted, inside the hood. He heard her. As clearly as if she'd spoken the words, he heard her.

He rose and crossed to her, taking her soft hands in his gloved ones. He'd *heard* her, even though she'd but *thought* it. This was new. A gift of this love? From her? From this unique form he still carried? He did not know.

"Perhaps all our dragons are princesses. And all our princesses are dragons," he answered her, giving her hand a squeeze.

She could not penetrate the shadow of the cloak to discern his face. She simply couldn't. Its magic would not allow it. She didn't need to.

Loneliness. It came off him in waves.

"Perhaps they wait, then. To see if we will act in a way that is both beautiful and brave... to remind us that life has not forgotten us. That it still holds gifts in its hands, for us," she told him wisely.

"Perhaps," was all he said, indicating to the nearby Mouse of a servant that her cup was to be cleared.

"You said we might go to the Music Chamber this evening. Is that still all right?" she asked him. "It might soothe what troubles your heart, My Lord."

He nodded, letting her go so she could change her gown and prepare herself.

While he burned.

Caught within his ill-conceived courtship, he could endure little more. She was beauty beyond beauty, and compassion beyond compare. She felt sorry for his misshapen form, a form he could shrug off with a drop of the cloak and a wave of his hand, if he wanted to.

As long as he was willing to risk her.

He wasn't. He sighed, watching the flames in the grate burn low. He would have to send her back. He would have to. He just didn't know how to keep Aphrodite's wrath away from her.

Maybe.

Perhaps he could simply bargain his obedience for her life. Would his mother accept such an offer? Eros wasn't sure. He'd never defied her before, and while his mother could bear love's gentleness, on the one hand, she bore its fury on the other. She did not tolerate being crossed well. No Goddess did. Nor did any parent, for that matter.

Eros sighed, and watched the flames burn lower still. A log snapped, and crackled, low. He felt the same sensation, almost, down low in his belly.

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Seeking respite from his restless thoughts, he hoped an evening in the Enchanted Music Chamber might help. After all, music, it was said, had charms which soothed the savage beast. He felt in need of soothing.

He plied her with kind flattery, and approved of the blue dress that silkily hugged her sweet body. He settled near her, on the cushioned floor, and watched her delight as song came down through an open grate over their heads. The stars were barely out, and in a moment, he knew why. Rain.

When rain fell from the sky, she greeted it, arms open, letting the raindrops paint her skin with damp silver.

He thought he might go mad from the sweetly sensual vision she presented.

---

The next night, in the enchanted room known as the Great Hall, he danced with her while unseen musicians played.

Last night's concert had been interrupted, so this one would be away from the elements. Besides, being here gave him an excuse to touch her as they danced. Special candles glittered, and he suffered with his love. Surely this torment would end, soon, some way?

"Eros..."

He felt her. Felt that the desire was burning as badly in her as it was in him. For a moment, he did not recognize it wasn't his, could not separate it from what he was feeling. But he did. It was not just him who felt this way. It was her, too.

"Will we ever truly be together?" It was fast, she knew. But the circumstances were remarkable, and the feelings were real. She knew his gentle heart. Knew his keen mind and his huge form, if not his particulars. She was lost to him. She could only hope he felt the same way.

His breath caught in his throat at her question.

"We could be... it is possible," he whispered.

*It was? How?*

"Tell me?" she asked, the softness of the invitation such that it nearly buckled his knees.

"I must stay shrouded... always. By cloak, when I walk. By Enchanted Night, in your chambers. I would be in this form... but I could... love you, if you will permit it."

"Love me? As a husband might?" Her cheeks were pink, but her eyes were hopeful.

"As a husband might." He knew the world she belonged to would never recognize a marriage, for he was a beast. Knew this was madness to even consider it. She belonged with a prince, somewhere, not to him.

But he wanted her, so ... much!

"I could not see you?" she asked.

"No. But you could know me. In every other way." His voice was a velvet lure.

Your cape would be gone?" She fingered its familiar folds, but did not move it back. She knew not to.

"There would be nothing between us but the beating of our hearts, and the dark, Psyche," he swore to her.

She looked down, caught between desire, embarrassment, and modesty.

"And if I say 'no?'" she asked.

The steps of the dance slowed to nothing. "Then... no matter what happens, no matter what comes... I will still love you," he vowed, and they both knew it was true.

She stepped back and squeezed the hands that had shown her treasure. "You say you are terrible." She itched to touch his face.



Knew she couldn't. "Perhaps you aren't. Perhaps it is the rest of the world which fears its aloneness and so they ..."

"I promise you it is not a lie that I am a beast," he told her, removing her hands from his. Slowly, almost timidly, he removed his leather gloves. It was the first time she would see his hands.

She could sense his fear: the fear of rejection.

He hesitated as he pulled the leather free. First the right, then the left. He showed her his dread, in the holding out of his hands.

Claws. They were claws. Claws, not hands. Fearsome and malevolent-looking, they were furred, and tipped with dangerous nails. They looked deadly. They were.

His voice shook a little. "I had to show you this much," he confessed. "For this is what would be touching you, if you willed it so." He held the hands further out, turning them front to back, revealing a palm that was more or less human, but fingers and a forearm that were... furred. There was no other word for it. The special candles he'd used for Winter's Festival showed his true form, beyond the cloak.

Psyche's love was a Beast. He had never claimed to be anything else.

For all they were, and whatever they were not, these hands had been kind to her. Had saved her, and brought her sweet marvels. Yes, his hands were indeed "terrible." But perhaps they could also be...

"Your poor hands. Terrible indeed, my lord."

His heart sank. Then it rose with her next sentence.

"But perhaps they could also be... mine?"

She clasped his hands in hers, holding. His fingers bent, and she raised them to her lips in an almost courtly kiss. A mouth meant for a prince's bed found a monster's rough knuckles... and he was broken.

That she would accept him, looking as he did, humbled and awed him. That she should know even a fraction of him, and not wince with disgust...

She shook him to his core. Then shook him further.

"Perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest being, something helpless?" She asked the question as she stepped forward, knowing darkness was about to take her eyesight away again, as it had done the time she was inside the cloud.

"Something... helpless," he repeated. He was an immortal. He was a God, an Eternal. He had never been helpless a day in his life... until her.

He caught his breath. "Something helpless that wants help from us?"

She nodded, and closed her eyes, accepting his proposal.

His kiss enveloped her in the Enchanted Night.

And the Night enveloped her in love.

His ardor surprised her with its gentleness. Thinking to feel his impatience, and by extension, his lust, he'd brought her something else, something that seemed to surprise him as much as it surprised her.

He'd been shy, and hesitant. Almost painfully delicate, as if he'd feared hurting her at the expense of his own pleasure.

She'd felt the strangeness of his mouth, and the caution in his hands. He'd turned his claw tips away from her, and bid her wrap his hands in

silk, that he might not accidentally scratch her. She'd explored his great body with curiosity and with love, wanting to know what pleased him, what lured, and enchanted. What charmed this being, touched by magic? She'd had to tempt him to her, had to torment him almost to the point of wildness.

Only when she had him panting and desperate, had he taken her. And still, with great care.

He adored her with a kind of sweet desperation that communicated his need.

For Psyche, unloved by men, it was unique, as it was meant to be.

For Eros, it was beyond that.

Experience, he realized, was a cold teacher. His other affairs had been largely based on the handsomeness of his form, he discovered very belatedly. This was not that. There was no way it could be.

A fair face had a great deal of ability to woo a fair maiden. His had done that, many times. And she was, by far, one of the fairest of those. She rivalled a goddess's beauty, and other mortals'. Helen of Troy was not her match for it, in his opinion. No one was.

So? Had he, Eros, not known beauty, before? This should be like his other affairs, then, on some level.

But it was not.

He knew who she was, more than he knew himself.

He was Eros, the God of Love-in-its-Passion. Skilled with technique and familiar with desire.

Who, then, was this gentle soul who shared her bed? Who was this man who oiled their bodies for her comfort, and not for his pleasure?

Who withdrew when she winced, and only returned for her urging? Eros didn't know. He'd never met this part of himself before.

She could have had any fair prince she chose. But she'd chosen none of her mortal suitors. She'd kept herself apart from them, kept her heart intact.

And then she'd chosen him.

Misshapen, disguised... more beast than man, she'd chosen him, and was taking him to her heart as she was taking him to her bed. Loving him. Again. And again.

She could not see, but she could feel. She knew he had fur for hair, and an untamed mane, rather than a curling set of short locks. She knew that his body was overly large, and hirsute, that the claws on his hands were echoed on his feet, which she'd sweetly put her lips to.

Few things on this side of hell were uglier than him, right now. Yet she loved him with a sweet kind of adoration.

It was a humbling thing, he realized - to be a handsome God, all your life, then to find yourself loved when you were at your most ugly.

It made him realize that no other amour of his had loved him, truly. That he'd been loved for his face, and his form, and his favors, but not "who he was," on the inside of himself.

In his youth and impertinence, he'd once enraged Apollo. He'd played games with the lives of others, causing them to fall in love, or not, largely as his mother bid him, or as his own whims dictated.

He knew he had not always been fair to others. But he also knew others had not always been fair to him. Passion was a hot thing, and most who swore they wanted it, wanted it only for a short time.

Suplicants used words like “eternal,” when what they meant was “for a night or two.”

He felt the hot burn of his own desire at war with the other love inside of him, the deeper, sometimes gentler, yet also fiercer kind. He marveled that there was more than one kind of love, and wondered if his mother knew this. If she did, she’d never told him.

He still felt the searing of his own enchanted arrow in his blood, yet the feeling that now thrummed through his monster’s veins eclipsed that. This love was not the enchanted facsimile, the heat driven pseudo-desire that sometimes raged hot, then cooled quickly.

This was different, and it was deep, and it was consuming him. She was priceless and she was love, love and soul, and those who had thought themselves in love with her for her beauty's sake had treated her wrongly.

There was so much more to her than that. So *much* more. If she would keep him, he would spend all of his days showing her that he knew her. Showing her love. All the love he had inside of him. All he had, period.

Their night together left him shattered. The next one did, as well.

By the third night, he craved a candle in the room. Just a small one. A remainder of one from Winter’s Festival, placed well back so that he might see her while they made love, just a little.

His face was still hidden from her eyes. Her vision could not use the light on the other side of the room as his could. Could not use it to see when eyes closed in passion, or teared in ecstasy...

He adored her. For a long, sweet time, he adored her.

Replete, exhausted, and spent, he fell into a lover's soft slumber.

And she rose to get the candle, unthinking.

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*But, he was beautiful!*

As Psyche beheld her sleeping lover who would be her husband, as her eyes took in the beastly form of the paramour who had dominated her days and filled her nights with splendor, it was all she could think.

He was beautiful. Even in his terrible, terrible beastliness, he was “handsome” incarnate. He was raw, and he was breathtaking.

The muscles in his back and arms had lifted the great beam from the Great Hall, and the broad shoulders had carried her through the passageways, to their chambers. His tousled, magnificent mane was the texture of silk, as was most of the hair on his body. The tips of his fangs showed, as he slept, fangs she'd traced with her tongue when they kissed. They were white, and pointed, a protector's tools, for a protector's use.

He was beautiful. Nothing, nothing she'd ever seen in her life was more beautiful than this.

She wished... (Oh, how she wished!) his eyes were open, so she could see their color, too. Were they brown, as most were? Deep grey, like the storm cloud that had enveloped her, and deposited her in the Chamber of the Winds? Were they green, like hers? She leaned closer.

And a bead of hot candle wax dripped down, landing on his sleeping arm.

Blue. They were blue. Blue like a storm-rattled sky, or the Mirror Pool, just before the stars came out. Blue like aloneness, and blue like the sorrow of a life that was full of people, yet had somehow remained solitary, with an untouched heart, until now.

And they were confused, for a moment.

And then they were horrified.

"Psyche. Oh, my love. What have you done? What have you done?"

The candle in her hands pushed back the veil of enchanted darkness, as only the candles of Winter's Festival could do. His face even seemed to shift and shimmer behind its leonine countenance. Sometimes he was his beastly self, and sometimes he seemed to be a youth, someone near her age, and blindingly fair, by classical standards. He was wrapped in the sheet. No, not the sheet. Wings. Huge wings, like an archangel's. He was wrapped in wings, folded against his great back.

The room shook with thunder.

"She's found us!" He grabbed her necklace from the bedside table, and placed it around her neck.

"Who?" Psyche asked, though she suddenly had the terrible feeling that she knew.

"Aphrodite. My mother. Wear this! The magic in it is all I have that can keep you safe, now."

He wrapped her in the sheet as the cloud that had brought her there suddenly seemed to be filling the room. His wings spread out, enveloping her, pushing the cloud and the dark to her. He was trying to hide her, again.

"Eros, no! I will not be apart from you!" But he was withdrawing, his lion's form gathering around him, ready for a fight. The cape that would shroud him was being drawn around his shoulders. Rock crumbled, and she knew he was about to send her away.

"We cannot be together." His eyes held tears. They were beautiful and blue, human-looking, no matter which face he shifted between.

"Forgive me. I didn't understand!" she pleaded.

"There is an understanding beyond knowledge. Goodbye, my beautiful Psyche. I swear I will still try to protect you..."

The stones began to fall in earnest, over her head. Cave-in. Shades of grey claimed her sight.

And she was carried away before she could begin to frame a reply.

--

She wept and she begged, from the safety of her rooms back in the palace in Miletus. She could never reveal where she'd been or what she'd seen, and her sorrow was all-encompassing.

She mourned the loss of him like she'd never mourned anything else. Her life was changed, forever. She was changed, forever. She'd been the beloved of a God. Her heart, good though it was, was different, now. So even her heart was changed, forever.

She prayed to any God that would hear her, and gave much of her wealth away, both for the good it did others, and hoping just one of the recipients might know a way back to him.

None did.

Not the people who bartered food from the land of Chin, nor the fisherman from Russ land, not gypsies, not beggars, not blind seers nor fools. Not even the great artist Kristopher, who observed no lines but those he chose, seemed to know how to show her the way back home.

For *he* was her home now. She would have no other.



She spoke to him often, in her heart, as the days passed. Somehow, she felt he could hear her.

But she knew he would not come to her. For Aphrodite had left her in peace. Psyche knew the price of that peace must be their separation.

Eros had defied his mother, and defied a Goddess. Defied her because he was in love, and their love was forbidden, and reckless, and wild in its purity.

Ironical that they had offended the only Goddess likely to champion their cause. Love's Goddess must be livid at the turn of events, Psyche knew, and it must only be Eros' vow that he would never speak to Psyche again that kept her safe.

That, or that he would never speak to Aphrodite again, if the jealous Goddess injured her.

Yes, he'd saved her.

He'd saved them both, for misery.

Days turned in to weeks, and nothing could console the woman who now felt severed from herself.

Psyche prayed for his return. When that did not come, she prayed for death.

Which nearly found her, at the hands of a zealot.

Determined to find the way back to Eros, she'd retraced her steps up the mountain, deciding to throw herself off the ledge again. Either the Wind would catch her, or Hades would take her for his own, and she would serve Persephone eternally.

She was not sure if it mattered any more, if that happened.

A man with a dagger made a different decision for her.

Grabbing her from behind, he thrust her against a rock, and leaned over her. His breath stunk of the worship of Bacchus, and his eyes looked both evil and soulless.

"Only Aphrodite is beautiful, you whore!" he swore at her, as he held the dagger aloft. The point came down near her ear.

"Be... marred!" he said, cutting into her skin.

Psyche screamed in pain and despair as her blood began to run. Her looks were costing her, again. She would die scarred, and unlovely. Her beautiful appearance had not brought her happiness anyway. If anything, it had only brought her shallow admirers and a doomed love. Fine, then. Losing her fair face would take away nothing she valued. Perhaps now, Aphrodite would leave her alone, and let her find either peace or death.

*Cut deeper, she thought, with sorrow. I need to make certain you leave a scar.*

He did, and she was afraid in her agony.

And then she was... nothing.

A beast's roar of fury, of indignation, of raw pain, and rage, and the man was torn away from her, and gone. She crumpled to the ground as Eros lifted him, and threw him off the cliff, into the waiting Abyss. No wind bore him up. And if it had, Eros' fury would have borne him back down again.

The Protector's face. He was wearing the Protector's face, the lion's face, the one she loved. She would at least see it again. Even though she was ugly, she would see her beloved again.

"My love! My love! Oh, Gods, my beautiful love!" Eros wailed, as he cradled her bleeding form. She was hurt. She was innocent of any wrong, and she was hurt anyway.

This was not his mother's doing. This was the act of a deranged lunatic. The unfairness of it destroyed Eros anew. This had not been Aphrodite's will at work. Just a zealot's. Just a fool's.

Psyche looked up into the leonine face she so loved. Even with the hood of his cape up, she now could see him inside its shadows, either because she had already seen his features, or because its magic was spent, and it was just a cape, now.

"Eros." She lifted a hand to touch him. He cradled her mutilated cheek.

"Beauty, my beauty. I protected you from the rage of a Goddess, and came too late to protect you from the rage of a man. Forgive me. Forgive me, my beautiful love." He wept bitter tears.

She smiled weakly. "Not so... beautiful... now. It is all right, Eros. If I can't love you, it doesn't matter anymore. You don't have to love me now. I may not be free of my love for you, but at least you can be free of yours for me. I love you enough to give you that, at least."

For a moment, he truly didn't follow. *Not so...beautiful...now.*

So she thought he might only have loved her because she was fair? Bile rose in his mouth, as he realized how unfair he'd been to her. To both of them. He'd loved her, it was true. But he'd never told her why, never told her it had nothing to do with her fair face, not really. Not in the end.

He caught a sob in his throat and he scooped her up, carrying her to a place of safety.

Though Aphrodite's rage had shattered several rooms of his palace, the Mirror Pool held magic, and it was near. He took her to it, and laid her next to its shimmering surface amid the rubble of what had once been the room that contained it. He'd not bothered to restore it. Why should he? Without her inside, it was simply so much stone.

"Don't die. Do not die. Do *not* die, my beautiful Psyche." He cupped water in his hirsute hand, and carried it to her cheek.

"But she is beautiful no longer," a divine voice came to him, as he tended his love's wounds.

Hera. The red-haired Queen of the Gods sat perched on a rock, watching Eros as he labored. She had been watching these two, with some interest, for a while now. Famous for her insights, her reasons were her own.

He had no time for her.

"She is beautiful to me," was all he said, nearly ignoring Zeus' queen as he worked. The water had some ability to restore, and heal. It had been blessed by Apollo, to help heal grief. What worked for a heart would work for a body.

At least, he prayed it would.

"And you? Do you think you are beautiful to her?" Hera asked, almost casually, watching as the once vainly handsome son of Aphrodite was brought low. By a mortal, no less. And now a scarred mortal, at that.

"It does not matter what I am. It only matters what she is." *Heal her. Heal her, damn you, Apollo. And I will owe you a debt, for Daphne.*

"And what is she then, Eros?" Hera asked, waiting to see if he would select the right words. Her eyes were shrewd.

He paused, trying to see if the water was healing her. He searched for words. Words he knew his love would hear, even in her shock.

"She is my beloved. She is my life, she is..." He hesitated. He realized he had never actually married her in any ceremony, even though he'd given her the words of wanting it. He could not call her his wife, then. Not before the Goddess of Marriage and Childbirth, certainly.

"She is everything. She is betrothed to me. We are... bonded."

Ah. There the words were. Everything. Betrothed. Bonded. Binding words, and words for a wedding ceremony. Hera was pleased, though Eros could not lift his head from his task to see her satisfaction. He had eyes only for his love's pain.

The water was working. It was healing the bitter gash to her face. He could feel her pain lessen as he tended her.

And all the while, Hera, goddess of women in childbirth, Queen of Immortality's Door, simply watched.

The wound closed, thanks to the magic in the water, but the cut had been deep. It would never heal completely. Psyche would always carry the mark. Eros' eyes were full of his love. She cupped his hand to her cheek, and turned to kiss his palm. His furred palm.

"You saw it, when she was attacked?" Hera asked.

He did not move his eyes from her face. Her beloved face. "No. I felt it. I felt her fear."

As all lovers brushed by enchantment did, if they were truly meant to be wed, and to be parents. Hera's sharply intelligent mind began to weave plans.

Marriage and childbirth. Two things she knew about, intimately. She smiled an almost secret smile, as Eros the Bold, the one who had infuriated her stepson and occasionally her, came under her sway, at last.

"And she? I wonder how she feels?" Hera asked in an almost idle tone, as her samite gown and feathered cloak swished around her generous form. She was the beauty of middle age incarnate, and she wore it like perfume.

Psyche struggled to sit up, then kneel, knowing she was in the presence of not just deity, but royalty.

"I love him, Great Lady," Psyche answered. Eros offered to lift her, but she remained on her knees in the presence of such blinding splendor as Hera.

The Goddess' face looked kind, though canny. She saw what others could not, always.

"You love him. Just as he is?" The First Lady of all Olympus asked her. Peacock feathers trailed the ground, from her cape.

Eros, now seated on a nearby rock, bent his head low inside his hood. He knew Psyche had seen his form, both ugly and fair. Like anyone, she would choose his fair form, and doom them both. She would be just another lover who favored him for his fair visage, and who could blame her?

And if he looked like himself again, especially with her, Aphrodite might hunt him, perhaps. Hunt them both. Only the fact that she was distracted with Hephaestus for the moment was sparing them now.

"Just as he is," Psyche confirmed without hesitation, reaching for the folds of his cloak. She meant to push back his hood.

*No. No! His mind screamed. Do not look. You can't love me, if you look. No one can, my Beauty! If I am ugly, you will turn from it. If I am beautiful, you will only love me for that. Don't you see?*

For it was then he realized the lure of the subterfuge he had used. He wanted to be loved for who he was, and not what he looked like. And so did she. It was part of what had drawn them to each other, from the first.

But he'd stayed hidden, deep in the folds of his cape, while she had been open. He'd used the cape as a shield, as much as a veil. He felt caught, like he needed it still. But for a blinding flash she'd barely seen him, in either incarnation.

Which one would she love? Which one could she love? He was terrified of the answer.

She set her lovely hands on either side of his hood, and slowly, very slowly, pushed the cloth back.

He waited, aware the net of safety he'd spun for himself was about to be moved away. The hood would no longer protect him. At least... it would not protect him from her scrutiny. He would be revealed, and know the fear of that, know its vulnerability.

The great, leonine face stared back at her. The muzzle she'd but briefly glimpsed, and all the rest: the soft trail of blonde hair that traced his nose to the arch of his blonde eyebrows, the gently riven lip; the chin that had been buried in the bedclothes but for a blinding second, down-covered and soft; the shape of his jaw, and the deep, protective set of his eyes in his brow.

She smiled, a little, as she returned her gaze to his chin. The hair there was soft. She knew, as it had caressed her skin as he'd kissed her body.

Then, his eyes. The unforgettable blue eyes she craved. They were the lightest of sapphires, or the enchanting shell of a robin's egg. Beautiful. Love-filled. Hers.

"When you look at me... what am I?" he whispered. "Do you see a man?"

He was desperately afraid that without the hood, a blonde-haired youth, winged and glorious, fair beyond all meaning of that word, now sat before her.

"Part of you is," she said, very kindly, not wanting to hurt his feelings. In the green of her eyes, he saw his reflection.

He was ferocious, and beast-like. An animal, in human clothes. The mirror of the pool confirmed it.

"I can restore the both of you, if you wish," Hera offered.

Her with no scar. Him with no lion's face. The wife of Zeus had certain magicks.

"No!" They said it together, meaning it.

Psyche's fingers went to her now-marred cheek, to feel the scar. A thin ridge of hate held the area just before her ear. He wanted to kiss her there. Just because.

"Then we shall clean her, at least." Hera waved her arm, removing the stains of blood from Psyche's gown, and from her skin. Eros barely shrugged his thanks as she was restored. Indeed, he barely noticed. His eyes still drowned in hers.

"I love you," he told her, lifting her fingers away from the scar and kissing them. "It takes nothing from your beauty. It couldn't," he



whispered into the same ear that bore the scar. He kissed the line of it, loving her.

"And I love you. You felt my fear? And now wherever I go, are you with me, in spirit?" She asked, as if that were the important thing. Not that she was now willingly betrothed to a man with a face that belonged either in a cage or in a gladiator's arena.

"I... do not believe I ever truly knew what love was, until this moment." He cupped her cheek. Then his face became sad.

"My life endangers you. My mother will return soon. Her rage will be..."

"Inconsequential," Hera concluded, stroking a soft peacock feather. It was time to conclude this. And a bit of revenge against the Goddess who had caused her at least some misery would be welcome.

"You cannot stand against my mother, Hera." No one seemed able to, for long.

Hera lifted a shoulder in a negligible shrug. "I am the Queen of Heaven. I have stood against other mothers - and fathers besides yours, Eros." It was true. Though often unfair, Hera's vengeance against her husband's lovers, and even against Zeus himself, was the stuff of epic literature.

Hera circled Psyche's slight form. "I have stood *for* them, too," she reminded the pair.

That too, was true. Her temples were often visited, her shrines adorned with gifts, hoping for her favor. The Goddess of the Everlasting Promise was not unloved in Greece.

"I am the Goddess of the Wedded Vow, and the promise that brings; I am the Goddess of the Birth of All Children." She eyed Psyche's still-

flat stomach. "That places her under *my* protection, now." She eyed Eros as her meaning became clear. "She carries your seed, impetuous son of Aphrodite. Since your first night."

"Now? She is pregnant? Now?" The Prince of Love and Desire shot to his feet.

"You are such a... male," Hera chided him, as if calling him stupid. Which he suddenly realized he was.

"The scar on her face, the one she decided to keep? The world will see it as a flaw, and Aphrodite will find her temples... busy again." Hera lifted her shoulder in a dismissive gesture. "But what interests me more is her condition. That makes her *my* servant, now, not Aphrodite's. Who, I think, will sing a different tune once her granddau - grandchild is born."

Aphrodite. The goddess who was right now visiting her husband, possibly mending her marriage. Eros wondered how much Hera had to do with his mother's sudden urge to do that.

"'Granddaughter.' You nearly said 'granddaughter.'" He leaped on her slip of the tongue. "I am going to have a daughter." Eros was astonished. Elated. Stunned.

And Psyche was... catching up. Her body had been telling her things. She simply hadn't been listening.

"A daughter?" Hera asked, as if posing a query. "One whose name will mean 'Bliss?' I said no such thing, and you are being foolish. She hasn't even accepted you yet, younger God," Hera pointed out.

Eros turned to his love. His life. And realized Hera was right.

"Queen Hera, we need a moment alone, if you please."

Hera inclined her head, a soft, almost secret smile on her face.

"Your love has a price. It was thus you conceived, and thus you must stay, Eros. Not every woman is content to be wed to a monster. Especially one as lovely as she." Hera left him with his doubts, as she vanished into the shimmering light of the pool.

Hera had called her lovely. He knew that even with her injury, Hera was right.

"Will you speak with me, Lady?" Eros asked her, letting the hood stay down around his shoulders. Finally.

Psyche nodded. "It is time that we do that, don't you think?"

He did.

"We told each other many things," she began. "And while you never told me a lie, I do not think you told me the entire truth, either."

"I spoke with my fears as companions, more than my realities," Eros admitted, realizing that trying to save her had cost him his heart, which in turn had cost hers.

"You wanted me to know you as something fearsome," she said.

"You needed something fearsome to save you," he reasoned. "Then after I did, I realized I was falling in love with you," he added.

"But you did not believe I was falling in love with you. You weren't sure you could have faith in it." She did understand, then.

He dropped his head. He hadn't had faith in their love. But the fault for that was not in her. It was in him.

He sighed deeply. "I knew I could inspire love, or at least desire, if I was beautiful. I was not sure if I could inspire love... like this," he admitted, introspectively.

"I thought...you could not love me, if I looked like a beast. But I *wanted* you to. Needed you to, in my way. And then... I could be no other way. I could not come to you wearing the face Olympus knows. And this one was..." he indicated a form the rest of the world would call "misshapen."

"Mine," she interrupted him. "Like your hands. It was mine, Eros." Her green eyes were full of her love for him, and full of forgiveness.

"I had only been loved for my form, before." Eros confided. "I think you know a thing or two about that. I should have trusted."

"The love of beauty is a kind of love," she allowed. "But it is not the kind that stays. I understand your fear. I shared it, even." She shrugged. "I wanted you to find me both beautiful *and* brave. To see the fragile places inside of me, and care for them. And I will care for yours."

He nodded his head, and bent it, humbled.

She whispered softly, remembering the words from the hall. "You were something terrible... that wanted my help."

"I was," he confessed. "When I thought I lost you... I thought I had to stay away. That way you could live your life, choose a path apart from mine. I did it to save you, but... it cost me. Cost us both, so dearly. I always wanted help, from you."

A God's tear traced his mighty cheek. "A sorrow rose up before me. Greater than any I had ever known," he said, sharing the depth of his pain.

Her green eyes were full of wisdom. He wondered if she had not been touched by Athena.

"That is when you must not despair, then. When you must think that something wonderful is happening with you. That life has not forgotten you, and will not let you fall."

He kissed her deeply, feeling her love. Feeling her promise. Feeling the generosity in her spirit that she would see something terrible, yet find something worth loving. She was his soul. Her very name would come to mean the word.

"We can marry in the vaulted halls of Olympus, in the throne room of Zeus. Hera herself will officiate," Eros tried to tempt her. It would emphasize that the couple were now under the protection of the Queen of the Eternal Vow, which is what marriage was.

"Here. Can she marry us here, my love?" Psyche asked.

"Here?" He looked at the rubble that had once been part of his secret palace. "Not the Crystal Cavern? Or the Stained Glass Chamber? Or the Chamber of the Falls? The deeper places still stand. We could go there. The Great Hall?"

"No. Here. Here, where we can see ourselves, imperfectly perfect, in the water, in the only mirror you ever showed me. Here. Where you can marry a woman with a scar on her cheek, and I can marry ..." she faltered for a noun, not wanting to offend him.

"A Beast." He gave her the word in his low baritone, pleased at its apt description. "I can marry a great Beauty. And you can marry a great Beast."

And they did.

--fin--



*Since antiquity, Psyche is often pictured with a butterfly. It is offered as the ancient meaning of her name, which has also come to mean the word 'soul.'*

*In many cultures, the butterfly signifies the transformative powers of great change. Change which has come over our lives, and must then be dealt with, acknowledged, endured, embraced, or all of the above, and more.*

*Wherever you are on your journey of change, I wish you love.*

*The Immortal Lovers*  
*Hephaestus and Aphrodite*  
*Vincent and Catherine*

*By Cindy Rae*



The Great Forge was a hole in the Earth beneath Mount Aetna. A site worshipped by mortals for a thousand years, if not more, it was a part of His palace. The working part. The working part, for The Working God. Perhaps the only working god, really.

The Forge was a cave meant for Divine Machinations, Divine Provenances. Or Providences, considering that all things, like all men, had a fate, and they were meant to be.

The World beneath the world was cavernous. Hot. Rock and stone. Lit by fire and sparks, it sounded like ringing steel much of the time. At other times, the soft hiss of steam could be heard winding its way through the tunnels, when the metal that was more than metal hit the

water that was more than water. It was the place where everything was more than it seemed, though it often looked like less. A weapon was not just a weapon, it was a means of survival. A pin did not just hold a cape; it declared one's station in life. The dichotomy of the place pleased its owner, if it pleased no one else.

The Way Down was known only to a few. The Way Out, to even fewer.

The Ways had to remain secret, and sometimes changed. For among the other priceless treasures, divine thunderbolts were forged here, as well as divine armor. Armor fit for a hero, or a prince, or a king, or even just a fair and shining knight.

Hephaestus wished he had some such armor, for his heart.

The Sweating God was among the loneliest of the Immortals, for he rarely left the volcanic forge where he plied his trade. He had scant help, and bore almost no company.

Mercury the messenger, his winsome eyes often teasing, came to bear away the forge-born gifts to Zeus and Man. Mercury rarely stayed long. It was just as well. He was ridiculous, and playful, and sometimes a bit of a thief. He was a distraction, like a playful mouse. Or Mouse, considering he was a God.

Hephaestus did not care for distractions when he was working. And he was almost always working.

The Smith God, the God of the Forge, he was a god of labor, and a god of laborers. He had a craft, and he applied it with divine precision and care. Above all other gods, he created.

Zeus might shake the heavens, and Apollo might drive the chariot of the Sun, but it was he, Hephaestus, who *created* wonders and marvels. He was not the half-idle Bacchus or the petulant Ares. He was



Hephaestus. And he was worshipped, everywhere, for his steadfast, almost ceaseless efforts.

As such, he had at least some things in common with working men. He rose early, labored long, and blessed the oblivion of sleep, when it took him. He knew pride at his creations, and pride in his skill.

Like most gods, he was a bit vain in that regard. From the most intricate brooch, to the sturdiest shield, to the deadliest thunderbolt, he could craft it all, and suffuse it with enchantment, if need be.

Hephaestus' powerful arms wielded a hammer no other man, yea, no other God even, could lift. The creations of the Great Forge were his handiwork, and his alone.

Powerful Zeus might be able to call down lightning from heaven, but he could not forge it, could not shape it, or bend it to his will. No, Zeus could not do this, this Creation Magic, any more than he could command the sea. That was Poseidon's realm.

This was Hephaestus'. Every God to his Talent. Every deity to his place. His was here. Below. Pounding.

Sweat glistened from a dark gold frame, as shoulders more powerful than Hercules' worked and rotated. Arms that could pound iron into anything from a javelin to spikes for a chariot wheel were fitted with plain yet enchanted bracers. A workman's belt defined his hips. His hair was an unkempt mane, with every color of firelight captured inside it. Blonde. Red. It looked darker when he sweated. And he always sweated. Some of that sweat trickled down the magnificent line of his bare back.

She was here. He felt her before he saw her. He always did.

His blue eyes lifted, but he didn't turn. She was watching his titan's back, and enjoying the view. Yes, he always knew when she was near. Always. She was Aphrodite, after all. And as if that wasn't enough, she was his wife.

A bond he'd not consciously forged but nevertheless felt, spun out between them.

She stood a long time, watching the play of muscle on his fire-lit back as he paused a moment, then continued with his work, unstopping.

Either he was intent on his efforts, or he was intent on ignoring her. The Goddess of Love and Beauty riled a little at that. Few others ignored her, ever. Only him. Only her husband.

If there was a more magnificent male in the cosmos, she could not name him. The power of his chest, of his arms and thighs... even the damaged foot, the one that set him further apart, did not diminish the raw edge of his beauty.

His face was seared by the forge. His features altered by it. His nose was broad, to draw in air like a bellows. His brow was deep, to protect his sapphire eyes from the flame. The soft gold of his beard never burned, and never grew. She knew it was soft, from when she'd kissed him once, teasing. His mouth was unusual, as well. Lion-forged. Her husband lacked only a tail to be the embodiment of a beast.

"If you ask me a riddle, you could be a sphinx," she teased to his silent back.

The hammer hit, and stopped. Then he simply lifted it again, and continued a moment longer.

When he was at a stopping place, and not before, he spoke to her.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Is that a riddle?" She stepped closer, sounding coy. Her pale gown made a whispering sound around her legs.

"It is a question."

Her love was dour today.

Her sand-colored hair was upswept, and entwined with gold thread. Her green eyes had enslaved kings of mortal and immortal worlds with want. Her white gown flowed around a body meant for loving, and her mouth was the most kissable thing in Olympus, Earth, or Hades.

"I'm here because you don't come to me," she told him, keeping her voice light, trying not to sound like she was complaining.

"I cannot go Above," he said, pulling a length of unforged lightning from a bin. Zeus might be able to wield it, but not in its present, wild form. Only Hephaestus could tame it, to make it usable. It was his gift, to make the fire in the sky a manageable thing. To shape it just enough, with hammer and fire and water, to make it useful.

There was an art to making a useless thing useful. A talent. Hephaestus had it. Others didn't.

"You could come Above if you wanted," she returned, eyeing his dreary environs. Of all the Gods, only he lived like a pauper. No, not like a pauper. Like a laborer.

"My place is here," he answered simply. The hammer struck against what would become a lightning bolt. The sound was softer and lower than it was when he forged iron, or brass, or steel. It was like the sound of distant thunder, on the anvil.

She crossed to his side to get a better view of him swinging the hammer. "They call you Vulcan in Rome," she told him.

He paused only a fraction of a second at that.

"And they call you Venus. What of it?" He did not turn his head to look at her, but stayed fixed on the task.

"Oh, nothing. I suppose I just like the sound of it better. 'Vulcan and Venus.' 'Hephaestus and Aphrodite.'"

"Call me Vulcan, then, if it pleases you." He did not look up.

"Perhaps I will. Next time we are in Rome," she teased him again.

She always did that, in the rare times she visited. And as much as it discomfited him, he knew he would replay every word, every gesture, in his mind once she left, once he was alone in his Great Chamber, and in his lonely bed. He would remember every word.

It was at such times the clutter of the forged items that were scattered everywhere in the room would bring him no comfort. Not the statues, not the little keepsakes, not the odd assortment of items wrought by men for their amusement, or him for their use, would soothe him.

Only every word she had said would do that. It was always thus. And it was his secret to keep, that it was always thus.

"You haven't told me how beautiful I am today." It was a gentle jibe. She was not fishing for a compliment. The Goddess of Love and Beauty knew full well that she was one.

"You are always beautiful." He hit the hammer to the bolt. "And I am always... working."

Ugly. He meant to say "always ugly." He'd substituted the word at the last moment. She was no fool. The Goddess of Love knew better than anyone the difference between what a man wanted to say, and what he actually said. It was one of her gifts.

She stepped close, and placed her hand on him. "You work too hard."

Her hand on his wrist. That was all it took to stay his swing. All it took for her to own him, body and soul. One touch of Venus.

He lowered the hammer slowly to the anvil.

"It needs done," he said, but made no move to forge the lightning further.

"It always needs done," she sympathized.

She, she alone could distract him from what he was doing. From who he was.

"If you won't walk with me Above, will you at least walk with me Below a bit?" she tempted him.

Of course he would. Even when he was peevish at her absences, he knew he couldn't stay angry with her for long. The years had taught him better. He knew he could not deny her.

"There *is* a place I wanted to show you," he conceded, turning his darkened hand up so it clasped her fair one. It was part of her magic that he never got her dirty.

Still, she drew his form to the great stone sink, and filled it with the Everfull pitcher. Magically linked to the bounty of the Great Falls, it poured until the basin was full of clear, sparkling water. She was attending him. Like a servant. Like a wife. He removed his bracers, and set them aside.

She poured the water down his arms as he soaped them, the soap a gift she'd sent, long ago. At the time, he'd taken it as a subtle insult, an intimation that she was clean, and desirable, and he so much... less so. Or simply so much less.

But she'd told him only that the amber-infused scent had made her think of him, so she'd sent it to him in a beautiful box he'd wrought for her jewelry a long time ago.

The box sat near the sink, golden and glistening. Looking as out of place as she did, here. Whenever he made something for her, he used only the brightest, most precious metals, the most radiant of gems. It was what she was, after all. Light. Precious. Radiant.

She watched the pour of the water down the muscles of his arms, watched it sluice the day's labors from his skin. He was hirsute, to protect him from the fires of the forge. Shirtless, and gleaming. He removed the heavy apron that held his tools around his waist, and set it to the side. The wide tradesman's belt had covered him halfway up his chest, and now left his abdomen bare.

He was breathtaking.

A leather band on his bicep gleamed in the light. She dried his arms with a soft towel, then reached for his enchanted bracers, and buckled them back onto his wrists. Such an intimate gesture, to be dressed by one's wife. Normally, it was a chore he performed alone.

"There is a cavern," he said.

His voice, too, could beguile. Better than hers, she thought, though she'd never told him.

"Filled with beauty. I thought of you when I saw it."

*What an intimate thing to say,* she thought.

"Will you take me there?" She smiled at him.

Her radiance filled the room, and his heart. He loved her, even if they were ill-suited.

He pulled on his cape, and offered her his arm, a courtly gesture. Lame for many years, he was still powerful, and if he kept his gait slow, she would barely notice his limp.

He'd gotten it in a fight with Zeus, long ago. The only God who'd dared to stand up to Zeus, once, when the Sky Father was being a bully. He'd paid for his temerity, though he never regretted it.

*We live. So sometimes, we bleed,* he'd thought as he'd nursed the wound. It was as simple as that, sometimes, even for a god.

Hephaestus shrugged away the injury as negligible, since it did not interfere with his work, or with his craft. Prometheus suffered far worse at Zeus' hands.

But Hephaestus did not like that coupled with his appearance, his wound was one more thing that set him apart from the other Gods. Marked by Zeus' anger, he could not heal his deformed foot. That meant he could not change what he was, to be more like not only those who lived Above, but those who lived Far Above.

He was not like them. Any of them, Olympian or mortal. So he did not live like them, or even near them. He lived here, isolated from All.

Work could consume his days, but it could not consume his sense of separateness. He was a laboring god, and a lame one. Revered by common men, more than others, for who else knew the sweat of work? He was not like the other Olympians, and indeed, there were none like him, anywhere, for compare.

The knowledge of all the things that kept him from her injured his heart, at times. The heart he'd lost to her.

Aphrodite's silver and white robe shimmered as she walked beside him. Her arm was clasped in a golden bracelet he'd wrought for her.

Poseidon's pearls shimmered in her ears. He felt a stab of jealousy. Had she been...?

"They were a tribute, from a Princess," she told him, reading his thoughts perfectly. She fingered the pearls. "I helped her find love."

"There have been others." He said it, damning himself for admitting he was not enough for her.

"Tributes?"

"Lovers."

"There have been." She admitted the carelessness of her life honestly, though with some sorrow. Perhaps it would have been easier for them if there hadn't been. Perhaps he would not be so intimidated by all that he was not, now. But it was her nature to love. And she had not always been his wife.

"I was younger, for most of it, and only sometimes a fool. Then later ... I was just ... unsure. Sometimes it seemed as if you wanted me to go. Other times ..."

She was struggling with something. Something she could not quite solve. That was interesting. Aphrodite the Blithe and Beautiful rarely struggled over her decisions.

She matched her step to his as they wandered. Eternally young, eternally beautiful, she did not bear her age in any other place but the knowledge that shadowed her eyes. He said nothing to her admission of fault, of guilt. It was enough that they both understood it, and accepted.

"We were all fools, once." He referred not only to his own few attempts at love, before her, but a little to their ill-conceived marriage. Of all the Deities of heaven, he might be the one least suited to her.



Better glistening Apollo, or even mortal Paris, or some other Prince of the World. Someone handsome. Someone who owned the sunlight, and walked freely in the day. Someone like her.

"So we were all fools, once upon a time. Do you think age makes us wise?" she asked him, stepping down a long and winding stair he'd cut from the rock a millennia ago. His palace was lovely, in its way. Rock columns supported the massive roof of stone.

The God of the forge was also the God of fire, and it flickered along the walls. In torches. In braziers and lanterns set on posts, and candles set in niches. He was worshipped everywhere. As was she.

"I think age... molds us. Shapes us. Like my hammer," he answered her.

She inclined her fair head, agreeing. Like his hammer.

She'd discovered much in the last few hundred years. How adherents made splendid admirers but poor lovers. How the word "loving" often described an act, but regularly lacked the accompanying emotion. How her own heart had never followed her body when it came to sex. Oh, she'd thought it might, for a while. But she'd always been proven wrong. She felt shallow in her loveliness. The Goddess of Love who had not felt that love, not truly, not deeply, for herself.

It had taken her a long time to realize that true love was a mature emotion, and not a flighty one. She began to suspect only the mature were capable of it, in some way. The knowledge was not easy for her to bear.

Nor was it easy for him.

He'd rejected her, long ago. Declared her too lovely to remain with him. So she'd fled his dark and smoky world for the one Above. As high as Olympus, she was the Adored One.

And the lonely one, it turned out.

"The work. Does it please you? Does it bring you joy?" She asked the odd question as they meandered down an especially long tunnel. He was taking her deep into his home. She was certain she had never been this way. Wind whispered all around them.

"The work fulfills me, in a way," he told her. "It pleases me to make something from nothing. Something useful, that will help the people. The armor, to protect a man. The sword, so he might protect his family, protect his honor." Hephaestus still carried his, in spite of anything that might or might not have passed between them.

"Doesn't yours?" he asked. "Bring you joy?"

Her sigh was rueful. "I think it took me far too long to discover that what most people call love is... something else. Diversion, though they mean well at the time. It's temporary, for most of them. So I'm temporary, for most of them."

"You burn hot." He said it simply. "You are difficult to bear for long." He didn't mean it as an insult. Just as an observation of how relationships often went.

"I know," she agreed. "I keep thinking that there is something more. Something more... lasting. Something deeper and more eternal."

"When most men pray for love, they are sometimes praying for that night, or for 'just a while.' They are not praying for 'eternal,' my beauty." His almost shy smile looked regretful for her sake.

She chuckled agreement at that. "No. But most of the women are."

He walked in quiet at that assessment for several paces.

His voice sounded almost hopeful. "They all learn, with age. As we are learning," he said.

She did not deny it. "We do," she replied. "And we change, though it is hard. I want to... be more than I have been."

He inclined his head at her admission. Was there a chance for them, now? Was she ready to be his wife, at last, and not a lovely flirt who craved attention?

She had never been evil, or cruel, though love often could be the latter. She'd simply been ... lost, somehow. Divided between what the world sometimes wanted her to be and what she wanted herself to be.

Was she ready to find, and to become, her deeper self? He'd been waiting a long time for this day, if that were true.

"They do learn with age," she agreed. "And much faster than we do. That must be the virtue of being mortal. What they learn in eight months, or eight years, or fifteen or twenty ... well. I feel old. It's taken me a lot longer." She confessed it, her green eyes full of apology.

She had devotees in every corner, and in every culture. Her coffers overflowed from offerings in exchange for her favor.

"Your wealth coddled you sometimes. Kept you from knowing what you needed," he opined.

She did not deny it was true. Her popularity was almost unrivalled, her adherents sometimes almost desperately devoted. Such things could be very... distracting to one trying to better one's self. Or to even find the way to do that.

His soft voice was full of forgiveness, of only the kind the persecuted may bear. "Your lessons were difficult. There was much to... distract you, Above. The world there is a huge place, my Dove."

He'd called her by the name of her sacred bird. His was the crane. A water bird. Ironical, for a god of fire, and yet not. Water was as necessary to his art as flame, she knew.

"You are being charitable with me," she demurred.

"Perhaps charity is called for," he answered softly. "There is an art to accepting help when it is offered."

Was he offering her that help, now?

"I've been trying to find the deeper meaning of things," she confided, her eyes worried that she would not be equal to the task. "It *is* hard. More than I ever thought it would be. Sometimes I feel old, husband. It's so... difficult to change. Even for the sake of love."

Clearly, she was worried that she would fail in this labor.

"Did you think it would be easy?" he asked her, his honeyed baritone washing over her like an offering.

She had the grace to look guilty.

"The blessing and curse of Beauty and Wealth. Everything is easy. Or I thought it was," she admitted.

"You were always beautiful without." He indicated her lovely exterior with a sweep of his clawed hand. "Being beautiful within is possible for you also. Your outer beauty does not preclude the inner kind." He kept her hand firmly in the crook of his other arm.

"You believe I can reach that? That inner beauty?" she asked him earnestly.

"I have always believed that of you, my Aphrodite. There is strength in you. I feel it. You just needed to begin to believe it, for yourself."

He had waited a long time for this day, for this Someday. The promise of it dangled before him like a ripe offering of fruit.

He indicated an all but hidden passageway in the rock, his open palm gesturing that she was to precede him.

The path was narrow, and it twisted. He was right behind her. Thanks to the narrowing of the walls, the wind came in with more force, creating a soft gale around her. For a while, she thought the glimmer along the dark walls was just some of his magic. Something he'd sent to light her way in the dark, so that there was no darkness when he was with her.

Then she stepped into a huge crystal cavern, and she realized the glow on the passageway walls was just reflected glory.

A Cathedral, no, an Olympus of crystal stood before her, the spires of gemstone reaching down from the ceiling, and up from the earth. Pillars. Spires. Amethyst glimmered on emerald in the dark. A shining crystal Kingdom, beneath the volcanic rocks.

And for all the great pillars of gemstone, a million tiny ones embedded in the walls, catching every facet of light. His hand moved and lit a brazier in the center of the room.

It caused the entire room to explode, to shimmer with the color and light.

From that one, central source, the light rose and bounced from stone to stone to stone. Shining. Gleaming. Laying pathways through the rocks light raced outward, and upward, ever upward. Brilliance flung itself to each far corner. Topaz suns fractured into starbursts.

Glittering sapphires danced blue in the walls, over her head, and at her feet. Rainbows arced over her fair hair. Colors prised and shattered all around her.

"My Gods." She breathed it, awestruck.

He stood behind her, watching the loveliness of her expression. He'd saved this room for her. For them.

"How did you find this place?" she asked him, never taking her eyes from its splendor.

"I wanted an anniversary present, a long time ago. It was always here," he answered her, "just waiting for me to find it. For you to ... share it." He watched as the Goddess who'd felt herself too old, suddenly looked young again with wonder.

Her heart skipped several beats, then steadied, and beat firm.

"It feels like... a baptism," she said, closing her eyes as the light washed over her. Stones crunched under her feet. "Like being baptized in light," she told him. Her eyes opened again, and she absorbed all the colors into her memory, or tried to.

"That is what light does, Beauty," he said simply. "It shines in dark places. Pushes them back. Reminds us that we are all connected inside it, and that everything can be re-born. Darkness is not a thing of itself; it is only the absence of light." Beautiful light. The room shimmered with it.

"Does it show us the way toward love?" She turned to him, her beautiful eyes full of helpless tears.

He saw in those eyes all he would ever need to see, all he would ever need to know, of her opening heart.

"One either moves toward Love, or away from it. There is no other direction, Aphrodite," he told her, seeing which way she would step.

She stepped toward him. At last.

He held out his hand in welcome, when her foot disturbed something.

"Oh, no," she said, stooping down, retrieving a piece of quartz, from the floor.

"Please don't tell me I've broken it." She held it out to him haplessly. She was referring to more than the pointed stone in her hand. She was referring to them, and he knew it.

"You haven't," he reassured her, asking for the trinket. She placed the slender stone in his hand. It was pretty, though fairly unexceptional. Faceted, it still had its point. She'd only knocked it loose from the rock, not crushed it.

"It is still a fine stone, though common." His smith's eye beheld it. "It is nearly clear. See how it holds in the light, and reflects it."

He handed it back to her, and watched her as she held the almost worthless piece of quartz aloft, turning it. She smiled. That smile would melt stone, melt steel, and had melted his heart, too long ago now to remember a time when it hadn't.

"It's lovely," she said. "But then, all of them are." She looked around the room, loving the wash of color, still.

He took the stone back from her. It was a peasant's gift.

"Choose something finer. I'll make you a necklace." His hand moved as if to throw the quartz away while she chose.

"No, no, don't, Hephaestus. Don't cast it aside!" Her voice was half frantic as she reached to stay his hand. "This one. Please. Make my necklace from this one."

"It is only a piece of quartz, my Dove. Choose something finer. Something more fitting of a Goddess."

"This one. This one, please, love." She was emphatic.

Love. Had she ever called him that?

He turned the long stone over in his work-roughened palm. It was fair sized, but even so, there were larger ones. More ostentatious ones.

"I suppose if I set it with enough gold, it would do," he tested.

"Gold? No. Just wrap it. Wire, perhaps, and as little of that as it will bear. Just enough to hold it on a simple chain. I don't want to cover the shine, Hephaestus."

"It's a common gem. It isn't worthy of you," he stated. Her admirers could bring her better. Far better.

"It isn't like that." The tears in her eyes were real. "Its value is... so much more than the others. Can't you see it? Can't you, of all people ... *see it*?"

The tear was on her cheek, and again, she knew they were discussing more than a trinket for her.

The Promise of Someday was fulfilled, and Hephaestus let go of a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding.

"I can," he said, holding "her stone" aloft. Its almost clear surface caught whatever color was nearest it. A chameleon stone, then. Chameleons represented change. The stone was common, yes, but no less lovely for that.



It was the kind of gift a simple man would bring to his love, his exceptional love, and hope that the gesture was enough for her.

"I just wasn't sure if you could."

"I am learning to," she told him, reaching her lovely hand up to bend his neck for her kiss. "Will you help me?" She asked it, needing him, and knowing it, finally, for the first time in their married lives. It was difficult to be brave, and to push the limits of her wisdom. But she was determined.

"Help you to be both beautiful and brave? Always," he told her, sealing the vow with a kiss amid the room with a thousand glistening rainbows.

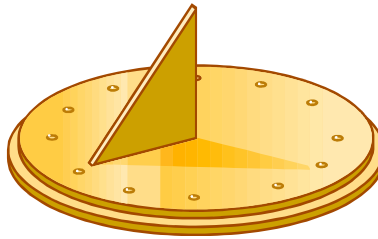
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# *The Immortal Lovers*

## *Odysseus and Penelope*

*By Cindy Rae*



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*One word frees us all of the weight and pain of life.*

*That word, is 'love.' –Sophocles*

-----

Twenty years. *Years.*

Had she chosen another, in her heart?

Twenty years. Ten spent in war, and then, staggeringly, ten more to come back home.

He wouldn't... no make that he couldn't blame her if she'd simply given up.

Had her cold bed grown to plague her?

Had the emptiness in her heart begun to feel too much like the emptiness in her... everywhere?

Had she finally, in a fit of pique, in a fit of despair, or rage or loneliness, or beneath the crushing weight of hopelessness, simply... given in?

Odysseus of Ithaca walked home along the island road, full of more questions than answers.

Which was odd, for him.

Because Odysseus was always the clever man, the wise one, and the trickster. He was vain about his intellect. He was even famous for it. He was used to having all the answers - at least, all the important ones.

Now he had none.

Possessed of strength and royal grace, he was nonetheless disguised as a beggar in his homeland, as he made his way home.

Twenty years. Twenty.

Had she opened her legs to another? Had she opened her heart?

Two decades of waiting told him it was impossible that she hadn't. And only faint hope kept him going, that she might still be his, body and soul.

He had no right to ask it. So of course he made his way through his own island nation, knowing he had to.

He'd seen his mother in the realm of Hades, and sent others there himself. All of Troy lay in cold ruin, still. Though once, the ruins had been blazing ones. The topless towers of Ilium had indeed been set alight, and King Priam of Troy had reigned in Hell for the turn of an hourglass.

Maybe less.

Until the Greeks killed him, and all that was left of his family.

Odysseus' trickery was to blame for that. At least some.

Priam watched his city die at Odysseus' clever ruse. The merciless general, Agamemnon, made sure he watched, before he slew the old monarch.

After all, Agamemnon had sacrificed a daughter for a fair wind. There was blood to pay for that.

So, Priam had paid it.

Ten years ago.

Mighty Achilles had met his fate, and beautiful Helen, the dancer with grace and beauty but little heart, had met hers. Cassandra had tried to warn them. Cassandra always did. Odysseus knew it would do no good. It was her fate.

He wished he knew what his was, now. But Apollo was the God of Truth, and he had favored the Trojan cause. Like Poseidon.

So no Oracle would tell him his future. Or even if he had one. Or if he had one, if he had one with her.

In patched clothes and with a needle-pierced heart, he made his way home. Finally. The Ionian sea glistened, but his heart felt shadowed.

His sins weighed heavy, both in his heart and on his head. Slaughter was no small thing to bear. Neither was faithlessness. He was asking for more than he had given, and he knew it.

On Calypso's island, he'd even forgotten his wife, forgotten it all, and slept with the nymph. Trance-bound, he'd let the dark part of himself run wild, and prowl unchained. Drinking. Feasting. Giving in to every temptation. Relieved, *yes, relieved*, to leave behind all he was.

In another palace on his endless quest, he'd taken the witch Circe to bed. Another dancer, of a different sort. Weren't they all dancers, in the end?

But not her.

His beautiful wife had danced with him, yes. But not for him. Not to tempt him. Just to join with him. To indicate their unity. Sometimes they danced to the music of minstrels. Sometimes, they danced to music only they could hear. It was the way, with them.

He loved her with all he had, and all he was.

And then was terrified to realize that might not be enough.

Penelope was Queen of Ithaca. And he had set her on a throne that should, by rights, long ago have turned to ashes.

They had a son. They had a life once, even. Telemachus would be a young man, while Odysseus had been captured by his hubris as much as his circumstances.

She would be near middle age. His youthful bride would be well into her thirties now. Burdened by care, and suitors she didn't want. Or maybe she did.

Gods, how he dreaded that thought.

For it was the only one with the power to break his heart.

He knew she still lived. Local gossip had told him that much. The beautiful queen of Ithaca had tried to stay her suitors while she wove her husband's burial shroud by day, then ripped out the work at night.

She'd tried to be clever. Clever like him. Given what he now knew about his cleverness, the results should have been predictable.

But still, she'd tried. Her sharp mind had formed the plan, and with a lawyer's precision, she'd executed it.

But she'd taken in a pregnant whore for a handmaiden, out of pity, and been betrayed. The secret of the weaving was exposed to the throng of impatient admirers. The endless waiting was making them bolder. They had already been pressing her to choose, from among them.

They'd caught her in her deception.

There was about to be a reckoning for that.

There was about to be a reckoning for so many things now.

Gods, the time he'd wasted.

Not that it was a conscious waste. The punishment of the God Poseidon was not an easy thing to bear. Punishment. Punishments. The prince of clever ploys had a price to pay. With so many reckonings between them, it was hard to keep score. So many prices, to be paid.

Not the least of which was for thinking that his woman might still be waiting for him.

Twenty years. Twenty. Three hundred and more days, times twenty, and exactly that many nights... Eighty seasons, almost to the day. The dial of the sun spun between them, madly. Around and around. One could get lost in such a great maze of time. He was not sure how she'd borne it. He was not sure how he had.

The night they'd conceived their son was a portentous one. He'd been half mad under the spell of an evil alchemist. Odysseus had raged, and he'd roared his royal displeasure into the night. He'd fled their palace to the low places beneath the citadel. Not so very far from here, as a matter of fact.

His bride had followed him.

And then she had rescued him.

It was hard to admit that.

Twenty years.

The war had gone badly, right up until the point it had gone well. And then very well. The Greeks were victorious over the haughty, wife-stealing Trojans. Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, had his bride back. And all the wealth of a sacked city to show for his troubles.

Odysseus had rags.

He knew she had found another. In his heart, he simply knew it. Twenty years was too long a time to wait; it was too much to ask for, and too much to hope. Half that was. All the others had long since returned to their homes.

Only he, Odysseus, had been the laggard. In the extreme.

He could not even bear to look like himself, as he finally, finally approached his home city. He'd begged Athena to disguise him. She had. The mended-over rags and a different face, that he might pass close enough to find out all he needed to, were his.

He did not even look like her husband anymore, much less like her King.

The goddess of wisdom had granted his request; she'd even given him a leonine countenance for good measure, to make certain he was not recognized.

Shallow princes gamed and even killed each other for his queen's favor. He was not safe, by any means. Not yet. He needed a disguise that

was impenetrable. He risked his life, to see her, again. It was a credible outcome that he might die, here, so close to home.

Would it matter if he did, if she were no longer in love with him?

It was a bitter question, and he knew its bitter answer.

No. It did not.

"I will go. Fate will work her will. What happens is up to providence," he'd told Penelope with extreme surety, the week before he'd left her. Her hair was the blonde color of beach sand; her eyes were the Ionian green sea.

"Don't go," she'd pleaded openly, the plea of every wife on the eve of leave-taking.

"I must. I've already convinced Achilles. We live, Penelope. And sometimes, we bleed." He'd sounded so ... positive, then. So certain of himself, and that he was right. As if no wound was permanent; as if no battle ever left a scar.

Well, he had plenty of those now.

So did she.

And while hers were mostly confined to her heart, she still bore them, he knew.

Had she found another?

Had she done the inevitable?

Had she, tired of his self-centered hubris, simply... left him? Had the ruse been to buy her time to choose another mate, time to get their son safely to manhood, and nothing to do with him?



The thought galled, and pained, and tore at him. Mostly because he did not know.

But he dreaded knowing. *Dreaded it.*

One night he'd had a dream. One of the dozen or so palace suitors who vied for her hand had grabbed her unexpectedly, and kissed her behind a column. Some Ozymandias who thought himself her equal.

She'd wished it was him.

But that was long ago.

Who knew what else she wished, now?

His dream of glory, and of war... it had come at the cost of all their other dreams. He was adrift. Lost. Like Theseus in a labyrinth, but without a guiding thread. Labyrinths. His life felt full of those, lately. It felt like he was in one as large as all of Greece, just to reach his home.

He picked his way through the agora, keeping his face covered beneath his disreputable black hood. A child who caught sight of him burst into tears. Another threw a stone on reflex. He was tattered, and patch-mended. A more ragged king Ithaca had never seen, both in clothing, and in spirit.

If only she were still his...

Ah, but that way madness truly lay.

Hadn't he driven her away? Hadn't he, in his pride, all but pushed her into the arms of another? Young men threw dice for her in the streets, making bets with each other. These were the young bucks, the fair and perfect fools. The hopeful idiots who did not have soldiers enough or wealth enough to be inside the palace. His palace.

He ignored them even as he wanted to beat them to death, and rip them open with his newfound claws. He ignored the urge, and kept the claws tucked inside his cape. It was hard to blame them for wanting her. He, above all others, knew what it was to love her.

He still wanted to kill them, just for thinking they could kiss her mouth.

The street led to a narrow lane, and to a drainage tunnel blocked off by an interior grate that led down. This way was known to almost no one. Possibly no one at all, if the elders had died.

It was a way into his castle. A way that wound far beneath the city streets. There was a world Below his world Above. And he needed the former now.

He sat near the entrance, waiting. Waiting for those around him to desert the area, waiting for everyone to go home to their happy life. Finally. Just when it looked like there was no way down, finally, there was.

The way cleared of witnesses. He moved the grate and stumbled into the low caves that led beneath his palace. He was hot. Desperately so. The goddess had seen fit to increase the mass of his body hair. He looked like an animal in more ways than one. An animal that was begging for shelter from the sun. He would have done better to make this trip at night, as all ill-favored creatures did.

He wound his way through dark passages, until an abandoned torch left in a wall sconce beckoned. Flint and tinder. There. Now he had light, at least.

Twenty years.

The way was dusty. The way was forgotten. It was all right. So was the King.

Sometimes he could hear muffled pieces of sound over his head, or hear vibrations along the pipes that ran along the walls. The palace had a crude plumbing system of sorts, for its time. Not for nothing had Odysseus been known for his cleverness.

He tapped out a message, but received no reply. He did not expect one. The friends who had inhabited this place once were likely long gone. Gone, or dead, or... imprisoned in his palace, above. His rivals were not above using dear friends as hostages. He thought he'd seen Pascal, once, near the palace gates. His old friend looked almost odd above the ground.

"I will come for you," he'd told his wife. "Whatever happens. Whatever comes."

"And if you don't?" The soft huskiness of her voice held fear.

"Then you must find another. Find someone to be a part of. Live the life you were meant to live."

She'd said nothing to that. Perhaps that was what now seemed so frightening. She'd just lowered her eyes at his idiocy, and accepted.

Had he ever given her any other choice, really?

He knew he hadn't.

Of course, he, in his self-assured attitude, did not count on ten years. Not ten. Not that many. And not twice that. He was far too clever to be away so long, wasn't he?

But there they were. Two decades. Gone. And now he was a fugitive from the sun, scrounging in the underbelly of his own home, wishing for a decent drink of water.

Water ran down the walls. Just a trickle, but at least it moved. He set his hands to it, and washed before he drank. Athena had given him fangs. Oh, lovely. It made taking in water harder, though he knew they would come in handy when it came time to fight. His hands were hair-covered, and clawed.

He wondered if she would restore him to how he had been before. He wondered if he cared. Realized he didn't. If the King of Ithaca was nearly a sphinx now, the irony was not lost on him. A sphinx always had a riddle for you. A sphinx was a trickster, and a destroyer.

Odysseus could relate to that.

Had she changed?

How could she not? After twenty years?

Yet it was not any changes to her face he cared for, though he adored it. It was her heart, her true heart, he needed.

She'd long ago captured his.

Her beauty was a magnificent thing. Her warm nature was a balm. Her Amazon's spirit, a blessing; she was a marvelous queen. Born among the wealthy and adept with the powerful, she'd ruled like a graceful empress, seated on her island throne.

Sometimes it hurt to look at her, she was so beautiful.

They'd shared a bond during their courtship. One of sweet touches and sighs. He'd read to her, as he'd been careful of her. The King of Ithaca was slow to take his bride.

But oh, how he'd taken her.

In sweetness and poignancy, she'd given herself softly to both his desire and her own. She'd banished his madness with her

steadfastness, and his loneliness with her love. Their son was conceived on their wedding night. He could not ask for more.

And then... ten years. Then twice that. And he'd all but told her to leave him, if it came to that.

Well, it had.

He barely remembered the places he stumbled through. There was a Great Hall, hung with tapestries, now half off their bearing rods. A vast hub that led to other caverns, the maze of which could claim him. A catacombs where the dead held sway. An abyss, which dropped down gods knew how far, and a gallery of whispers, whose old bridge now seemed too perilous to attempt.

And a mirror pool.

That room was perhaps the most ironic of all.

Early stars shone down through a narrow crevasse of rock. The water shimmered starlight, as the stillness shimmered his reflection. He was a shambling shadow of his former greatness. Deep-set blue eyes stared back at him, and a soft blonde beard framed a muzzle. Athena. She'd had her way with him, had his patroness. His eyes were the only thing about himself he recognized.

He drew his cape closer. Night brought cold, and the caverns were always cool. If he were victorious, he would restore this place to usability. But that thought was for later. For now...

He would need to find the way up. He would need to rest this night, before he faced taking back his palace tomorrow.

Or perhaps he would just leave it.

Perhaps she'd already buried him in her heart, and the queen he'd held more beautiful than Aphrodite had abandoned him.

It was only fair. After all, he had abandoned her, first.

He rose from the pool that gave him no comfort, and went to the whispering gallery. He would need to cross the bridge across the abyss, to reach the side he needed. He wondered if it would just give way as he stepped on it. Now, that would be irony for you: to die in his own sub-basement, after twenty years.

But the bridge always seemed to contain just a bit of magic to him, and so it did still. The ropes that always looked “just that frayed” held him, and the wood that always looked “just that weathered” stayed firm.

He heard sounds. Old sounds and new ones. Music, and the raucous noise of the suitors in his hall. The song of a mother putting a baby down to sleep. The sharp words of a young couple. Then an old one.

And then he heard her. Her. *Her.*

He knew it was Penelope's voice. Knew the sweet, steady sound of her in her prayers. He had listened to that voice pray over their newborn son at his cradle side. Had heard it swear devotion to him on their wedding day. Had heard it full of both fear and love, as he'd been her brief husband.

He heard it now.

"...don't know where you are. I don't know if you even remember us, or me. But I swear I have loved you faithfully all these years. I swear I have. We are something that has never been, and never will be. I love you now. I will love you always. No matter what happens. No matter what comes. There is no life without limits, but we still don't know

what ours are. You can't be dead. You can't leave without me. Not without me." Her voice faltered, then continued.

"But my time is short, and the monsters that surround me give me no quarter. Please come back, my love. Please. Come back. Even if you are a beast. Even if you only think you are, thanks to the war, thanks to whatever has kept you away ... come back." Her voice broke on a sob, and then drifted away.

*Even if you are a beast... or only think you are.*

She loved him with everything she was. And everything was...

Athena's disguise made sense, now.

His heart shattered open, and he filled the dim cavern with his roar, as he filled his heart with her steadfast love. Tears fell down his cheeks, full of contrition, and full of devoted adoration. He might not deserve her, but he would take her, by any beggar's bargain he could make.

"Wait for me," he told her, pulling up his hood. He achieved the end of the bridge. Once his feet were on solid ground again, he began to run.

"Providence will see us through this," he swore under his breath as he made a leap across a wide ditch. The stones were as nothing. The distance was as nothing. There was a heavy bow that wanted stringing, and a line of thieves who wanted banishing, if not killing.

She had spoken, and he had heard her. Words more sweet than any he'd ever thought to hear. "Enough of caution. Enough of care. I am coming to you, my love." He reached a ladder, and soft light filtered down, like a diffused benediction. It came up right inside the palace.

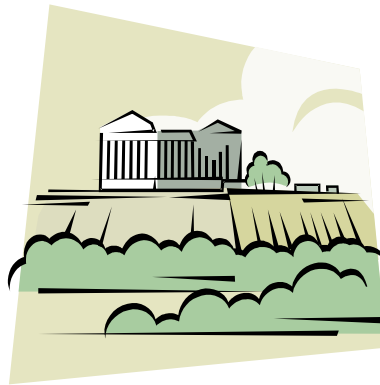
He would walk empty-handed, among his enemies. He would face down all foes, and pull her to his side, penitent. Permanent. Hers.

Because he knew, in the best part of what he was, they had endured. And he knew that after all his time away, he was finally, *finally* coming home. Before this night was over, they would be together, again. And after this night, they would never, ever be apart.

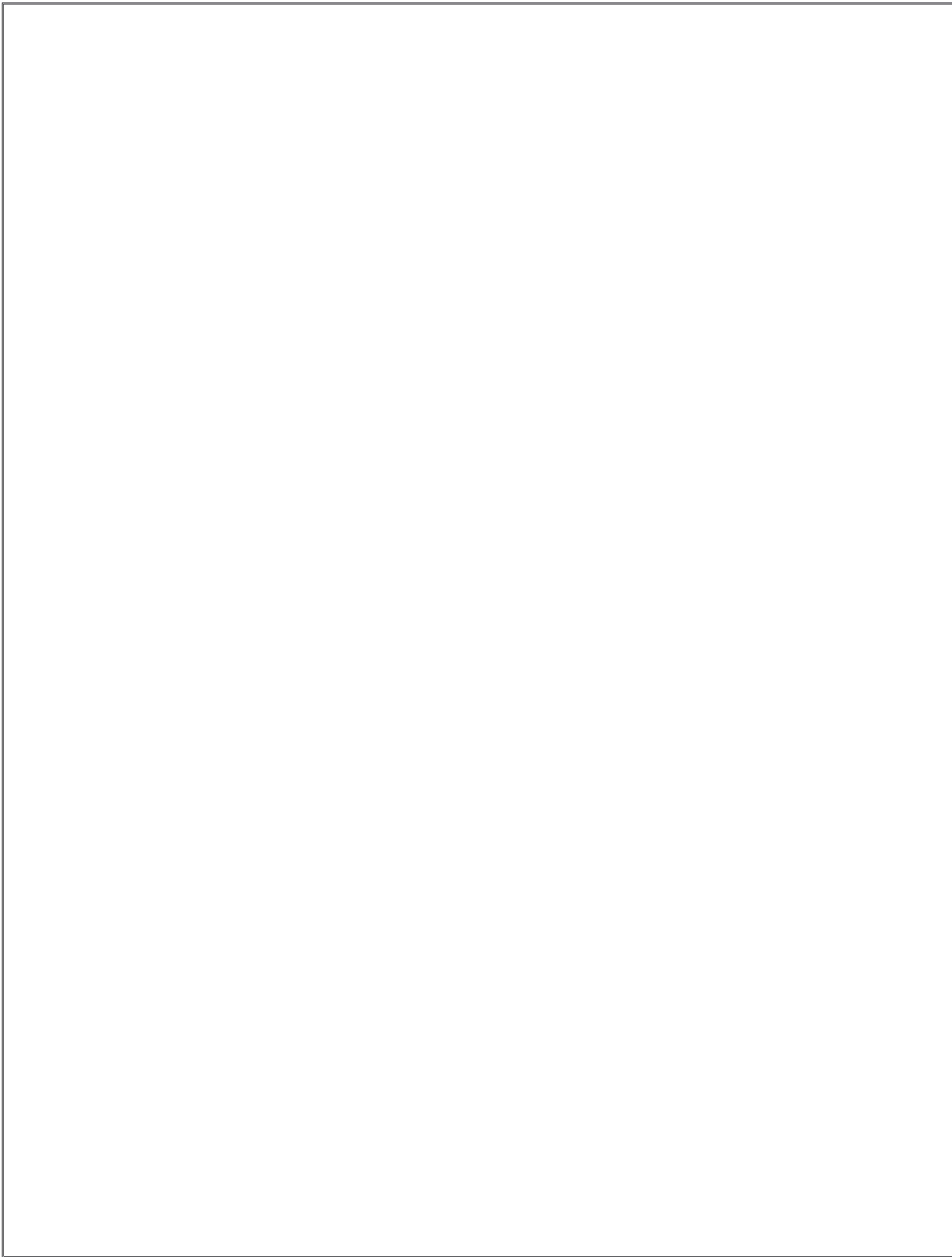
His heart ached with loving her. It was such a sweet pain.

Providence would see him to her side. Because Providence was when something was meant to be.

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*The Immortal Lovers*  
*Perseus and Andromeda*  
*Vincent and Catherine*

By Cindy Rae



To be a princess, was not necessarily a marvelous fate or birthright.

For Andromeda, for instance, it meant her destruction.

A monster was held as a threat, over her kingdom. A monster would be fed. A monster would be fed a princess, to teach humility, to Andromeda's parents.

Andromeda, though innocent, would be sacrificed, to that monster. It was a hideous kraken. She had ten days to live. Her life was changed, forever. Right before it was due to be ended.

Like most royalty, her wealth was obvious. Copious, even in its way. It brought suitors to her side. Wealthy and powerful ones. It was supposed to.

They disappeared, once it became clear she was doomed.

In desperation, her mother, Cassiopeia, offered the hand of her only daughter, in marriage, if any brave fool could slay the beast.

A prince with gold offered a purse, for a hero.

But he did not offer his heart. Or for that matter, the strength of his arm. She was wise enough to know that was significant, on both counts.

Andromeda waited, with an almost detached sense of ennui, as she looked at her own life, and its questionable value. Being a princess had not fulfilled her.

Would being a sacrifice?

Her beauty was not a thing she valued. Indeed, it had caused her little but misery, to this point. Boasting she was more beautiful than a sea nymph, her mother had sealed her terrible fate. The Nereids had complained, bitterly. Father Poseidon had sent a horror, Cetus, to ravage their kingdom. Vain Cassiopeia had doomed her daughter to not just her death, but to her realization of loneliness.

For her life was suddenly measured in land and titles, sheep and horses, docks and ships. And nothing else. While the gossiping servants buzzed about which man or army might or might not save her, which war chief needed the gold most, or might be willing to take the

risk, not one, not once, did anyone say they might save her out of love for her.

At least that was honest, she mused.

Cetus the kraken, the sea terror, the demolisher, had prowled the coastline near her palace, ravaging the homes.

The sacrifice of the princess would stop the destruction and its attendant slaughter. Cetus was quiet, now, at least. Patient. Waiting. Waiting for her to make the journey down to the sunless sea, with the anticipation of a twisted bridegroom.

The irony of that was not lost, on Andromeda.

So she sat in her rooms, under guards that were both obvious, outside her doors, and unobtrusive, as they left her to her privacy. There was no way out, or down, from this high place. Not without breaking her neck. Not that she was bent on escape. She knew her duty, and even if she hated it, she accepted it. If she had to spend her last days confined to a prison, there were worse ones than this.

Her royal chambers were notoriously fine; Andromeda's were no exception. A soft blue and grey palette did not compete with her fair beauty. Gilt mirrors cast light around the room, as well as reflection. She was beautiful from every angle. Perfect even. Or she had been.

Her quarters kept her safe from strangers. Safe from the hate of a populace who wanted her head even before the deadline passed. They were afraid, and their fear gave them a kind of fever that made them stupid. The high rooms kept her safe from their hate. Safe from the harm of the Nereids, who longed for her blood.

She'd found that out, the hard way.

Yes, her rooms were well appointed.

They were also notoriously difficult to reach.

Andromeda's private abode was high above the ground, with a balcony that overlooked both a great garden, and then the sea. The entire palace overlooked the sea. Her parents' kingdom was vast, and powerful. The wealthy and powerful ruled it, and kept it for their own.

She would look on it, sometimes for the little bit of life that was left to her, and realize that for as much potential as this great World Apart ever held, it held little for her. She had known sorrow here. The sorrow of an unfulfilled life.

Which was now destined to be a brief one.

A world she had surprisingly little use for needed her, to save it. Irony, again.

Was it so bad, then, that she would be sacrificed to save it? Would life spent with a loveless prince-who-would-be-king be so very much better than the harsh destiny that awaited her? She wasn't sure.

Perhaps a quick death was better than a slow one. Andromeda didn't know. A night breeze wafted into her rooms, from the open balcony. The nighttime wind lifted her hair from her royal face, as she sat at her desk, writing.

Her hand covered her injured face, as she wrote, the bandage feeling bulky. Two days ago, before the edict, a Nereid had slashed her cheek, with a piece of shell, in anger. It would leave a scar. The perfect princess would go to her death, marred. It was fitting vengeance, for the insulted daughters of Poseidon.

"Your face. Does it hurt?"

That voice. She knew that voice.

Wheeling from her desk, she turned to the open doors of her stone terrace. He was there. Him. She knew that voice. He had carried her from the bathing pool in the royal gardens, when she'd been attacked. She'd gone to wash alone, in the evening. It had been a costly mistake.

*You're safe. You're safe, now. No one will hurt you.* Honeyed tones had melted into her brain, claiming her.

She knew that voice. Knew the sensation of being carried, so gently. Of being placed where the guards would find her. Of her parent's horror, when they saw the mark. Of her princely fiancé's subtle rejection.

"You! How are you here?" She did not ask who he was. She did not need to. He was her salvation, or so it had felt, for a time.

But her rooms were meant to be unreachable. She was a princess, after all.

"There is always a way, for the determined," he told her. Something winged crossed the moon. A winged horse? No. Not possible.

"You saved me. Rescued me, after my attack."

"You were bleeding. I had to get you to safety."

The demand for her ransom had been made the next day. He'd risked himself, for nothing.

She shook her head, touching her fingers to the lone desecration of her beauty. "It was a wasted effort. But I thank you for it. They will send me to the monster, in little more than a week."

"Ten days. Ten days can change your life, Andromeda." He made no move to enter the room. She was not certain if she liked that, or not.

"They will change mine," her tone was rueful. "In the most... permanent way."

"Would you escape, if you could?" he indicated the wide parapet. He had gotten in...

"No." Again, the noble head shook, sending her soft hair dancing. It was beautiful; bound up by a golden cord, and sand colored. A long wave of bangs softened her forehead. Green eyes he'd not really seen before, pinned him. Her words were sure.

"My place is here. My people will suffer, from Poseidon's monster, if I do not stay."

"The thing that doomed you. Your mother's boast. It was not your fault," he told her.

"Most of us seem doomed by a thing that is not our fault," she returned. She could not see his face. But she knew she did not fear him.

He watched her cross to a sitting place. It was more than a chair, and less than a sofa. She looked elegant, and unreachable. The bandage on her cheek covered the wound the Nereid had given her.

He did not step into the light, toward her.

"You are well, then?" he asked. Watching as she stared, trying to perceive his features, under the hood. She would not be able to.

"I am well. And you are my rescuer. And your name is...?" It was time to know that, if she could.

"Perseus. You are not going to come to harm in ten days, Andromeda." The name meant nothing to her. The promise meant less.

"There is a beast waiting for me and a loveless marriage behind that, if he becomes irrelevant. Both say you are not right, my savior."

There was a small box in his hand. He set it on the small table inside the doorway, then stepped back onto the balcony.

A gift? What? Jewelry?

Curious, She crossed to it, and opened it, carefully. Tea. It smelled of oranges and rose hips.

"Tea?"

"It heals, and soothes. You should drink it." Now that she was closer, she could smell him. Candle smoke and a deeper, more amber tinged scent clung to the great cape which enveloped him.

Ah, so he'd brought her something for her comfort, rather than something for her vanity. She was inordinately pleased, though her reply was practical.

"There is no reason to soothe me, Perseus. Less to heal me, considering I will be dead before the next full moon. But I thank you for your gift." She inclined her lovely head. Her mother had not lied, about her beauty, though he could see it was but one of her graces.

There was a lawyer's sense of logic in her. She had a fine mind. Perseus eyed the well-appointed room. It was full of scrolls. She was well read? Interesting. And not a requirement, for a princess.

Something in her life had worn her to this place. While she had fought the Nereid, and lost, she was not fighting this. It was not the scar on her cheek that led her to this despair. It was the one on her heart. Had someone broken it? Or had no one claimed it? Both, possibly? She was very interesting, if that were true. The thread of connection he'd



felt strung between them from the moment he saw her, thrummed. Also interesting.

Interesting and interested. His hands. He'd revealed them, when he set down the box. Clawed. Furred, even, on the fingers. She remembered those. Remembered them as they swung in warning, at the vicious Nereid. Remembered them as they carried her. He was strong. Very. Though his entire form was hid, inside the cloak, he was huge. Mighty. She'd wondered if she hadn't simply dreamt his unique hands. Now she knew she hadn't.

She looked puzzled, but not afraid. So her savior was a beast, of sorts, too, like the Kraken. Ah, well. At least this was a kind one.

"I am trying not to be afraid of what will happen," she confessed, losing her bravado. She was afraid. He could feel it.

"Don't be afraid. Please don't be afraid." he told her, drawing farther away from her on the wide set stones. Was he talking about her future, or his own appearance? And were they, somehow, one and the same?

"It is growing late." He was about to leave her.

"Will I see you, again?"

He could not resist. "Yes. Tomorrow I will come. I will bring you a good story. Perhaps a great one. Perhaps we will read it, together."

"I have ten days before my journey. My little odyssey. The Odyssey, then?"

Homer. Odysseus. The trickster who barely made it home. The faithful wife, who waited, beset by suitors she loathed and spurned. He wondered if Andromeda felt a kinship with Penelope. Perhaps, in a way, she did. Very well. The Odyssey, then.

"I will see you after moon rises, lady." He was half in love with her, already.

"There will be guards." She worried for him.

"I will be careful."

"I don't even understand why you are here." He had not tried to molest her, nor spoken of claiming her.

"I will kill the monster for you, Andromeda. A few guards do not mean so much, compared to that."

"You will not. You must not even try." It was suicide to attempt it. A legion of men had already fallen. "I will not be your doom, Perseus."

He had the distinct feeling she already was. If not his doom, at least his destiny.

"Andromeda. There are times when we must walk empty-handed, among our enemies. But do not worry for me. I will go with caution. And with care." *And with a winged horse and a helm that granted invisibility.* The demigod son of Zeus was not without a way to acquire certain gifts. But she didn't know that. Her concern touched him.

"You behave like a man who does not know his limits." Was that censure? Or wonder?

Was she calling him rash? That she'd called him a man, was compliment enough.

"I know them, Beauty. I just also know that how I feel about you isn't one of them."

He left, a whisper in the night.

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The next night he came to her, bearing Homer's epic. She had the tea waiting, and they sat on her balcony as he read, his voice issuing from the soft cape, the hood pulled low. She did not try to see his face. Not yet. She was destined to be chained to a rock. She did not want to frighten away her only comfort.

His voice was a balm to her soul.

And astonishingly, she found that she was indeed, no longer so afraid.

She drowsed, next to him on her terrace, while he read. "I'm not sleeping," she assured him, though her eyes were closed. "I'm just... floating. Flying."

"Fly, then," he told her gently, feeling the soft weight of her slight form. He continued to read until he finally left her, tucked safely in her rooms.

The march of days continued as they fell more and more in love with each other, though did not say those words. Homer's old story spun itself out. Odysseus the ruse master convinced the Trojans to take the gift of a great horse, into their city. Horses were sacred to Poseidon. It was meant as an offering, to the sea god, for safe passage.

Ironic that they should both suffer for irritating the same deity, Andromeda thought.

Odysseus would take ten years to return home. She had less than ten days, now.

A day was as a year and more, in the reading of the tale, and the lines of the epic passed onward, as he read to her, often for hours. They talked sometimes, as well, long into the night. He gave up little of himself, in some ways, and much, in others.

"It is rumored one of your admirers is raising an army to save you." He told her one night. "Does that not give you hope?"

"Phineus will not solve with gold what he can not accomplish with his arm," she told him, wisely. "He is not an evil man. But he keeps money as a mistress." She shrugged, as if it were unimportant.

"You would be a wealthy queen," he told her, testing. "And he is close to your father."

"I am already a wealthy royal, and already close to my father," she pointed out. "I am ... a prize to them. All of them. Not so much more. Am I that, to you?" She knew she wasn't. But she had to ask.

The head inside the hood shook, perceptibly.

"You are every grace I have never had." He replied. It was true. Hera had been jealous beyond belief, at his birth, and his life had been spent in hiding, with his small family. Fishing villages, small, hard to reach settlements. He'd even lived with his family in a warren of caves, once. Hera's wrath was a vengeful thing. But for all the strength of his form, and a face that once passed for fair, he'd found no love.

"They offer you a crown," he told her. It was true. Many of her suitors were princes, or even kings, in their own right.

"And you?" she asked, standing nervously. "What do you offer?"

"All I am. All I have." He said it surely.

She bowed her head, chastened. That might not be much. But he was sincere, in the offer.

"Your hood. Why?" She was curious. Of course she was. She was female, after all.

"My appearance is... frightening, to some." She nodded at that, understanding that the gods sometimes marked those they chose to either punish or reward.

"Your face is part of all you are, my Perseus," she told him.

"As is yours," he touched her still-healing cheek.

She nodded that his words were true. Her life had marked her on the inside as well as the outside, now. That was a first. People treated her differently, with her stitched wound. How odd. Was she not the same person inside, after all? The Nereid had brought her a painful lesson about being treated based on what the reflection in the glass indicated.

None of which meant she didn't wonder, about him.

"Another night, my Andromeda," he returned, rising. "Another night."

"Perhaps after the Island of the Lotus Eaters?" she prompted him, naming a place in the story they were reading.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps even later; when he reaches Ithaca." She'd just given away that she knew the story, and not just the title. He was not surprised. She was an educated woman, after all. His love had beauty, as well as brains.

"My doctors will remove my stitches before I am offered to the beast. My mother says I must wear my hair swept to the side, so that I do not offend Cetus, by being an imperfect offering." She touched her bandage. It was smaller, today, but in a way, she, too, was covering her face.

"Nothing about you is imperfect," he declared, unwaveringly.

"Nothing."

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She could not dissuade him from facing Cetus, for her sake. She could not even dissuade him from making the dangerous trip to her balcony, in the evenings.

Each night, they sat on her terrace, though never inside her rooms. The implication of the bed lay between them like a soft invitation. He ignored it, as did she. He read to her, and brought her some small treats. A rose bud. A scroll of music for the lyre. More of the tea that she definitely favored. She discovered he liked chess. He discovered she liked art. They were different, in many ways, and alike, in others.

If she still thought about her impending sacrifice, she no longer spoke of it. Perseus divined she was simply ignoring it, as they chatted. It was almost as if she was pretending no dark future existed, no dark spirit hovered, between them. It was all right that she did that. It gave her some measure of peace to focus on their story, rather than on her pain.

Her father loved her, deeply. And as all such fathers are wont to do, he had spoiled her ceaselessly. She'd grown up the indulged favorite of two parents who, though flawed, were both good people. Cassiopeia wept, in her queen's chair, at what she had done. As Andromeda's time drew close the two could not face each other. It left Andromeda feeling more abandoned than ever.

But ignoring a thing can not make it go away. And the ability to do that did not last forever. He knew it wouldn't. So did she.

Perseus came to her chambers one night to find her sad eyed, having wept many of her sorrows into a pillow or into her hands, during the day. The happy life her parents had always envisioned for her was not to be. No life was "to be." The sands of her life were running out. She was trying to be brave, and to face it.

He held out his unique hand. "I did bring you a gift, this evening."

A small white cloth bore a love token. A lovely crystal, wrapped in wire and hung on a chain.

The stone was common, and the workmanship of the setting was both rudimentary and lovely, at the same time. The wire was simple. But someone had wrapped the crystal in such a way as to suspend it perfectly, and highlight its facets and shine to greatest advantage.

"Did you make this?" she asked him, smiling. She was delighted with his gift.

"A Mouse I know did the setting. I fetched the stone."

It was lovely. And fairly unremarkable, in monetary value. It was a poor man's gift. She loved it.

"It is beautiful." Her lovely smiled seemed to fill the room with light.

"I have something for you, as well," she told him, pleased.

A rough bag of sturdy brown material was cinched by a rawhide cord. The stitches were inexpert, and uneven, but sturdy. He knew without asking, they were hers. It had been difficult to make it. The bag was thick.

He reached inside, and pulled out a beautiful piece of silk. Upon its tight blue surface were stitched two roses, one red, one white.

"These will never fade," she told him. He fingered the cloth, experimentally. She had taken her time with this. It was nicely done. And very like the bush that sat on the edge of her balcony.

"You can take them with you wherever you go, now. And remember me. For after." She was nudging him away from his quest.

He tucked her roses inside the pouch, and draped it around his neck.

"I will wear it for luck, when the time comes," he said.

No. He must not do that.

"Perseus..." her tone held her warning.

"You risk much just by being here. If they even caught you..." her voice betrayed her worry. She still did not believe he would be triumphant.

"If they catch me they will kill me. But I think we both understand that it is worth it."

He would not use the word 'love.' But she knew he was feeling it. They had been together for six days. Homer's masterpiece was mostly done, between them.

"You must go." She said it sadly, but the stubborn look in her eyes was firm. "You must go and not come back. This is folly, though I have adored it. But this is too dangerous, for you." Her voice held concern. He marked that, pleased. So she was falling as in love as he was. Good.

"Does a princess care so much, who lives or dies?" he asked.

"This one does," she responded, realizing for the first time how true it was. Before, the lives of other people simply "existed." She was not unsympathetic. But neither did she feel a "part" of them, a part of that life. Her royalty had separated her, as wealth often does.

Now, ironically, she did feel things in common with others. Her lady's maid was pregnant, and her back hurt. Her lyre player, Orpheus, was pining for a lost love. All of it mattered, now. All of it. It had taken her a long time to understand that. But she finally did.

"There are things I must do," he told her. "Things to help you. You may not see me again, for a while. Perhaps not until the last day."



"No!" She did not want him to return. On the other hand, she hated the thought of never seeing him again more than any other thing she could think. Her emotions felt confused, and her will to send him away was slipping as low as the china moon that hung in the sky.

"This place is ours," he indicated her terrace. "But you must return to your world without me, Andromeda. It is all right." His voice held sadness. "It is where you are meant to stay. I will still be near; I will still watch over you. Go back into your rooms. Close the doors of the balcony, and lock them tight."

"Why?"

"Because that way, it is you who will leave me. I would like to give you that choice, at least."

It was a choice she didn't want.

"Do it, my princess," his husky voice urged her. "You know you must. The House will stir, soon. The servants will be coming."

She did know they had to part. And she didn't want to.

"Sometimes I feel as if I am trying to swim a great river, just to reach you," she said, holding the handles of the door. He was backing away.

"And sometimes, I feel I am praying for your safe passage," he told her, standing as he bid her leave him.

"I will keep your secret," she told him.

"I know you will," he replied.

And then he was gone.

--

Three days. Nearly eighty hours that felt like eight months. The sands of Andromeda's life drifted down, and Perseus felt as if he had much time, to ponder their mutual fate.

He could rescue her from the demon that plagued her. From all the demons that plagued her. And after that? What? Would she be content to be a queen to a beast, all her days? He had bastard in his blood, and faithlessness in his bloodline. All Zeus' progeny bore the risk of Hera's wrath.

Yet, he knew he would not undo the bargain he had made. The price for the magic armaments he would use was high, but he paid it, gladly. The demigod son of the King of heaven knew his place; it was to be her rescuer. No matter the risk, to him.

For as long as she would have him, and under whatever restrictions she chose, he would stay near her, somehow. In secret, more than likely, but near, nonetheless. His originally fair face had brought no great love spell, for his heart. Aside from some few dalliances of his youth, he was still primarily an untouched soul. It was all right. He could offer her, if not a marriage, at least a deep understanding, that way.

It was ironic that the transformative magic that enabled him to save her had shown him they could not be together. Even while it assured him they could never be apart.

For not only now could he love her, he could sense her, as well.

She was with her mother, as he acquired his sword, and with her doctors as he bargained for his shield. Athena, Mercury, Zeus, all were helping him, and all were giving their own version of advice.

Athena had none, for love. She was a virgin goddess, though she was wise. Hers was the gift of strategy, for the coming battle. Mercury lent him winged sandals, in case he needed them, and Zeus...

Zeus' words rang hardest, in his ears.

"Do not let this act of kindness destroy you, my son," his careless father had intoned. "After all, part of you is a god. But the other part of you is a man."

"I am in love with her." The son had told the Father.

"This girl... she can bring you... only unhappiness," his very flawed parent had advised.

"Then I will be unhappy!" Perseus had snapped, his voice a low growl.

Zeus' message was clear. Women were faithless. And beautiful women were more faithless than most. Zeus should know. He'd bedded enough of them, and been a faithless consort, himself.

Perseus shunned the advice, which he viewed as both well-meaning and misguided. Zeus' life was not his.

That did not necessarily give him the right to claim her, however. By the time his plan was secure, he was certain they should stay apart, no matter how much he loved her.

He did not *mean* to go back to see her, therefore. He told himself he wouldn't. He wept for the choice, and bore it, for as long as he could. The hours felt like months. The days, like years.

The suitor she did not want, Phineus, visited her, in the daylight courtyard of the palace. He was wealthy. And shallow. And he tried to convince her to have an affair, before death took her.

She rejected him. Though he told her he would not give up on her, and would not be dissuaded, she bid him part from her royal presence.

Anger simmered, inside her. Perseus felt it. Good. She would need its strength. She would need all her strength, to reclaim her life from those who would make it little more than a bargaining tool.

For she was not a treaty or a bargain for better land, or safe passage through the Hellespont. She was not a set of farms, or harbors or mines. She was Andromeda. And she was her own. And when Cetus the Kraken died, she would be given the choice of her fate. He, Perseus, would see to it.

He set his sword in his scabbard, knowing the last night before she would be free to claim her own fate was upon them.

The gentle weight of the Odyssey swung against his legs, inside his cape pocket. They had not finished it. One chapter remained. The homecoming. The one where the faithful wife Penelope, and her husband, Odysseus, are reunited against all odds. After ten years away, the king of Ithaca would be a husband, again. He adored his wife. He would see no shadow of another parting, from her.

Perseus turned the steed beneath him toward her balcony. Even though he knew he shouldn't.

--

He would drop it there. Drop the scroll of the last chapter. Drop it and just go. Just leave her and let her be, to her life. Save her, kill her tormentor, love her always, feel her always, but stay away.

He had to.

She was a future queen. He was just another of Zeus' bastards. An enchanted helmet would keep his face from the crowd, as he slew Cetus. The crowd would remember the deed, and draw him as some fair young prince.

Perhaps that was the memory she could take with her.

--

"Don't go. Please don't go. Look. There's a little night left." Her voice was pleading. Her hands tugged his, to the center of the balcony.

She'd caught him. Either by accident, or she'd been listening for him, or he was simply careless, praying for one more glimpse of her. He was never sure. But she'd caught him.

She was more beautiful now than when he'd first beheld her, though her face still bore a light bandage. He felt all but powerless, before her loveliness. She had captured his heart, with her beauty, her warmth, and her spirit.

"What would you have me do?" he asked her.

Her eyes were pleading. "You can read me the last chapter." She fumbled for any excuse. "Tell me about Odysseus, and all his great expectations."

She asked for so little. And she meant so much, to him.

So they sat, and they read, as they had done only a few days/much too long ago. She was calmed, and she was soothed, and she loved him. He could feel it.

"You could stay with me," she told him, proposing. Or propositioning. In the years to come, he was never sure which.

"I have seen your world. There is nothing for me in it. But you are in it. So I am here."

"You don't show your face," she said gently. Was she asking if he would, finally?

"You would not like it. I remind people of what they most fear."

"Their own ignorance?" she asked, knowing that beneath the hood, he must be somehow different. Very different. Hideous, even, to some.

"Their aloneness," he told her, understanding now that that weight was his, to bear. He set aside the completed scroll, for the night.

"Andromeda, why was your life so ... valueless, to you, before?"

She rose, and looked out into the night, out into the star swept night.

"To be a princess... it is a luxurious thing. But the luxury comes with a price. My fate was decided before I was born. My betrothed was an... avaricious man. As are all men who court a princess, for the most part."

"And do you think I am one such as they?" he asked her.

She lifted her lovely shoulders in a wry shrug. The bare one was beautiful, as was her neck. She wore his necklace. It looked lovely, against her skin. "I think there is much about you that I do not understand," was all she said.

"If you had to live as a poor woman ... could you?" he asked. Was he telling her he was poor? For the gift of his companionship, this last ten days, she blessed him. For though she had wealth to the point of embarrassment, she, like he, was often 'alone,' in the truest sense of the word. She felt a hollow place inside her heart. One no amount of wealth or adoration from worthless suitors could fill.

"In some ways, I think I have been poor all my life," she told him, reaching for the corners of his hood. It was time.

In a way that was both gentle and slow, she pushed the deep folds of heavy wool trimmed with leather down. A lion's face stared back at her. Nemean. Prophetic. Beautiful. Hers.

"Your face..."

"My Father is Zeus. He can take any form," Perseus explained. "And has, when it suited him to court a beautiful woman. A bull, a swan... even a shower of gold," He named the form Zeus had taken to impregnate his mother, Danae.

"You chose this form?"

"It chose me. I needed the image of a hero; of one with the strength and skill to beat any foe. This is the one the magic sent me. If I am victorious, it is the one I will keep." It was a warning to her. He would look this way all his days, if he survived.

"I beg you to leave this fantasy." There were tears in her gentle eyes. "You cannot beat this thing. You do not understand the monster you will be facing." There were tears in her sweet, green eyes.

But he had no choice, and he knew it. Something had tied him to her from the moment he'd saved her. A chance encounter had led to his fate, as surely as her beauty had led to hers. They were both caught, now.

"Perhaps it does not understand me," Perseus told her, keeping his hood around his neck. It felt good to be free of it. He did not tell her he had a gorgon's head in a bag, for the task. There was no need to. Some secrets were his to keep.

A revelation for a revelation. He gently lifted the bandaging, at her ear. She allowed it.

The Nereid's swing had been true. A deep scar marked the area just before her ear. Though healing, her face might never be the same.

"There is an old woman, I know. Ancient, half-blind, and Ethiopian. She is full of magic. She makes a cream for such things." he touched her wounded face, gently.

She shook her head, causing her soft, sandy hair to move in waves.

"I know it sounds strange, but... I think I would like to keep it."

As a memento of their meeting, to go with his crystal. His heart was lost to her. If he survived the next few days, he would make her his queen, if she would have him.

He rose from her balcony, and offered her his hand. He turned her toward the huge night sky, tucked her against his body, and listened as she spoke.

"When fate takes my life... be that days from now, or decades, I hope it pleases the gods to place me among the stars," she told him, looking up at heaven's bounty.



"Why?" he asked her, enjoying the look in her green eyes, as she stared.



"I have lived in the palace my entire life, here. But the stars stretch so far. They seem to see everything. And everything is ... everything," she concluded simply.

His voice joined hers. "The starlit sky. Where love is never lost. And death has no dominion." She nodded at his words, and he embraced her, tightly.

"I am going to save you. Do you believe that?" he asked her.

*Again. He was going to save her, again.* Very well, then.

"Yes."

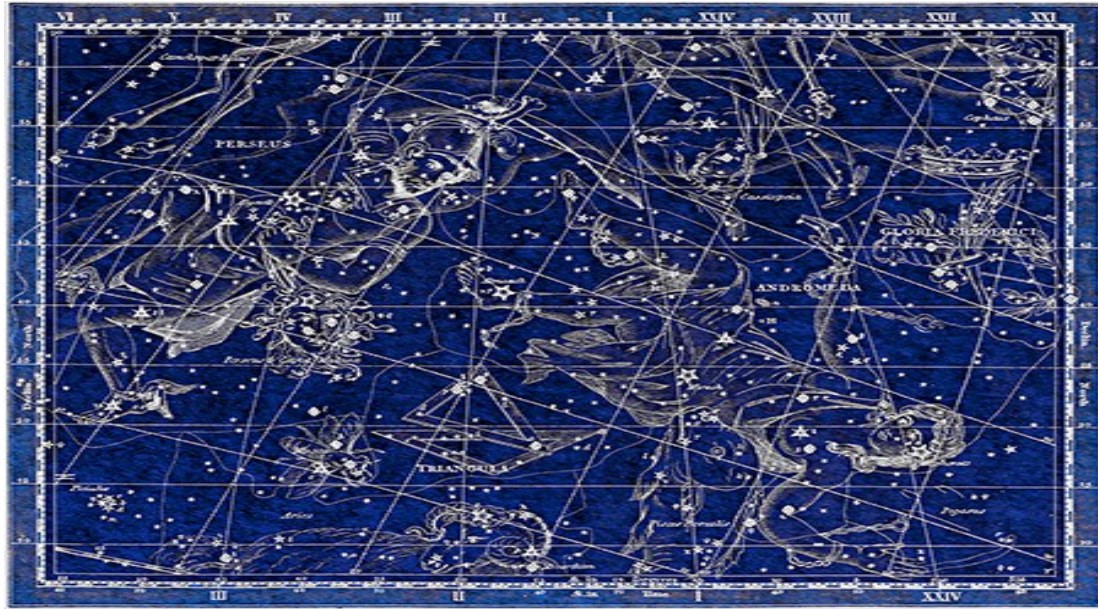
It was an acceptance. Not just of the fact, but of him, and of their marriage. He felt her assent, along their bond.

She felt the warmth of him, the strength of him. She felt tied to this creature. For better or worse, all her days.

"I think you will," she answered him, holding herself close, inside the folds of his cape.

"And after you do, then I will save you."

---fin---





*The Immortal Lovers:  
Hades and Persephone,  
Vincent and Catherine*

By Cindy Rae

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*This is an odd bit of fancy that makes much of the similarities between  
two sets of immortal lovers.*

\*\*\*\*\*



He desired her. He knew he did. He knew he always would. However, hers was the World Above the Ground; his was the World Below.

He was Hades, King of the Dead.

Her name was Persephone.

At first (and this was true for years), she was utterly unaware of him.

That was not a surprising thing, considering she belonged neither in his

realm nor in his heart. She was alive, while he ruled the dead. She was fair to his dark, and warm to his chill, the chill born of dark places, and cold, deep caverns.

Hell was a cool place, not a warm one. Those who thought differently, thought wrong. How could there be warmth in a realm with so little light?

All that she was, he was not. And all that he was, she had no use for, nor experience with.

Not wanting his heart, she captured it, almost from the first moment he saw her.

Demeter's daughter was without vanity, he noticed. And while other maidens looked a long time in the mirror of a pool, she washed as she would, dried as she had to, and went about her day. Only Aphrodite's children were fairer, and not by much, Hades insisted.

The Mirror Pool was important to him, because it sat in a sylvan glen where one of the several gateways to his kingdom stood close by. It was cast in Finality's forge, and marked by the special roses that only bloomed at midnight. The doorway to his secret home might open, or not, depending on the user.

Only the dead could see it, or walk its path. The dead and some special few besides.

Orpheus had found it once, in a long distant dream. But he was one of the few.

Persephone never had.

It was odd, he thought, as he watched her wash her arms. She seemed as unaware of her face and form as she was of his. But of course she could not see him. The magic of the Mirror Pool forbade it, though he

saw her clearly enough. At times, it seemed as if her amazing green eyes looked right at him through the reflective surface. But he knew that was folly. She was no more aware of him than she was of any other lovesick swain. And of those, she had several.

At first, of course, he tried to ignore the things he felt. Ignore her. Men always try to ignore the feelings of love at first, and Gods do this even more than men. "Forever" is a long time to feel a love that cannot be yours, after all.

He grappled with feelings of servitude, of vulnerability; feelings of longing, and of want. Those feelings sifted through Hades' veins, and threatened all he was. A God, vulnerable? Unthinkable. He turned from her, in an act of desperate self-preservation.

She could wreck him. Change him. Change his life, forever.

The Lonely King in the lonely place where no dreams lived any longer, dared to have one; and it was one all his own.

His dream was both simple and impossible. That she would, somehow, some way, some day, look upon the most terrifying visage any mortal could face, and know no fear; that in her bravery, she might feel -- dare he even hope the word-- love.

Roundly, and often, he cursed his own stupidity, his own immortal folly. She was a creature of light, and of sun. It was caught in her hair, just as spring meadows were caught in her eyes.

Even the fields of Elysium did not shine with a shade that mysteriously green. Her hair held colors of sand, and a distant beach, a distant shore. Her skin glowed with the tones of cool snow, and ripe peaches.

She was a contradiction, just by her being. The cool of her skin should not be able to exist with the warmth of her hair. Much less the warmth

he saw inside of her, in her heart. She was like a question he could neither answer nor dismiss.

And so was how he felt about her.

Aphrodite would laugh at him, if she knew. So of course, he would not tell her. Aphrodite always insisted her power brought both men and Gods low. It galled, to know she was right.

*Patience, his mind whispered to him. Persephone will belong to you eventually. Everything does, eventually.*

But she would be old by then. Wizen, and beyond the strength of her youth.

He could return the gifts of her younger self to her, of course. The King of the Dead had his certain magicks. He could wait forty, fifty, or even sixty years, then restore her beauty to the way it had been the first day he'd spied her.

But in between now and her passing, he could not change that she would love another. Would give her heart, her mind, and her body to some ... being. Some flawed hero, or a prince from her world, some lesser faun, or some... something. Something that was not him.

A drink from the river Lethe would wipe her mind, of course.

But would it wipe his?

No. It wouldn't, and he couldn't. He could re-set her beauty to its glory years, erase her mind to nothing, but he knew *he* would never forget the sensation of another's kiss on her lips.

And he wasn't quite certain if she would forget it either.

Sometimes, for some of them, the ones who loved hard, and with all they were, Lethe did not completely remove the gentle chains of love

from their hearts. Would she remember some Ozymandias, even in Elysium? It happened, now and then, with some mortals. Not often, but often enough that he did not wish to risk it, to risk her.

Besides, even if *she* didn't remember, he would. The Prince of Battle's Bounty had to remember each mortal life. – (All the better to catalogue your sins with, my dear) and punish the truly wicked. And of course, he had to reward the rest.

For ones such as the Truly In Love, Hades often took pity and allowed them to remember one another. For what was the point of the Elysian Fields, if love was utterly left behind?

Could he stand to do that, with her?

Could he stand not to?

And... sixty years?

If she knew a Great Love, he would be damned.

If she did not know one, she would be. He'd seen the kind of bitterness, the kind of aloneness wrought by a loveless existence. He was living one of those himself, now.

But if her life was a truly fulfilling one, he would be eternally doomed. *At least I am in the right place for that*, he thought wryly.

He chafed at his thoughts. Indecision and decades of waiting loomed large before him. Even the King of the Dead knew the length of a year. He felt the days she wasn't near the pool as weights on his heart.

He riled at his own predicament. He hurled his scrolls and scattered his servants. Even Charon knew to hide.

Should he let her be, let the forces of providence simply take their course?



Why do that? What was the point of loving her, if another would claim his princely prize?

Yet his visage was terrible. A face so odd that it was cast out from Olympus, his riven lip curled over fanged teeth. Hair the colors of a bright fire caped his shoulders and whispered across his chin and muzzle, for a muzzle it was, owing to what it took to breathe in Hell's deepest reaches. Shirtless, he was otherwise clad all in black; with a regal cape he sometimes wore hooded low, so he did not frighten the children. He hid a leonine face behind eyes so blue that Brother Neptune should have claimed them for the sea.

It was all right that they were blue. Water flowed here in the Underworld, too.

Between Styx and Lethe (or "Crossing Over" and "Forgetfulness"), and many more rivers besides, the sea flowed in the Underworld, just as it did in the world Above. Some of the rivers were Nameless, and some were feared, and others were lost to the Abyss.

But their colors, from clear to obsidian, flowed through the realms of Hades' domain. "Blue" was a color here, as well. Glittering blue, in the case of his deeply set eyes. Shot through with hard desire. His eyes had a tendency to resemble the color of a day-lit sky, and no, the irony was not lost on him.

Hades sat on his throne, in the cavern of rock that was his Great Chamber, and brooded.

He needed to think of a way to not love her.

Before he could think of nothing else.

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In a different Chamber, in a different world Below, Vincent shifted through the dream, turned over, tugged a quilt higher up, and returned to the shadow images that played behind his eyes.

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Perpetual spring. Bright sunshine shimmering on water, making it crystal. The luminous daylight caused deep shadows in the dappled glen, and they danced across the soft tresses of her hair. She was as unattainable as ever, today, as she mingled with her friends. Her female friends.

As it often did, their conversation shifted to the men in their lives, and Hades watched no other face but hers in his magick mirror pool. She indulged her close companions as if they were sisters, and shook her head as she listened more than she talked.

The maidens teased her. While this youth or that had sometimes held her interest, no man yet had claimed her heart.

Hades knew that was about to change.

Her friends left the glen after a while, but a mortal prince walked in the woods. Midas' son, heir to the great fortune of the gold king, was drawing close. Nearly as cursed as his father was, the ambitious prince was blessed, as well.

Cursed with Avarice, and blessed with Beauty, Midas' pride, Elliot, was no youth, but a man. A man intent on claiming a prize, the best prize, for his palace and his pleasure.

Of course, when he saw her he would want her.

How could he want anyone else?

The thought of her in his bed enraged Hades. The shallow heir drew near...

A decision made was a decision done, and the King of Hell determined he would take his bride. Before the callow prince could get too close, before bad luck could take her, or time make her its penitent, Hades split the earth asunder and claimed her on the wings of impulse and want, drawing her to safety, drawing her down, drawing her to Beneath All.

She knew that she was lifted, knew that she was borne away. Knew that the treasures of the top side of the Earth were no more in her view. Darkness claimed her eyes, as if they were wrapped in filmy gauze.

She had entered the World Below.

Revealing his terrible visage to her beauty, Hades realized that in haste and fear, he'd taken with strength what he feared he could not win with wooing.

She was beautiful. And the first time she saw him, she was startled. And ... sympathetic?

It was not the adoration that he craved from her, nor was it the terror he dreaded. It was something else. And "something" was better than the "nothing" that had been his, before.

She asked to go home only once. He refused gently. Elliot was still too close, and Hades was still too smitten. *It will pass*, he told himself. *This is love, and it will pass. It always does... Doesn't it?*

She accepted his decision. She had little` choice. He told her not to be afraid, and that he meant her no harm. She accepted that as truth, simply because it was.

He gave her a set of regal rooms, their closets full to bursting with finery. An odd Mouse of a servant fetched what she bid from the treasures Hades offered. She asked for little.

The longer Hades kept her, the more in love with her he became.

She sat at his left hand, for he was left-handed. The backward God in the downward domain. For the Latin-tongued races, “dexter” meant “right,” and “sinister” meant “left.” It was a distinction he marked, though he denied it to be true.

He did not acknowledge that he was a sinister being. Terrible, perhaps. And inevitable, certainly. But not sinister. He was not an evil force, and did not see himself that way.

After only a handful of days, neither did she. She watched him pass judgment on the good, the indifferent, and the wicked, and Hades found that for all her gentle heart, she had a lawyer's sharp mind. She did not flinch at his punishments, though he spared her from the more severe of those, not wanting her to fear him, or think him cruel. She smiled at the number of men and women he ushered into Elysium, and shed happy tears when an elderly couple came before him.

They'd been married more than sixty years, had grown up together, from childhood to old age. They were devoted to the point that when she died, he simply curled up next to her on the bed he'd made for her, and did the same.

They'd stood before Hades trembling. The man put his wife behind his frail body, a little, seeking to protect her, one last time, from any punishments that might be coming.

"For you, Elysium." Hades had indicated them both with his rumbling baritone. "And a choice; one I seldom give. Drink from Lethe, and risk

forgetting each other, but have your youth restored. Or go as you are, bent and wizened, but remembering."

Persephone's eyes went from her abductor to the married couple.

"I do not need Lethe," the man had said. "My wife is more beautiful to me now than the first day I saw her, carrying a basket of olives."

But he had turned to his life's mate, and still offered her the choice of her beauty. "Elana, do not do the same if you do not wish to," he'd told her. "Age pained you, terribly. If you want to be beautiful again, be young, and strong, where every step is not a discomfort, I would understand." He'd smiled at her as a tear ran down his cheek.

Elana had kissed it away as if in all of Hell, that tear was the one thing she found objectionable. "Forget you?" She was incredulous. "That would be its own torment, and the only one I could not bear. You are still my handsome husband. And now you always will be," she'd told him.

"It is done," Hades had intoned, motioning for servants to take them to the fields of Paradise. "You will not drink from Lethe."

With a wave of his left hand, he wrote their eternity. A halo of light had surrounded them, and subsided. When it was gone, a youth and a maiden stood in their place.

"My Lord?" the man had questioned, holding his wife again, as she stood erect without pain. Persephone saw she was pretty in a plain sort of way, though it would have been a stretch to call her "beautiful."

Elana's eyes had gleamed with love as she beheld her husband. He'd been handsome in his youth, Persephone realized. Though he carried it as a working man often did, as if he were unaware of it.

"There is no pain in Elysium," Hades had told them. "But it pleased me that you offered her the choice. The River is not the only path to a restored youth. Go. Be well, with each other. Though if you see your neighbors, do not be surprised if they do not remember you. Not all have your strength of heart."

The restored couple left the Judgment Chamber, and went to their eternity.

"You can be very kind," Persephone whispered, her voice affected by what she'd seen.

"Not always," he'd told her honestly. "But there is a truth beyond knowledge. The wisest attain it."

His feelings for her continued to grow even stronger as the hours and days passed. And he realized he'd not offered her the thing he'd offered the couple. He had not offered her a choice to be with him.

As he fell more in love with her, he withheld the words of that love, as well the act. The King of Eternal Night was caught in a trap of his own making. He'd left her with no option, for her life.

Guilt tore at him, on the one side, while his love for her tore at him on the other. It would be wrong to offer her his love.

Her life was only half lived. He'd committed a sin to take her. She deserved her life. And she could not have that if she stayed here, both ageless and choice-less.

He knew the error of claiming her almost from almost the moment he'd pulled her into his world. It was an act of desperation, borne of love but marked by loneliness. She deserved better. He'd simply had... no... choice.

There was that word, again.

He did not take her to his bed, as Zeus or the vainly beautiful Apollo would have done. It would not be right. He'd only sought to keep her from the other, and he would commit no rape, nor even an unwanted touch, to ease his passions. He would not use the magicks at his disposal to charm her, falsely, to his side.

He chafed at his own predicament.

He sat alone in his kingly chambers as candlelight shimmered behind stained glass. Glass was made of sand, and sand was earth. Diamonds lay scattered on a table, refracting light. The ground and all that was in it belonged to him, though its beauty gave him little comfort now. His great, wide bed was empty, and his great heart was full of a piercing kind of love.

He thought of Lethe again, and wondered if he could make her forget herself utterly. She could forget how he had brought her here, forget her years spent in the warm sun, so she could be with him. They could both be free of the regrets his loneliness had caused.

Then he wondered if he would still love her, if that were done.

Wasn't "she" a part of "her" memories? And once those were gone, wouldn't she simply not be... herself?

The World Above tore itself apart in the quest for her, as soldiers searched, and commoners wondered. Eternal spring grew cool as her mother fretted. Fortune hunters scoured the land as her father promised gold to the man who could find her.

Several came near the sylvan glen to try.

Hades knew they would fail.

For she was his, his now. *His*. The words burned, and claimed, and damned them both. No! He would *not* return her! He would not! He

would not give her up, give her back, or give her away, to the world that had borne her.

For he was Hades, and his need was great.

And the conflict in his heart was breaking it.

----

In a beautifully arrayed pedestal bed, Catherine Chandler shifted at the vision of the Judgment Chamber, at the princely figure of Vincent as he sat on a stone throne, looking mighty, yet bereft at the same time. Dark gloves hid his claws.

Nothing hid his shirtless chest, or the leonine grandeur of his face.

Nothing hid the love he bore for her.

----

Time trickled on, and where Persephone once was puzzled by her complicated captor, she came to understand him, as well. He was just. Indeed, he was Justice, as judgment must always be. He tempered his judgment with mercy when he could, and with wrath when he could not. He was thoughtful and severe, at times. Fair and understanding, at others.

And he was almost hesitant near her. The being who hesitated over nothing else seemed to approach her with an almost tentative caution. There was a quietness in him she found soothing. She found him both brazen in some ways, and beguiling in others.

Immortal while here, she did not age, nor eat, nor drink. Such things were mortal concerns. She rested, sometimes, but was not certain if she slept, truly. Such were the rules in the land past All Sleep.



His world was vast. Beyond vast. There were secrets here that it seemed even he did not know... passages down which treasure waited, or surprise, or despair or wonder. He told her of the passing of a life, and how the changes are wrought from one phase in it to the next. Told her of great poets, and plays. He read her Ovid, and Herodotus, and Sophocles to soothe her fear.

And as she fell in love with him, he knew he was falling even more deeply in love with her.

Oddly, it was her love for him that spurred him to return her.

If they pursued this, her life above would be lost to her. Forever. Utterly. He was a thief to have taken her in the first place. And a penitent thief, to return her. The being who ruled the land of regret had his, and unlike the others of his realm, he could act upon it.

She was to go home, even if it broke him to let her.

"You have to go," he told her, hours... or had it been months? ... after her abduction. "Time" had so little meaning here, to all but him.

"Why?" she asked him, wondering at his mercurial nature. "Didn't you bring me here because you wanted me?" She was not on the throne beside him now. He had requested her presence and had the servants bring her. He'd stood her in front of him, like another judgment he had to make.

"Lady, I stole your life from you. That cannot stand. I brought you here..." the pause was long, and considered, "because I fell in love with you. I did not realize in that moment, what that meant."

He came down from the throne, and touched her beautiful hair.

"Now that I do... I understand what it truly means."

"And what does it truly mean, My Lord?" she asked him, curious.

He held his head to one side, considering. "That I desire your happiness above my own." His voice was both firm and sad. And final.

"You may go. Walk in the light, Persephone. Have a better life than the one I could give you as the Queen of the World Below."

He nodded to his lackeys. "Bear my lady to her chambers, and see that she is dressed in the gown she wore when she came. Only that; nothing more."

He was the Lord of this place, and he would be obeyed. Servants led her back to her regal chamber. She put on the soft clothing she'd been wearing the day he took her, setting aside the royal gown he'd given her to wear. Her old gown still held the faint smell of the glen. The newer one, like candle smoke and underground waterfalls, old scrolls and secret dreams.

Her head dipped low as she contemplated her fate. Was she really considering remaining with him? In this place? This ... Nether Place?

She realized she was.

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"Parts of your world shimmer with splendor," she told him, seeing pieces of it when he escorted her to the World Above.

"And part dwells in deep shadow, untouched by sun. I will have a poem for a sunset, Beauty. But you must have a sunset for a sunset," he replied.

Catherine, dreaming, nodded with understanding. He was only trying to do what was right. As she nodded slightly, in her bed, Persephone did

the same, in her dream. "The World Above is my home. My father is there. He loves me."

"Of course he does," Hades answered her, his cape swirling like a cloud. She stopped, on the way to the path Above.

"And so do you," she told him, sitting near a beautiful outcropping of crystals. They shone blue and violet in the walls. She ran her hands over the stones. "So pretty!" she said, fingering one long one in particular.

"All that is here is mine to give. But you must take nothing with you, Lady."

"Mustn't I?" she asked, wondering.

"Nothing save my heart," he answered her. Giving her his hand to rise. He lifted the long purple crystal from the wall, tucking it into his pocket. Perhaps once she was back above. Perhaps once she was free. But not down here. He knew she must take nothing, down here.

"Will you be lonely once I go?" she asked him.

His arms were sculpted marble in the dim light. The leather of his boots almost indistinguishably black from that of his pants. A low-slung belt girded his hips. His abdomen was made for touching.

"I will be desolate. But you will be free," he answered.

She stopped again.

"Doesn't the thought of another man touching me, making children inside me ... doesn't that do anything to you?"

He slammed one gloved palm into the wall near her head. "Do not speak of such things," his voice growled at her. "My resolve is tenuous enough."

She blinked up at him, her green eyes misting.

"My children. Could they not be yours?" She whispered it, asking.

"My children will be doomed and damned to this place, as am I," he told her. "I would want another fate for you. Even if you are not wise enough to want it for yourself." His voice had grown harsh.

Vincent moaned in his sleep uncomfortably. Catherine nearly wept, in hers.

Persephone's voice persisted. "The fire in you... and the pain. Is there another you love, My Lord?" she asked.

"I am a God, little beauty. And when it has pleased me, I have taken others to my bed. But none to my heart, not truly, until now."

He waved her down the last passage.

"It is why I am letting you go."

"Sire?" An old woman's voice inquired, rousing herself from a nearby alcove. "You have faced a hard journey." Her head was wrapped in bright fabric, and her skin shone darkly in the half-light. A long nailed finger, be-ringed and arthritic, beckoned them forward. Her eyes were sightless, but Persephone got the impression that she missed nothing.

A small table had been set. A decanter of wine sat next to a freshly split pomegranate. The old woman poured for her Master, and offered him

both the cup and the plate of sweet seeds. Her hands were unsteady. Her eyes were milky with cataracts.

"A drink before you go?" She extended the cup.

A wine deeper red than any Persephone had ever seen filled a chalice wrought from silver and set with jewels. Precious metals and gemstones came from the earth. Persephone's suitor had wealth beyond compare.

"Narcissa," he greeted the blind woman. He wasn't thirsty. But if he stopped to drink, he could spend a few moments, just a few moments more, with his love. The pomegranate seeds scattered on the plate as he lifted the chalice. He ignored them.

"I will take the wine. You may leave, Narcissa." The words were imperious, but the inclination of his head let Persephone know this old crone was special to him.

"Do not forget to offer your lady something, Sire," Narcissa told him.

"No." Hades kept the cup to himself. "There will be no tricks to make her stay, Narcissa."

To remove anything from his realm was to be bound to it. It was why he'd made her change her clothes, and had fed her nothing. "She will drink from the clear stream, tonight, Lady Fate, for that is *her* fate."

Persephone watched the exchange with interest. From her bed, so did Catherine.

"Indeed it is." The blind prophetess inclined her turbaned head, bowing low, as she retreated.

Persephone stepped away from him a bit, knowing that the fate they spoke of was close at hand.

"When I leave... will you find another?" she asked him.

He drank deeply, from the cup. "Not until my loneliness drives me to it," he told her. "Not until after you are well quit of this place. Well quit of ... everything," he added, tactfully. She knew what he meant.

"What if I live a long time?" she asked.

He turned to face her squarely, his back to the exit.

"I will take no lover while you live, Lady, that I swear. You will know that no matter how long you live, when you are old, when you are frail, when your grandchildren play at your feet ... that I am here; and I am longing for you."

A tear slid down her cheek. She understood the risk he was taking, sending her back. She might find a love there. She might not. She would certainly find her life there. A life without his graces. Or his sorrows.

"Is there no way for us to be together?" her gentle voice prodded.

He shook his head, staring at the wall before him.

"Only if you die unloved. And I would not wish that for you, even for my own selfish needs." He turned his back to her, ready to take her above.

"I plan to see to it you live a long, full life, Beauty. Have the life you were meant to have, as much as I can."

"And when I die?" she asked his retreating back.

He paused and looked to the side.

"It may be that another loves you the way that old man loved the old woman. I will pray for your sake, that that will happen, that you find someone. Someone to be a part of. Even as I dread it," he answered.

Persephone understood. She was being released that she might find another. No matter what it cost him. He'd learned to want her happiness more than he wanted his own. It was a hard lesson. Love's sweetness had a bitter edge, and it was cutting him.

Moonlight dropped its beams into the hole before them. She moved to his side. His profile revealed his torment.

"I could come see you," she told him. "Just sometimes. Sometimes, to ease the loneliness of your heart." She touched his cheek in longing. It was fire and glaciers under her palm.

"And be divided all your days? I would not see you thus," he answered sadly, shaking his head.

They stepped forward. He moved his hand in a graceful arc, and a clear, rising path opened upward before her. Chambered moonlight filtered down, diffusing its blessing. She could smell jasmine, and water. She could smell home.

*No!* Something inside her railed.

"Follow this way out," he told her. "It will take you to near the glen where I found you."

"I will come back," she told him. She was grasping at straws.

He shook his mighty head again. His fiery mane rippled down his bare back. "Only the Underworld knows the way back to the Underworld, my love." He touched her cheek as she did his. "You cannot return unless you belong. And I will not bring you here again." He kissed the silver tear that lay on her eyelashes. "I might not be able to let you go again, if I do." The confession cost him deeply.

"I ... Wait, I need to think." She looked at the exit with fear.

How odd he should see that expression on her face right now. It would be the first time she'd ever shown him that feeling. The first moment she saw him, she'd been startled. But she hadn't been afraid.

*Let me do this for you,* He begged his resolve to hold. Just a few minutes more. Then he'd have an eternity to miss her.

"There is a stream before you. You are thirsty," he said, and she knew there was magick in the command. He was compelling her to leave. It was the only time he'd compelled her to do anything. At first, he'd forbade her to leave, but he'd not compelled her into thinking she wanted to stay. There was a difference.

"I love you." She said it an instant before she found herself pushed above by invisible hands. She had to walk the path. It was her fate.

The dark stones curved upward, into the glen. The night forest waited for her, and a silvered stream ran through it. Moonlight glinted on boulders, and night-blooming jasmine overwhelmed the bushes everywhere. Red and white midnight roses twined, sending their fragrance, into the night. The dark smelled heady, like sweetness, and sex, and she spun about and dropped to her knees the moment she felt her foot hit soft grass. Her hands traced the ground and pawed the air, trying to find the opening again.

But it was gone. She knew it was gone. The entrance to his world was sealed up against her. And he would come for her no more.

No!

Sorrow rode her like a pitiless lover. The lover he'd never been, and now never would be.



He watched her a moment, watched her claw the ground, frantic to find the way back, until she realized it would do no good. It was not enough to know the place. You had to know the way.

"I love you," she told the air in front of her, knowing he could hear her. There were tears in her desperate green eyes.

"I love you," he returned, looking at her beautiful, beautiful face. She couldn't hear him, and he knew it. He stood staring into the circular opening as if it were the mirror pool, and only one of them could see the other. His face had tears to match hers.

But the world would have her back. Her life would have her back. Her parents would be soothed, her friends relieved, her suitors emboldened.

And he would have heartache for a mortal lifetime. Her mortal lifetime, to be exact. Longer, perhaps. Perhaps much longer.

The stream trickled aimlessly as it wound its way to the pool.

She stumbled over to the water's edge, washed her hands in its sylvan beauty, splashed her face... tried to compose herself in her sorrow.

Hades turned from the image, aware it would weaken him if he watched her more.

Belatedly, he realized he still held the silver goblet in his hand. He walked the few steps back and set it on the empty tray.

The empty tray? But there had been...

"No!" He shouted the word, as he saw her drink from the stream, cupping water in one hand.

She held something else in the other, and he was terrified for her that he knew what.

"Beauty, no!"

His voice reached her just as she put the pomegranate seeds into her mouth, purposely binding herself to him forever.

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In his bed, Vincent knew the words had failed to sway her, even though she'd heard. He watched her swallow, and knew what it meant.

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The night air shimmered, and shifted, and before her, a long circular opening wound back into a magic path of stone walls. The way to the Underworld. She could see it now. Now that she was a part of it.

"No...." his voice groaned in pain. "What have you done? Oh, my love, my love... What have you done?" He came through the opening, his black cape casting night and stars out after it.

The seeds made her feel faint. Made her feel lightheaded. Made her feel that the darkness was not terrifying at all, that he was not terrifying at all. That the World Below was a place of comfort, and rest, and peace, and warmth, even in its chill, and that it was not to be feared, as she'd previously thought.

He caught her as she fell. She now knew he always would.

"You bound yourself to me," he told her. "Ah, love. Why did you do that? Now part of your life must be spent Below. You are no longer as you once were."

"Neither are you." She took off his glove, and put his fearsomely clawed hand in hers. "We were changed from the moment we met each other. Did you think I would let you live your life alone?"

"The choice you just made..." he struggled with the impact of it, struggled that she had done it, struggled even more that she had done it for him, "...It comes at the cost of all your other choices."

"There was always only one choice in the end," she told him, smiling, loving the feel of his arms around her. "We either move toward love, or away from it."

"But I rule Hades. Only the dead can go there."

"No," came the wizened voice from the opening. Narcissa stood a few feet back from the entrance, knowing she could not cross to the world of the living.

"If she had taken the seeds as a trick, then would her life be claimed, and be yours, my Lord," Narcissa told him.

"Like this... she is free to come and go as she wills it."

"But she is bound to me," Hades told the old woman as he cradled the young one. "I can feel it in my bones. We are bonded."

"As all lovers are bonded, one to the other," the sage told him.

"This is more than that." He brushed her shimmering hair back from her head. She lay smiling up at him beatifically. He felt her, inside his mind. And she felt him.

"Perhaps this is a greater love than most," Narcissa replied simply, and turned to go back to the World Below.

He cradled her in the damp grass of the soft night, feeling the force of her life change, and flow, and merge with his. After a while she sat up and pulled his dark cape around herself, causing it to be heavy wool lined with leather where her hands touched it.

"I will never leave you." He swore it fervently. "Now I will never leave you."

"And I will never leave you," she replied, happily, letting him draw her to her feet.

And as Vincent and Catherine felt dawn's fingers shift their way across the park, they saw the two Immortal lovers make their way back toward the circular entrance.

"Will we always find each other, do you think, my love?" Persephone asked the one she adored. "After all, there are many lives for us to lead. The world will not believe in Gods forever."

He kissed the crown of her head. The world could go and hang itself, for all he cared. He had his Love.

"Of course we will always find each other," he scoffed. "Some way. Some how. And I will always tell you 'no.' And you will always overcome my objections," he chided her, reaching inside his pants pocket for the crystal.

"Even when they don't believe in Gods?" she asked him.

"They'll still believe in love," he told her, shimmering a silver chain into existence. He placed the violet crystal around her beautiful throat. "A wedding gift," he told her, loving how it looked against her skin.

She touched the jewel, loving the smooth feel of it beneath her fingertips.

"I hope I remain strong. You can be very stubborn," she told him, giving him a midnight rose from beside the stream. It was white as moonlight.

"A gift deserves a gift." She offered it to him. Such rarities did not grow Below, though there were wonders aplenty for the curious.

"A rose?" he asked her. "And I think you are quite stubborn enough, by the way."

"A wedding gift," she admonished him, drawing his ungloved hand up, around her shoulders as they walked through the portal.

And somewhere in New York, two people awoke to face the day.

It was April 12, 1987.

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