

Thetis

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## Abstract

Thetis is a Nereid, a minor female deity, living a quiet existence in her villa on the island of Lemnos. When a strange, wretched creature crash lands onto her shores, Thetis has a prophetic vision that the wretch's life is inextricably connected to the fate of her prophesied son. Complicating matters, the Olympian gods Zeus and Hera have taken a strange interest in the creature, commanding her to kill it. Thetis must make a choice: trust her visions and care for the creature, or go against the will of the gods and decide to kill it. Throughout her journey, Thetis will discover the nature of the creature, how it has earned the animosity of the gods, and what the creature has to do with her unborn son.

Drawing on the myths of Homer, Ovid, and Apollonius Rhodius, *Thetis* brings the life of a background character into the foreground, and connects the seemingly disparate mentions of her life into a unified narrative.

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*This work is dedicated to Nadya, my Charis.*

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I watched him fall like fire from the sky. When a meteor enters the earth's atmosphere, it starts slowly, but then picks up speed as it approaches. It could be gravity. It could be perspective. It could be both. Unlike a falling star, his speed was steady – a drop of water rolling down a smooth surface. Through the clouds towards my island, Lemnos. Inside the fire, very clearly, was the silhouette of a body.

“Eurynome. Look.” I pointed.

She was, as usual, lounging in her hammock, strung up from some trees in my courtyard. She tilted her head to the sky, but she acted like it was such an effort.

“What? Where?”

Unbelievable. “Look where I'm pointing. Quick or you'll miss it.”

She slowly followed my arm's direction and saw the fire falling towards earth. She shielded her eyes from the sky's light.

“Whatever. It's a meteor.”

“No, there's a person in there.”

The fire grew brighter, as if burning up in the atmosphere. So bright it looked like another sun, too bright to look at. It hit the earth near the shore with a sound like a thunderclap. A glacier cracking. Smoke blended with steam from the ocean.

I looked back at Eurynome, but she had already turned her head away. Technically, Eurynome was family, but the relation was pretty distant. She thought that eating was too much of an effort. Unlike me, she had the look of a Nereid – what men like: blonde hair and big eyes and things. She had occasionally taken lovers, but only because she did not like to expend the effort resisting them. She would let the man do things for her: refilling her wine glass, fanning her on a hot day, combing her hair, making love to her, fetching her grapes. Eventually, the poor sop would realize that he was woefully infatuated with her and she was entirely ignorant of whether he was present or not. Her lovers might fly into a temper or they might skulk away, dejected. Eurynome didn't care which.

“What should we do?” I asked her.

She didn't bother to look back to answer. “What do you mean, ‘What should we do?’ It was just a meteor.”

“It wasn’t. It was a person. Aren’t you curious?”

“Not really. I’m comfortable right here.”

“Of course you are. I’m going to look.”

The meteor had crashed on the west coast. I transformed into a seagull and flew towards the pillar of smoke. I was curious, but not hurried.

From the air, I looked back at my home, its white walls gleaming in the sunlight, Eurynome sleeping in the courtyard. Beyond the walls, my vineyards and farmlands. A few servants, now specks, were working the fields. Then I was high enough to see the whole island of Lemnos – yellow grass, grey rocks, and blue ocean.

As I approached the western shore, the charred earth of the blast site came into view. I flew low over the crater and saw that the meteor strike had turned some of the sand and rock into glass. Driftwood and kelp were still burning. The smell of cooked seaweed. I landed and became a goat, carefully putting my hoof on the ground, testing for heat. The ashes were warm, but cool enough to walk on. Standing on a high jagged rock, I looked down into the crater. In the centre of the steaming pit was what looked like a wad of ragged seaweed. But then I saw it move.

The crater was filling up from the tide. I had little time. Carefully placing one hoof in front of the other, cautious of slipping or cutting myself on the glass and sharp rocks, I descended into the crater. As I neared the bottom, underneath the pile of kelp I saw two eyes.

It was, I supposed, an infant. But it was disgustingly deformed. Its face and body were distorted in proportions, one eye slightly higher and its back hunched. Its body was covered with wisps of long black hair. Its nose was massive, like a beak, but the tip curled to the side. A hair lip revealed gums like clams in its mouth. But worst of all were its legs. Thick thighs, tiny calves, warped feet twisted inward.

It was disgusting. I wanted to kill it.

But I wouldn’t have to. The ocean was filling up the crater and the tide would soon drown it. I could walk away. I turned to leave, but then I had a vision. I am sometimes struck by visions: glimpses of the present, the future, or the past. I am often confused by what is when.

This vision was of my son. I had seen him in many previous visions; he was a human, dressed in amazing armour, strong and beautiful and not yet born. I had not yet met the father, not that it mattered, for I had also received a prophecy that my son would be greater than his father. So I knew that my son would live to become a legend, a god among humanity. But the

vision I saw while in that crater was not of my son being glorious; instead, it was of him dying, pierced by something, naked, fading away into obscurity. No triumph. No glory.

I turned back to the wretched infant. The ocean's tide was higher, waves lapping at its feet. I again tried to leave, but I was overwhelmed with image after image of my son's murder – stabbed, mauled, or beaten. Whenever I turned to the wretch, the images stopped; whenever I turned away, I saw my son's torment. I didn't understand why, but in some way my son's fate appeared to be tied to this creature. I hadn't met my son yet, but I already knew that I would do anything for him. No matter how repulsive the job, I would do it.

I stepped down into the bottom of the crater and skipped over the waves and rocks. I paused as I stood over the wretch, who had still not yet cried or made any discernible noise. It looked even more horrible up close, if that is possible, as though its skin was pulled too tight over its undulating bones. Its movements were all shambled ripples. Its sunken eyes fixed upon me and in them I saw recognition. I wanted to stick it with my horns or ram it into the ocean to drown.

Changing back into a woman, I swaddled the wretch in some of my clothing, and picked it up with straight arms, my hands under its armpits, avoiding as much skin contact as possible. Despite my efforts, some of its skin and hair, cold but moist, touched mine. I fought back the gag reflex, and climbed back up the rocks, awkwardly trying to avoid touching the wretch more than necessary without dropping it. As I walked back to my villa, the creature was silent, except for some blubbling and gurgling noises. After a while, I tired of holding it away from my body with straight arms, so I gave in and held it a little closer. Ooze from its mouth began soaking through my robe, near my breast, and its small hands clutched at my clothes like it wanted to feed on me.

When I got back, Eurynome was still in her hammock. She did not bother to get up.

“We have a guest,” I said.

She turned her head and saw the back of the creature's skin through the bundled clothes.

“Ew. Is it dead?”

“No.”

“Then I think you should kill it.”

I set the wretch down onto the ground in the courtyard. Its eyes looked around, curious. Its comprehension and intelligence made it all the more horrible.



“I am tempted,” I admitted.

Eurynome and I sat in silence for a while, listening to the wretch gurgle.

“What do you think it eats?” she asked.

I did not answer.

Eurynome made few demands of me, and she liked my hammock. She also, when she wasn't being insufferably lazy, had a perspective on life that I found valuable. If there was an expedient way to do something, Eurynome would see it right away. I tended to overcomplicate everything.

“Killing it would be easier,” she suggested again. “It might even be good for it. What kind of life does it have ahead of it? You wanted a warrior son.”

“This isn't my son.”

“No? You're just taking it in. Get rid of it. If you don't put it out of its misery, I will.”

“Feel free.”

She looked at the wretch. Then rolled over and looked away. “I couldn't be bothered.”

We sat in silence for a while longer, listening to the wretch gurgle. What was this thing? Why was it tied to my son? I hadn't had any visions since the beach. The future was murky.

“I need some time to decide what to do with it,” I said to Eurynome. She didn't roll over to look at me.

“Well, don't leave it here,” she said.

I called the servants to empty a room. They were repulsed at the sight of the wretch burbling on the courtyard ground, but obeyed. One of the servants was a new mother, so I took her baby's cot, placed it in the new room and put the wretch inside it. It didn't cry, so I didn't know whether it was warm or not, but I took my best guess with the number of blankets.

I needed to feed it. I called for servants to fetch some goat's milk. He retrieved it in a wineskin. I slit the skin and brought it to the wretch's mouth. It spat the milk back up, the liquid dribbling down its chin.

“Come on. Drink it.”

I held the skin closer. It spat it back up again. I didn't know what to do, so I went to tell Eurynome. “I don't think it likes milk. Maybe it eats solids?”

“It doesn't even have teeth.”

But I tried solids anyway. Crushed apples, grapes, strawberries, pomegranates, yogurts, various cheeses, breads, juices, ambrosia, and wine. When none of these worked, I tried meat, both cooked and raw. The wretch would have none of it. It wasn't until I was dangling an artichoke over the crib that the infant reached up, but not for the food. Its clammy hand slipped up for my breast.

I dropped the artichoke into the crib. Its thin hairlip stretched into a smile, giddy and salacious, as it stretched its hands towards my body. I folded my arms to hide myself from its gaze and left the room. I returned to Eurynome.

“It wants to suckle.”

“Ew. Why are you taking care of this thing?”

“I don't get it, either,” I explained. “I had a vision.”

“Like, of the future?”

“I think so. In some way my son's fate is tied to this thing. If it lives, my son lives to be a hero. If it dies, my son dies in battle.”

Eurynome thought for a while. “Why don't you just raise your son to be a bard or a poet?”

“Poets are cowardly.”

“Well, then. What matters to you? Yourself? Or this hypothetical future son? I'd go with self. But, whatever. Like, if it was me, we wouldn't even be having this conversation.”

I left Eurynome and searched for the servant who was a new mother, until I found her nursing her infant. Pulling her baby out of her hands, I gave it to another servant, and brought the mother to the wretch's room. When the mother saw the wretch sleeping in her baby's cot, she realized my intent, began to cry and tried to run away. I chained her to the wall, whipped her, and stripped her shirt. From its crib, the wretch watched all this, apparently fascinated. The servant blubbered away as I picked up the wretch and held it to her breasts. The wretch turned its head away. I tried again.

“Come on. Drink it.” The wretch again pulled away. I grabbed the servant's breast, ignored her screaming, squeezed some milk out, and, holding the wretch's head, pushed its hair lip onto the nipple. The servant clenched her body, pulled her shoulders up, and turned her head away. But still the wretch wouldn't drink. I gave up and put the wretch back into its cot.

As I was setting it down, it again reached for my breasts.

I looked at the wretch's scrawny form. It looked hungry. I couldn't understand why it refused to drink from the mother, but was so fascinated with my body.

I gave the servant the key to her chains, letting her unlock herself and run back to cry to her infant.

"Well," I said to the wretch. "Now what?"

\* \* \*

Night.

I sat in the corner of the wretch's room, in the form of a mouse. I wanted to observe it, but I didn't feel like having the wretch constantly trying to feed on me. Still, it wasn't blind to my presence, occasionally looking at me. One of the servants had given it a fork to play with. It held it tightly in its hands, occasionally putting it in its mouth. I wondered if it would jab itself and die from blood loss, solving my problem.

Then the wretch began to shape the metal. Becoming molten silver, the fork changed forms in its hands, extending, curling, lengthening into a slender, delicate plant shape. The fork was now a bracelet. Polished. Made new. I became a crow, flew down to the crib, snatched the silver, and flew it out of the room, down the hall. The bracelet looked alive, like it was blowing in some wind despite being indoors. I expected it to bloom. Whatever the wretch was, I wanted it to survive to find out more.

I took the form of a new mother, generating oxytocin and letting it seep into my alveoli. My breasts became tender as their sacs flooded with milk. I returned to the wretch's room. It was sitting up in its crib and, seeing my new form, its mouth split into a greedy smile. I pulled my dress down, revealing a breast, and picked up the wretch. Its body was still as cold and clammy as it was when I pulled it from the kelp in the crater. Its arms greedily clutching for my body, I brought its mouth closer and felt it slobber over my nipple. Clammy gums began to massage and squash the areola painfully, squeezing the milk out into its mouth. The wretch revelled in finally finding sustenance, the slobber and milk frothing over its twisted gums. The wretch gurgled euphorically as it clutched and sucked at my body, malformed calves rubbing against my stomach in a fervour. I stood, trying to pull away, while the wretch tried to pull me closer as it suckled my insides out.

I sat huddled with my knees to my chest on the floor of my bedchambers. Through the window, I heard the servants going about their day, and Eurynome, I knew, must still be in the courtyard. I didn't want to see any of them. I didn't want them to see me.

Every time I thought of that hair lip against my breast, spitting and frothing my milk, I was disgusted. The memory made my skin feel too raw, too alive. I needed to stop. I needed to stop feeling. I slowed the pumping of my heart, the movement of muscle, the vibrations of my particles. My muscle fibres became stiff, my blood congealed, my hair froze together, my ocular retinas solidified. I could no longer see, feel or touch. My entire body transformed into stone.

It didn't help. Sometimes soldiers, after losing a limb, wake up at night to the ache of their missing arm. Their nerves are completely severed, the stump long since healed, but the brain still detects pain. I was solid stone, without senses, but all I could feel was the warmth and cold of the wretch's mouth salivating on my breast.

Who did that beast think he was? My line was older than the gods. My name is Thetis. I am a Nereid. My father was a Titan, a child of the earth. My mother, an Oceanid. However, I like to think I take after my grandmother. Her name was Tethys. Before Poseidon came along, she was the lord of the ocean. She liked things to be constant, but also liked things to constantly change. Tides can be predicted, but the ocean never looks exactly the same. My grandmother loved paradoxes. Permit me to tell you one particular story I like that I think summarizes her and me quite well.

Even after she retired, the gods would sometimes go to Tethys when they needed someone to settle one of their petty squabbles. One day, Hera caught Zeus cheating with Callisto, a virgin priestess of the virgin goddess Artemis. Callisto was beautiful, pursued by many suitors, but spent her entire life refusing these men's advances because of her faith. She desired the love of her goddess more. When Zeus saw her, he grew, as usual, aroused. He spent days on Olympus watching her when she wasn't looking. He eventually asked her out, and, naturally, Callisto refused the thunder god's advances. So Zeus appeared to her in the form of Artemis.

Callisto was confused. Why had she kept her virginity all these years for Artemis, only to now find her goddess slobbering on her neck and fumbling with her robes? She could feel the

hunter god's bowstring-calloused hands as they fondled her skin. Still, Callisto had faith and would obey her god.

Several months later, while bathing in the streams and pools, Artemis – the real Artemis this time – and her other virgins were horrified at Callisto's exposed growing belly. Artemis chased her out of the pool, shooting at her with her bow and arrow. Callisto was not even given time to dress herself in her priestess robes. Alone and naked in the woods, covered in rain, dirt, and shame, the former priestess gave birth to a son, Arcas.

Hearing about what happened from Artemis, Hera was furious.

"Don't worry. She didn't mean anything," Zeus explained with a smile and an apologetic shrug.

Hera, instead, became mad at the one she thought was responsible for this entire affair: Callisto. And her son. As a punishment, she changed them both into mindless bears.

After seeing the two bears wandering the forest and sleeping in caves, Zeus felt bad. He couldn't tell his wife, but Callisto did mean something to him, after all. The least he could do was set them in the heavens, and he transformed them into the constellations, Ursa Major and Minor. That made him feel better. He was a swell chap after all.

When Hera saw these new constellations in the shape of bears, she figured out what Zeus had done. She could not believe her husband's continued betrayals, so she went to see my grandmother.

"I want you to punish them. Don't let them rest. Never let them touch your waters."

"You know that stars don't need rest?" my grandmother asked.

Hera gave one of her sardonic smiles. "I know. But I would also know that they are punished again."

Tethys did as Hera asked. Her waters pushed against the firmament, and the bowl of sky began to rotate. The stars, used to being stationary for so long, found themselves for the first time moving through the sky. Throughout the evening, they would fall below the horizon and be allowed time to rest from their movement. Except for Ursa Major and Minor. Circumpolar, they constantly move, yet are constantly stationary.

My grandmother's solution was typical for her: a paradox. Was Callisto honoured by being turned to stars, or was she condemned to an eternity of movement? Was the stars' movement still a punishment if the punished are unaware of their punishment? Hera thought so.

Ultimately, Callisto's fate depends upon interpretation. In this way, I love this story because, like my grandmother, I love paradoxes. How you understand the story is based upon your outlook.

Perspective. Interpretation. Even the gods are not omniscient, but rely upon their perspective to understand and make sense of the world.

I also like this story because I think that Zeus and Hera look like idiots.

But now – at least now I knew that my family line would continue. The visions of my son were more defined and the images of him in pain receded. I could see him, strong, proud, and shining in his armour. My son would live on and gain glory in war. Until then, I simply needed to endure this pain for him.

Visions of the future. Time, like matter, is not constant. It is affected by large celestial bodies or gravity. If I hurtled along at the speed of light, I would age more slowly, assuming I aged at all. Time, synced with matter, is not an obstacle. So I can sometimes see things that other people cannot. Sometimes it is the future. Sometimes the past. Often the present.

Perspective. Interpretation. These things govern the universe.

When I first had visions of my son, I didn't understand what I was seeing. He was handsome – a warrior, obviously, due to his physique and armour – but I hadn't any inkling of who he was. He appeared in dreams, divinations, mind wanderings. Sometimes I would be working on some menial task – chopping tomatoes – and then his face would push through the murk of my mind, water coming through a cheese cloth. My mind would be squeezed like a sponge, and all these liquid memories of events that had not yet happened would bloom out.

I needed to know who the face belonged to, so I had gone to visit old man Proteus. He was the one who had told me that the face belonged to my son. He was the one who prophesied that my son would be greater than his father.

Proteus. He would know what this wretch was and why its fate was tied to my son. Proteus would know. He knows everything. Almost. I would visit him and he would tell me.

I changed back into human flesh, and studied the bracelet the wretch had made. It looked elegant in this light, refracting into new colours.

“Thetis?”

I hid the bracelet in my robes before turning. Standing in the doorway, looking slightly unsteady, was Eurynome. I rarely saw her off her hammock.

“We have another guest,” was all she said.

Eurynome and I rarely had visitors, solitude being a luxury of living on this island. The timing of having another guest drop in could not be a coincidence. I liked having time to think, to contemplate. So much had happened this morning with the wretch, that I had not yet had comfortable time to process. I fingered the bracelet inside my robes. I did not wish to reveal it to anyone yet. Eurynome led me back to the courtyard, her bare feet padding lightly on the stone floor.

In my courtyard was Hera.

Dark eyes, slender limbs, flowing robes, and a matron veil over her long, black hair. As she turned to face me, her entire form undulated, as though she eternally flowed in the wind. The queen of the gods was beautiful. So beautiful that I wished I had dressed in more elegant clothing. I looked down. My dress was still dirty from the crater and walking across Lemnos. If I took another form now, it would give away my uncertainty. If I had known that she was coming I might have taken a more beautiful form. I also wished I had tidied the courtyard – algae was growing on some rocks, moss coming up between the cracks, the weaving on some of the baskets had come undone in the corners. Hera’s eyes were all contempt and mild disgust as she surveyed my home and my appearance. What was she doing here?

“Hello, Thetis.” A sardonic smile. I had the impression that she enjoyed being here as much as I enjoyed hosting her. “What a lovely place you have.”

“Hello, Hera,” I said.

Hera was someone you didn’t want to cross. Many of the gods were fickle: Zeus would fly into a tantrum about something, throw a couple lightning bolts, and that was the end of it. He would forget about whatever it was by lunch. Hera, on the other hand, luxuriated in grudges. Like the time she was tricked into nursing Heracles, the result of one of Zeus’s affairs. Heracles chomped down so hard on her breast that Hera pushed him away, spilling the milk over the sky, creating the Milky Way. Hera wouldn’t kill Heracles directly; snuffing a life out wasn’t really her style. She prolonged her enemy’s suffering: she drove Heracles insane until he killed his wife, six of his children, half his town, and burned his own property to the ground. And now, here was Hera in my courtyard.

“I hear you have a visitor,” she said, her eyes still judgmentally surveying my home.

“Word travels fast.”

“So what are you going to do with him?” she asked.

“I hadn’t given it too much thought.”

“Oh? Do you know that Zeus wants him killed?”

I looked at Eurynome, who had returned to her hammock. She raised her eyebrows at me in an “I told you so” fashion.

“I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.” I fingered the bracelet tucked under my robes. “Why do you want it dead?”

“Oh, not me. I would never want such a thing. It has been condemned by Zeus for its rebellious behaviour.”

“Rebellious behaviour.” I tasted the sound of the words on my tongue as I repeated them. Since when was Hera concerned with Zeus’s wishes?

“Oh, you know Zeus,” Hera said. “It’s a good thing I decided to come as a favour to you because I really value our friendship. I just want to make sure you didn’t unintentionally cross the wishes of the Olympian gods.”

“Listen, the only reason that I brought that thing here was because I have been getting visions of a son – my son. They seem to be saying that if this wretch does not live, my son will die.”

“Oh, Thetis. Your imagination is running wild. You can’t know that for certain.”

“I have seen it.”

“That is your interpretation of what you have seen.”

“My interpretation is all I have.”

Hera stayed silent for a while.

“Listen, I am the goddess of mothers, and I guarantee that your son will be born healthy and live a strong life. Your guest has nothing to do with him. Besides, Zeus has punished him. I just don’t want you to find yourself in a bad situation with the gods. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

At this point, I didn’t want to debate any longer. I wanted her to go away.

“Ok, Hera. Of course. Whatever the wisdom of the gods.”

“Excellent. You’re making the right decision.” She looked around at my courtyard. “I would hate for everything you have built here to be destroyed, Thetis. One lightning bolt from Zeus could burn your lovely home to the ground. You know, if you ever need anything, like someone to talk to, you know you can come to me.” She turned and stepped away into the sky.



After she had left, I breathed out a sigh. I didn't realize how tense I was.

"What a cow," Eurynome said. "Who does she think she is?"

"She probably thinks she's the queen of the gods," I said.

"So what are you going to do? You can't trust her."

I didn't know what I would do. Hera was hiding something. Rebellious behaviour? It didn't make any sense. The wretch was hardly a rebel war hero.

"So how are you going to kill it?" Eurynome asked.

"I'm not going to."

"But you said..."

"Not yet, anyway. I need to show you something." I took the bracelet out of my robes and held it in front of Eurynome's face. The sunlight coalesced in the light and the flowered bracelet blew slightly in the wind. It looked fragile, but it was quite sturdy and well-made.

Eurynome's eyes grew wide. "Where did you get this?"

"The wretch made it."

"It did? It's beautiful. Give it here." She took the bracelet from me, put it on her wrist, and held it up to the light. "It brings out the colour of my eyes, don't you think?"

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Can it make more?"

"I don't know. Probably. It seemed pretty easy for it to do."

"Well, it's lovely," Eurynome said. "Go get it to make more."

"I will later. First I was thinking of paying a visit to old man Proteus. There is more to this than we currently know."

"Do what you want. But I'm keeping the bracelet."

Of all the gods, Proteus was the closest to being what human philosophers call omniscient. No god is truly infinitely knowledgeable, as the cosmos does not contain an infinite number of facts. But Proteus knew all of the facts that were knowable, and even a few that were not; however, he didn't necessarily know all the facts at the same time. Given that he was a very ancient god of water, his mind was mercurial, slipping from hundreds of places to hundreds of times in an instant. Even if he knew something one moment, he might not the next. For Proteus to tell me anything about the wretch, I had to convince him to hold his form and then he had to be in the mood to tell me anything. Even if I could manage to wrestle some information out of Proteus, making sense of whatever he said was another matter altogether.

I descended from my villa on the familiar paths to the ocean, two servants following along behind me, bringing a goat with them. We reached the shore, and stood among the tidal pools and black rocks. I listened to the sound of the sea hissing and sucking as the servants built a bonfire on the rocks.

Summoning a God has quite a bit of ceremony attached to it. Now, I don't mean to brag, here, but I consider myself to be very good at the theatre of calling the gods.

"Proteus!" I called out to the ocean. It sounded quite dramatic, my voice resonating even over the ocean's waves. I waited. No reply. My only response was the splashing of the waves and the crackling of the fire. I had the servants stoke the flames higher and I called again.

"Proteus! Can you hear me?" Still no response. "Fine," I said. "Be that way."

I grabbed the goat by the horn and slit its throat. The goat screamed, then gargled from the blood in its vocal chords. I cut open the goat's stomach and pulled out some of its intestines. The goat kept making a retching noise that might have been bleating if the animal weren't disembowelled. As the blood of the goat mingled with the salt wash of the ocean, I chucked some of its fat and intestines on the fire. They landed with a splat and a hiss. Then I felt a presence behind me – the air became thick with steam, like the atmosphere of a sauna, but without the heat. The servants ran and hid behind some rocks. I turned to the ocean. Hovering over the water was Proteus.

Unlike many of the trendier, newer gods, Proteus did not share the appearance of any living creature on earth. Instead he appeared as a massive deposit of water floating in the air,

quickly slipping from shape to shape to shape. He was a figure eight. A spiral. An isosceles triangle. I could tell he was hungry.

“Hello, Proteus,” I said.

“Blood and guts.” Proteus said, as he observed the offering. “The fate of King Charles.”

“Proteus, do you remember me?” I asked.

“You are Thetis.”

“Yes, Proteus,” I said. “You know me.”

“I am the old man of the sea. Give me more of your offering.”

“In a minute, Proteus. I need you to tell me about my visions.”

He began rambling on about the anatomy and developing intelligence of the octopus. Oh, good. Octopus brains again.

“No, Proteus. My visions.” I needed to get his attention. I threw some more of the goat’s intestines and fat into the fire. They landed with a sizzle. As the goat’s fluids seeped down the rocks into the ocean, Proteus’s watered form began mingling with the blood in the water, turning Proteus into a shade of pink. He curled into a Fibonacci spiral. Yes, that brought him some pleasure.

“Did you like that?” I asked. “There’s more. Tell me about my visions. You once told me about my son. You told me that he would be greater than his father.”

“It is fated,” he said.

“I have had more visions, this time connected to the wretch I found on the beach.”

“Hephaestus.”

“Hephaestus? Is that its name? What is it?”

His spiral began elongating. “The fire and flame. A volcano will bury Pompeii. A dog, people making love, parents protecting children, frozen in lava.”

Oh, good. More poetry. I was losing him. I threw more fat on the fire, and he shifted into a rotating cube.

“Proteus, you are so wise. You are probably the only one who knows how they are connected... How are they connected? What does this wretch have to do with my son?”

“He will protect your son.”

This made little sense to me. The hair-lipped wretch didn't look like it would ever be capable of defending anything, let alone my warrior son. My son in armour. My son that would always be remembered as a war hero.

"How is that possible?" I asked him. "How could that beastly thing protect anything? Why does Hera want me to kill it?"

"It is fated," he said.

That was Proteus's way of saying that this conversation was over.

"No, Proteus! Can my son survive any other way?"

"It is fated."

I threw the rest of the goat's guts over the fire and watched as Proteus thrashed ecstatically from a sphere, to a cone, to a tetrahedron. His watery form turned red and dirty brown from the blood and ash coursing through his system. Then a great wave struck the rocks, drenching out the fire, and he was gone. A cool ocean breeze blew away the thick mist. I was left alone with the smoke, the cowering servants, and the charred husk.

\* \* \*

"Where were you?" asked Eurynome as I walked back into the villa. My clothes were drenched and covered with blood and soot.

"Visiting Proteus," I answered.

"Did he tell you anything?"

"Not a damn thing," I said.

I didn't say a word to anyone else, I was so frustrated. I stormed into the wretch's room. It was sitting up in its crib and its mouth split into something resembling a smile when I entered. I ignored the recognition, tossed a spoon in the crib, and waited. Nothing. It ignored the spoon, continuing to look at me.

I bent over the crib, and placed the spoon into its hands. As I did so, I felt its hand clutch for my breast.

"No," I said, swatting its hand away. "This first."

The wretch kicked the spoon out of the crib onto the floor, and began grasping for me, its face distorted with effort, its lower gums appearing through its hair lip.

“No.” I said again, and I put the spoon back into the crib. Clang. The creature had pushed the spoon onto the floor. I put it back a third time. Then the creature began to scream.

Its cry was piercing, like the shriek of an old man with a nasal voice or the amplified scream of a spider. Its gurgling had sounded somewhat infant-like, albeit creepy, but this noise was thoroughly horrific. Its screams grew more insistent and desperate as it reached for me. I didn’t know what to do.

I showed the wretch my breast and the beast shut up. Staying far enough away so that the creature couldn’t touch me, I picked up the spoon, and tossed it back into the crib. The creature kicked the spoon back out of the cot, and returned to wailing. I was at a loss. We were in a stand off. I covered my breast, left the room, and closed the door.

All night, the creature’s howl could be heard throughout the villa. The servants looked wide-eyed and terrified from the noise. It could be heard over the water by fisherman passing by in their boats, which began the legend that my island was haunted. In a way, I suppose it was. For much of the night, I sat in the courtyard with Eurynome, who had covered her head with a pillow.

“Is that thing going to scream all night?” she asked with a muffled voice.

“Probably,” I answered, “but it needs to know who is in charge.”

Eurynome pulled the pillow down from her face. Her eyes were closed tight. “It sounds as gross as it looks.”

“At this rate,” I said, “Hera will hear it from Olympus.”

Then, in the early hours of the morning, the howl abruptly stopped.

The servants all looked exhausted, but relieved. No one in the villa had been able to sleep. After I put them to work, I made my way to the wretch’s room and stood in the hall before entering. Nothing. Was it dead? Would it go to the underworld to meet Hades? Hades would probably be as excited to have the creature in his home as I was to have it in mine. But for all of Eurynome’s talk of killing it, and despite Hera’s demand, I had doubts that the creature could die at all. Even if I had wanted to kill it, I doubted that I would be able to, given that it had already survived a fall from the sky from such a great height. I also hadn’t been getting any more visions, so the creature’s death seemed unlikely. I opened the door.

The room was still. The spoon was still in the exact spot on the floor from the night before. I waited. Still no movement from the crib.

I broke the silence. “Are you dead?”

The wretch turned its head to look at me, its ugly face devoid of expression. Was it dejection? Abandonment? Whatever it was feeling, it was still alive. It reached a hand out to me, its fingers stretched out, like it was pleading. I entered the room and pulled up a stool next to the cot.

“Listen, creature. I don’t know what you are or where you came from. I’m not entirely certain what role you are to play in all this; however, somehow our fates have been intertwined. So we might as well make the best of it, and learn to live with one another. You may stay here in my villa, but, in exchange, you earn your keep.”

I picked up the spoon, and held it up to show the creature.

“Spoon first,” I said. I placed it in the cot, then I stood back and waited.

The wretch looked at the spoon, then up at me. Then back to the spoon. It made a little snort with its nasal voice, then picked the spoon up. Like the night before, the metal instantly became soft and pliable in its hands, the spoon’s handle lengthening into a thin strand. Its fingers separated the spoon’s head into a pendant, a slender round cage with bars so fine that the ornament caught light as if it was a dangling jewel. The spoon had become a necklace. I took the jewellery from the wretch’s hands and put it on, admiring myself in the mirror. It would go nicely with more elegant clothing.

“Good,” I said. I closed the door to the room, leaving the two of us alone, and revealed my breast to the creature. “You have earned your right to stay another day.”

Time passed, if that's what it does. Months turned into years, batted by in an instant. The wretch continued to obey. I would bring it other metal objects – forks, spoons, knives, plates, horseshoes, nails – and drop them into the crib. My villa soon overflowed with ornate objects – jewellery, candelabras, vases, urns. It was all better craftsmanship than anything I had ever seen, and I had seen a lot. More intricate and beautiful. However, I discovered limits to the creature's abilities: it couldn't reshape wood, cloth, or leather. Only metal. Also, while I found the items beautiful, I found their style to be too luxurious for the rest of me, both for my clothes and personality.

But as the wretch grew in size and talent, it also grew more grotesque. Its hair, the thin strands, was now thicker and fuller, forming into matted wads. As it lost some of its baby fat, its skin pulled tighter. Soon its feet were almost touching the edge of the crib. But while most of its body grew longer, its calves remained the same size. If anything, they seemed to shrink in comparison to how its body grew.

I had not heard from Hera. In theory, she could, at any moment, spot the wretch. Her gaze might fall from Olympus to my villa, and there the wretch would be, as plain as day, in defiance of her wish. Ordinarily she might have not bothered to look from Olympus down to Lemnos, but I could never be sure because showing up so soon after the wretch made it pretty obvious she was concerned. I took a number of steps to prevent the wretch's discovery. I kept it hidden inside the walls of my courtyard, and never brought it outside the grounds of the villa. I was constantly on the watch for any suspicious looking animals that might be spies for the gods or perhaps even be the gods themselves in disguise. Whenever the wretch was in the courtyard, I was careful to clean up any trace it left, such as any object with which it was playing. Despite taking all these precautions, I often woke in the night with a start, expecting a meteor to strike my villa. In the day, I would keep my eyes to the sky, awaiting the wrath of the god of mothers.

But it never came.

But the wretch. It was always the wretch. It filled all of my life and I felt like parts of me were packed away and diminished; not gone, per se, but dried out and ignored. My life was refocused around its schedule. The need to feed it, clean it, bring it outside. In the morning, I

would nurse it, and then take it to the courtyard. Eurynome, almost as tradition, would offer some form of protest:

“Ugh. Again?”

“Why don’t you just leave it in the crib?”

“You’re wasting your time with that thing.”

“It’s still clammy.”

She was right, and I was often tempted to leave it to rot inside. I never did, though. The wretch always looked slightly slimy, no matter how many times I would bathe and dry it. I tried cropping off wads of its hair, but that left the crooked nose and hair lip looking all the more visible. Eventually, I would clean it just out of routine.

In the afternoon, I organized my property: checking in with the servants, maintaining the food and land, etc. Truthfully, there was very little to do. I had already trained many of the servants in the administration of my lands. But I liked having a task that kept me away from the wretch and making choices instead of responding to needs and demands from someone else. I would leave it in the courtyard with Eurynome – not that I could be sure that she’d raise a finger if it were drowning in its own blood, but still, it seemed irresponsible to leave it unattended.

In the evening, I would feed the wretch again, and then give it metal of some kind to shape into some majestically ornate object. Eurynome would even make the effort to turn over and watch in fascination as the wretch worked its magic. Her clothes weren’t much better than mine, but, for some reason, the jewellery the wretch made always looked incredible on her. Then I would put the wretch to bed and sit in the courtyard with Eurynome. I often felt exhausted.

Getting the creature to shape objects soon required more resources. I noticed that my dinner table had a number of elaborate candelabras, yet I was running out of silverware.

But eventually, after breathing days in and out like lungs, I needed time away from the villa. I didn’t feel like going all the way to the mainland, but I needed some place for myself – some place apart from the schedule. I explored around the island until I found a crescent shore on the west coast.

I spent hours sitting there, watching the waves come in. The blue water, the white waves breaking, silver sand, black rocks, windswept trees. The mornings often had a mist over the water. This was what I needed. I transformed into a gull and let the wind off the ocean keep me aloft. I loved it out there. I wanted to come here as frequently as possible, and I told myself that



there was no reason why I could not. Exploring the cliffs above the beach, I found a cave, and I decided it would do as a second home. I ordered my servants to stock it with a few comforts: a bed, some baskets for weaving, a variety of cheeses and wine.

After breathing this air, after having finally felt this freedom, returning to the villa became all the more difficult. When I walked through the front gate, the wretch sat there in the courtyard, its eyes looking at me questioningly, as if it were wondering where I had been. I didn't owe it an answer and I kept the location from Eurynome. The cave was now my place to go. I said nothing, sat down, and began mending a basket.

"Begging your pardon, but may I ask where you have been?" The question was delivered by a voice tight and strained. It could have been a crow asking. I looked at Eurynome, but she shrugged her shoulders. It was a moment before I saw the wretch's eyes on me, and I realized that the question had come from it.

"Good day. Hello. If you don't me asking where you've been, that is," the wretch spoke again in its raven voice.

"You can talk?" I asked back.

"We had arranged something of an agreement," it said, "and yet you haven't been here all day."

"UMM," Eurynome asked, "you can talk?"

"Where I go is my own business," I answered. I refused to show that I was flustered.

"And you left me here with her." It pointed at Eurynome. "I'm quite certain she wouldn't care whether I was alive or dead."

"That's true," Eurynome said. "But seriously, you can talk?"

"This is my first time," the wretch said to her dismissively. Then it turned back to me. "But aren't you my mother? Aren't you supposed to take care of me? Your servants have mothers. They take care of their children."

That was it. My breaking point. I tried to keep my calm, but I could feel the edge creeping into my voice. "Let's get one thing straight right now. No. Let's get two things straight. I am no servant, and I am not your mother. You landed here! I don't know who you are or where you came from. What are you? How do you shape these things? Why are you so good at it? How did you even survive your fall! And why does Hera – Hera who might destroy this place at any given second – why does she want you dead?"

“Forgive me, but I’m afraid that I don’t know.”

I was incredulous. “What do you mean, ‘Don’t know?’”

“I’m terribly sorry, but the answers to any of those questions – and I agree that they are truly pertinent. I don’t know. I don’t even know what I am. You’re Thetis. And you’re Eurynome. So who am I?”

“You’re name is Hephaestus, apparently,” I said.

“It is?” Eurynome asked.

“Proteus told me.”

“Hephaestus.” The wretch said slowly, trying it out.

“Really rolls off the tongue,” Eurynome said. “So, did you actually rebel against Zeus and Hera?”

“I don’t believe so. Who are they, exactly?”

“A high drama couple,” I answered.

“A fireball and lightning throwing high drama couple,” added Eurynome.

“How can you not know?” I asked again. “Your first words are complete sentences! You make this jewellery all the time!”

“Well, that’s quite easy, actually. That I just do.”

“You just do?” I asked.

“The items you give me – it looks wrong. It’s like looking at a crooked picture on the wall or something to that effect. It’s off balance. I’m just straightening it so it looks right.”

“You do a lot more than straighten,” Eurynome said while admiring her bracelet in the sunlight.

“Thank you. I’m delighted that you think so highly of my work. The raw material can be more,” it said, “I just see it. It’s capable of more.”

“What do you have to do with my son?” I asked. “No idea about that either?”

“Well, up until you enlightened me just now, I thought I was your son.”

“Well, you’re definitely not. What’s the first thing you remember?” I asked.

The wretch looked straight at me. “You, actually.”

“Me?” I asked, “Doing what?”

“Carrying me. Rescuing me, I think. I thought this was our arrangement. You take care of me, and then I...”

“I don’t know how your interpreted our, as you call it, ‘arrangement,’ but that is your own interpretation. I refuse to be bound by your rules.”

The wretch might have stubbornly pursed its lips together, but the hair lip prevented it.

“Then what is our agreement? Would you prefer it if I stopped making things? I could stop making you jewellery. Do you even need more candlesticks? What’s so great about having candlesticks crowding the table while you are running out of forks?”

“You are a guest in my house,” I shot back. “I will keep you alive, but you need to do your part around here. The least you can do is pitch in and help out. Can you help with home maintenance?” I hoped that he couldn’t see that the crack about the candlesticks embarrassed me.

“Home maintenance? I’m two years old!” How did it even know what two year olds should be capable of, anyway? Its sudden understanding was disorienting. What had I talked about in front of it?

I look down at its legs pointedly. “Then when you’re older, I’d like to see you try. But for now, the way you can help is shaping metal.”

“Besides,” Eurynome piped in, “these baubles make me look exquisite.”

“Now,” I said. “I have errands to do. I will be around later” I transformed into a gull and prepared to take flight. I didn’t, in fact, have any errands to run, but I wanted the wretch to know that I had things to do other than it.

“What errands? Perhaps I could help? Do my part and all that” it asked before I could fly away.

“I don’t know,” I said, in annoyance. “I have a villa to run. We’re running out of things.”

“What things?”

“Silverware. Pots. All this stuff you shape – it’s beautiful – but we need some practicalities. I was already planning to make a trip to fetch some basic supplies.” I lied. I wasn’t. But it didn’t need to know that.

“Did you want me to change it back?” it asked, looking at Eurynome’s bracelet. “Or make it something else?”

“No. Nono. I don’t want to lose those things.”

“Where do you plan on going?”

“I guess to the mainland.” I didn’t want to go to the mainland. I hated the mainland. I also didn’t want to do a huge trip, but I was beginning to feel like I was in a box here.

“May I come?” asked the wretch.

“Absolutely out of the question,” I said. “Hera might see you. Besides, I want to go alone. You can stay with Eurynome.”

“I don’t want to get stuck with it, either.” Eurynome said.

“Please,” I said to her.

“No way,” she responded. “You brought it here. This is all your fault. Don’t bring me into this.”

Eurynome could be so insufferably lazy. All I was asking her to do was lie there in her hammock.

“Please,” the wretch said, “I can help you with this. You wanted me to help. This is something I can help with.”

Its eyes were pleading with something in me. I remember being at a loss.

“Fine,” I said. “You can come. But we need to figure out some way to keep you hidden from Hera.”

Human villages stink. Dung, excrement, sweat, all manner of foul stenches unnameable and unidentifiable. In towns, the smells of animal and human are indistinguishable. They are a collection of shoddy homes, broken down shops, destitute farm-land, and muddy paths – poorly designed everything. I hated being in these cesspools. At least when on Lemnos, I could correct anything not up to standard. But these people weren't mine; instead they resided in Zeus and Hera's territory. The gods simply holed themselves up on Olympus – a location that was, in contrast to the rest of their domain, truly resplendent – but let everything else go to rot. I hated it here. Left to themselves, humans are little better than savage animals, weak and stupid creatures. But we needed metal. Cheap metal. And this place was what the humans called "a mining town," however, that made it worse. The whole area was thick with smoke.

Before we left, I had hidden the wretch within a pack. I couldn't risk it being spotted by Hera. Then, in the form of an eagle, I flew it across the open ocean, carrying the pack in my talons. Once we landed near the town, I changed into the form of a woman, and slipped the pack onto my back. "It is quite uncomfortable in here," the wretch said, as we drew closer to the town.

"Quiet," I said. "Do you want Hera to find us?"

The wretch didn't respond, but I could feel the stubbornness in its silence. Through the haze, I could see the smoke's source: a plume rising beyond the town. I headed in the direction of the mine.

We walked through the town without incident. We didn't want to speak to anyone, and they didn't want to speak to us either. As we drew closer, the blurred lines of mountains, initially unseen due to the heavy smog in the air, came into view. Finally, we arrived at the smoke's source: a large hole dug into the earth, fumes billowing out of it like a chimney. Hundreds of enchained servants were ascending and descending ladders into the pit. Coming up the ladder, they carried buckets of rock, and going back down, they carried buckets of water. A group of them pulled several bodies up a ladder, and then threw them into a nearby trench that was filled with dozens of piled carcasses. I approached several of the servants standing in a line, who were preparing to descend into the smoke pit. Another servant, armed with a whip, stood behind them to keep them from falling behind in their duties.

"Where is your master?" I asked.

None of them spoke up a reply, but they all pointed to a shack up the rise, next to the mountain. Without another word, I began walking in that direction.

“Let me do the talking,” the wretch said, popping its head out of the pack once we were out of earshot. I couldn’t believe the creature’s audacity, and I had to stifle a laugh.

“You? What good do you plan to do here? Now get back in the bag.” It didn’t get back in the bag.

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking, what did you plan to say?”

“I was going to change into a tiger and force them to give me what I want.”

“Begging your pardon, but, um, doesn’t that seem a tad...aggressive?”

“And what would you do? Ask them politely? These human creatures are barely above animals.”

“I can haggle,” it said.

“You can’t haggle. You don’t even know what haggling is.”

“Sure I do. Just watch me.”

I wasn’t sure about this, but the wretch certainly seemed full of surprises.

“Fine.” I said reluctantly, “You can have a try.” If the human refused, I had ways of making him do what I wanted.

“Oh, excellent!” said the wretch, its face contorted into a gleeful smile, splitting the hair lip further. “I won’t let you down.”

“Now get back in the bag.”

Clearly, the hovel on the hill was meant to be seen, but lord knows why – it was rather like displaying a pile of dung on a pedestal. While mystifying, the location made it easy to find.

We entered the master’s shack, and I was appalled at the decor. The home had no subtlety; the master lived exactly like a servant, but simply with more stuff piled about, as though he was trying to display his station by merely owning things. Everything was beige on beige on beige, which I think was supposed to hide the imperfections, but became an imperfection in itself. The air smelled of grease and soot.

“Who the hell are you?” asked a short, sweaty man who was sitting down smoking a pipe. He was so covered in grime that I was sure this hovel’s smell originated with him.

“Where is your master?” I asked him.

“You just barge in my home? Don’t you knock? Get out of here!”

“This is your home?” I asked. I couldn’t believe that this dirty and sweaty creature had not mastered his own personal hygiene, let alone the responsibility of property. “So you own the mine?”

“What’s it to you, lady?”

“Would you be kind enough to let me out now?” the wretch asked. The “master” started at the wretch’s crow voice, and looked around the room trying to find its origin.

“I’m worried about Hera,” I protested.

“I completely understand your concern, but we’re inside. She’s not going to be able to see us within these walls.”

“Well, keep yourself hooded. We don’t want to scare the human.”

I pulled the wretch out of the pack and sat it up on the table.

“By the gods...” the human started. “What the devil is this?” His back was instantly to the far wall.

The cloaked creature sitting on the counter did look somewhat forbidding, despite its small size. The shadows kept most of its face hidden, but the human looked horrified from what it could see.

“Hello! A pleasure to meet you,” the wretch said.

“What are you?” he asked. “You aren’t human!”

“A customer,” the creature answered in its crow voice. “We are here to trade, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Trade? Are you crazy? There’s no way I would ever want anything to do with you. Please just leave me in peace.”

This wasn’t working. “I told you, that you wouldn’t be able to do this,” I said. I wondered if it would be better to change into a lion instead. I had been a tiger quite a bit lately.

“No, no. Please give me a moment,” the wretch replied to me. It turned back to the master. “What is your name, sir?”

“Um...Nestor. My name is Nestor.”

“Nestor, this is your lucky day. We are about to make you a very rich man. We have an opportunity for you that you simply cannot walk away from.”

The human was taken aback by the creature’s upbeat and chipper tone. The wretch continued, seemingly unfazed by the human’s discomfort.

“So Nestor, what methods are you using to dig out the metal?” the creature continued, “Fire, correct? That’s what all the miners are using these days.”

The master nods. “We...Erm, yes. Burning the wall makes it easier to dig out the ore.”

“Well, what if I could increase your productivity. Say, by half?”

“Half? Ha! That’s ridiculous!” The human seemed to forget that he was afraid. “I’m working the slaves as hard as they can.”

“Right. We saw the bodies. Terrible business, losing so many of the workforce at once, am I right? Costly. But what if I told you, it’s not about working harder; it’s about working smarter. And your tools...would you be kind enough to pass me that one?” it asked, turning to me while pointing at a mining pick leaning against the wall. I picked it up and sat it down on the counter in front of the wretch, who reached its hands out to the tool and began to shape it. The metal, crudely made, caught fire as it burned away the impurities, leaving a singe in the wood of the tabletop.

“What are you doing?” the human asked.

“Don’t worry,” the wretch answered. “Just wait and see.”

When the process was complete, the pick was made new, ornate.

“Pick it up, please,” the wretch asked. “Give it a try.”

The human paused for moment, and looked at it, as though it might burn him. Gingerly, he picked it up, and as soon as he did, his eyes grew wide.

“What do you think, Nestor?” the wretch asked.

“It’s so light,” the master said in awe. “Balanced. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And stronger than anything you have encountered, I can assure you. I can do this for more of your tools. You can use them or sell them – whatever you decide. Consider this one a gift, just to show you that I’m serious. But that’s only the tip of the iceberg. I can also increase your productivity in another way.”

The master’s eyes never left the pick. “And what way is that?”

“Shielding. Your workers are dying from the smoke, so we contain it. Funnel the smoke out, your workers stop dying, and can probably work quicker.”

Nestor was struck dumb at all that they had discussed. He was in a daze, thinking of the possibilities. Then he seemed to come to himself, and he looked suspicious.

“Wait. You said that you were here to trade. What could you possibly need?”



“Oh, we just need to buy some of your raw metal. So, you see, your success improves our success.”

“The ore? How much do you need?”

“All of it.”

\* \* \*

We made our way back to the shore, through the town, the smoke blurring our vision. The wretch was happily chattering away at the deal it had swung. Nestor had several other mines in the region, and he felt that there was more ore to be dug up in the area. In exchange for the technology that would revolutionize the industry, he had happily given us the ore mine. We would have no shortages of metal again.

“How did you do that?” I interrupted its prattle.

“Do what?” it asked.

“All that fast-talking. You manipulated him.”

“No, no,” It said. “That wasn’t fast-talking. Those were manners. I was just informing him of an opportunity.”

“I thought you sounded pretty tacky.”

“Perhaps so. But we got what we wanted, didn’t we? And he will definitely get what he wants. Both sides are walking away quite happy, as far as I can tell. No tigers or bears required.”

“Well, hide again. We’re closer to town.” I couldn’t have told it to hide a moment too soon.

“Hello, Thetis,” came a voice as we rounded a corner.

I froze. I knew that voice. It had been haunting my dreams. I turned left and right in a panic.

“Here,” said an old woman next to a shack, collecting coins. She stood up, tall and proud. Regal even.

“Hello, Hera,” I said at last. The old woman morphed into the beautiful goddess. My whole body tensed, shoulder pains stretching down my spine. I could feel the wretch burying itself deeper into my sack.

“Why, what brings you to the mainland?” she asked, her voice all sugar and honey. “I saw you leaving your island, and I thought it was so lovely that you would come out and visit the world! I simply had to see what provoked you.”

As she spoke, she began walking around me, her robes, hair and matron veil flowing behind her. I felt encircled. Stalked.

“Oh, you know,” I tried, “I just came for a few supplies.”

“Oh? Is that so? To a smoke-filled mining town? A bit of curiosity about the commoners?”

“Well, it’s lovely to see you,” I said, “but I really must be going.” I started to walk away.

“I’m sure,” she said. She snapped her fingers and my pack unbuckled, falling to the ground. The wretch rolled out of the sack, its hood and blanket falling off, its horrible face and twisted legs revealed. Hera recoiled at the sight, her lip curling.

“Disgusting! Thetis, I told you to get rid of this creature. Now you have forced my hand.” Huge cracks split the earth all around us. Geysers of enormous pressure began hissing and popping, like a kettle coming to a boil. The air became thick from the heat and the steam and something else, and everything was in motion.

“Please, Hera! I was protecting my son! You’re the goddess of mothers! Surely you can understand!”

“I wish I didn’t have to do this. But you brought this on yourself.”

“Why are you doing this?” asked the wretch.

“You’re an abomination! You shouldn’t exist!” she shouted at it.

More geysers of steam exploded around me, knocking me off my feet. I transformed into a tiger and jumped between the wretch and Hera, pushing it out of the way with my paw. A giant boulder blasted out of the earth and blew me to the side.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Hera’s voice was deadly calm, as she approached. “You lesser gods always get involved above your station. Can’t you see I have an entire planet to keep in order?”

She blasted hot steam from under me, and I couldn’t help but cry out from the pain of my skin broiling.

“Leave her alone!” shouted the wretch, stretching out its arms. Suddenly, a wall of fire erupted out of the earth, between Hera and myself. The creature burned as bright as the day I saw

it fall to my shore. I could see Hera's shocked face through the blaze that blocked her from us. The wretch saved my life.

"You've made such a terrible mistake here, Thetis. You don't know what you have done," she said, through the heat. "And you can't get away with it. I know where to find you."

"Leave her alone!" the wretch repeated.

"You don't command me to do anything, you beast!" she shouted back.

"What is this thing?" I asked her. "Why do you want it dead so badly?"

"This creature is my responsibility!" she shook as she shouted. "And this isn't over. Not by a long shot." With that, Hera turned away into the sky. One more final tiny geyser erupted, kicking dirt up into my face.

I stood up, wincing as I gingerly touched my cooked side.

"Are you okay?" the wretch asked.

"And this is why I didn't want you coming to the bloody mainland," I shot back.

\* \* \*

We limped back to the villa. It hurt to fly, but I managed. Neither of us spoke the entire journey. When we landed in my courtyard on Lemnos, I dumped the creature out of the pack onto the ground.

"What in the seven hells was that?"

"Ow," said the wretch, rubbing its forehead. "What was what?"

"All the fireballs, obviously!" I was furious at this creature's obstinacy.

"I just wanted to stop her. I reached out my hand and it happened."

"I know what you did. I saw it perfectly well with my own eyes. I'm asking how you did it."

"Honestly, I don't know. I reached out, and it just happened."

"It just happened," I repeated. I didn't have time for this. We needed to move, and quickly. Hera knew where to find us. I went to tell Eurynome what happened.

"Where would we even go?" she sighed. "It's not like we can hide from her. I'm surprised we're not destroyed already." She was right. Why hadn't anything happened?

Panic struck me. What if she took my son? That would be in step with everything I knew about Hera. I had given up so much already, and now the little beast might cost me my son's life as well. It would have been heartbreaking to have suffered the wretch only to lose everything I valued. My kindness would have cost me everything. My entire life, unearthed by this creature. I was in too deep at this point. I could give the wretch up, but Hera would still hold this slight against me. If I was caught, I could wind up chained to a rock like Prometheus, condemned to eternally having a monster eat my liver each day. And was the wretch even safe to be around? All that fire. It certainly hadn't told me about all of its powers. What if it lost control and burned down my entire villa? Damn it for not levelling with me. Damn it, and its secrets. And I still couldn't figure out why Hera even cared about this creature. But that gave me a better idea. It was certainly capable of being a threat to her. Who knew what else it was capable of?

All these random thoughts were buzzing through my head as I was busily throwing anything of value into one of my baskets when an enormous man showed up at the entrance of my villa. He was the size of four Eurynomes. The top of his head was bald, except for the fringes, and he had a long, dark grey beard. The tips of his hairs all were frosted with white, like electricity.

"Hello there, Thetis," he said in a deep, booming voice.

"Hello Zeus," I greeted him. I felt a tightness in my chest, like finding out you are in a small room with a vicious animal.

"Going somewhere? You look worried. You're still as beautiful as ever, of course," he continued, approaching me, "but you should be smiling." It had been a while since I was the object of his sleazy charm.

"Always a pleasure, my dear," he said as he kissed my hand, a little too wet. "I hear that you and my wife had something of a disagreement." He didn't let go of my hand.

"You could say that." I tried pulling away, but he still didn't let go. With my free hand I gestured to my side where the blood had soaked through my clothes. He cocked his head forward so that he was looking at me from below his eyebrows.

"Tsk. I married a feisty one, didn't I? You poor thing, you. Did you want me to have a look at it?" He reached for my wound. I pulled away, also managing to slip my hand out of his grip.

"I'm fine, thank you," I said. "It's a little sore, but it will heal quickly, I'm sure."

Zeus wasn't a safe person to be around. As king of the gods, he was used to getting whatever he wanted. As he moved, he had an abundance of swagger charged by cocky self assuredness that could only come from thinking he was charming enough to get away with it – someone who was used to having all the power, so that no one could tell him otherwise. However, he had the awkward habit of talking with his hands, and, being such a big man, listeners would sometimes need to take a step back or they would be whacked accidentally.

Most dangerously, as there were never any restrictions put upon him, he dove deeper and deeper into satisfying any number of perversions. It was well-known that he had a fetish for raping women while in the form of an animal. It could have been his way of degrading them, a way of showing them that they were less than human. His power was only ever put into check somewhat by Hera, who could sometimes outsmart him.

“I hope you don't think poorly on me for my wife's outburst. I just love a woman with passion.” He looked meaningfully at me. “So where is this...creature?”

“Do you plan to destroy my villa with a thunderbolt?” I asked.

“I suppose I could, couldn't I? You may recall in the war against the Titans I destroyed several of them from Olympus,” he said, looking me up and down as he gesticulated wildly.

“The wretch is over here.” I said, and I lead Zeus inside my villa to the creature's room. As we entered, the creature was sitting up in its crib.

Neither Zeus nor the wretch said anything. The king of the gods examined the wretch, looking it up and down, staring the longest at its twisted legs.

“This is a powerfully ugly creature,” he finally said. “You know, ugly creatures can often be evil in some way. Like they have been cursed or something.”

“A pleasure to meet you as well, I'm sure,” the wretch said, giving me a look that read, “Who does this guy think he is?” and then pulled a sheet over its legs. “My name is Hephaestus.”

“Is it now?” Zeus answered. “Indeed.”

“As far as I know, I'm not cursed,” the wretch continued.

“You wouldn't necessarily know though, would you?”

Zeus turned back to me and gestured that I follow him out into the hall. Zeus stood uncomfortably close to me, so close that I could not avoid the rank odour of his breath. It smelled vaguely like he had been drinking ambrosia, which generally smells and tastes quite good, but it

smelled off and sour coming out of his mouth. Due to his size and the smell, the hallway felt immeasurably small.

“Do you really want to keep this creature that badly?” he said in a low voice. I had to take a step back because of the smell and his hand waving. “It’s clearly defective. Why make a thing of this with Hera? Why don’t you ladies make up, and we’ll have you over for a good time, just the three of us.” Something in the tone of his voice made it very clear he was talking about sex.

“My son will die if I don’t,” I said, trying to downplay his implicit meaning.

“Yes, yes. Hera told me that you believed that your son’s fate was tied up with this thing. You know, if you really want a son, you would need a man in your life. I could help you on that front.”

This was getting dangerous. I didn’t want to wind up being another of Zeus’ peccadilloes.

“Oh, Zeus. I’m honoured. But I’m pretty sure you don’t want that,” I responded, carefully trying to keep my voice upbeat.

“Don’t I?” asked Zeus, taking a step closer. The smell. I tried to hide my revulsion.

“Proteus gave me another prediction: he said that my son would be greater than his father.”

“Oh, you know Proteus. He’s an old fool. Why should we listen to him?” asked Zeus.

“Wasn’t there a similar prophecy about you and your father? And didn’t it come true? You turned out be greater than your father as well, didn’t you, Zeus?”

“Than Cronus? I certainly did.”

“And how is Cronus doing now?”

“Dad? Well, I had to kill him to take the throne. Ah, I see your point.”

“You disembowelled him,” I pushed further.

“To be fair,” Zeus replied, “that was in self defence. Dad was trying to eat the rest of my family at the time.” Zeus paused as he began to mull this all over. I said nothing, hoping that this conversation might sink in.

“Erm. You have a point, I suppose,” he finally said, taking a small step back. “No, that won’t do. That won’t do at all. I need to keep being king.” He paused, and looked at me hungrily and stepped closer again, putting a hand on my waist. “But... doesn’t the fact that it’s dangerous somehow make it sexier?”

“All the same, we can’t, we can’t,” I said, putting a hand against his chest to maintain some distance, and forcing a smile to be careful not to offend him. “Where would the world be without Zeus on the throne?”

“Well, that’s true.” He took a step back in his disappointment. “It would be terrible for everyone, wouldn’t it? I’ll have to think on a way that we might be able to swing that.” Then he turned serious again and cocked his head forward.

“So, you’re sure you don’t want me to destroy this creature? Hera told me that she already offered to protect your son. Why didn’t you take her up on her offer?”

I didn’t want to tell Zeus about the amazing craftsmanship this creature was capable of. He would simply chain the wretch up and force it to make things for Olympus instead.

“Proteus had told me a different story than Hera, and I didn’t know who to trust. As you know, women can’t always keep their promises.”

“Well, that makes sense to me. So do you really want to keep this thing?”

I looked at the wretched creature for a while. Through the doorway, the wretch stared back at me. My son’s fate. The amazing art.

“Yes, I would. Please.”

“Okay, then. You can for now,” Zeus said.

“Well, I, for one, am delighted at the news!” said Hephaestus, beaming through the doorway.

“How much of our conversation could you hear?” I asked it.

“Well, I tried really, really hard not to listen. So hardly anything, I’m sure.”

Zeus took another step forward. “And I’m sure we can think of a way for you to thank me later, Thetis.”

“What about Hera?”

“What about Hera?” he asked back. “I am king, after all.”

“Thank you so much, Zeus. You are as merciful as you are strong.”

“I am a good king, aren’t I? Well, I should go.” He took my hand and kissed it again.

He was so disgusting. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Until next time, my lovely.” He turned around and stepped into the sky. I breathed a sigh of relief, and wiped the slobber from my hand.

I picked the creature up, moved back out to the courtyard, and sat down next to Eurynome. For the first time since my first meeting with Hera, I didn't fear that my villa would be destroyed by a fireball. I had been holding that in the back of my mind for so long. However, now I was worried that Zeus' love for his perversions would overtake his love for the throne. I would have to keep a lookout for animals.

"Well. He was certainly quite the jovial chap," Hephaestus said.

"Shut up," I said.

"So are we going to be destroyed?" Eurynome asked.

"Not today."

"Way to use all those feminine wiles," Eurynome said.



We sat in the courtyard, Eurynome in her hammock and I in my chair, futilely attempting to mend another basket. Those blasted things were always breaking. The wretch sat on the floor trying to balance a rock and a stick. For the past week, we had heard nothing from Zeus and Hera. Despite Zeus' repulsiveness, he seemed to have been good to his word. Since we had a quiet moment, I asked the wretch again about the fire.

"So," I began. The wretch didn't respond, as though it didn't realize I was talking to it even though there were only three of us there. I cleared my throat, and tried again. "So, I can change my shape like water – I am a water nymph, after all – but only Poseidon can control the ocean. And you..." The wretch looked up now. "You made fire erupt out of the earth. What are you? Only gods can control creation. And you are certainly no god."

The creature sat in silence, seemingly puzzled.

"Any other random powers I need to know about?" I pressed. "You aren't going to cause an earthquake and cause my home to collapse are you?"

"No," it finally responded. "Well, actually – to be honest, I suppose that I truthfully couldn't know for certain. There's nothing I have noticed, at any rate. At the time, I only wanted to protect you." the wretch said again.

"Do it again," I told it.

"I'm sorry?"

"Make the flame happen again. We need to know what we are dealing with."

The wretch looked around. "Here? All that fire? I don't know."

"Start smaller. I don't want you to torch my home to the ground." I picked up some flint stored from the edge of the courtyard for our winter fires. I sparked it a couple of times. "I want you to focus. Try to sustain the flame."

I sparked it again, and this time the fire simply hung in the air – a tiny, floating flame.

"Are you doing this?" I asked.

"Yes," the wretch answered, its eyes not leaving the spark.

"Good. Have you got it?"

"I think so."

"Okay, now, can you make it a little bigger?"

The spark began expanding by several inches until it was a small ball of fire hanging in the air.

“Ok, good. Any trouble?”

“No,” the wretch answered. “This is quite easy, actually.”

“Well, I suppose you could be some kind of fire deity. That is the only explanation for this level of control. But I’ve never seen any kind of deity that looks like you.”

“What about the metal?” it asked. That was a good question.

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of a metal deity.”

Just beyond the villa, several of the servant children were playing some type of ball game. I’m not certain where they got the ball, but it looked like it may have been made from the bladder of one of my sheep. The fire in the air went out as the creature watched them play. One of the children was the infant who would have slept in the cot I took for the wretch. The servant children all had been darkened in this sun; the wretch’s skin, in contrast, was extraordinarily pale.

“May I join them?” it asked me.

I returned to my basket weaving. “Do whatever you feel like. But remember that they are just servants.”

It seemed happy enough with this, and began to crawl towards them.

One might think that it would be inappropriate to let this creature – something not mortal, surely – associate with human servants, of all things. But the joy of being a true master is that you can do whatever you want. I am not lowering my station if I associate with them. It is because of my station that I get to choose.

“Maybe the wretch is some kind of aberration?” I whispered to Eurynome once it was out of earshot.

“Well, something definitely went wrong,” she responded. “It’s clearly not natural.”

As the wretch began to get closer to the game I realized something, and walked out towards it.

“To play,” I said to it once I caught up, “you won’t be able to crawl.”

The creature looked at me, before gazing at its spindly, twisted legs, then back to the children running through the field.

“I’ve always found walking to be rather difficult, I’m afraid.”

“Have you tried?” I asked.

The wretch crawled back to a chair and tried to stand, but its legs buckled. It tried again, but its feet were so twisted, the creature tottered on its ankles, and it collapsed again.

“If you are a deity of some kind, you should be able to stand on your own two feet,” I told it.

For the rest of the day, the creature tried standing on its own. It would lean against tables and chairs, and, under great duress, manage to hoist itself up onto its bent ankles. Once up, it tried a hobbled form of walking, using its arms to hold itself up against a table, and then climb sideways. But the bulk of its weight was born by its arms, and, without fail, the creature could not stop itself from tumbling to the ground.

I didn't want the wretch to know that I was spectating, so I tried to hide my quick glances at it. It wouldn't do it any good to stand there watching it repeatedly fail. Instead, I continued to mend my basket and pretended to ignore its struggle. Some might call me cruel for neither helping it nor telling it to give up; however, the wretch needed to learn its own limitations. The world does not tell its inhabitants how to live or what they are capable of. It sits, immutable, allowing the observers to make of it whatever they interpret. In spite of myself, I admired the creature's determination. To even stand upright, I could see it was painful.

I glanced over at Eurynome, expecting her to be asleep on her hammock, but her eyes were open, also watching the wretch struggle. Unlike me, she didn't make any pretence at hiding her observations.

I eventually returned to my errands around the villa, organizing the servants, and heard reports from the grounds. When I looked out the window, I could see that the wretch was still at it, still clinging to walls and chairs. Standing up with assistance, it would try letting go, and standing on its own. I looked out the kitchen window once just in time to see it let go and collapse.

As the sun set, so did the wretch's chances. In the evening, the servants called their children home from the field. The wretch stopped its struggle and watched the children run home, realizing it missed its opportunity. Once the last child was gone from view, it gripped a chair and with a cry threw itself onto its twisted feet, as if hoping that it would be like a baby bird falling from its nest whose wings jumpstart into action.

Instead, the wretch skittered forward, landing face first against the stone. It lay there for a moment, then let out a great howl before thrashing against the stone in an upset fit. I waited to see if it would stop. When it didn't, I went outside.

"That's enough!" I said to it. "These hysterics change nothing."

"But I can't do it!" it protested, tears streaming down its hideously large nose.

"That is your interpretation. You won't have me to carry you around all your life, so you need to figure out some way to get around. Find out what you can do and do that. Now is as good a time as any. But I refuse to listen to your wailing, so whatever you're going to do, do it quietly."

That shut the creature up, thank the gods. It sulked for hours instead. I put it to bed that evening without another word.

The next morning, it began to work and design. It found some chalk and began sketching designs on the ground. The first involved some type of wheeled cart with him sitting on it.

"That would never work," Eurynome objected. "How would you get up and down stairs? Or go over uneven ground?"

The creature wiped it away. Its second design was far more elaborate: some contraption that would walk for the creature. It was a tripod that provided its own motion, the inside having a number of spoked wheels and belts that powered the device. Having movable legs, this would be able to ascend and descend stairs. The creature couldn't walk, so its invention would walk for it. However, I thought that the wretch would look weak sitting on top of it and I said so. Its face tightened and looked hurt for a moment, but then it erased the design.

"I probably don't have the materials I would need anyway," it said.

The third design was far simpler, and involved no drawings: a walking stick. It crawled out to the field and found one. Leaning against it like it did with the table, the creature stood up shakily. When it tried to take a step, its legs buckled and fell over. It tried again, but had the same result.

The creature crawled around a bit more until it found a second stick, this one the size of a staff. It set the stickends into the ground and pulled itself up into a standing position. It wobbled. But it held on. It was only when the creature tried to move forward that it fell over. It pulled itself up again, and carefully, tentatively, moved forward its left foot first. Then it carefully, tentatively moved the left stick. Then it moved the right foot forward, followed by the right

stick. Left foot. Left stick. Right foot. Right stick. It managed to take several slow, ginger steps in this manner. But then it fell over again.

It looked at me in desperation.

“Keep trying,” I said and headed back inside.

The next time I saw the wretch through the villa window, it had found some tools on the villa grounds. It was using a hacksaw to cut the sticks into even lengths, and had attached some wood pieces together to build a pair of crutches. It stood up, easier this time than in the field, and it took several steps forward, this time without falling. I could tell that the motion was still painful for it, but it was finally able to move on its own.

When it saw me next, passing each other in a hallway, it wore a look of triumph on its face, looking at me expectantly as though I should congratulate it.

“You will never be a warrior with those legs. And you certainly won’t be able to play sports.”

“But it looks like quite a bit of fun.”

“That’s your lot in life.”

\* \* \*

It was after this conversation that the wretch began to throw itself into its work.

“If its not too much trouble, I was hoping I was hoping I could have a work space.”

“Space?” I asked.

“Forgive me if I seem self-aggrandizing, but I have quite a few ideas – some of which might turn out to be rather good ones. But I can’t design them or actualize them in your lovely courtyard. I worry I would make quite the mess. Do you think I could have my own space?”

I was aghast at the wretch’s presumptuousness. “You have your own room. You can’t do it in there?”

“Quite honestly, I’m worried it will catch fire.”

“Catch fire? What do you plan on doing?”

“I need a shop.”

After discussing a few options, we settled upon one of the old sheds. However, it agreed to make some of its items for me in exchange.

It wasn't long before a ship arrived in our harbour, the crew offloading crates of materials onto Lemnos. Our head servant met them and had the lot brought up to the wretch's shed.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"Just some supplies, madam."

The wretch seemed to be aware of its effect on humans, the fear they had in response to its appearance. For the most part, it kept itself out of sight of the humans and had the servants perform most of the interactions. However, once they arrived with their cargo at the shed, the wretch again appeared within a hooded cowl, looking like an infant spectre sitting on a bench next to the shed. The human sailors all stopped short, nervous. The wretch didn't speak, but very slowly pointed at one of the sailors, whose face went ashen white. Very quickly, the wretch thrust its hand towards the door, and pointed for him to take his crate inside. Terrified, the sailor slowly approached the door, worried that the phantom would curse him. Then the wretch slowly pointed to the next sailor, who also looked terrified, and directed him to go into the shed next. Seeing as the first sailor escaped unharmed, the other sailors, still nervous, brought their goods in, and then quickly left back towards the villa.

"You couldn't just speak to them?" I asked, as I picked the wretch up to take it back to the courtyard.

"Honestly, I particularly enjoyed the sensation of having gravitas," it grinned up at me. In spite of myself, I couldn't help but grin back.

The sailors all cast eyes at Eurynome, and began muttering to each other appreciatively when they walked past her in the courtyard.

"Excuse me!" the wretch called out to them in its crow voice. "If it's not too much trouble, please refrain from lecherous behaviour while at the home of your client."

I again grinned at the sailors' look of bewilderment at the sudden voice of the spectre. But before they could react, the head servant shooed them off the island as quickly as he was able.

Once they were gone, the wretch used its crutches to hobble its way back to the shed, now filled with stacked crates. When checked in a few hours later, the wretch was leaning against its crutches while holding a hammer and wedge, splitting the boxes open.

"And what do you plan to do with all this?" I asked it.

"As you kindly agreed to before, I'm building a workshop."

“A workshop?”

“I didn’t have the supplies I needed to construct some of my ideas, so I wanted to store it all in one place. I thought it might perhaps annoy you if my things were spread out all across your villa.”

“Um, yes. That...that would certainly annoy me.”

“As I thought then. Thank you for giving me the space. I earnestly hope some of my designs will be to your liking.”

“Right. Well, I’m sure they will be.”

“Good, then. Well.” it said. The wretch paused in its opening of boxes and looked at me. I realized it was waiting for me to leave.

“Well, good luck,” I said. “Remember this is still my property.”

“Oh, of course. Absolutely. I am only here at your pleasure.”

“Right then. Good.” I left, and as soon as I stepped through the doorway, the door closed behind me, and I heard the banging resume, long into the night.

One night I woke up in my cave to find a man on my mouth. My arms and legs were being cinched together by some knotted leather straps.

Years later, I pieced together what had happened. I now know much more of the story than what I did at the time, but even now, my own memory of the entire event is quite foggy. Sometimes I don't remember the flow of events as well as I usually recall details. However, I later heard stories about a human man on a sex mission from the gods passed around by the poets. It took me many years before I realized that I was the sperm receptacle in this tale.

Months before it had happened, Peleus had slipped in off the ocean, landed on the shore, and hopped out of his schooner. He would have looked as he usually did: his beard laden with sea salt and sand, and his armour, spear, and skin all worn and splitting from the ocean. As always, his body would have looked like it was covered in a light film of grease.

He had been sailing with Jason and the Argonauts, pulling off some heist involving a golden sheepskin. After finishing that escapade, why had Peleus come to Lemnos of all places? He was led by the gods, of course. Specifically, by Zeus himself.

After our last chat, Zeus had reconsidered Proteus' prediction, that my son would be greater than his father. This made Zeus fear that if he became the father to my child, then my son would undermine his control of Olympus. Zeus, in his wisdom, was decidedly opposed to carrying on the family tradition of regicide, and as king of the gods, Zeus would not permit even the potential for someone greater than him to ever emerge. The possible world that contained a son that could be greater than him needed to be eliminated.

Now, it seemed to me that a simple solution for Zeus's problem here could have been to – I don't know – not have sex with me. But, apparently, that possibility never entered Zeus's mind. In his eyes, I simply had to be taken out of the picture. Zeus told Peleus to find me and take me for a wife.

Peleus, of course, was left wondering how, a mortal such as him, would be able to restrain me. So Zeus suggested that he ask Proteus, since me having babies was all his idea.

I can see it now: Peleus thoroughly proud of his own importance, approached by Zeus, and now the ancient god Proteus – everyone deeply concerned about how he spread his seed around – being told to impregnate, not some human woman, but me. There he is, scrounging



together an offering of sheep, some wine, and incense. Him building a fire and sacrificing the sheep on the shore. When the oscillating geometry of Proteus bubbles up out of the hissing sea foam, he apparently arrived much quicker than I had ever experienced with him.

“Hey, Proteus! Listen, Zeus told me about this woman, but she might not know that she wants me yet. Any tips?” asked Peleus.

Then, of course, Proteus, normally so cryptic for me, was perfectly unambiguous for Peleus: “Tie her down.”

This led to my waking up with Peleus’s dirty beard smearing across my chest. He was chuckling to himself as he gave the straps a final yank and they constricted around my hands. Then I smelled his old clam breath as he slobbered on my neck. All four of my limbs were bound together, like he intended to lift me by a stick – a pig for the feeding. I shoved him away and snapped into the form of a viper, which should have allowed me to slip out of the cords. But as he jumped away, across the room, he flicked the leather straps around so that I was still entangled by them.

“Who the hell are you? Let me go!” I hissed.

“Easy, easy. Wow, you’re something. You just need to relax. I just want to show you a good time.” He laughed as he thrust his hips forward so that I would understand that he was talking about sex. He was used to women finding his grin charming. Lots of teeth.

“Get the hell out of here,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s not happening. Zeus’s orders. Come on, this could be fun. Don’t be a bitch about this. You know, Zeus was planning to do this, but sent me instead. Think about how lucky you are. I’m not going to turn into an animal or anything weird. Just relax. Easy.”

His tunic was too short and his greasy scrotum was peaking out from below. I don’t really know what happened then – how he managed to move so quickly, but I remember us fighting, and suddenly I was on the floor, further entangled by all the cords, with him on top of me. His musk was all around me, and his breath smelled like old clam. I think at this point I changed into an eel and shocked him with an electric charge.

These days, I’m good at remembering more details other than just clam and scrotum and fighting someone who shouldn’t have been able to beat me. But those are still the strongest memories.

Up until this point, I had always considered Proteus' prophecy to be a blessing, that I would be part of producing something great: a son greater than the father. Looking back now, I see that my understanding was based upon a particular interpretation of the wording – "You shall bear a son who is greater than his father." This wasn't a blessing; it was a curse. The prophecy wasn't speaking about the greatness of the son, but the weakness of the father. Zeus surely saw it this way. Maybe many fathers fear that they will be eclipsed by their son, secretly dreading that they are never truly the man of the household any more. For many men, this means passing off responsibilities, but for someone in Zeus's position, this would be a death sentence. For Peleus here, shaking and jiggling his bits in front of me, who the heck was he? A sailor and an Argonaut, but little more than an extra on the stage. What did he have to lose? He was a nothing – a nobody – remembered for little other than being the father to his son, in a world when everyone is known for who their father is. Son of so and so. Son of whomever. But for Peleus, he would be remembered as "father of." In retrospect, this may have been Peleus' last chance at being remembered.

He crumpled from the electrocution and fell back, slamming against the wall, breaking some furniture. However, he managed to cling to the cords, tightening them as he fell away.

Again, I don't know how it happened, but I remember us fighting again and then Peleus was standing over me and groping himself. Spittle was frothing on his lips, and I could see straight up his tunic at an unkempt thatch forest of salt-encrusted pubic hair. Then he came down on top of me, and I shifted from form to form to form. I don't remember many of the details here. But I do remember that in each shape, Peleus clung to me tight with the leather straps. I tried smaller and larger beasts. I thought that if I was small, I could slip out; if large, I could break out. But for each form I took, he hung on top of me, the cords loosening or tightening, but always remaining strong. Tiger, swan, ferret, armadillo, crow, beaver, beetle, racoon, bear, tarzier, cheetah, rat, porcupine. Male, female, androgynous. He hung on through it all. I thrashed and swatted, and hissed and stung.

"Ow! Fuck you, you're pissing me off. You change into a bug, I swear I'll break your legs. Would you like that?"

He had mounted my back, and I could not tell if it was his penis or his mouth dripping on me.

"I'll kill you!" I shouted at him.

I was in the shape of a male aardvark when he first tried forcing his prick inside me. If I was in the shape of a large animal, it would make it easier for him to enter me, but the smaller I became, the more painful it was. Well, fuck him, that bastard. I wasn't going to make it easy on him. I shifted into a species with the most complex and resistant sexual system in nature: a female duck. Twisted tracks of uterus lined with prickles and barbs, ready to spike any prick daring enough to enter. The male duck needed a foot long penis to corkscrew through this labyrinth. Sex becomes painful for both parties, or at least for men who don't have spiral penises.

But it didn't matter. None of it mattered. It couldn't have been pleasurable for him, physically, so I now wonder what it was that spurred him on. Maybe it was the challenge of it that enticed him to keep going. Or maybe it was that he was mortal, and I was divine, above his station. Or maybe it was the fact that I was resisting and he could dominate me, anyway. Or maybe it was all of it, his lust a madness of motivations.

Once inside me, it only took a couple of rough pumps before he finished, and fell, heaving, over my bird body. I was still in the middle of thinking, "This isn't happening" before it was over. His grip loosened on the cords, and I, finally having some slack on my bindings, shifted into a donkey and kicked him off me, as hard as I could. Then I took the form of a bear, and he turned around just in time to see my paw smacking him upside the face. I hit him so hard, he flew to the other side of the cave, out the entrance, and back down the cliffs, landing face first in the salt wash and barnacles.

I changed back into a human woman, and tried wiping his semen off me, dousing myself with wine and water. But I couldn't make myself feel clean. I ran down to the ocean, and began scrubbing myself with sand and seawater, but I feared it was too late.

Peleus walked through the surf so that he was a little closer to me and laughed when he saw what I was doing. "Don't worry. There's no stopping those white soldiers now. They're unbeatable. You'll finally get that son you wanted."

My skin crawled with the thought of him penetrating me. I swear I could feel things squirming inside me, in addition to the heat and the pressure.

"Get out of here!" I shouted at him.

"Stop overreacting. This isn't such a big deal. After all," he said as pointed up at the sky, "it has been ordained by the gods." He splashed a bit of water playfully in my direction, stretched, yawned, and headed in the direction of my villa.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked.

“Thirsty. Back to your place. You’ve got wine, right?”

I could feel myself shaking, as I watched him walk away. I remember standing there for a while, even when he was out of eyesight. And then I was walking back up to the cave and looking at all the baskets, the furniture, the cheeses and wine, much of it dishevelled from the fight.

I think quite a bit of time passed before I realized I was muttering to myself, repeating the phrase: “This is how my son is to be brought into the world?”

As a bear, I flipped the bed up and smashed it against the wall. As a gorilla, I skewered the baskets with splintered wood. As an elephant, I trampled all over the spilled food and wine. After the room, then I destroyed myself. I scratched my tiger claws against the cave walls until they wore down and bled. I rammed my elk antlers against stone until they snapped off. Then I was a human, crumpled to the floor, clawing at my face and ripping out some of my hair. I couldn’t feel any of the pain enough.

Then it was just buzzing, ringing, and I realized that I was sitting at the entrance to the cave. Then I was stone, and I watched days and nights pass over the ocean.

My line is older than the gods. I know what you are thinking: that I was weak. I could have done something else. Changed into a lion, perhaps, and broke free of the cords. Slipped away in the form of a gnat. While sitting there, overlooking the ocean, I considered all of these other options I could have tried. Maybe something else would have been more effective. Maybe I needed to be smarter, try harder. Maybe some part of me even wanted this to happen, subconsciously wanting a son.

Mostly I think you’re wrong in thinking these things, but then, I sometimes think them too.

But to this day, I still don’t understand how the leather straps even worked. All of the animals I tried: serpents, insects, birds, mammals large and small...none of it worked. I think it would be better if I could pinpoint a particular course of action I failed to act on, a form I could have taken that would have managed to overcome Peleus. Instead I’m left wondering if there was anything I could have done that would have stopped him. But with the power of the gods behind him, maybe there wasn’t any solution. Or was there? I still don’t know.

Once I changed back to human, I still wasn't ready to return to the villa. What would Eurynome say? Or the servants? There they would be, whispering among themselves about what I had allowed to happen. I was panicked. I didn't want to face them. And Peleus would be there, waiting. Smugly drinking my wine, raising a glass to me as I entered home, toasting the beginning of the life we were about to have together.

“Come on, boy!”

Peleus and Achilles would practice in the yard using wooden rods. Our child grew to be a specimen: blonde hair, olive skin, trim – he looked kissed by the sun. He was also talented, physically. Leaping, jumping, fighting came as natural as breathing. And Achilles never lost a fight. Except, of course, with Peleus. Unfortunately for Achilles, he had to fight Peleus every day. Hephaestus and I often sat with Eurynome and watched them train in the courtyard. The game was simple: the first one to score a touch with their wooden sword won; however, calling it a “touch” was an understatement. Achilles was frequently hit left and right by his father. He was permanently covered with welts on his arms, knuckles and sides. Peleus had never been touched once.

Peleus moved like a gorilla, jumping from one place to another. When Achilles would raise his sword to strike, Peleus smacked it away. Often, Achilles would lose his sword from the strength of Peleus’ blow and the rod would skitter across the courtyard. For losing his weapon, Peleus furiously beat him with his stick.

“Now you see what happens!” he would shout as he swatted away at the boy. “This is what happens when you lose your weapon!”

Achilles would collapse to the ground and use his arms to block the blows as best he could.

“It’s not fair!” Achilles shouted back once. “You’re stronger than me!”

Peleus responded by giving him several solid kicks to the ribs, then held the boy down by the neck with his knee.

“You’re damn right, I am! And don’t you forget it. There is always someone stronger. There is always someone bigger and more powerful. Look at Heracles facing the Nemean lion. Or Jason needing to get past the Colchian dragon.” He looked at me and gave his toothy grin. “But you need to learn how to beat them anyway. Right, Thetis?” He laughed some more.

He removed his knee from the boy, and gave him a light smack on the face. “Now, pick up your weapon and let’s go again.”

Having Peleus here was awful. Fortunately, he was frequently away for months at a time going on adventures with his Argonaut mates – these times were always a welcome relief. When

he was home, Peleus would eat. Then he would drink. Then he would make a drunken pass at Eurynome. Then he would drink more until he threw up. Then he would pass out, face down in the courtyard somewhere and sleep until the next morning.

After dunking his head in water, his mornings would be spent training Achilles. It seemed to me that he really only wanted someone to beat on.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why do you put up with him?” Hephaestus asked me, as we watched the two of them practice.

“It’s complicated,” I responded.

Maybe I could have stopped Peleus. He had only managed to capture me by surprise while I slept. This time, however, I would be awake and ready to fight from the outset. This distinction never seemed to dawn on Peleus, who always appeared smug, daring me to try. I never did, though. He always kept the cords he used to tie me down close at hand. When he caught me looking at him, he would pat it meaningfully, as though it was a trophy. As though it was a weapon he was ready to use at any moment.

“I could burn him,” Hephaestus offered.

“No.”

“I don’t need to kill him. I could simply – you know – singe him a little.”

“No.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I am of the opinion that you certainly deserve better.”

Obviously, most people treated Peleus and me as a couple by this point. Every now and again, though, Hephaestus made knowing comments like this that let me know that he knew this situation wasn’t right. I couldn’t help but give him a slight grin in return for the compliment.

“Unfortunately, the gods are rarely interested in what we all deserve. Besides...” I looked at the young boy desperately trying to ward off Peleus’ strikes. “In many ways, the hand dealt to me is beyond my expectations. Achilles is spectacular.”

It had been several years since my first encounter with Peleus in that cave. When I first came back to the villa, he was watching the wretch working away at a rotor and wheels of a cart.

“What the crap is this?” Peleus asked.

“This is Hephaestus,” I told him. “He lives here.”

“You just keep this ugly thing around? Alright.” He gave me a look like I was insane.

“Charmed,” said Hephaestus.

I couldn't stop staring at Peleus, aghast that he was there in my villa. I'm sure that my disgust must have been visible on my face.

"What? What are you looking at? You looking at something?" he demanded. "You should be grateful. Many women would like to be in your position, you know."

"Go find them, then," I said a hundred times over in my head.

"This place is great," he said as he looked around my villa. "You've really suffered here, haven't you? With all these servants. All this wine. Why don't you introduce me to the rest of your house? I'm the new master of the house, after all."

"That's not...no."

"You're going to have to get used to this. I told you, it was ordained by the gods that we get together. Besides, I heard you wanted a warrior. If you are going to raise a son, then how much do you know about swordplay?"

He was right. I knew nothing. I felt desperate for my son not to be weak, not to be defeated by men he should have been able to beat.

Peleus began helping himself to the wine. I told him that he couldn't have whatever he wanted, but I could even hear in my own voice that I didn't sound strong.

"Apparently, I can," he shot back while grinning and taking a swig.

\* \* \*

I don't want to talk about the wedding. It was held on a grassy patch on the island. Zeus presided, thinking I should be "honoured" as a wife, rather than suffer the shame of being a single mother. Hera was there, sneering, and looking more beautiful than me.

"You should be thankful, you know. Think of the alternative," she had said.

And it was true: there were worse options. At least I wasn't a spurned woman. Throughout the marriage, I thought of the women dishonoured by being raped and abandoned. Europa, Leda, Medusa, all these women who were used by men like Zeus against their will, and then cast aside like rubbish. That disgrace would have been unbearable, and I wasn't the only one to come to that conclusion. It was a well-known secret that Hera agreed to marry her brother, Zeus, to cover the shame of being raped by him. Hera, ever the upstanding, dutiful wife. Maybe that was what I was doing. Maybe not. I don't even know now.



“The gods have decreed this,” Hera had said, “You don’t want to go against the gods, do you?”

Eurynome poured some goat piss into Hera’s wine when she wasn’t looking. For everyone else, it was a party where everyone got to eat my food and drink my wine. I even had a few of the gods congratulate me.

“At least your son will have a father,” a few of them said to me, offering their pity through small smiles and knowing looks. And it was true. Other than fear of the gods and shame, there were other reasons to tolerate Peleus: my son would need training, and I knew nothing about warfare.

It wasn’t long before Achilles was born. I don’t remember much about being pregnant, although, in a way, I was relieved that I was with child. No repeat needed. I can’t really describe waiting for a repeat, but I used to wake up in repeats that weren’t real. The uncertainty and fearful anticipation would ache. It took years to believe that it wasn’t going to happen again. When I feel strong, I like to think my spiral uterus shredded Peleus’s member to pieces.

Achilles was born in the villa, on a sunny day with a cool ocean breeze. Considering all the pain at his conception, I expected his birth to be shocking. But it wasn’t. I remember one time I was nursing him as sunlight streamed into the room through a window, his survival completely dependent upon my body. Inexorably connected, the barrier of me and him melting away. Milk passed from me to him like quicksilver. Eurynome was in the courtyard, probably ignoring a drunk Peleus. Other than the servant women, the only other one there was Hephaestus, who sat in a corner, looking upon us. I didn’t want him there, so I ignored him.

“Do you plan to name him?” he asked.

“I already have. Achilles.”

“From achos: ‘pain.’ Isn’t that a little...um, well...melodramatic?”

“Out.”

Throughout the years, Hephaestus spent less and less time in the courtyard, and more of his time alone in his shop. He had built a hearth and forge into the structure, and then fashioned an anvil and hammer out of some metal objects. The fire would roar with heat, and he often emerged covered with soot and sweat. His daily hammering caused his arms to grow wiry, muscular; however, his horrible legs always remained stunted, little larger than they were as an

infant. He built a little stool to sit on, so that he could set down his crutches while he hammered away.

The wretch's craft had only improved. His room in the villa had become a mechanized world – the inside buzzed and whirred with automation. He had built contraptions to tell time, observe the stars, predict the ocean's tide. He had also fashioned the most beautiful jewellery the earth had ever seen and would never see again. Language, language, language. There is only so much that one can do with language to describe it. Seeing his jewellery was like a moment in love. Like watching my son grow. Like having food withheld for a day, and then finally having a fabulous feast. You didn't realize that life was missing something until you saw his craftsmanship. It was also like none of these things. I don't know. Like I said, words fail me. I grew proud of the wretch in my own way. I loved that the most horrible creature to look at was capable of producing such beauty in the world.

Hephaestus didn't only make beautiful, exquisite items, but he also forged strong, almost indestructible products as well. Horseshoes, nails, tools. When he was rebuilding his shack, he would hold the nails and refashion them. Their impurities would burn out, and the nails would become shinier and sturdier than before.

Hephaestus had also visited the master of the mine, Nestor, several times. I had never bothered to go back to the mainland, but, apparently, his mining empire was rapidly expanding. He had started several other mines, built according to Hephaestus' specifications, that were now the wealthiest mines on the mainland. There were endless shipments of metal offerings sent to the island in repayment.

Peleus snapped his stick up and Achilles' went flying. He stepped forward as though he were going to belt the boy again, who cringed and raised his hands to defend himself. Instead, Peleus simply shoved Achilles to the ground. Then he walked over, picked up the fallen stick, and gave it back to him.

"Up," he said, to which Achilles obediently stood up. "Your stance is all wrong, and your legs are getting all tangled up. My buddy Jason figured out a few manoeuvres when he was fighting the Spartoi. It was amazing watching him fight them, but he told me that it was all in how his feet were balanced. More like this. See?" He adjusted the boy's feet.

"Now. Let's go again."

Achilles tried as best as he could, as Peleus bounded after him, but, again, he was unable to maintain his grip and the stick went flying. As soon as it was out of his hands, Peleus swatted Achilles upside the head, so that he fell to the ground.

“That’s enough for today, boy.”

After training, Peleus went to the storehouses to look for another skin of wine, and Achilles, bringing his wooden sword, ran into the hills of the island for the afternoon. He had often done this, so I decided to follow him from the air as a hawk. The boy eventually stopped running in a clearing by a stream and sat on the rocks, setting his practice sword down next to where he sat. He didn’t move for a while, but then he spied some seagulls perched upon a large boulder. He picked up several stones, and then, with barely taking any aim, rapidly hurled them at the birds. His aim on each throw was perfect, each hitting their intended target on the side of the head. He threw four stones. Three birds were dead before they knew what was happening, and the fourth died before it reacted and flew away.

I wanted to go to my son, to comfort him, but I decided to keep my distance and allow him to process. The world has many challenges before us, and we need to rise to meet them. Peleus was another challenge, perhaps his first challenge, to be overcome. And Achilles will be better than his father. One day.

I flew to a nearby rock and perched so that I could get a better look at his face while he sat so still. He was not crying, but his eyes were wide and his mouth was rigid. I could see from his jaw that he was grinding his teeth. I watched him stare at the stream for quite a while, before I heard a click, click, click. It was Hephaestus’s crutches on the path.

“Why, hello there, Killi,” he greeted. I hadn’t seen the two of them interact before, so I decided to sit back and observe.

“Hello, Heph.” Achilles didn’t look up.

“You seem particularly out of sorts, if you don’t mind me saying,” the wretch continued.

“I hate him,” Achilles said as he killed another bird.

Hephaestus raised his eyebrows. “Well, that makes two of us. Your father is a difficult man,” he agreed.

The boy looked at the wretch for a while, but then he turned his eyes back to the water.

“I want to kill him.”

“Then let Peleus train you,” Hephaestus told him. “Think of it this way: Peleus is teaching you how to kill him.”

I felt my feathers rustle with dark pleasure. He took Achilles’ rod and held it up, examining it, as though testing it for balance. “Have you ever considered modifying your weapon?”

“Modifying? How? It’s a stick.”

“Yes. But it is also your weapon.”

“I can’t change it too much or father will think I am weak.”

“That’s silly. Weapon technology is changing all the time. Well, let’s just change it a little, then.”

Hephaestus pulled out a knife, and began to whittle away at the wood.

“When he attacks you, the reason you lose your grip is because your wrist doesn’t have the tensile strength of an adult. Your body is still developing. But if we contour the handle slightly to fit your hand better, it should be enough to allow you to maintain your grip easier.”

“I thought you didn’t work with wood,” Achilles said.

Hephaestus didn’t look up as he carved. “Does it look like I don’t know how to work with wood?” Achilles shook his head.

Hephaestus was cutting notches into the wood. He kept looking at Achilles’ hands, and then carving further into the handle.

“Okay, give it a try.”

Achilles took a few practice swings.

“My fingers fit into the grooves you carved,” he said, “but otherwise it feels the same.”

“Good. You don’t want it to be too different, right? Look, this isn’t going to overcome everything you’re facing. It will just compensate for your body’s disadvantage.”

“That will mean that I’m weak.”

“Do you think I’m weak for using a crutch?”

“Yes.”

Hephaestus didn’t answer for a bit. “Well, you probably have a point. But, you’re weak too. Otherwise you wouldn’t need this.”

I flew from my perch to their midst and changed back to human form. Neither of them seemed surprised by my dramatic appearance.

“He’s not weak,” I said.

“Hello mother,” said Achilles.

“Of course,” said Hephaestus. “I meant no disrespect.”

I picked up the stick and examined the handle. Hephaestus had expertly carved the finger grooves into the wood. Remarkably, even from just using the knife, it was smooth as though it were sanded.

“Well, we’ll see how it goes tomorrow,” I said.

We walked back together, largely in silence as we listened to the sound of the ocean breeze hiss through the grass. Achilles hung back with Hephaestus, who walked a little slower than us, and occasionally asked him questions about weapons, and he always received a detailed answer. It was a peaceful moment, for a change. I used to have those moments all the time. So much had changed.

When we arrived back at the villa, Peleus was drunk again. He was drinking some wine while fondling one of the servant girls with his dirty hands. He was a pig. He pushed her away when he saw us approaching.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Have you been babying that boy?”

I was about to reply that I had simply been talking with my son, when Achilles stepped in between us.

“Father, I’d like to try another round.”

Peleus took another swig of wine. “Training is tomorrow, boy. I’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve never known you to back down from a fight, father.”

Peleus grimaced. “Fine. Have it your way.”

We cleared the courtyard. Peleus began to circle the boy, as per usual. Achilles, for his part, held his rod out in front of him. When Peleus bounded at him, he thrashed at the stick several times. It seemed to me that Achilles managed to hang on to his weapon a little longer than usual, but it wasn’t long before it went flying. Peleus knocked the boy down with a smack and gave him a couple kicks while he was on the ground. Achilles managed to block several of the blows, but I could see that one or two managed to break his defence.

“You lost your weapon, again!” Peleus shouted at him. “What did I tell you?”

When Peleus backed off, Achilles stood up slowly and looked at Hephaestus, whose face was impassive. My son held up his rod again, this time holding it with two hands.

“Watch your stance,” said Peleus. Achilles shifted obediently into the stance his father taught him, one foot in front of the other.

Peleus charged forward. This time, Achilles managed to block several of the blows. He was on the defensive, stepping back several times as the brute swung away at him, but he didn't lose his grip and he didn't fall over.

When Peleus lifted up his rod to swing down hard, Achilles dodged out of the way, and brought up his rod with a resounding smack against Peleus' ribs.

The brute's face betrayed a mixture of surprise and ferocity. Then he regained his composure.

“Alright,” he said, while rubbing his ribs. “I might have had a bit too much wine, but that's a little better. We'll try a little more tomorrow. Now, I need to get back to drinking.”

Achilles looked triumphant.

“Did you see?” he asked Hephaestus, who nodded.

With that, Achilles turned away and ran out of the courtyard to the field where some of the servant children were playing ball. When Achilles arrived, he kicked the ball into the field, away from all of them. He then commanded them to arm themselves with sticks and attack him. The other children hated this game, but they did as they were asked. Once they were armed, Achilles tore through them, hitting them all with his rod. A few were knocked out cold and would probably have concussions in the morning. When he reached his last opponent, he knocked the stick out of their hands, then kicked the servant to the ground and punched him repeatedly in the face, just as his father had done to him. There was a splash of blood as a tooth fell out.

Achilles was a blur of motion, and it was beautiful to behold.

Hephaestus stood next to me, also watching. “I don't think he needs my help any more. I think that's the last time I'll help him.”

“He's a warrior,” I said. “He doesn't need your help.”

“This is Patroclus. He’s going to stay here now.”

The youth presented by Peleus was older than Achilles, with early signs of a beard beginning to show. He was as thin as a rake, had a dark complexion, dark hair, and laughed awkwardly like a hyena. My villa was becoming crowded.

“Where did you find this boy?” I asked.

“Ah, he killed someone, so his father asked me to take care of him.”

“He asked you? Why would anyone ask you to take of their child?”

“Patroclus here is a little wild, but he’s a good kid. We thought he’d make a good sparring partner for Achilles. I’m leaving tonight for a while – Heracles wants to go hunt Amazons again – and our boy needs someone to practice with while I’m gone. He needs to learn different styles of opponents, and your slaves aren’t able to put up much of a fight.”

“Where will he sleep? We’re running out of rooms.”

“The boys can share rooms.”

With every fibre of my being, I hated Peleus. I wanted to kill him for how he had treated me. But, for the moment, he did seem to be thinking about Achilles, so, again, I’d put up with another one of his antics.

After he introduced the two boys, he brought out a couple of edged metal swords, and handed one to each of them.

“Alright, so we’ll try practicing. But this time, we learn to use real weapons. You guys feel up to it, right? Yeah, you do.” He handed each of the boys a sword, and they swung them around a bit to try their weight.

“Now Patroclus, Achilles has more experience than you, so you’re going to have a big learning curve.”

This comment seemed to annoy Patroclus. “I’ve used real weapons before. My father said I was quite good.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out. Achilles, no killing.”

The two boys engaged, and before I blinked, Patroclus was flat on his back with Achilles’ sword in his face.

“Do you feel stupid now?” Peleus asked as he helped Patroclus to his feet.

They sparred a few more times, and each round had the same result.

Patroclus was clearly getting increasingly frustrated with each failure, and he lashed out with his sword. Achilles dodged, but Patroclus managed to nick him before my son knocked him flat again. A drop of Achilles' blood fell to the ground.

I shouted for them to stop.

Peleus shrugged. "Just a scratch. That kind of thing happens in battle all the time. What did you think would happen?"

"But this new brat meant to attack him!"

"Well, Achilles dodged it, didn't you, boy?" Achilles nodded.

"See? No worries," he grinned and flashed his teeth at me. Something in my face made his smile falter.

"Ugh. Fine. Right boys, even though I'm leaving tonight, I want you two to keep practicing. But we can't have you two killing each other while I'm gone. So, Patroclus, keep a clear head. Achilles, bring Patroclus up to speed with what I've taught you. If one of you dies, I kill the other one. Then I'll make like Orpheus and head into Hades to kill the both of you again for being so stupid. Got it?"

They both nodded and went back to training, but I was suddenly very anxious. I had always wanted Achilles to be a warrior, but seeing him bleed made me worry. I arrived at a dreadful realization: he was so very mortal. All it would take is an accidental slip during practice, the wrong swing at the wrong time, and my son could be killed. Mortal lives are so fleeting. And now this bratty upstart that Peleus dragged out of the-gods-know-where suddenly came close enough to nick him. Peleus's constant beatings on Achilles were always done with the intent to build the boy up. He used fists and feet; not sharp objects. Even I could see that, and I hated the man. But this Patroclus upstart wasn't as skilled as Peleus was, and he seemed more prone to a careless accident. I needed to protect Achilles.

I had an idea. It was an extreme idea, but I thought it perhaps would work.

I left the courtyard, and began rummaging through my storehouses, until I found what I was seeking: a bottle of ambrosia, the nectar of the gods. The golden liquid collected the light in the room and, perhaps it was an illusion, exuded its own illumination. It would take a trip to Olympus to get more, but I could do that another day when I had more time. The ambrosia was one tool I needed for my plan, but I needed one other component. I went to find Hephaestus.



He was in his shop, putting the finishing touches to some contraption on his workbench.

“Why, hello there, Thetis! Always a pleasure to see you! To what do I owe the honour?”

I wasn’t entirely in the mood for his chipper nature. “I need your help.”

“Hang on a moment,” he said, even happier than usual. “Look! I just finished building something.”

He lifted up what he was working on, and set it down on the ground. It looked almost like an odd stool: a round platform supported by three sharp legs. But the tripod was small, only rising to the height of my knee.

“Okay,” Hephaestus said to the stool, nudging it with his crutch. “Don’t be shy.” I was worried that he was going insane, spending all his time alone in his workshop. But then the stool moved. Its legs shifted, slowly and tentatively. Then – even now, I feel like I might have been imagining things – it took a few steps closer to me, almost like a three-legged spider. Hephaestus placed a small hammer on its back, and then pointed at me.

“Go on,” he said, as soothing as his crow voice could manage. “Bring it to her.”

The tripod walked over to me, and lifted its back. When I didn’t take the hammer instantly, the tripod lifted its back even higher, insisting that I take it. When I did, its sharp legs skittered back across the room to Hephaestus, who laughed delightedly.

“Isn’t it amazing! If you don’t mind me saying so, sometimes I even impress myself.”

“What powers this automata?” I asked.

“Um. Well, it’s quite technical to explain,” Hephaestus responded, as though trying to find the words. But then he started and slapped his hand on his forehead. “Oh, forgive me! I forget myself. You said, you came to me for help? What, may I ask, do you need?”

“How hot do you think you can burn?”

\* \* \*

That night, Heracles’ ship pulled close to the island, and Peleus rowed out to board it. I could hear the reunited friends all shouting and laughing from my villa. After they sailed away, I brought Achilles to Hephaestus’ shop. As we opened the door, a wave of heat billowed out. Hephaestus had his forge lit and stoked.

“Hello, Killi,” he said. He looked concerned.

“Hello, Heph.” The boy was picking up that something was wrong.

“Stop scaring the boy,” I said to Hephaestus, and then I knelt down next to Achilles, and took his hands in mine. “You know I want what is best for you, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Today, when I saw you fighting with Patroclus, I saw that you got hurt.”

“It didn’t hurt so bad. I won that fight.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling, “you always win the fights. But you are mortal. You could die at any time. There could come a time when you are killed and then you won’t have any more battles to fight.”

“Dad says that dying in battle is a glorious death.”

“Yes, that’s true,” I agreed as amicably as I was able, but I could hear the frustration creeping into my voice. I gripped his hands more tightly. “But today if Patroclus had run you through then that wouldn’t have been glorious. That would have been shameful to die sparring in a practice. And you could potentially die from anything. An accident, even. So I want to stop that from happening.” I pulled out the bottle of golden liquid.

“This is ambrosia,” I explained. “And it will, with Hephaestus’s help here, help me protect you.”

“What if I don’t want protecting?”

“Peleus is training you to fight. He is already protecting you that way. And I want to protect you too. I am going to make you immortal. Then no one will be able to stop you.”

Achilles seemed interested. “Immortal? Like you? Then I won’t be able to die?”

“That’s right,” I said, nodding encouragingly. “We’re going to burn the mortal part of you away.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Killi,” Hephaestus said, “but I feel obliged to tell you that this might hurt.” He paused. “A lot.”

Achilles looked more defiant. “I’m not afraid of pain. I want to be unstoppable. I could kill anyone I wanted.”

“Okay,” I said. I gave his hands a squeeze before I let go. “That’s a good boy.”

We stripped him of his clothes, and, using a cloth, I applied the ambrosia to his body.

“Now, Hephaestus is going to use fire to burn the mortal parts of you away,” I said.

“Are you sure, Killi?” Hephaestus asked, “It’s not too late to say ‘no.’”

Achilles nodded.

“That’s a brave warrior.” I said in my most assuring voice as I squeezed his shoulder. Then I turned to Hephaestus. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Hephaestus shook his head, gave a sigh, and drew the fire out from the forge. His skill and control with flame had improved significantly through the years. The fire came out in a mercurial column, almost as though it were a fiery gas, and collected in a large sphere at the top of the shed, Hephaestus keeping it so controlled that it still didn’t burn the ceiling.

“Now,” I said, giving him a nod.

Hephaestus’s face looked very hesitant, and somewhat fearful of what he was about to do.

“Now,” I commanded him, as firmly as I could.

The ball of fire grew hotter and brighter, until the flame turned blue. Then he brought it all down on top of Achilles, who screamed in agony. The ambrosia kept him alive, but I could see his flesh was scorching and catching on fire. The smell of burned meat and hair filled the room. Parts of him was burned to hot coals, so that his face looked like a skull. But as quickly as the fire was burning him away, I could see that the ambrosia was healing him. It was like there were two forces in conflict: the healing salve of the ambrosia, and the burning fire of Hephaestus.

Then Hephaestus stopped, the fire dissipated, and Achilles collapsed into a heap.

“Why did you stop?” I demanded.

“It was hurting him.”

“But it was working! The ambrosia is keeping him alive.”

“Maybe so, but it’s too much. He’s in pain.”

I put more ambrosia on Achilles body, which was burned down to bone in several places, but I could see the charcoaled flesh quickly knitting together.

“He’ll be completely healed in an hour or so,” I said. “And if we can do this treatment enough times, no blade will ever hurt him!”

Hephaestus screwed up his already terrible face. “I’m terribly sorry, and I mean no disrespect. But you’ll have to continue this procedure without me,” he said. “This feels wrong.”

“Fine,” I said, as I comforted my wounded boy. “But I get to use your forge.”

\* \* \*

By the time I carried Achilles back to his room, his skin was already looking completely healed, if maybe a little pink. However, his hair was burned right off, so he was completely bald.

“What happened!” exclaimed Patroclus as I walked in, carrying the tender boy.

“It’s none of your business,” I snapped at him.

I laid my son down onto the bed, gingerly.

“Do you need anything?” I asked him.

“Do I have to do it again?” Achilles asked.

“Yes.”

“But it hurts.”

“It is working. The pain is only temporary.”

“Could I have a glass of water?”

The next day, I watched the two boys train, and Achilles looked to be in fine form. His hair still hadn’t grown back, but his body seemed to function completely adequately. At one point, Patroclus was careless, and his sword nicked Achilles again. I stopped the sparring, and inspected my son. There was no wound. The blade didn’t cut through the skin, but glanced off him instead. The ambrosia was working. This confirmed it for me. I resolved to keep going.

That night, I brought Achilles to Hephaestus’ shop again. He was sitting outside, waiting for me.

“Forgive me if I’m speaking out of turn, but I still think this is a bad idea.”

“How so?”

“There’s a distinction between the gods and mortals. Aren’t we fudging with the natural order of things?”

I was so frustrated with this kind of argument. “The gods don’t care about ‘natural order,’” I snapped. “They only care about satisfying their own whims. And this is important. It’s working.”

“Mother,” said Achilles, “I don’t know if I want to do this again.”

“You don’t know what’s good for you,” I said to him. “You can and you will.”

I strode past Hephaestus, and into the workshop. I stripped Achilles, and covered him with ambrosia again. He began fidgeting with worry.

“Don’t worry,” I said, holding up the bottle. “I know that this hurts. But this salve will protect you.”

I stoked the fires of Hephaestus’ forge, held Achilles to my breast, gave him a peck on the cheek, and placed the boy inside the furnace. As soon as I sat him down on the coals, his skin gave a great hiss, and Achilles screamed again. I began pumping the bellows. It took longer for his flesh to burn this time, as though his skin was more resistant. I waited for a good length of time, pulled him from the fires, and placed ambrosia on his charred body. When I turned around, I saw Patroclus, a shocked expression on his face, standing in the doorway.

“What are...what are you doing?” he stammered.

“This is none of your business,” I snapped again.

“You’re hurting him.”

“I’m his mother. Get out of here.”

I passed Hephaestus again, on the way out. He was sitting on a bench outside, and he looked at me disapprovingly. I ignored him and his sulking. Patroclus walked behind us as I took Achilles back to the villa, and up to his room.

“Does Peleus know?” Patroclus asked. “I don’t think he’d approve.”

Damn him. I hated Peleus. “I don’t care what that brute thinks. Let’s get something straight. This is my house and this is my son.”

“But isn’t Peleus master of the household?”

I smacked Patroclus across the face. “No,” I said, not even trying to hide my anger. “He certainly is not.”

Achilles started whimpering in pain. His vocal cords had just healed.

\* \* \*

I continued this routine for a month. Each night, Achilles grew stronger and his skin tougher. During the day, he and Patroclus would spar, but then after training, they would walk away together and wander the island. The two of them began spending many hours together, which made me worry. Patroclus might have been a bad influence.

On what I thought would be the final night, I had just put Achilles on the coals when Peleus – I did not even know he was back on the island – barged through the door, armed to the gills, Patroclus worming away behind his legs.

“What are you doing, you stupid cunt?” my husband shouted. He charged past me, and pulled the screaming Achilles from the flames. Then he turned around and he punched me in the jaw so hard that he broke a tooth and my vision went black. I snapped into the form of a tiger, and roared so that the shed shook.

Peleus whipped his leather cords out again, but I managed to bat them away and get close enough to scrape his leg with my claw. He drew his sword.

“You want to go? You want to go!” he shouted. “I’m not looking for fun this time.”

Suddenly, ten of Hephaestus’s tripods came skittering out of the corners of the room. They looped onto Peleus’s cords and began crawling all over him. He fell to the ground, completely entangled. One of the tripods sat itself on his face with a leg raised like a metal scorpion ready to strike. Its leg was so sharp, it would have no problem puncturing Peleus’ skull.

“I believe it’s time that we all take a quick breather and calm down for a moment,” said Hephaestus as he hobbled into the room.

“You fucking cripple! Let me out of here.”

“Terribly sorry, my dear sir. But I’m afraid I’ve had quite enough of your horror.” He picked up Peleus’ sword, examining it, then threw it into the fire.

“Hey! My sword!”

“It’s a piece of junk. To be quite honest, you need to get a new one anyway.”

I growled at Peleus, and then changed back into human form.

“I need to make Achilles immortal.”

“What the fuck are you thinking?” Peleus demanded of me. “You wanted a warrior son, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, he’s not a warrior if he can’t die. He’d be a god then, wouldn’t he? Gods, you’re stupid. You immortal types, you’re all the same. You miss the point of it. Someone is a hero when there is actual danger. If you take the threat away, it’s not dangerous anymore, now is it?”

I honestly hadn’t considered that.

“But, isn’t it about how many enemies you defeat?”

Peleus laughed and smiled his toothy grin, but his eyes never left the spike pointing at his face.

“Sure. If Jason or Heracles kills twenty people, and they haven’t been killed, then it’s exciting. Those guys are heroes. But if you kill twenty people who can’t hurt you, then it’s like beating up children. You can do it, but no one will think you’re a hero.”

I looked at Achilles’ singed bottom. I could see it was healing already. But he was still, very much, a mortal. I glanced over at Patroclus, and his eyes told me that he was horrified at what I was trying to do.

“All of you think this was a bad idea?” I asked.

Everyone in the room nodded, including Achilles, who whimpered a little.

“Fine,” I agreed reluctantly. “Achilles can remain a mortal.”

Patroclus ran forward and hugged Achilles. I could see Hephaestus also grin a little with relief.

But then I turned back to my brute of a husband. “Regardless, Peleus, I want you off my island.”

“What? You can’t kick me out, you bitch! Where will I go then?”

“I don’t really care. But you aren’t going to live here anymore.”

“Well, who is going to train Achilles?”

“When you find a place to live, he can go and visit. In the meantime, I think I can find a few people to train him here. But for now: get off my island. Now.”

Hephaestus’ tripods snipped open the cords with their legs, and Peleus was on his feet. I changed into a bear, and got low.

“Hephaestus, please show Peleus off the island.” I growled.

“I know the freaking way to the boat,” Peleus said.

The tripods formed up around the brute, and lifted their spikes menacingly.

“With pleasure, madam,” Hephaestus said, and he began hobbling after Peleus who kicked sand up in the air as he stomped down to the shore.

“What about me?” asked Patroclus.

“Do you want to stay?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

“As long as you don’t burn me alive.”

“I won’t today.”

I looked at Achilles, who was now gingerly touching his quickly healing buttox. “And I need someone to keep training with my son. But if you kill him, I’ll throw you in the fire without any ambrosia.”

And train they did. Over the next month, they trained almost every day. Patroclus was never as good as Achilles, but my son still improved almost because he was teaching his sparring partner. A month later, Peleus found accommodations sleeping at an ex-girlfriend’s, and sent Achilles gifts, letters, and people for him to train with.

Achilles would send letters back too, an awful lot for a child. I heard, after the fact, that he had asked Hephaestus to make a sword for his father as well, to replace the one that was destroyed. He and Hephaestus spent several evenings discussing its design.

But after those nights spent attempting to burn away his mortality, Achilles had a different relationship with me. I first noticed the change the night I forced Peleus off the island. When we got back to the villa, I lifted up my son, and held him, feeling his smooth, newly healed skin. However, he didn’t hug me in return.

“You’re okay, right?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he replied.

But Achilles was never fully okay after that night. He was never quite as close to me as we once were. He generally preferred the company of Patroclus. It was as if he detected that we were somehow characteristically different – me with my immortality. What I had promised him is that the two of us would become more alike, but instead the result was that our differences became all the more apparent, and the one who was most like him was now rowing off the island, under the light of the moon and stars.



“Who is your mother, Heph?”

The question came out of nowhere. Achilles, Eurynome, and I were actually having a relaxing day. Hephaestus was shambling past with some parchment in his hands, probably on the way to his shop when Achilles asked him the question.

Hephaestus stopped dead in his tracks. Achilles, Eurynome, and I were looking at Hephaestus.

“I’m afraid that I don’t know, Killi.”

“You don’t know? Why is that?”

Hephaestus strained a smile. “Perhaps I don’t have one.”

“Don’t have one?! Everyone has one!” Achilles exclaimed.

“That’s enough, Achilles,” I said. “Stop pestering him. He’s busy.”

“This is my mother,” Achilles said pointing at me. I managed a small smile. “Is she your mother?” The boy asked.

Hephaestus looked at me with a long look, before responding. “No, I’m afraid not.”

“Well, she’s my mother. You should find out who yours is.”

Hephaestus continued walking. “True enough.”

Once Hephaestus was gone from the courtyard, without turning over in her hammock, Eurynome said, “Smooth.”

Later that evening, I went to visit Hephaestus in his workshop. As I approached I saw the smoke rising from the chimney, and heard quite a large amount of banging from inside, the clanging of metal on metal. I knocked on the door, and the banging stopped.

Hephaestus pulled open the door. He was covered in soot, and had pulled some face mask off that he had built to protect his eyes. I suddenly felt awkward to be standing there, as though I was interrupting at a bad time.

“Hi...I’m sorry about what Achilles said before. I know it can be painful, but I think you need to accept what is in your life...” I felt so awkward that I was blabbing.

“Hera knows something,” Hephaestus interrupted.

He stood out of the way, and gestured with his hand for me to come in. There were a few windows in his workshop, but they were small as this used to be a shed, after all. The main light came from the hearth. The room was shadowy and hot – far too hot to be comfortable.

“I...that’s probably true,” I admitted.

“Ever since I was an infant, she’s wanted me dead. She knows something about me, something from before you discovered me on the beach. I know it.”

“Well, how do you plan to get her to tell you? She’d be more likely try to kill you again, rather than divulge any secrets.”

“I have an idea,” he said, his eyes all fire. “I think I need to appeal to one of Hera’s vices.”

Over the next several days, I didn’t see Hephaestus as he was busy in his shop. For nights, the glow from the hearth would be visible in his windows. When he emerged from his workshop, he found Eurynome and me in the courtyard and told us that we should expect some guests. True to his word, it wasn’t long before a ship arrived on the coast, and sailors, several being the same men who arrived on the island to originally deliver his supplies, made their way up to his workshop. As they passed by the villa many of them gawked when they saw Eurynome. Several sailors also seemed impressed by Achilles practicing combat in the courtyard with Patroclus. One of the men, a hardened looking sailor, offered to practice with my child in good humour. Achilles had him flat on his back with a rod to his neck in moments.

As the men approached the workshop, this time Hephaestus played no jokes with disguises – he appeared as he was, and gave them instructions. The men cringed at his appearance, and could not look him in the eye when they saw him. Hephaestus ignored their reactions, asked them to wait, and disappeared inside the shop before pulling out a huge crate on a cart. As the sailors pulled it down to the ship, he scrambled his way to the top of it, hammering away at the nails, sealing it for transport.

“What’s inside?” asked one of the sailors.

“I can assure you, it’s quite safe for transport,” Hephaestus said as he hammered away, “but, truthfully, if it’s opened before it reaches your destination, it could be quite dangerous and kill you all. If I may be so bold, I recommend that you simply leave it alone, and you’ll all be fine.”

The men all gulped at this, but nodded. They pulled the cart with its cargo down to the ship, Hephaestus still hammering on the top of the crate, and on the way passed by the courtyard. One of them saw Eurynome again and gave out a low whistle.

“Excuse me!” called Hephaestus down to him, stopping his hammering for a moment. “Please refrain from harassing all members of the household of your client!”

When they loaded the cargo onto the ship, Hephaestus dismounted the crate, and then the two of us stood there and watched it sailing off into the distance.

“What is it?” I finally asked. “Where is it going?”

“It’s a gift for Olympus.”

\* \* \*

Hephaestus remained tight-lipped about what he had done and what was in that crate. I hadn’t looked up at the sky with fear for ages, but I began to fear that retribution from the gods would be swift to follow. Whenever I vocalized this to Hephaestus he always said the same thing, “Nothing to fear, nothing to fear. I have this under control.”

Eurynome was less convinced.

“You know, messing with the gods is generally a bad decision right? Why can’t you two just stay out of their warpath?”

Hephaestus wasn’t deterred, however, and would not explain his actions. However, despite my fears, months passed without hearing a rumble in the sky.

One day, Eurynome and I were watching Patroclus and Achilles train, this time with spears. Achilles managed to disarm Patroclus, when we heard slow clapping behind us. We all turned to look to find Hermes, the messenger for the gods. He was lithe, thin, and, as usual, naked. Two white wings were on each of his ankles that fluttered with his mood.

“Well done, well done, Achilles, the legend of your fighting skills is even told upon Olympus.” His voice was all silk – too smooth, for my liking. “Greetings, everyone! My, my ladies, don’t you look lovely!”

“Ugh. Put on some clothes,” complained Eurynome.

“If you had to fly around as much as I did, you would want to reduce drag too. Now, where is the wretch of Lemnos?” I found it odd how naked men loved to talk up nudity’s practicality.

“Hephaestus isn’t here,” I replied. “He is in his shop.”

“Hephaestus? He has a name?”

“He does.”

“Very well, then. Would you be kind enough to take me there, Thetis? I have been sent all the way here on a matter of some urgency.”

We walked together out of the courtyard, and Achilles and Peleus returned to sparring.

“How are you keeping, Thetis? Everything good?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“That’s so lovely to hear.”

“What do you want, Hermes?”

“To deliver a message. To the wretch of Lemnos.”

“Does Olympus plan to destroy us?”

“If they wanted you destroyed, they wouldn’t have sent me.”

“Why didn’t Zeus and Hera come themselves?”

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“They are...indisposed.”

As we approached the workshop, I could see that the fires, for once, did not appear to be burning. I knocked on the door, and when Hephaestus answered, he was not covered in soot, as per usual. Still, Hermes stepped back and his ankle wings fluttered in surprise at Hephaestus’s appearance.

“Erm, hello there,” said Hermes, trying to recover himself. “I was asked by Zeus and Hera to deliver a message to the wretch of Lemnos.”

Hephaestus looked impassive to an outsider, but I knew his face well-enough to see it twitch a little bit at that title.

“Thetis here told me that your name is Hephaestus. Are you one and the same?”

Hephaestus sighed, “I suppose I am.”

“Very well, then.” Hermes stood in more of a formal way, his ankle-wings also rigid. “Your presence has been requested upon Olympus.”

“Well, I’d certainly hate to disappoint,” Hephaestus said, “so I graciously accept. However, I have one condition.” He gestured at me. “She comes with me.”

Hermes looked at me. “Well, I was asked to escort only you. But, come to think of it, they didn’t specifically say that you had to come alone. Since Thetis and I are such good friends, I don’t see why not. Are you ready to leave?”

“Now?” I asked. “I don’t really want to go.” This caused Hephaestus to look at me impatiently.

“Yes, now,” Hermes replied. “As I told you, this is a matter of some urgency. Make up your mind.”

“Forgive me, madam.” Hephaestus said, “But you absolutely want to come. You have wanted the answers to who I am for ages. I think when we arrive, Hera might be in more of a mood for talking.”

“Ha! Oh, she’s in a mood for talking,” interrupted Hermes, grinning silkily, “but I don’t think you’ll be interested in hearing what she has to say.”

Hephaestus kept looking at me, so I felt like I didn’t have a choice.

“Alright,” I said. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Hermes held out his arms, and the two of us took hold of his wrist. His ankle wings began fluttering quickly, like that of a hummingbird, and then there was a sudden jolt as we lifted into the air, and rocketed through a wind tunnel. I have experienced being a falcon, which can fly quite quickly indeed, but this was faster than anything mortal. The ocean and then fields blew behind us in an instant. True to Hermes’ statement, my clothes were whipped wildly around me, to the extent that I was worried that they would tear. Though, in retrospect, I can’t see how nakedness would be pleasant for a man with that kind of pull from the wind. Then the mountain, Olympus, approached, snow-capped, with its peak surrounded by clouds.

When we touched down, Hermes turned to us.

“This way, please.”

He led us through the snow up to the hall of the gods. I had been here before, many years ago with my grandmother. It was exactly what you might expect: large pillars, fountains, statues

of the gods. The only room for improvement was the metalwork, as it wasn't as good as at my place, thanks to the "wretch of Lemnos." I took a little bit of silent pride in that.

As we approached the main hall, we could hear voices and shouting coming from inside.

"As you can hear," Hermes said to Hephaestus with a slight smile, "you have the gods in quite a tizzy."

He opened the door. The gods were all crowded around the royal dais and shouting at one another. There were two thrones, one of which I was familiar with: the stone throne of Zeus. But Hera was seated on another throne made of metal, next to it. It was beautifully ornate, carved and fastened with mixed metals – definitely one of Hephaestus's designs. Most of the throne was silver, but the back and sides had beautiful copper and gold lattice-work of an intricate, organic design. The branches of the tree and vine motif, however, had stretched out and had entwined Hera by the neck, arms, legs, and torso. She was ensnared by the throne.

We had caught the gods in the midst of a furor over how best to release her. Ares was holding his axe; however, it looked damaged and bent from hammering it against Hephaestus' design. Athena and Zeus were shouting at each other. But as soon as we entered, they all froze. Dead silence.

Then, click, click, click. Hephaestus' crutches echoed through the halls as he approached the throne.

"Hello, everyone. I trust you are all having an excellent day?" he said. At first I thought his candor was amusing, but then I looked again at the cables binding Hera. It wasn't that long ago, that I was bound myself by Peleus. I couldn't help but pity her, even though I despised her.

"You little beast," said Hera. "You tricked me. You wrote that this was a gift."

"It is, in a manner of speaking," responded Hephaestus. "Seeing you confined up there, it certainly is a gift for me. I didn't say who the present was for."

"It was addressed to me!" shouted Hera.

"You want me to chop him up, mother?" asked Ares, hoisting his axe.

"Put it back, Ares," said Athena. "He's not able to release her if he's dead."

"All of you," said Zeus, his deep voice booming in the hall. "Out."

Everyone left the hall, one by one. I was about to leave as well, but Hephaestus put his hand on my arm, indicating he wanted me to stay. Soon, it was Zeus, Hera, Hephaestus and myself in the throne room.

“Thetis, delightful to see you,” said Zeus, cocking his head forward. “You look excellent, as always.”

“Stop hitting on her,” said Hera, squirming in her prison. “Make that beast release me.”

“If you want my help here, sir,” said Hephaestus, “I’d kindly ask that you refrain from using your charms on my family.” His crow voice reverberated throughout the hall.

Zeus seemed taken aback by these responses.

“But she isn’t really my family,” Hephaestus continued. “Is she?”

We all sat in awkward silence for a moment, before Hephaestus spoke again. “I have the ability to release Hera, and I gladly will. But I want answers. Thetis and I deserve answers.”

“What are the questions?” asked Zeus.

“What am I? Who am I?”

“You’re a despicable monster,” said Hera. “We should have destroyed you. Zeus, we don’t need him.”

“Begging your pardon, but I’m afraid that my creation cannot be destroyed. Maybe Zeus could with his lightning bolt, but that would fry you along with it. And, as you have discovered through Ares’ attempts, you do not possess weapons that can break the bindings. Quite frankly, you don’t have the technology to do it. Only I do. So, contrary to your claims, Hera, you, in fact, do need me. Please. All I want are answers. All I want is to talk.”

“I’m not telling you anything you monster,” said Hera.

“Then you’ll be stuck here for the rest of your life, I’m afraid,” said Hephaestus. “Thetis, enlighten me, as I’m simply a humble wretch. How long do gods live for again?”

“Eternally,” I said.

“That does sound like a long time, doesn’t it?” said Hephaestus. “Well, good day.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” said Zeus. He turned to Hera. “I think you two have some things that you need to discuss.”

“I don’t want...” began Hera, but Zeus interrupted, his arms flailing about.

“I’m not interested in what you want. You disobeyed me and caused this whole problem.” Zeus turned to me and cocked his head forward. “Thetis, I had no idea what had happened until rather recently. I promise you that Hera will cooperate.” He turned back to his

wife. “That’s an order from the man of the household and the king of the gods,” Zeus snapped at her.

Hera looked furious, but silent. Zeus stepped down and made his way across the hall to the door. “Right, well. I’ll leave you to it.”

With that he stepped out.

We sat in silence for a while, as Hera looked down at us. I had the feeling that she was somehow still feeling condescending to us, even though she was the one outwitted.

“You two think you are so very clever. Don’t you?” she asked. “Why should I even bother telling you the truth here? How could you even know?”

Hephaestus shrugged. “I can always check with Zeus, I suppose.”

“You wouldn’t want to disobey your husband, now would you?” I added, “You know what he can be like.”

With that comment, her face looked all the more furious.

“Yes, I certainly do know who my husband is. Unlike you two, I know my place in the world.” As she looked at the two of us, her eyes were ice. I swore that she could kill us by looking. But then she bowed her head for a moment, and when she raised her face she was impassive, controlled. Her voice had an edge to it, though, like she was a teacher explaining something obvious to poorly behaved students.

“I understand why the two of you have both been so impertinent. I get it. Truly, I do. You are trying to move above your station – to improve your standing in life. But that’s not the way that the world works. Believe it or not, I was once frustrated, just as you are now, but that is all behind me. And you two need to learn your place as well.”

I could tell that beneath the surface, Hera was all condescension and cold rage, but she still managed to speak slowly as a mother who was being kind, but also disappointed with her children.

Hera turned and looked directly in my eyes.

“You don’t understand what it’s like to be married to Zeus. Married to someone who has the ability to kill you in an instant, but chooses to withhold his power. But you never know: he might one day just lose it all in a fury. So I can never really express my displeasure. So when he goes around, fucking anything he can get his hands on, even as a queen, I can’t say too much about it. The goddess of mothers? I think I’m also the goddess of wives; wives, who have to sit



at home, and know what their husband is getting up to when they go out on ‘adventures.’ But I was good at one thing: we could have beautiful children together. Family. That’s what dutiful mothers are proud of: their children. I think you and I have that in common, at least.”

“You know that I would do anything for my son,” I said.

“Of course. You have demonstrated that. It is your best, most proper, quality. One day, though, Zeus came home after another one of his affairs. He had knocked up some whore – the goddess Metis – and was worried because she was prophesied to bear a child ‘wiser than the father.’ Sound familiar?”

“It does,” I admitted. “In my case, though, it didn’t take much for Achilles to be greater than his father. Peleus was a fool. I have your husband to thank for how he treated me.”

“Begging your pardon,” asked Hephaestus, “but who goes around coming up with these paternally obsessed prophecies, anyway?”

“I remember how ungrateful you were when you were given Peleus as a husband,” Hera continued, ignoring Hephaestus. “You thought you had such a hard time, and were so unhappy with the way the world was, as though this life owed you something. But you didn’t know how good you had it. In the case of Metis, Zeus ate her and the unborn child inside. He ate them. Trust me: your arranged marriage was actually Zeus using mercy.

“Well, things quieted down for while after that. We gods all returned to our routine. But then one day, Zeus had a headache – one of those headaches so bad you go blind. Zeus spent days avoiding conversations, seeking out quiet places, and dipping his head into the snow on the top of Olympus. He was mad in the pain, and he would have broken things in anger, but that would have caused too much noise. No matter what he did, it wouldn’t stop.

“One evening, he came into the Olympus commons, shouting with pain. There was an odd growth on his temple – a bulging sac, looking like it was filling with pus, stretching the skin so thin that it might burst. Zeus was moaning for someone – anyone – to lance it. Ares responded, disgusted at the sight. He pulled out his axe, and with it, chopped the sac clean off. I have never heard Zeus howl in pain like that, nor seen him bleed so much as he crumpled to a fetal position on the ground, his hands on his bleeding temple.

“Then, emerging from the hole in my husband’s head, I saw slender fingers begin prying their way out of his flesh. They poked out of the wound, and then eventually a blood-covered hand appeared. Then two. The hands began to work at widening the hole, prying apart Zeus’

skull. Zeus gave one final cry as we heard a sickening crack as his skull split apart. Out came a blood covered arm, desperately feeling around for some kind of leverage. It found the broken Zeus' shoulder, and began to push as another arm came out. Then a head, wearing a blood-covered helmet. It was a woman. Once her head and arms were out, we could see that she was wearing armour. None of us other gods said a thing, but we sat there silently watching, not entirely understanding what we were witnessing.

“There was another sickening crack as her shoulders came through. The split in Zeus' body reached from his skull, down his neck, and even pried apart some of his shoulders and chest. The woman began to push with all her might until her body wriggled free. Then she stood up.

“‘Hello, everyone,’ she greeted, her body covered in gore. ‘My name is Athena.’”

“‘My baby girl!’ shouted the bloodied Zeus from the floor.”

I never knew that was how Athena was born. Although a little pompous, she was always my favourite of the gods. She wasn't as moody. It seemed odd that she would come from such gory beginnings. Either Zeus and Hera stopped the gossip somehow, or I was much further out of the loop than I thought. God gossip is mostly annoying to hear, but still.

“It wasn't long before Zeus was healed up, and it was clear that Athena was his favourite child,” Hera continued. “Do you understand what a rejection that was? My entire life, I had been providing children and making a home, and now he does this. Makes a child without me, on his own.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“What do you think? What could I do? Again, being the dutiful wife and caretaker of the home, I respected my husband's decisions. I was polite to Athena. I said all the right things: ‘Welcome to the family, yada, yada, yada.’ But she was so perfect. So wise. So beautiful. So good at war and wisdom, and as pure as a virgin. And Zeus made her on his own! Without me! I couldn't handle it any more. I was so sick of it. So I decided that – fuck him – I would make a god myself.”

Then she turned to Hephaestus, and looked him up and down, her lip curled.

“Me?” Hephaestus asked.

“I began creating my design on a table. Using clay, stone, and the other usual materials for sculpture, I formed the body. The most difficult part was giving my creation life. What would you have used?”

“Lightning,” answered Hephaestus, without hesitation.

“Many would agree with you, but that was Zeus’ domain, and I was sick of relying on Zeus. I wanted him to have no part of this whatsoever. I wanted it to be all me. So, instead, I used fire to spark life into the creature. I ventured deep into the volcanoes of the world, collected lava and flame, and carried them to my creation. I spread lava over the form to smooth the shape, and placed the spark of fire inside it.”

She paused for a minute, as she considered Hephaestus, and there was a strange look in her eye.

“I remember being so proud, so happy with what I had accomplished,” she said, quietly. Then her eyes hardened again.

“But once the creature took its first breath, I realized what I had done. I saw you move: all the horrible, undulating, artificial parts of your body. Your warped, grotesque feet. Your terrible face and hair lip.”

Hephaestus’ face winced at every unflattering description she made.

“Obviously, I should have known better. What had I done? How could I have hoped to compete with anything that mighty Zeus could do? I was a woman. Of course Zeus, being a man, could create on his own anytime he wanted. There was no way that I would ever be able to do that as well as him. The creature was so repulsive. In my disgust, I threw the beast off of Olympus, and watched it fall to the earth.”

“You threw me?” Hephaestus asked. “Off Olympus?”

“I suppose that was when you first encountered this abomination, Thetis.”

“My name is Hephaestus.”

“I had called you that, when I was constructing you. Before I knew what you would become. Before I knew how much my hubris would lead me to fail.”

“How does he do what he does?” I asked. “I understand the fire, but why the metal?”

“I’m not fully sure. But as I was creating it, I wanted to outdo Zeus. I put all of my design, my creativity, and all the fire that the world contained. Some of that might have rubbed off. This creature might have been a god if it were not so defective. But this is no god. This

wretch is the result of a woman over-reaching beyond her station, just like you two are trying to do now. There is a natural order to the world: Zeus is above me, and I am certainly above you two.” The tone of her voice returned to a dangerous tone. “So now you know. So let. Me. Go.” She paused in between each word to let the venom sink in.

Throughout her story, as she described how she created him and how repulsive she found him, Hephaestus had looked more and more grim. When she finished, he turned his back to us. He stood in silence for a long while. I didn’t know if I should speak, but it did not seem like my place to do so. Hera’s face was impassive.

“You’re a horror,” he said, eventually, looking up at her. “I was a baby. I had done nothing wrong.”

“And look how you’ve turned out now,” Hera said. “You didn’t have to do anything. It’s what you are. You disgust me. If I could unmake you, I would.”

“But you can’t,” said Hephaestus, quietly. “You can’t, or you would have.” He thought for a moment, and then stood up and said, “Thetis, could you please get Zeus in here? I think the king of the gods needs to be here for the next part of the conversation.”

I was curious what he had in mind. I walked over and opened the throne door. The other gods were all still out there. Ares was flexing his muscles for Athena, who looked bored. Zeus, was drinking some ambrosia. Hermes, had stretched out his nude form on a chaise-longue

“Zeus?” I asked. “They’d like to see you.” Zeus hopped up, and as we walked into the throne room he bumped into me he was walking so close. Hephaestus turned to him.

“I’ll let her go, but we need to bargain.”

“Bargain?” said Zeus. “You can’t bargain with the gods.”

“People bargain with the gods every day. They call it sacrifice, I believe. I give you this, and you give me that. Transactions seems to be part of the regular order of things. But my price is a little steeper. Now that I know the truth, I deserve more.” He looked teary in his eyes. “I’m a god. I’m one of you.”

“You are not one of us,” said Hera.

“I don’t look like you, but I was made the same way that Athena was. If you want your wife back, then you’ll acknowledge that. I want to be able to come to Olympus, if I want. And I want a seat here, like the rest of you.”

Zeus thought for a moment, and then said. “I’d like to make a counter-offer.”

“Counter-offer?!” exclaimed Hera. Zeus ignored her.

“I’ve seen your craftwork. If I agree, in exchange, you make things for Olympus as well.”

Hephaestus nodded, looked at me, and then turned to Hera. “Here you go, mother.”

The vines quickly withdrew with a snap. Hephaestus turned away. “Keep the throne. And I was lying before. It was a gift intended for you.”

Zeus walked up to put his arms around Hera, who slapped them off her. She hissed something at him, but I couldn’t hear what it was.

We walked out of the throne room and stood in front of the other gods. Hephaestus looked at them all, their beautiful sleek bodies, and then looked down at his deformed one. He approached Hermes, still on the chaise-longue “I’d like to go back to Lemnos, Hermes.”

“Indeed?” He turned to Zeus. “Your business with the wretch is ended?”

Hephaestus winced at the word, and then looked back to Zeus.

“Part of the deal is that they have to stop calling me that.”

Zeus nodded, then he said. “Gather around, kids. We have a new addition to the family.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said to Hephaestus, a bit of desperation in my voice.

“Yes,” he said. Then looked at me as we took hold of Hermes’ wrist. “Home.”

After we whipped back to the villa, everyone was sleeping. I bid Hephaestus good night, and went back to my room. I didn’t see Hephaestus for several days afterward our meeting with Hera. I would occasionally quietly go outside the door of his room, but never dared knock. Through the wood, I would either hear silence or occasionally his strange voice, softly crying.

“Mother, I need to go to Troy.”

It was no longer a boy who stood with me that day on the shore, the two of us watching the sun set, me with my toes in the water. Achilles was now a young man, complete with muscle definition, weapons, and a blonde beard. He was stunningly good looking; he even drew Eurynome’s ever-so bored eyes. Although he looked impressive, he wasn’t the tallest man I had ever seen, not even reaching the height of Peleus. However, he was lightning fast, and amazingly skilled as a warrior, his battle prowess coming as natural to him as breathing. Like Ares, he was ferocious. Many of his opponents would see him charging at them, and the blur and fury of Achilles’ attacks, like fighting a berserk beast, would immediately put them on the defensive. But like Athena, Achilles was tactical. When fighting, he could read all of his opponents’ movements, so that he knew where his adversary was going to go, even before they did. He had a lifetime of experience fighting people larger than him, smaller than him, stronger than him, weaker than him. He had torn through them all with his sword or skewered them with his spear. And the reputation of his skills had attracted followers. He had made several friends throughout the years, and his drinking buddies decided to call themselves “The Myrmidons” (Ugh. Boys). But his best friend was still Patroclus – the two were inseparable. Unfortunately, his taller, older friend was still an idiot. And I knew that he was the source of this idea.

“So, whose idea was this?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“Patroclus talked me into it. Everyone who is able to fight is going. The Myrmidons want to go, and they want me to lead them. This will be the greatest war ever seen by men. There will be many Trojans to kill and I will hang their bodies by their entrails from the city walls. I need to be there.”

“Are you sure? There will be other wars.”

“Never one as legendary as this. Troy has enormous walls to breach, the best soldiers to kill, and beautiful women to claim. The pillaging will be glorious. Just like we have always talked about.”

“What is the war about?”

“A woman, they say. But I think that jerk Agamemnon just wants to sack a city. Either way, I need to go.”

I couldn't deal with it. Here he was in front of me, wearing his father's armour. I should have been prepared for this. How long had I expected him to become a warrior? He had been training for this his entire life. Before he was born, I had foreseen that it would be his destiny. But now that it came to it, I didn't want him to go. But despite myself, I nodded.

The next day he left on a ship. I stood on the shore, watching it sail away, until it was a dark spot on the horizon. Even after it disappeared, I stood motionless, gazing in the direction it had gone. When I walked back to the villa, it was dark, and the servants had all returned to their quarters.

Peleus was gone. Hephaestus was gone. Achilles was gone.

"It's just you and me," I said to Eurynome.

Eurynome didn't respond because she was asleep.

\* \* \*

After our encounter with Hera, Hephaestus hung around Lemnos for another year or so, but largely kept to his shop. He had changed after finding out his origin, becoming less chipper, less polite. I noticed that his import and export business had also slowed down quite a bit, as though he lost interest in keeping it going. I suppose that finding out that your mother tried to kill you would do that to some people.

One day, he appeared in the courtyard announcing that he needed to leave Lemnos. He hadn't been shaving and had grown a scraggly beard in a vain attempt to hide his hair lip. He was remarkably hairy all over his body now.

"The forge in my shop doesn't have the power I need," he said. I knew that he was lying because his forge hadn't been active for quite some time, but I decided not to press the issue. "I think it's time I find my own place."

It wasn't long before a familiar ship manned by familiar sailors returned to my island, and the seamen were busily loading all of his equipment down to the shore – they were seemingly his favourite shipping company. I stood back a distance and watched Hephaestus give Patroclus and Achilles, both still youths at this point, customized swords as going away presents. He said something to them I couldn't hear over the sound of the waves, and Achilles smiled and

Patroclus screeched out his awful laugh. I approached and admired the new weapons. Achilles was already practicing with the new blade, getting used to its balance.

“Where will you go?” I asked Hephaestus.

“I don’t know yet,” he replied. “I have a few ideas.” He looked around.

“Eurynome is still in her hammock?” he asked, looking a little disappointed.

“She was unable to make it. But she asked me to tell you not to work too hard.”

We paused awkwardly.

“Well. I guess this is it, then.” I managed a small smile.

“Thank you for raising me,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say to him. I wished I could have said something auspicious, like “it had been a pleasure,” but he was sharp enough to know when I was lying.

“Well, good luck then,” I finally said. “I’m sure I’ll call you if I need you.” I gave him a pat on the shoulder, and walked back to the villa.

\* \* \*

Years later, after Achilles had gone to Troy, I woke up at night with another vision. I hadn’t received one in such a long time, but it was a vision of Achilles again, wailing in grief by a pyre. I didn’t know how, but I knew he needed his mother. Getting to Troy was not going to be a quick journey, so I immediately changed into a gull, and left Lemnos. I wished I could fly as quickly as Hermes.

I flew for several days and nights before approaching the besieged Troy, and, as Achilles had said, it was a city with high walls and towers. Unlike the mining town that Hephaestus and I had visited so long ago, there actually seemed to be an attempt at architectural design; however, the walls had not escaped damage from the battles, several places having been scorched by fire. The Greek army had set itself up in an encampment which surrounded the Trojan fortress. The siege had lasted for years, so much of the farmland was ruined. It was a war of attrition. Either the Trojans would run out of food, or the Greeks would destroy the farmland and starve themselves, or one of the parties would get sick of waiting and attack the other group.



Many of the soldiers in the encampment no longer stayed in tents, but had built more permanent residences, such as huts. The men weren't fighting a short war, but had arrived planning to live somewhere for a long period of time.

As I descended, I heard the screams of Achilles. There were fires throughout the camp, but I spied him near the largest one, smoke and the aroma of burning flesh billowing from the ground. I could see the Myrmidons huddled around my son, who was the only one not in armour. When I landed, I changed into the form of a human woman, causing several of the Myrmidons to jump away in alarm, and whisper to each other that I was Achilles' mother.

Achilles was on his knees in front of the fire, wailing away in a manner I had never seen. Even when he was younger, with his father beating him, he had never cried like this.

"Hello, Achilles," I said. My son looked up at me in response, but his gaze was blank, as though he couldn't process that it was me standing in front of him, and then he went back to crying. It had taken quite some time to get here, so I was somewhat disappointed that I didn't get a little more acknowledgment for making the trip.

"I'll kill him!" he shouted.

"Who?" I asked.

When Achilles didn't respond to my question, one of the other Myrmidons responded, "He wants to kill Hector. Patroclus is dead. Achilles refused to fight because he was angry with the king Agamemnon, so Patroclus dressed as Achilles, led us into battle, and was killed by Hector."

That boy was an idiot until the last. Didn't he realize that dressing up as Achilles would make him a target?

"Everyone, leave," I said. The Myrmidons didn't obey my command, but looked at Achilles. He nodded, so they began to leave. I took some pride in the fact that my son possessed such authority, even when he was grieving. I kneeled down in the dirt, next to Achilles.

"I know it's sad to lose a friend," I sighed. "But interpret it this way: he died in battle. That's an honourable way to go. That's what happens in war."

"I don't care," he choked, and then punched the earth. "I'm going to kill Hector!"

"Then kill him," I said. "What's stopping you?"

"They took Patroclus's body. He was wearing my armour."

"Can't you use someone else's?"

“They need it. And no one else fits me. I’ll fight him without armour, if I need to.”

I suddenly remembered my visions from all those years ago, of Achilles being stabbed and mauled and beaten. I suddenly recalled that in those images he wasn’t wearing any armour. But in the ones where he survived, he was. And the vision of him looking so regal, I now recognized the design of the armour he wore. I knew it so well.

“Don’t go sending yourself into battle just yet. Someone owes me a favour, and I think they will help me build some armour for you.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

\* \* \*

I descended down deeper and deeper inside the earth, the temperature growing warmer and warmer. It was as though Gaia herself was sweating, everything was so slick. I kept falling. When I slipped for what must have been the fifth time, I slid down the slick rock and landed hard against the earth. I checked my lamp. In the fall, I somehow managed to protect it, but my robes were wrecked. They weren’t fine clothes, as per usual, but now they were torn and stained with a black slime from the cave’s sides. My feet and sandals were stained with the same sludge. My clothes weren’t suitable for spelunking.

Shaky, I stood up and banged my head on the low ceiling.

“Freaking Zeus.”

It had taken me days to come to the island of Vulcano, and a morning to find the cave entrance carved into the base of the volcano. I could no longer tell how deep underground I was and I had no idea which direction I was facing, but I could taste the soot and sulphur in the air. I felt for which direction was the hottest, and continued down the path. I wished that I could have taken the form of a bat and flown in as deep as I could, but the animal didn’t have the system to be able to survive in this hot atmosphere. The whole cavern was an oven. Even in the dim lantern light, I could see the air rippling in the heat.

But then I heard the slow, methodical, high-pitched ring cut through the rumble of the mountain. Clang. And then again. Clang. The slow rhythm, like a bell in slow motion, of a hammer and anvil.

The cavern soon no longer looked natural, and the walls looked smooth, like they were hewn. I was in a tunnel, long and thin, descending deeper, and, at the end of the tunnel, in the distance I could see a doorway lit with light. I blew my lamp out because an orange glow began to fill the passage, and I could see clearly with my naked eye. As I walked down the tunnel, the doorway kept getting larger, and the ringing kept getting louder. When I stepped through, I was in an enormous cavern, the walls glittering with uncut diamond. At the other end of the cavern was an enormous waterfall of lava. In front, was the source of the clanging: a small silhouette, raising and lowering a hammer.

“Hello, Thetis,” Hephaestus said, without looking up from what he was doing.

“Hello, Hephaestus.”

I approached the shadow, still unable to make him out. I had not seen him for many years. He hated being with the other gods, listening to their easy laughter with each other, and their awkward glances in his direction. He was constantly being reminded that he didn’t belong with them. Not really. Despite this underlying sentiment, Zeus was true to his word – there was a seat for him up on Olympus; however, Hephaestus rarely chose to sit in it, letting it serve as a reminder to the other gods that he had a place if he wanted it. Instead, he spent most of his time in the forge, having created this cavern himself with his flame.

As I crossed the smooth floor, small, gold tripods set on wheels rolled up and whizzed around me. The wheels were a new addition. I bent down to inspect one, but it rolled away out of my grasp.

“Forgive them,” Hephaestus said, not ceasing his hammering. “They get nervous around strangers.” His voice was even as he said it, but I felt the sting of the words.

“I’m sorry that it has been so long.”

“No, I understand. You’re busy.” I hadn’t been busy, and he knew it. He stopped hammering, set down his hammer, and shambled towards me.

“What do you want?”

He sounded so different than how I was used to hearing him. We had been through so much. Hephaestus was glowering at me for having come down there, disturbing his space. In that moment, standing before him, appealing for his assistance on behalf of Achilles, I missed his old accommodating self.

“I need your help.”

“Mmhm. Of course you do. This is about Killi, I take it? It’s always about your son.”

There were drips of resentment in his voice.

“Yes.”

“Your life – my life – has been completely focused upon helping your son. How much has he cost you?”

“Hephaestus, he’s at war. He’s at Troy.”

“Well, you must be very proud of him. So what? You’ve been training him to be a warrior his whole life. This is the life you wanted for him.”

“I know, I know. But I have seen that he will die, if you don’t help him.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“Proteus once said that you would be able to protect him.”

“Do I look like a war god to you?” he asked, pointing to his crippled legs. But while standing there, despite his slouching, he was in his element – a giant cave, surrounded by automata and flame – he looked mighty and terrible.

“Actually, you honestly look like a god. I never realized it in your youth.”

“No, you never did, did you. That’s because I don’t look like one of the gods; I look like some horrible beast. Achilles looks like them. He’s always looked like them. He’s only a mortal, but everyone...you always treated him like he wasn’t.”

“And now he needs your help. Hephaestus, I raised you, and I fed you. No mother is perfect, your mother less so, and she’s the goddess of mothers, but I took you in. Please.”

Hephaestus let out a grunt and turned away from me. “What would you have me do?”

“Do you remember what Proteus said? Exactly?”

“Not really. You told me a few times in the past.”

“He said that you would protect him. I never knew how you would, but I remember in the visions Achilles was wearing armour – I now realize that armour was designed by you.”

“Armour? Doesn’t he have his Dad’s?”

“It’s been lost. And it would never be as good as what you could forge for him. Please.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

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Hephaestus had a cot for me to rest in as I waited for him. He stoked the bellows and the fires beneath the mountain raged hotter than anything I have ever experienced. As he hammered away at the metal, I could see that each blow was necessary to fashion the armour, taking shape before my eyes. He crafted them in separate pieces, and each section took his attention: the breastplate, the shoulder guards. Sometimes, he would hold and touch the metal with his bare hands, and then it would turn to liquid, so that he could reform it in a manner he chose. Other times, he would use his control of fire to heat and shape the metal. Other situations seemed to require the use of his tools: the forge, his hammer. He seemed to have a preference for when he used one technique or another, but I couldn't decipher his methodology. He used a variety of different metals in the armour's construction, some I had never heard of, others a blend of different elements. Hephaestus explained that some materials were specially suited for strength, and others for lightweight function.

"Killi's strength is his speed," he said to me at one point during the process. "He needs an armour that can keep up with him."

However, in all the discussion of the function, I don't want to understate the aesthetics. A more beautiful armour will never exist. Most of the armour had a matte finish, that gave it a sheen rather than a shine, however, other parts gleamed in the red lumination as highlights, as though the metal itself was glowing. The armour seemed almost flexible, as though the metal could bend and move like it was organic, but whenever I tried to bend it myself, it was quite solid.

Once the armour was completed, he turned his attention to constructing the shield. The shield was a microcosm, divided into rings. The outer ring containing all of creation: the earth, the seas, the sun, moon, and stars. The next ring contained rural farmland, with farmhands taking care of animals and crops, having festivals. Then, urban cities, with people working, eating, drinking, making love, marriages, funerals. Finally, in the centre, was the image of the gods on Olympus. All of them moved, as though they were alive. If I gazed at it long enough, I could see the figures moving between the rings, the gods visiting the realms of men, humans venturing into wilds of nature. The vast expanse of the cosmos, moon and sun and constellations, bearing witness to it all. After studying it for several hours, I found the image of myself, looking at the shield, sitting next to an image of Hephaestus performing the finishing touches on the wristbands.

“The entirety of creation will be protecting him,” Hephaestus said, as he saw me losing myself while finding myself in the enormity of it all. I love paradoxes.

When it was all completed, he laid it all out before me, so I could see what he had done. I looked at it all in wonder, but then I noticed something.

“The armour doesn’t cover his whole body?” I asked.

“No, that’s right. I told you, his strength is his speed.”

“But won’t he be vulnerable?”

Hephaestus turned away for a moment. Without looking back, he asked, “Are you proud of Killi?”

“Of course I am.”

“Are you proud of me?”

That question caught me off guard. “It’s not my place to be proud of you. I’m not your mother.”

“Then who is?” he asked.

“We already found out the answer to that. Hera.”

“She is not my mother.”

I paused awkwardly. I wasn’t sure what he was looking for.

Eventually, he sighed. “I am certain, that with this armour, Killi will survive so many battles, that he will go down in legend.”

“Thank you,” I say as I packed up the armour. “My son already is a great warrior.”

“Yes. He certainly is.”

“But this will help him become a legend. Thank you.”

“I hope that will make you happy.”

I managed a small smile, turned away and made my way back up to the surface.

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Ascending out of the cave was even more difficult than the descent, due to now having a bundle to carry. Although it was awkward to be holding something, the armour wasn’t heavy at all, but rather quite light. When I finally reached the surface, I turned into an eagle, and flew back to Troy, carrying the armour with my talons. I made good time due to a favourable wind,

and when I descended upon the war scene, I spotted Achilles among the tents. He was in the midst of playing with a Trojan girl, who was crying to get away and go home.

I landed in front of him, and shifted back into a human woman.

“Achilles,” I said. “Who is this woman?”

“Just a Trojan prisoner,” he replied, swatting her on the ass with the flat of his blade “She doesn’t matter.” He passed the girl off to one of the other Myrmidons and told them to bring her back to his tent.

His face had changed somehow. His eyes looked tired, the sorrow from losing Patroclus still present. But now there was another emotion overtop it: an anger, a fury. His hands were shaking, and there was an edge in his voice. In that moment, he looked like his father when he used to be in a drunken rage.

“What are you looking at?” he snapped.

“I had this made for you. By Hephaestus himself. I think this may be his best work I have ever seen.”

“What took him so long?”

“He lives far away. He wanted it to be perfect for you.”

“I don’t need armour. I could destroy those walls with my bare hands. I could rape all the women. I could defeat Hector, beat him to an inch of his life, then drag his body around the city gates by a chariot until he is dead. Afterwards I could rape his wife and children. I could do all of this naked.”

“Hector is Troy’s best warrior.”

“He’s not as good as me. No one is as good as me.”

“That’s true, but you still need armour. Please, believe me. I have foreseen it.”

He grunts, but despite himself, puts the armour on.

And there it was. All the other Myrmidons stopped with a start to admire him. I had an experience like *déjà-vu*, but I knew exactly where the memory had originated. In that moment, I saw the scene of my vision I had first seen all those years ago: Achilles looking glorious on the field of battle. I knew I had succeeded. He would become a legend.

“There,” he said. “Are you happy now?”

“Thank you, Achilles,” I said. “You look amazing.”

He didn't wait for another moment, but retrieved his weapons, and then charged up to the Trojan gates, with his sword at his side, his spear on his back and the shield carrying the cosmos in front of him. I didn't watch the battle, but there are many accounts of it elsewhere. True to his word, he defeated Hector easily. I heard the Trojans wail from their walls as he struck Hector down, and the Myrmidons and Greeks cheer for Achilles' vengeance. But over it all, another sound carried: Achilles' scream of rage once he struck the killing blow. Apparently, he had knocked him down, and then stood over him, screaming as he stabbed the spear into his chest, deliberately missing the heart so that Hector would live long enough to be dragged by a chariot. Achilles' scream chilled me. It was as though all of the rage for all of the beatings he had received from Peleus's hand erupted at that moment. His silent suffering bubbled over, carried up into the sky, and that howl would become a song that was sung by poets for thousands of years.



I stood on a hill above Troy, and watched my son's ashes go up in smoke. Now a smouldering ruin, the city was sacked, and the walls breached due to a trick with a wooden horse.

I couldn't believe it. After everything I had done, after everything I had been through, after all the precautions I had taken – it still wasn't enough.

Achilles was dead. Killed by a coward with a bow and arrow.

I flew to Olympus and stormed into the hall of the gods. They were all lounging, sipping their ambrosia, chatting happily among themselves about the war that killed my son as though they were discussing a sports game, re-enacting their favourite moments and the best plays. Athena, who's Greeks had conquered Ares's Trojans, was performing a little happy dance in front of her brother to the amusement of the other gods.

"Brains over brawn, right Ares?" she laughed.

The wretch's seat was, as usual, empty.

"Why are you celebrating?" I shouted at them all, to which they all stopped dead. "Do you know what this cost us? Do you have any idea at all?"

"Now, now, Thetis," said Zeus. "Don't be so dramatic. You're overreacting. A few mortals died. That's all."

"My son was killed."

"We know," Hera said with a slight smile. "You must be so very proud."

"Proud? Proud! You wicked bitch!" The other gods gasped. "I want him back. What kind of mother are you!?"

"One with her children still alive," she shot back.

"You can't have him back, my dear," Zeus said to me, smiling as though he could make everything better. "He's with Hades now."

"Then have Hades return him," I demanded. "You're the king of the gods, aren't you?"

"Watch your tone," said Hera.

"It isn't so simple," said Zeus, a little apologetically sheepish this time. "Achilles was mortal. That's what makes him mortal, you know – he can die."

I glared at Hera. She should have at least sympathized as a mother. I didn't care if she struck me down with a meteor or not, I wanted her to feel how much I hated her.

"You know what will make you feel better?" Zeus said. "Come, listen. If you stand at the edge of the mountain, you can hear all the songs they are singing for your son. He was a perfect son, Thetis. A warrior, just like you wanted. Just like his father. If I brought him back, they would stop singing his praises."

"I don't want to hear any songs," I said, and I could hear my voice breaking. "I want to hear his voice."

With that, I changed into an albatross, and flew off the mountain. The gods were idiots, and I was getting nowhere. They were happy to bend the rules and prolong the lives of mortals if it was someone that they cared about, but as soon as you wanted something from them, then there were all these blasted reasons why they couldn't do anything about it, and that the world was as it should be. People in power have always helped themselves when it suited them.

But there was someone who told me that he would help, but he didn't. And the more that I thought about it, the more I needed to confront him. I needed to visit the blasted wretch, Hephaestus.

I fumed the whole way across the ocean, and then dove into his cave as a bird, and then I changed into a bat. I held the form as long as I could, but eventually the heat became too much, so I was forced back into the shape of a human.

I scrambled my way down over the rocks. Without a lamp, I had to feel my way down, blindly, which caused me to fall twice as often as last time. But eventually I arrived. The small tripods came out to greet me as I entered his chamber, the heat sweltering.

"Hello, Thetis." Hephaestus said, in the process of building something. But then he put his tools down and looked at me. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Achilles is dead."

"I know. I heard."

"You said," I had to stop and start again because my voice was choking up. "You said that you would protect him." Hephaestus looked taken aback.

"I did. I did protect him. As best as I could."

"Achilles is dead!" I shouted. "That doesn't seem like he's protected."

"But I made him armour, just like you asked. Why are you so mad at me?"

“I even asked you about that armour. I asked you if there was a weakness in it.”

“Yes, and I told you that there was.” He began speaking more quickly now, getting defensive. “I made the armour with some vulnerability, but it accentuated the way Killi liked to fight. What would you have had me do? Encase him inside an impenetrable metal box, so he’d be safe? But then he wouldn’t be a threat to anyone. What good would that do?”

“What good would it do?” I repeated, incredulous. “He’d be alive!”

“But he wouldn’t be a hero. He wouldn’t be a warrior. That’s what you always wanted. That’s what he wanted.”

“I used to! But last time I saw you, I told you that I wanted him to be kept safe! And you just as good killed him! I should have left you in the ocean to drown!” I could see that last line hurt him. I wanted to hurt him.

“Maybe so,” he said, raising his voice. “But thanks to me, he achieved what he always wanted! Look, Killi was a psychopath. He was a killer, just like his father. The one who took after you was me, though you loathe to admit it.”

“He was nothing like his father. And you are nothing like me.”

“Oh yes he was. And you’re still too blind to see it. As far as I can see, his death makes the world an improvement.” For that, I slapped him across the face.

“That’s not for you to decide!” I shouted at him.

“It isn’t? I’m a god,” he said bitterly, “Who else gets to decide?”

“You bastard! You miserable wretch!”

I changed into a gorilla and hit him as hard as I could. Hephaestus flew into the air, his crutches flying. He fell onto the floor hard, and I was on him in the form of a lion, tearing and clawing at his disgusting form, ripping out hair and clawing off his clammy skin.

“Thetis! That’s enough!” he shouted, and I was overwhelmed by hundreds of his tripods, like drowning in a swarm of metallic spiders. I managed to bat a few of them off me, but there were too many. A few of them nicked me with their scissor-like legs, distracting me enough so that Hephaestus could crawl away out of my reach.

Then a burst of fire exploded from the volcano’s lava waterfall behind his forge. A tongue of liquid flame belched out between us, and erupted into a wall of fire. I transformed into a rhinoceros, the thick hide protecting me from the tripods’ scissor legs. I was forced back from

the heat and flame, but through tongues of fire I could see Hephaestus's silhouette crawling towards his crutches, then struggling to stand up.

“At last you are calling me a wretch to my face. You've always thought that I was a miserable wretch, and I am, aren't I? The mortal Achilles, better respected than I will ever be, and I'm the god of fire. You think I don't think on it? Every day of my life? I'm hideous! A failed science experiment! I'm only useful to people who want me to make stuff for them. Everyone loves my creations, but hates the creator.”

“You killed my son!” I managed to shout, still struggling against the heat and the swarm of tripods.

“No, I didn't! Achilles survived long enough to become a hero because of the armour I built him, just like you wanted. You've always said that you wanted a warrior son. Well, this is what they do. They die in battle. This is the best ending that Achilles could have hoped for. What else was he going to do? Die as an old man on a farm? Who would remember him, then?”

You are a vicious, miserable wretch,” I managed. I changed into a porcupine and skewered several more of the tripods.

“Yes, you keep saying that. You've believed that interpretation my whole life, and I believed it myself. But I'm not going to believe it any longer. You're the one always going on about how things are a matter of interpretation, but that just lets you choose to say whatever you want, and then call it “interpretation.” It seems to me that many of the things that have happened to us are truly terrible things. How we've been treated by the gods. Your marriage to Peleus. Me being cast off of Olympus. Your son dying. These are just awful things. Why try to mask that by calling them interpretations?”

“That's a naïve, binary way of seeing the world. It's rigid. It's not flexible.” I said this almost automatically. I didn't feel like debating philosophy. I flipped back into a tiger form and batted the last of his automata into the fire. They melted on contact.

“Not flexible? Look at you! You have spent your life convincing yourself to be satisfied with the most awful stuff, that everything is all sunshine and rainbows, but then nothing ever changes. For someone who can change their shape at random, your life ends up being one of the most static ones I know, where you completely accept your fate as though it is written in stone. Then you're locked into that interpretation of the world for your entire life. Sometimes, things shouldn't be interpreted as a good thing when it's something that's terrible.”

I was shaking, I was so mad at him. I had just lost my son, I didn't need to listen to his ranting. I changed back into a human woman.

"I know one thing that I am going to change," I said. "All that time in my home with you, ever since you first invaded my home, it wasn't worth it."

I reached into my robes, and I pulled out the bracelet in the design of the plant, the one he made when he first arrived on Lemnos. I had taken it back after Eurynome upgraded to a newer one. I held it up into the light so that he could see it, and so that he knew that I had kept it with me. It looked as delicate and fragile as when it was first made, but the plants on the bracelet had bloomed into beautiful flowers of mixed metals.

"This is all you are good for, and I don't even want that in my life." I said, and I threw the bracelet into the fire. It caught flame, and the plant looked like it was wilting as it melted away. "Get out of my life. I never want to see you again."

I turned to leave, but before I left, I changed into a lion and roared as loud as I could, which echoed satisfyingly throughout the whole cavern. I even saw Hephaestus jump a little. Then I bounded out of the cave, kicking over some of his tools on the way out.

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When I emerged from the cavern, I stood on the shores of Vulcano. I was finally rid of him. I didn't feel relief, only numbness. What brought me back was the stinging pain caused by the few scratches I had received from the wretch's tripods. Blast him.

I had one more person to visit, and it was the person that I hated to see the most in all the world. Whereas before I had an urgent need to rage at the gods and the wretch in person, this next encounter I dreaded. However, duty called me to go there myself and deliver the news. I changed into an eagle and took off. I took one look back at the wretch's home as I flew away. I don't know what I expected to see. Some sign of Hephaestus, I suppose? The wretch on the shores begging for me to come back? The island looked deserted and empty. There was a bit of volcanic activity, lava weeping down the mountain's side.

It was nightfall by the time I arrived at Themyscira. I spied ships moored in the harbour below, and then tents set up on the shore surrounding a fire. As I circled, I could see that outside

of the camp there was a large pile of bodies, and as I descended, I could see that all the bodies belonged to women. It was the carcasses of the amazons. I didn't see any prisoners.

I landed outside of the camp, shifted into the form of a panther and quietly stalked up to the fire. I needn't have bothered with the stealth; the men were too noisy or too drunk to hear me. A huge, shaggy man wearing a lion skin was drunkenly passed out next to the fire. Heracles. In his hands he held a ripped girdle, like a child clinging to a blanket while asleep.

There was Peleus, lying down chatting with several of the other men. It had been years since I had last seen him, but I hadn't realized how long it had been. He was older, with greying hair, and a lined face. Some of the cracks in his weathered armour looked like they were extending into his skin. He still looked like he was covered with grease.

I shifted into the form of a human woman, which caused several of the mortals to jump.

"Hello, Peleus," I said.

"See boys?" he shouted, raising his wineskin to me. "I told you the bitch would come calling, eventually!"

"What happened here?" I asked.

Peleus shrugged. "Meh. Nothing you were ever interested in. Heracles, here," he nodded at the drunk giant, "needed to get the Amazon queen's girdle. Funny thing was, she was going to give it to him. But Heracles was drinking a lot, and he suddenly thought the amazons planned to attack him. Ha! I don't know where he got that idea from. Anyway, we ended up just taking it. We gave the ladies a night to remember, didn't we boys?" He grinned, flashing his teeth, while he thrust his hips forward so that I knew he was talking about sex. The other men drunkenly laughed.

"Achilles is dead," I said. "I thought you should know."

"What? How'd he die?" He stopped his drunken showboating, and, for a moment, lost his grin and looked genuinely concerned. I had never seen that face on him before, his eyes widened, his brow creased with worry. He suddenly looked even older.

"Troy. In battle."

Peleus turned away for a moment. The men around me began to mutter and murmur to each other. One of them stood up. When Peleus turned back, there were tears in his eyes, but he was grinning and showing his teeth.

“Ha! Well, the boy couldn’t have asked for better. They’ll sing songs about him. By the gods, I wish I could have lived his life.”

“He was shot with a bow and arrow.”

“What? That’s a coward’s weapon! Who?”

“Paris, I think.”

“That miserable punk!” he shouted, and the other men grunted their assent. “I’ll kill him! I’ll beat that pretty boy to an inch of his life, and then drag his body around the city by a chariot!”

“What?” I said. I heard him, but I was taken aback. I felt tightness in my chest, like I couldn’t take in a full breath. “What did you say?” I couldn’t breathe, so it came out in a whisper.

“I’ll make him regret ever being born!”

I felt chilled. I couldn’t be here any more. I needed to leave. Now.

“Well, now you know,” I said quickly, and then turned my back to him to leave.

“Goodbye, Peleus,” I said. “We won’t meet again. If we ever do, I’ll kill you.” With that, I transformed into an eagle and flew away.

“I’d like to see you try, you bitch!” he shouted after me, as the other men around him laughed. “Come down here and say that to my face!”

I never heard from Peleus again. Unlike my son, he faded into obscurity. He actually has more attention in this story than he deserves.

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There were no more prophecies. There was nothing left to fulfill. When I returned to Lemnos, I didn’t really know what to do with myself. Everything felt so empty, so numb. Now what?

The cry of a newborn carried over Lemnos’ walls. Mortals are so temporary. I sat down in the courtyard next to Eurynome, who was in her hammock. I felt myself shaking slightly.

“Where’ve you been?” she asked.

“Troy, Olympus, Vulcano, and Themyscira.”

“Oh, wow. You really got around. Has travelling always been that easy for you? You’re always here.”

“Achilles is dead,” I said. I couldn’t contain it any more. The shaking exploded, emotion bubbling out of me, and I started to cry. I must have looked so weak and wretched.

I didn’t hear her move, but Eurynome’s small frame was suddenly sitting down next to me. She held my hand in hers. Her hands were cold. She had never touched me before, let alone demonstrated any intimacy. She leaned my head onto her shoulder. I couldn’t keep the emotions back and cried and cried, more than I ever have in my life.

“These miserable mortals. My life’s been wasted,” I eventually said.

“You still have me. You still have Heph.”

I stopped crying. “I told the wretch that I never wanted to see him again.”

“What? Why?”

“He killed Achilles. He was jealous of him, I think. He killed him.”

“What? But Heph always took care of Killi. He wouldn’t have done that to you.”

“Well, he did. He was supposed to protect him, but he didn’t.”

She was quiet for a long time. “There’s no way. You have never needed to question whether or not Heph would have your back. You always knew he would. You knew he would make Achilles’ armour, even though he didn’t want to. You still knew he would do it for you. Achilles, though...”

“What about him?”

“It’s not my place to say.” Eurynome looked distressed, and bit her lip.

“What about him?”

“You gave a lot for him. And he was great, I mean, obviously. But I don’t think he ever would have done the same for you.”

“He was my son. Of course he did.”

“He was a warrior.”

“He was a great warrior,” I agreed.

“You keep saying that like it’s a good thing. But was it really what you wanted? When he told you he was going to Troy, you didn’t have anything to say about it. He made up his mind and then told you. Peleus was a warrior too, and you hated Peleus for what he did to you.



Achilles was a great fighter, but that also meant that he was the same kind of guy. It was what warrior men do, but you hated it.”

“Shut up.” I stood up and pulled away from her. “What do you know of it?”

“I’ve had a pretty awful time with men too, you know. They refuse to leave me alone. I don’t know what to do, sometimes. Heph used to make them stop.”

“Achilles was not his father’s son,” I said, as firmly as I could. Eurynome didn’t say anything, but nodded.

I left her and wandered the villa. I passed by several servants going about their duties. None of them looked at me, but kept their eyes down at the floor in front of them. I wandered aimlessly, until I found myself in front of the door to the wretch’s room. I slowly opened the door and looked in.

The room was beautiful, buzzing, ticking, and whirring with motion. While he had taken his tools from the workshop, Hephaestus had left several instruments and objects here. I had kept them in place for him, in case he ever wanted to come back. The instruments kept a steady track of the world’s comings and goings.

One large instrument caught my eye: a large globe in the centre of the room that displayed and tracked the rotation of the celestial sphere of stars. It was one of the more beautiful contraptions. I examined it more closely and saw that the firmament’s movement was powered by gears beneath the representation of the ocean. And, in the centre of the ocean, was a very clear depiction of my grandmother, Tethys. I had never noticed that before. The way that it was structured looked as though she was rotating the ocean, which was rotating the stars. My story and my family are so often forgotten, but Hephaestus remembered it, and built it into his microcosm and understanding of the world. I looked further in the room.

In the corner of the room, by his bed where his cot used to be, there was a metalwork sculpture of figurines, each about the height of my hand. Each character was seemingly alive, in motion. Once I looked closer, I saw it was the people who had lived in my villa. There was a representation of Hephaestus working on something on the floor of my courtyard. Eurynome lounged in her hammock, and I sat next to her, fixing a basket. Nearby, Peleus was training Patroclus and Achilles. A family portrait? Dysfunctional though it was. He must have made it years ago, before leaving for Vulcano, but my son was not a youth, but an adult, just as I saw him at Troy. The figurines must have been aging with their real-world counterparts, or, at least

they were until they died. I wondered if the representation of Achilles and Patroclus would now stop aging, or if they would continue aging as they might have done, training with Peleus as old men. I looked for a long time into my miniature son's bearded face, and I couldn't help but see the similarity with Peleus. I had not seen them together since Achilles was a child, but now that their adult representations were set right next to each other, the two of them in the midst of sparring, I couldn't help but see the resemblance: the similarity in movement, the shared intensity. Everyone was right. I hadn't been able to accept it until that moment. Achilles was truly Peleus's son.

I couldn't take it. I couldn't take any more. I couldn't think and I didn't want to feel. I stood there for such a long time, looking at those figurines without being able to leave what was causing me such pain. Eventually, without meaning to, I turned to stone.

Days passed. Weeks passed. Months passed. I never changed back. Maybe I could have if I tried, but I didn't really feel the need. It felt right that I should continue being numb. It was the longest time I had ever taken that form. Although I didn't have complete senses, I had occasional impressions that Eurynome would come in and check on me. But I didn't really want to respond as I didn't see the point. One day though, she came in to rouse me and had a concerned voice. I decided that I would assuage her fears and change back to tell her that I just needed more time.

But I couldn't. I couldn't muster the will to do so. It was all too much effort, so I stopped trying.

As I remained stone, I found that I lost track of time more frequently. My mind became fuzzy, and I didn't know if I was awake or asleep, or even if those states meant anything any more. I wondered if there was a part of me willing myself to stay this way, to lose my mind in the marble. I was so cold.

I sometimes had the vague impression of Achilles being there. I would black out and dream – or was it a dream? – and there he was, surrounded by other fallen Myrmidons. Everything was so dark and cold. Was I glimpsing into Hades? Could I die and become a shade there too? Was I crossing a threshold? I swore that I also sometimes heard the familiar sound of the ringing hammer and anvil in the distance. I would feel that Hephaestus and Eurynome were next to me, reading things, telling me stories, making things. The numbness, though, was omnipresent. I felt so alone. It was awful, feeling trapped, but it was also easy to just give up and go with it.

But then suddenly I felt shot through with warmth. My mind cleared and became less foggy. I didn't leave where I was, I could still see Achilles, but I was suddenly more aware that Hephaestus and Eurynome were truly there beside me.

Hephaestus had his hands on my stone form, flooding me with warmth. I remembered that Hera had once said that fire could be used to give life, and up until that moment, I had believed her, but I didn't feel how true it was. Before, I was restricted to the one path because of the numbness, but I now felt like I had a choice. I could stay with Achilles if I wanted, or I could go back to the room in my villa. I could tell that Eurynome and Hephaestus were worried. They hadn't given up on me.

I tried to change back. It was so difficult. I was still groggy, but I felt tingling all over my body as my skin began to reform.

"Come on, Thetis," I heard a voice say. Eurynome. My senses were coming back.

Hephaestus didn't remove his hands and I felt myself go from warm to hot, like being in his volcano again. I could begin to move my fingers. Then my toes. Then my legs gave out, and I fell to the ground. I heard happy cries and felt myself being lifted onto a bed.

"We thought we lost you," Hephaestus said, he looked relieved.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. My voice sounded strange. Coarse.

"Eurynome invited me. She said you were having a rough time."

"I said that I didn't want to see you again." They stopped short. I didn't mean it to sound as harsh as it did, but my voice was so strange.

"Thetis!" Eurynome scolded me. "Seriously. Stop it."

"It's alright," Hephaestus said, dejected. "I'll go. It looks like she'll be fine now."

"No," I said. "I only meant that I was surprised that you would come all this way. Please stay." My words sounded stupid.

"You want me to stay?" Hephaestus asked.

"Were you here long? I thought I heard you hammering."

"No, I just arrived off the ship now. It took me a while to get here."

"Maybe we could – I don't know – talk," I said, feeling terribly awkward. "You came all the way here. You should stay for dinner at least."

Hephaestus smiled through his hair lip. "I would like that. I'll, um, go wash off some of this blacksmith soot."

After Hephaestus left, Eurynome turned to me.

“About damn time,” she said.

“Question.” I asked. It hurt to speak. “How would you feel about – and you don’t have to agree to this, but – how would you feel about having Hephaestus stop by from time to time?”

She turned over to look at me, her clear blue eyes looking a little confused. “This is your place,” she said. “You can do whatever you want.”

When Hephaestus came back, I lay back in the bed to recover, and he pattered about the room, readjusting some of the instruments, making slight corrections since it had been so long since he had been here last.

I can do whatever I want. I had never really made choices for myself before now. It was a strange feeling. I had always been part of some plan, some destiny that I was moving towards. Everything was for the good of my son, or at least, that’s what I had told myself. But now, if there were other prophecies out there in the world, I didn’t know if I wanted to know them.

We gods are not omniscient. We can fool each other. We can fool ourselves. But we can also be surprised by what the universe has in store.

Hephaestus took the world of stars in his hands, and gave it a spin.