

~ The True Story of Cupid and Psyche ~

by Zipplie

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Disclaimer: Contains references to what Roman gods were up to back in the day- i.e. violence, both of the physical and sexual variety, and slavery. No actual depictions of violence. Enough swearing to bring a blush to the face of a delicate Victorian flower, but I think that you can probably cope. Also love (and other things) between women.

Characters/Story: As you might expect, this is a take on the story of Cupid and Psyche, which first appeared in a novel by the Roman author Apuleius. So I can't with total honesty say that the characters are mine, but this particular approach to them is.

"Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who had three very beautiful daughters. They were so beautiful, in fact, that it was only just possible to find words of praise for the elder two, and to express the breath-taking loveliness of the youngest, the like of which had never been seen before, was beyond all power of human speech. Every day thousands of her father's subjects came to gaze at her, and were so dumbfounded by the sight that they paid her the homage due to the Goddess Venus alone..."

She spent Monday afternoon in the bookstore, as usual, working her way through the graphic novel shelves as she leaned casually on the New Age Religion rack. The store clerks, who had learned long ago that she would never buy anything, gave her nasty looks now and again but she was used to looks. All kinds of looks. Looks of worship, looks of terror, looks of everything in between. It would take more than that to rattle her and besides (she reasoned) it wasn't as if they were getting paid on commission.

She used to go to libraries but she preferred to stand up to read. Some long-standing instinct told her to keep an escape route open. It wasn't that she was still afraid. It was more like she was placating the part of herself that knew she had a reason to be.

Whatever. The fact was that on that Monday, when she caught the familiar scent- something between Pine-Sol and cherry liqueur- she wasn't frightened, not even close. Exasperated, yes. But there was also something like dazed relief. The way a recovered alcoholic might feel when halfway down a stolen bottle of rum, before the shuddering feeling of oh-fuck-oh-fuck-oh-fuck.

She replaced her book on the shelf, taking her time, before she spoke to him. "You might as well come out, Zeff."

He didn't, not right away, so she picked out another book and flipped through it idly. Surreal drawings, philosophical digressions, tortured romance, no blood whatsoever- she wrinkled her nose and put it back. "How come you still smell of cypress, anyway? You don't *have* to, right?- you could tweak it."

She turned around slowly- no sudden movements- and this time he was there. "Dunno. Habit, I guess."

"So? Nothing else about your look stays constant." Today he had a ripped t-shirt over several other ripped t-shirts and a pair of half-shredded jeans. His running shoes looked like squashed, dirty loaves of bread. "Last time I saw you, you were within spitting distance of respectable. I dimly remember a hat, even."

"That was in the Victorian era," Zepher pointed out, running his hands through spiked hair. "Everyone was going respectable then. You know they made little lace sleeves to cover piano legs? 'Cause otherwise it would have been indecent."

She snorted. "That's just a myth. Besides, *I* sure as hell wasn't respectable then. I think that was one of my brothel periods."

"Yeah?" he said without real interest. "Which one?"

"The one when I had that red satin thing and a girl of mine gave you the clap. So," she continued, without more preamble. "Which one of them is it this time?"

His eyes had unfocused a bit, and he was staring off vacantly. Whether he was remembering the girl or the clap or the red satin thing she didn't know.

"Zepher," she said impatiently, "which?"

"Right," he said, jolted. "It's her."

Which made sense. She had talked *him* down from a window ledge in Antioch about ten years before, and he was usually good for at least a century after an intervention. That was one thing you could say about gods, even gods who were substantially past their sell-by date. They were always ready to be convinced that their lives were filled with meaning and purpose.

A sigh escaped her anyway. "For gods' sake," she muttered, not without bitterness. "I keep thinking that I'm done paying my dues."

"Is that what this is about?" Zepher said, as he pulled a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "Paying your dues?"

"Don't get defensive. Idiot. I just mean, I wish they could sort things like this out on their own now and then. For variety- that's all."

From the crumpled cigarette packet, Zepher had extracted a crumpled cigarette, and now managed to jam the end into his mouth without losing too much tobacco from the end. "Fuck, don't get snippy," he said. "Are you coming or not?"

"Out of curiosity- what would you do if I said 'not'?"

"Drag you," he said without hesitation, and as he said it he took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette, even though it was unlit. "Sorry, Psyche- but I have my priorities. And I have my orders."

"I'm just waiting for the day when you develop the ability to think independently," said Psyche, as she retrieved her messenger bag from the floor. "Should be thrilling."

He smiled- with some difficulty, it looked like. "I'm amazed that neither of them ever cured you of the smart mouth," he said.

"They tried," Psyche said shortly. Typical of Zepher to fish for details. It wasn't the people who really had the power, it was their hangers-on and running-dogs, who made it hard to be under someone else's control. "Go smoke that outside, I want to buy a magazine."

He paused, twiddling the cigarette between his fingers, for just long enough to let her know that he wouldn't necessarily leave. "Don't take too long," he said at last.

"I won't."

"And don't try to sneak out the back way."

"I never have before," she murmured- to herself; he was already gone. "I'm not likely to start now."

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...Her poor father feared that the gods might be angry with him for allowing his subjects to make so much of her, so he went to the ancient oracle of Apollo and asked where he was to find a husband for his daughter. Apollo delivered the following oracle:

*On some high mountain's craggy summit, place
The virgin, decked for deadly nuptial rites-
Nor hope a son-in-law of mortal birth
But a dire mischief, viperous and fierce,
Who flies through aether and air with fire and sword,
Tires and debilitates all things that are...*

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She flipped through *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*, and then the *Soap Carving Digest*, while she got herself under control. She still wasn't afraid, she told herself.

There were three things that, despite the centuries since everything began, Psyche had *never* gotten used to. The first was that, no matter where she went or who she turned herself into, one or the other of them could always find her. The second was that, when they found her, they would expect her to go with them as if it had been days since they last met. And the third was that she always, always would.

She didn't know what that said about her. Perhaps if there was a magazine that catered to her particular demographic (*Immortals Illustrated; Demigods Journal*) it would contain a quiz on the subject: "The fact that you are not seriously contemplating an attempt at escape right now means that you are (a) lovestruck (b) suffering from the world's longest-lasting case of Stockholm Syndrome (c) forgiving (d) stupid..."

"Excuse me? Miss?"

The breathy voice sounded right by her ear, and in spite of herself, she jumped. "Yes! What?"

It was a clerk who she didn't recognize. "I just wondered whether...you needed some help. Not with the magazines, I mean, with- that man." He made a great effort. "I just wanted to make sure that you're all right."

She studied him. His face was puckered with yellow-headed zits, and combing had left furrows in his greasy hair. His brand-new uniform already had yellow stains in each armpit, and his TRAINEE badge dangled pitifully from one pocket. Yet Psyche felt her heart go out to him anyway. It was the sheer sincerity in his expression. She was mature enough, by then, that youthful sincerity had once more become praiseworthy for her. Instead of idiotic beyond all sense.

"I'm fine," she said, "really."

She had made a small bet with herself that this wouldn't be enough to put him off, and she won it. "I could call 911," he said. "Or you could come to the back room, he couldn't find you."

He really wasn't trying to seduce her, she decided, not at all, and that was rare enough that she smiled at him properly. And at that he turned first very white, and then very red, and then he wet his lips with his tongue and then stared furiously at his shoes. But he was smiling all the while.

Psyche never really bought the idea that you could determine who the most beautiful woman in the world was (for starters, it made a universe of difference whether you were judging by Jupiter's standards, or Diana's). And even if she had truly held the title herself, once upon a time, standards changed. Back in the old days, no-one expected you to have a dead-flat stomach and buttocks like a boy's. Flesh meant prosperity and health; thinness meant starvation and starvation wasn't sexy yet. Helen of Troy herself probably weighed as much as any two of the whisper-thin, dark-cheeked girls who crowded the pages of modern magazines. If *she'd* been born in the twentieth century, no-one would have launched a thousand ships for her. She'd have ended up hiding in the locker room during gym class, scoffing endless bags of snack cakes and whimpering when someone threw dirty underwear in her face. Yet, back in the day, Helen could extract all the air from your lungs with a glance, and make you believe that nothing in the world existed except what she said and saw.

I would have gone there, Psyche mused, and then gave herself a mental shake. Right. I did. Twice.

Psyche wasn't large herself, but nor was she a twig. She still looked exactly the same as she did nearly three thousand years before, when they used to leave offerings of doves and myrtle before the palace for her. It was the people that had changed. The great fickle mass of men had moved on and found other things to worship, as usual. Nevertheless. There was still the *something* about her, just as there always had been, and though she barely ever used it, it was nice to know it was still around.

She smiled again. He was staring too hard at his shoes to notice.

"I really am fine," she reassured him. "That guy and I- we go way back. He just has the tact of a wrecking ball."

He looked up. "It's not right for him to threaten you. You don't have to do what he says."

"No, I don't," she said slowly, and not *entirely* truthfully- but there was no point in worrying him, the sweet boy. "The thing is, I do owe him a favour or two. He helped me through-" she paused- "a very, very bad breakup."

He looked appalled. "You weren't with *him*, were you?"

"No, I was with his friend- I mean, his boss. Or- I guess, if you want to get technical, I was with his boss and his boss's mother. Only not at the same time; I was with the mother first."

Now his jaw was swinging free. "But-"

"You are looking at the living embodiment of a long story," Psyche told him.

She heard a series of sharp raps, and she turned her head. Zepher had finished his cigarette, and now he was tapping his knuckles on the store's plate-glass window. When he saw her turn, he gave her an unfriendly grin, and pointed at the dial of his Mickey Mouse watch.

"Jerk," Psyche muttered- and then, because the clerk was still watching, she had to follow that up with, "I can handle it. Really. Thanks."

She stuck the magazines back onto random spots on the rack (someone would be along to straighten them soon anyway; might as well help them to earn their \$8.50 an hour). "See you," she said to the trainee.

"Are you going to be back?" he asked her, walking backwards to keep her in sight as she strode towards the door.

"Sure," she said. "I'm here every Monday."

"This guy and his boss," he went on quickly as she reached the entryway. "I mean, the boss and his mother- why would you-"

It was none of his business of course, but he'd been quite patient; she threw him a bone. "Well," she said, "they were a hell of a lot better than the alternative."

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"Psyche was left alone weeping and trembling at the very top of the hill, until a friendly west wind suddenly sprang up. It played around her, gradually swelling out her skirt and veil and cloak until it lifted her off the ground and carried her slowly down into a valley at the foot of a hill, where she found herself gently laid on a bed of the softest turf, starred with flowers. There lay the gentlest and sweetest of all wild creatures, the love-god Cupid himself..."

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Zepher had a key to the apartment; she didn't ask why. After he opened the door, he actually put a hand on her back as if to thrust her in.

"Zeff," she said tightly, "you're already on my list. Don't make it worse."

"She asked me to bring you," he said, around his seventh crumpled cigarette. "I'm just making sure you get there."

"She didn't ask for me. It was your idea." This was a guess, but it was as good as confirmation when his eyes shifted away from her. "And she might be older now, but she could still bounce your skull around the Apennines- and she *would* if I asked. So don't push me and I won't push back."

He snorted smoke through his nose. It made him look like a skinny, scruffy sort of dragon. "Are you going to go in?"

"Yeah. Don't listen at the freakin' door."

She didn't watch him leave, but suddenly the smell of cypress was gone and she breathed a little easier as she stepped inside.

At first all she saw was a great shifting sea of *pink*, like a great swimming flock of flamingos- a perfect setting for a succession of acid trips and everything that involved. But the blinding effect died down after a moment and she was able to pick out the various items: tiny pink teddy bears, stacks of folded pink sweatpants, boxes of pink pens and pencils, pink band-aids and pink t-shirts and pink notebooks covered in pink feathers.

"They're not mine," said a voice from the couch. "The breast cancer network was short on storage space."

Psyche stepped gingerly over a pink beach-ball and studied Venus. She was wearing ratty sweatpants- not pink ones- her feet were bare, her nails chewed off and ragged. Some people might have taken that as a bad sign. Psyche knew better. It was when Venus was dolled up and on the town that she was most prone to self-loathing.

The television was blaring, but muted, and though Venus's eye were fixed on it, it was obvious that she wasn't paying any attention. The pill-bottle was overturned on the coffee table, beside a pile of back issues of *National Geographic*, a box of tissues, and a half-eaten chocolate bar. Psyche reached for the pills casually. Just extra-strength Tylenol. Good. That put this solidly in the cry-for-help camp.

"Can I sit down?" she asked.

"You don't have to be here," Venus said, unnecessarily, as an ad for hypoallergenic bran flakes swirled up on the screen.

"Well, I am. How many did you take?"

Venus gave a long sigh, and adjusted herself on the couch, hugging a pillow tightly against herself. "I guess three bottles," she admitted. "It was stupid."

It was. Gods could kill themselves- that was made plain by what they all referred to as the Bacchus Incident, back in the tenth century- but it took some extra effort and application. In spite of that- or maybe because of that- an awful lot of them made the attempt, and they did it with exasperating frequency. Psyche wasn't sure why they did it (her own ill-starred suicide attempt had been long before she became a goddess) except that it made some kind of twisted sense for immortals to be obsessed with mortality. Like a native of Siberia staring at fire.

"You're going to make it, one of these years," Psyche said, rattling the bottle. "Just call it law of averages. You can't miss every time."

"So?" Venus said, and then, "Did Zepher pull you out of work?"

"Nope."

"It's Monday, right? You don't work Mondays?"

"I don't work. I decided to be a kept woman this century."

This was dangerous- more than a little provoking- but it had the impact she wanted. Venus' head turned sharply. "And who the fuck is keeping you?"

Psyche kept her face bland, dumb-bland, exactly the expression that would bring the goddess to a boil. "Who the hell do you think?" she asked. "He's still my husband, after all. In a technical sense."

Two burning red spots flared up on Venus' cheeks.

But her voice stayed very calm. "If I thought it was anything more than technical," she said, "then I'd-"

"You'd what?" Psyche asked, tired all of a sudden. "Cupid's not a kid, would you get that through your head? You can't just send him to his room and spank him. The two of you haven't even *talked* since the fall of Constantinople, and all you did *then* was to sit bickering in the Hagia Sophia while I tried to play referee. And for the love of Hades" (she was on a roll now) "don't give me a hard time about the money. He made a big score a while back, but it was kind of sketch how it happened, and he's been dealing with the guilt by cutting me a cheque."

"Sketch?" Venus asked, looking up again. "What, some kind of Ponzi scheme?"

"Actually, he *was* Ponzi. Long story." She took a deep breath. "I don't love him. You know that."

Venus spoke with the usual bitterness: "You can love whoever the fuck you want. It's not as if I own you anymore."

"O Jupiter, Vishnu, Mohammed and Christ," Psyche swore impartially. "Get off the fucking couch, I'm taking you for a walk."

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"A white gull brought Venus the news: 'The story is that your son has fallen desperately in love with a human named Psyche.'

*Venus was absolutely furious. 'What! With **her**, of all women? It was through me that he got to know the girl!'"*

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Even the park was depressing. It had the bleak, bony look of a place that parents hurried their children past. Trails of dog urine. Litter overspilling the garbage cans. Psyche nudged a fruit tin with her foot. "You always liked the phrase *clingstone peaches*, remember?"

No answer.

Venus was trudging ahead, trudging on the hem of her ratty sweatpants with her green flipflops. Her hair was brown this century and from behind, it looked a little like seaweed.

Psyche kicked the peach can and watched it bounce along the concrete. "I'm not giving up on you," she told the god's back.

No answer. Venus wandered over to the springs.

"I remember once upon a time- when we were in France? Seventeenth century?- you cut your wrists and I almost smacked you senseless. Should I be getting my butch on, this time around?"

The swings creaked as Venus sank into one. Her hair slipped around her face.

"You never even bawled me out for that," Psyche said, grinding onwards. "And it was as bad as anything *you* ever did-"

That was enough to make Venus look up. "That's bull," she said, "and you know it."

A wind toyed with the swing beside Venus. The links of the chain clinked and rattled.

For some people, it was smell that was the most evocative, but there were certain sounds that would always drag Psyche to times and places that were hundreds of years different. Sometimes she was glad of this. Sometimes she was not. This was a "not" kind of time.

Venus knew. She caught the swing in one hand, holding it taut to stop the chains from drifting. "You might as well sit."

So Psyche did.

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"Venus gave Mercury careful instructions: "Brother from Arcady, you know how long I have been without news of my runaway slave girl. So you simply must make a public announcement offering a reward to the person who finds her, and insist on my orders being obeyed at once. Her person must be accurately described so that nobody will be able to plead ignorance as an excuse for harbouring her."

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"Once upon a time," Psyche began at random.

Venus's eyes rolled up to her. "I know this story."

"You know all my stories. And just about everybody else's." Psyche dipped backwards on the swing. The wind teased her short hair. "Once upon a time, there was a girl."

"That's usually the beginning." Venus let herself begin to drift gently to and fro.

"And there was a goddess. And this was when the gods played with their food."

"You don't have to make excuses for me."

"I'm telling the story, okay? This was when gods didn't court mortals, they hunted them. Rape was a game, and half-breed offspring were trophies. This was the time of Marpessa, of Cyrene, of Daphne and Cassandra-

"That one was bad," Venus said. "Even friggin' Jupiter had trouble looking at Apollo the same way afterwards."

"Of Aretheusa. Of Syrinx."

"And Arachne," Venus put in. "Athena wasn't interested in her because of her *weaving*, if you know what I mean."

"Of Leda, of Callisto, of Pasiphae, of Europa and Danae..."

"Ganymede," Venus added absently.

Psyche winced. "That poor boy."

"Him? *He* didn't have it the worst, not by far. Jupiter treated him like a spoilt poodle. Which- " she corrected herself- "involves its own kind of problems, but mother of God, Psyche, you *saw* what he did to some of the others."

"I guess so," Psyche admitted. "I guess that I just didn't know any of the others. Not as well. And it seemed to go on so long."

Venus nodded silently.

"He's better now," Psyche said, "did you know? I ran into him about five years back. He's got all these big plans for catering college."

"*Ganymede*. Has plans."

"He still gets the shakes when he sees a guy with a beard, but otherwise he's doing pretty well."

"*Ganymede? Plans? College?*"

Psyche began to think about maybe getting angry again. "You act like he's a moron."

"If he wasn't a moron, he did a damn good impression."

"*Oh, bloody hell*. How else was he supposed to survive around Jupiter? And do you really think you can keep up an act like that, for freakin' *centuries at a time*, without it changing you just a little?"

Venus frowned, but seemed to accept the rebuke. She slipped off her flimsy sandals, wiggling her toes in the dirt. Psyche watched her. "That sand is probably equal parts kid shit and broken glass, you know."

"Probably. I didn't know you liked Ganymede."

"I don't, really." Despite her spirited defence of the boy, there was no denying that he acted like a lapdog. She would be overjoyed if the catering project kept him from seeking out yet another sugar daddy, but she wasn't counting on it. "I just feel responsible, kind of- since that could so easily have been me. A 'there but for the grace of God' type thing."

Venus looked up with burning eyes. "Don't."

"Don't what? I know what happened, I was there, remember?"

"You can't excuse what I did by saying-

"We're not talking about what happened later. We're talking about why you got involved in the first place. And we both know that if you hadn't claimed me, I would have been another notch on Apollo's headboard. And that's something that I have an opinion about, so do not fucking *dare* try to tell me how to feel."

Venus pressed her eyes shut, and gave her head a single, violent shake. Psyche almost wanted to slap her, but instead, she let a hand rest on the goddess's shoulder- touching her for the first time that day.

"There but for the grace of god," she repeated. "There but for *your* grace."

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Psyche gave up all hope of safety. She said to herself: "Where in the world, or out of it, can I turn for help? Where is there a building in which I can hide myself from the watchful eyes of great Venus, even with all doors and windows locked? I must renounce all idle hopes of escape and make a voluntary surrender to my sovereign mistress. It may be too late, but I must at least try to calm her rage by submissive behaviour..."

The light was already dimming when they walked back to her apartment. Psyche carried Venus' sandals, since she had refused to put them back on.

"Breast cancer network, huh?" Psyche said into the silence. "That's not usually your bag."

"Ran into some of them at the women's centre. I dunno. They're so damn *pushy*, makes it hard not to give them what they want."

"They're the big thing this decade," Psyche agreed absently. "Remember when it was widows and orphans?"

"Beside- breasts. Worthy cause."

"Meh. For me, they've never been the most important part of the package."

"I remember."

"They're sweat glands, you know that? Sweat glands with exalted opinions of themselves."

There was a touch of colour in Venus' cheeks again. "There was a girl I loved once in Alexandria," she began. "She wore a fringed silk scarf, and her hair was almost purple- have I told you this?"

"Not lately."

"The lumps swelled up almost overnight- that's how it looked, anyway. We had the barber cut

them out and by the end she looked like- like a puzzle with pieces missing. Pus and gangrene and she died the next week. One of the uglier deaths that I actually stuck around for. I've never forgotten it."

Obviously not, since she described it every century or so. The first time, Psyche had asked what she thought was a reasonable question- why hadn't Venus done more for her lover than arrange a literal hack job with the local haircutter?

"Gods know exactly dick about healing," Venus had answered shortly. (She was edging into a phase of salty talk.) "Never have, probably never will. The other thing's so much easier, after all."

"But Apollo's the god of healing," Psyche had protested. With stunning naiveté, considering how old she already was by then.

"He fakes it, so that he can feel people up while he's 'looking for swollen lymph nodes.' Fact is, humans are the only ones who've ever been able to heal anything."

Gods weren't big with forgiveness either- either giving or receiving it. In the twenty-first century, under a pink-tinged sky, Psyche watched Venus shuffle ahead of her in bare feet and wondered whether she was ever going to get through.

They mounted the stairs together, and in the coffee-coloured hallway Psyche looked around for Zepher, but he was either gone or staying out of sight. Venus spent a little too long fumbling with her keys.

"You don't have to come in," she said eventually.

"I know," Psyche said. "But I'm gonna."

Venus's face almost crumpled, and then it hardened. "This isn't good for you."

"Like you said. You don't decide that. Not anymore."

"*I'm* not good for you."

"If you want to be good for me, you can stop making half-assed suicide attempts every century or so. That'd be sweet."

Venus was gripping the doorframe, and beneath her fingers the wood was beginning- just slightly- to splinter. "Don't you fucking *get it?* I'm *trying* to let you go!"

"I'm not yours to let go, and besides-" there was a warning knock at a door further down the corridor. "- we're bothering the neighbours," she finished.

Reluctantly, Venus backed through the door, letting Psyche follow her into the sea of pink- pink-

pink. "Don't try and tell me that you've forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" Psyche said absently. She tossed Venus's sandals onto a rubber mat, then rubbed her together. "Bathroom?"

"Through there. And you know what."

The bathroom was even worse than the rest of the apartment. Psyche washed her hands gingerly and dried them on her jeans instead of the matted towel. Then she rooted in the cupboard beneath the sink. There wasn't much there- Venus's depression wasn't a put-on- but she found most of what she needed. When she emerged from the bathroom, she had a hot, wet washcloth over one arm, and a bottle of some kind of cream that smelt of hazelnuts.

Venus was leaning on the dusty windowsill, staring blankly at the street. Her arm stiffened when Psyche touched her, but that was all. She allowed herself to be led to the couch, showed no sign of any kind- when Psyche knelt at her feet.

Psyche washed the left foot first, working between the toes and then down the soles. She had done this so often, back in that strange dim time long ago: after Venus had taken her, and before she ran away. She had done it each time the Gods feasted in Olympus, while other mortals or nymphs or sprites did it for their own masters; Ganymede had been doing it for Zeus, somewhere down the hall. But she had never seen most of their faces- the faces of the ones like her, the ones who didn't belong there, who were present because of the whims or fleeting passions of some god or other.

You don't have to be afraid to lift your eyes from the floor, Venus had said. But of course that was easy for Venus to say. Venus didn't understand what Olympus looked like to a human- one whirling wash of power and terror and splendour and glory, enough to sear your brain. And then there was Venus herself, in her divine form. She was beauty and she was fear, and just looking at her broke your heart in a way that never really healed.

Psyche squeezed some of the nut-smelling cream onto her hands, rubbed them together, and began to anoint Venus's newly clean feet.

"In answer to your question," she began, "I remember everything."

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"Psyche was already near her mistress's gate when she was met by one of the household, who screamed out at once at the top of her voice: "You wicked slut, you! So you've discovered at last that you have a mistress, eh? But don't pretend that you haven't heard of the huge trouble that you've caused us in our search for you. Well, I'm glad you've fallen into my hands, not some other slave's, because you're safe here-safe in the jaws of Hell, and there won't be any delay in your punishment either, you obstinate, impertinent baggage!" She twisted her fingers in Psyche's hair and dragged her into Venus's presence, though she came along willingly enough."

"I remember you appearing to my father," Psyche said. "I remember you demanding the sacrifice, I remember being chained to the tree. I remember you coming for me, I remember waking up in the palace, I remember sleeping with you that first time. I remember the years afterwards- it was years, right?"

"Four years," Venus said. Her feet were utterly still in Psyche's hands as she worked the cream over them.

"And yes, I remember leaving with Cupid, and yes, it was my idea. At the very least, he doesn't deserve to be blamed for *that*."

A laugh burst out of Venus- startled, mocking.

"You heard me," Psyche said. "You can blame him for taking your-" she hesitated- "your lover, your slave, or whatever word you like. But it's stupid to hang onto the idea that it was all his fault. It's stupid to pretend that I didn't run. And you can blame me for that, or yourself, or both of us, just as you like. But it's time to stop twisting what happened. The truth is bad enough. I can't cope with a hundred different variations. I *can't*, V."

Somehow even the silence then sounded cracked and raw. So did Venus's voice when she answered. "You haven't called me that for over two hundred years."

"Since the last time that we had this conversation," Psyche agreed. She set down the bottle of lotion and turned so that she could lean against Venus's legs. For just an instant, there was a *something*- a stir in the air?- which made her think that the goddess's hand was going to come to rest on her head- but there was nothing. She closed her eyes.

"I ran away," she said. "And don't ask why, because you know why. It was too damn much. *You* were too damn much. However much Cupid scared me, it wasn't even in the same scale. At the very least, I didn't care whether he got bored of me. Whereas, with you..."

She let the words die out.

"Would you have come back?" Venus said at last. "If I hadn't decided to hunt you down?"

"I have no idea. We both lost the chance to find out." There was a heavy intake of breath behind her- it wasn't the answer Venus had wanted- so Psyche reached back and found a hand to hold. "I've come back so many times since then," she pointed out. "Every time you pull this kind of fucking stupid stunt. Doesn't that count for anything?"

The words were tight, barely controlled. "I don't- know- why you do."

"You mean, because of what you did to me?" Psyche felt Venus try to pull her hand back; she tried to grip it more tightly but it was yanked from her grasp.

"I beat you," Venus said, and she spoke every syllable like she wanted it to cut her own tongue.

"I had you chained and whipped. I set you impossible tasks, I starved you and mocked you. I did everything that I could possibly think of to punish you for running. I did everything I could think of to make sure that you never did it again. Right up until the day when Cupid went and tattled to Jupiter. You know, when I first made up my mind to save you from the others, I didn't even *know* you- but once I loved you I had to make you hurt. Is there an explanation for that? Is there an excuse for it?"

Venus never cried, never came close, but her knees were trembling. Psyche hugged her own knees as she stared at the wall.

"No," she admitted.

Venus was close to the edge. "Then- *why*?"

Psyche licked her lips, knowing she should answer faster- but the seconds crawled.

"I don't know," she said at last. "You'll have to take some comfort in the fact that I *do* keep coming back. I always have. I'm here now. And I can't promise that I would still come if you pulled any of that shit again. I guess I don't think you ever would."

She sighed, pulled herself to her feet, and moved over to the window. It looked out onto a brick wall, but the small triangle of sky that she could see prickled with stars.

"Cupid wasn't exactly Mr. Healthy Relationship himself after the wedding," she noted absently. "Gods know, there was enough that I had to forgive *him* for. Maybe I'm just a fucked up personality. Anyway. That's between him and me. And this part is between you and me."

She turned around. There was the cluttered apartment, the piles of pink schlock, and the crumpled goddess on the couch. Another century, she thought, another world, another time- but in the end it's always the same old story. Trying to love without getting hurt.

"You always ask whether I've forgiven you," she said, "and I always say the same thing back. Do you remember?"

Venus looked up. "You say that you won't answer that until I'm ready to believe it."

Psyche waited.

"I'm not," Venus admitted. "Not yet."

She hadn't really expected anything else, so Psyche just nodded.

"I've got time," she said. "But not a *universe* of it, you know. Even when you're immortal, things change and things end. The Bacchus Incident should have taught you that."

Now Venus's mouth quirked in a tired smile. "Don't tell me that *you're* contemplating suicide."

"After all these years of talking you two down from it? Hell no. But I always wonder whether one of you is going to make it in the end. And you owe it to yourselves to try to make up before that happens. He's your goddamn son."

"He's *your* goddamned husband."

"That means as much as we let it. Times *are* changing, you know. And I've got at least enough from Cupid's last Ponzi scheme to book us both to Vermont or Montreal." She grinned at Venus's expression. "Okay, all right, I know, too much, too soon."

They both contemplated that a moment.

"Too soon," Venus murmured. "It's been- what, more than three thousand years?"

"It was a lot to get over," Psyche pointed out. "And I'm not promising to wait forever. But hell in a bucket, V., you're the goddess of love. When you take a girl...she damn well stays taken."

She bent to pick up the damp and soiled towel that she had used for Venus's feet, returned to the bathroom, and dumped it in the washer. By the time she came out, she had her composure back, more or less.

"V.," she asked, "are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," said the goddess. "I think so."

They managed to give each other watery smiles.

"Zepher knows how to find me," Psyche said. "He always does. If I don't hear from you in the next ten years or so, I'll come back and check in."

"Where the hell are you staying, anyway?" Venus asked, sounding nearly normal.

"It's nicer than this place. But I don't have my own washing machine. Cupid's next cheque is pegged for that." She leaned over, and traced a length of Venus's hair with one finger, from the root to the tip. "I'm gonna see you soon, right?"

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Jupiter from his sublime throne read the following address: "Cupid has found and seduced a pretty girl called Psyche, and my sentence is that he must have her, hold her, possess her and cherish her from this time forth and for evermore."

Then he turned to Venus: "My dear, you have no occasion to be sad, or ashamed that your rank and station in Heaven has been disgraced by your son's match; for I'll see that the marriage is one between social equals." He ordered Mercury to fetch Psyche at once and escort her into his presence. When she arrived he took a cup of nectar and handed it to her. "Drink, Psyche, and become an immortal," he said. "Cupid will now never fly away from your arms, but must remain

your lawful husband forever."

All things considered, Psyche thought as she emerged into the coolness of the street, she'd seen worse.

Well, of course she had, what with the plagues and genocide and vile fashion trends that she had seen in a life of three thousand years, but still- she'd seen Venus much closer to the edge before.

The only warning she had was a swirl in the air, a prickling at the back of her neck, before Zepher fell into step beside her. "You took care of it?"

"You know, Zeff, you really have to find a new job."

His laugh was like wind through broken branches. "Three thousand years," he said, "I'm not changing. And neither is she."

Psyche looked up. "You think so?"

"How long have you been trying? How long have you been grasping at straws? She's either pretending you never existed, or she's so mired in guilt that she can't move forwards. There's nothing else."

Psyche sped up, putting her hands in her pockets. It was getting cold. Zepher matched stride with her easily.

"All these centuries they've been telling my story," she said. "And all those centuries, nobody's given a damn about *my* side of it. Least of all her. But you know something? I still believe that someday, she's going to wake up and listen. Listen to what *I* want. And if she can ever extract her head from her ass long enough to do that, then she might finally realize..."

Her voice petered out, but there was no reason to go on, anyway. Zepher was grinning his nasty grin.

"You think so?"

"Yeah," she said, "I do."

And at that moment, she did. It was enough.

"You want to bet on it?"

"Sure," she said.

"Shake."

And they did.

Zipplie's Scrolls
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