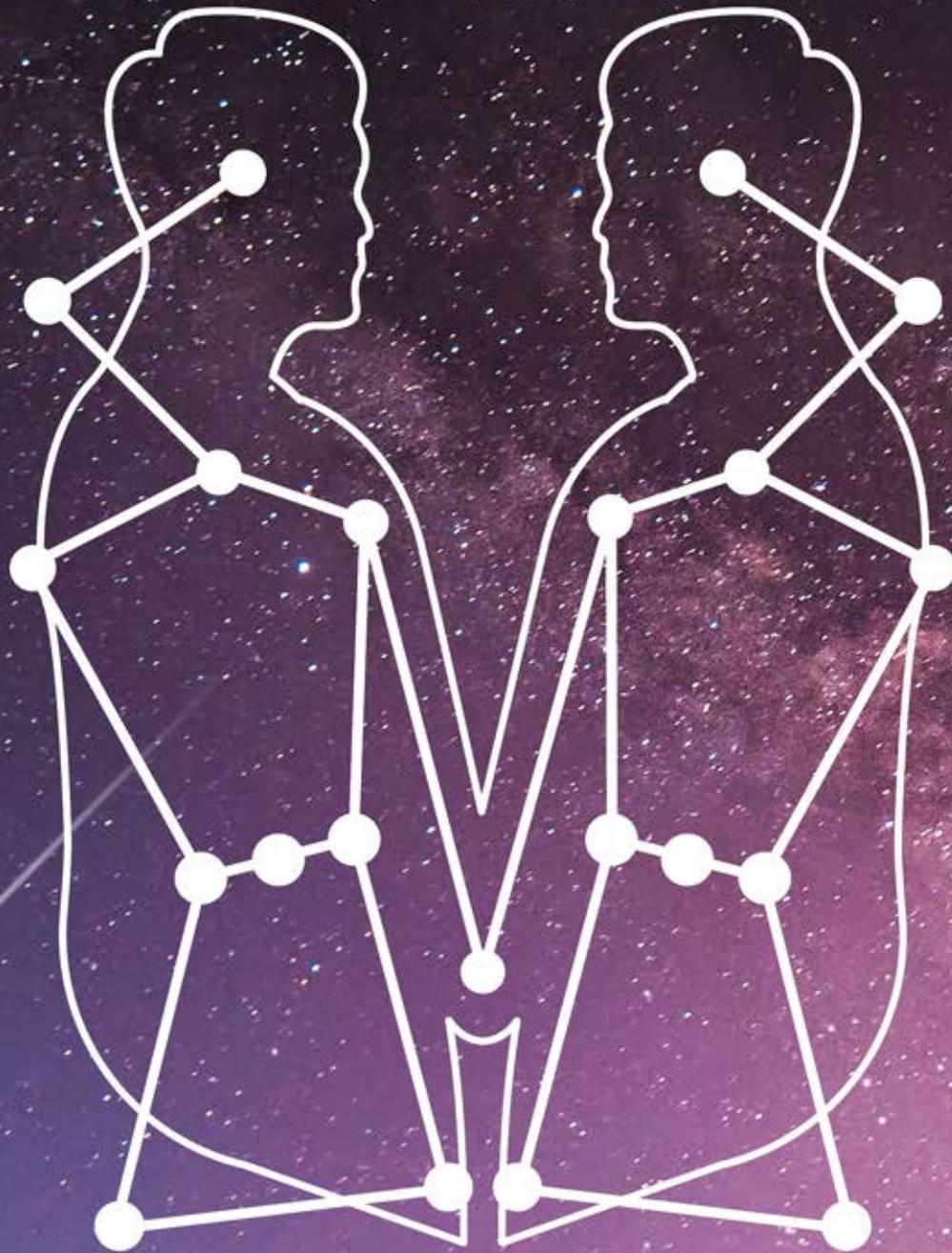


ORION'S BEAU



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Princess

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MINISTERING ANGEL

by Stephen Mead

At first they must have burned & itched a bit,
those little pin feather nubs poking through your shoulders.

What could the blades make of such tufted things
no padded sweaters hid?

You say you have no idea. Your soul was upholstered
with more than adolescent ignorance secretly prolonged.

That darkness was equally intimate as your own whispered confession
& nothing else, making my eyes wide as my ears.

Sure, knowing their presence, I could picture the heavens' vast canopy
expanding over our bed, recalling also the right-side impression
there on the sheets you last left me with.

Your returning by touch itself was something I felt I must have dreamt about
or, like breath across the cheek, a caress for your throat
to realize your presence.

Wing by wing, radiance returned slowly as your bare body grew,
broader the torso & longer the limbs.

Unawares, had I called for you to ferry me here past flesh & past sickness,
past aging & the rest?

Little matter, your glow responds now, drawing me near.



STEPHEN MEAD is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s, he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for the Health Insurance. Currently he is resident artist/curator for The Chroma Museum, artistic renderings of LGBTQI historical figures, organizations and allies predominantly before Stonewall, The Chroma Museum.
<https://thestephenmeadchromamuseum.weebly.com/>

THE LAST GEMSTONE

by Solomon Robert

For how poisonous it was, the Mediterranean Sea was as predictable as a mother rocking a baby to rest. If only sleep were possible. The utter darkness in the hull of the ship made a man's nightmares more vivid than the present. The scent of salt had long faded. Days had passed since the dragoness had locked me in this cell, since she decimated my entire village. The rocking of the waves kept the time like the ticking of a clock.

Dragons were the only ones able to survive in the oceans. They crafted boats out of their shedded skin, and thus, they controlled the seas. My village had been completely exposed. Though, the dragons hadn't made the waters toxic. The humans had seen to that. They spent centuries polluting the oceans. When the water levels rose, landlocked cities became coastal. My community moved from Barcelona to Sallent to Cercs as our homes submerged. Dismembered jewels clinked together somewhere in the darkness. It was up to me now to remember our history, our traditions.

The hatch above opened releasing a blinding light. My crystal form heightened the burning glow. Instead of skin, muscle, and bone, my body appeared to be cut from precious stones. I made no motion to conceal myself. Malys might have destroyed my home, my family, and my robes, but she could never take my pride as a man.

The wooden stairs creaked with the weight of the dragoness. Even in her human form, black horns hid amongst her flowing, black hair. Light from her lantern flickered in her purple eyes. Matching colored scales covered the skin of her chest. Dragons didn't have hearts, only scales. She stepped down in front of the rusted bars of my cell. Holes in her blush, chiffon gown revealed hints of skin. Each sway of her hips revealed a hint of the spikes along her spine. Her beauty stunned the spiders crouched upon their webs, yet I knew better. I had seen her as the monster she was.

"Tombeur." She called my name. Malys' voice sounded more like a growl — low and raspy. "I do hate seeing you down here."

"Is that why you keep me locked up?" I asked.

After placing the lantern on the floorboards, Malys turned. Her face darkened, while her black spikes illuminated further. Carefully, she jangled the rusted lock and chain barring me in this cell.

"Would you behave if I let you help me with something?" she asked.

"Whose life do you plan on ruining today?"

"Tombeur," she said. "Normally, I don't need to ask twice."

"What do you require, dragoness? Someone to steal for you? Kill for you?"

"Do you think me a petty criminal?" Malys harrumphed. "Don't answer that. No, there's a bounty on a woman in Lyon. Not as highly paid as the one on your head." Malys flashed her teeth. "Or should I say heart?" She gnawed at her bottom lip like she was fighting the urge to bite it out of my flesh. "Don't look at me like that. You know that I only keep you down here to keep other bounty hunters from catching you. They wouldn't be as generous as me."

"I can defend myself," I said. "Thank you."

"You surely know how to wield an axe."

On her left arm, Malys rolled up the sleeve of her gown. I had chopped it clean off when she attacked my home, yet it grew back instantly. Slender and soft-skinned, her arm didn't even have a mark on it now. She seemed unkillable, but the beasts could slay each other with ease. Perhaps it has to do with their magic. A blue scaled dragon had once attacked Paris. He swam through the poisonous waters and projected ice from his snout. The Parisian Empire almost fell until the emperor enlisted the help of a red scaled dragon. The red dragon emitted fire from her snout incinerating the blue dragon. However, I'd never heard of a purple dragon or its counterpart. If I ever walked out of this cell, I would devise a way to end Malys' life. I owed it to my mother, my sister, and everyone I watched her rip apart.

"Why do you need my help?" I asked. "I have yet to see you use your true powers. I've seen red dragons

emit fire, blue project ice. What of a purple dragon? Do you erect fields of lilacs? Lavender?"

"I could say the same to you," Malys said. "You, gemstones, must have more magic than resisting my charm."

If I couldn't discern a way to defeat her, I could, at least, escape. Scholars must know of these monsters' weaknesses. I only needed to secure my freedom.

"Give me an axe and some robes, and I'll help you find this woman," I said.

"Splendid."

"What magic does this woman possess?" I asked. "You can command any human you need to. Why not go to her and ask her to follow you?"

"If I asked nicely, then there wouldn't be any need for a battle." Her lips stretched into a jubilant smile. Slowly, the dragoness peeled her bodice down to where her scales stopped. The purple formed a diamond-shape where her heart should be. Out from her corset, Malys revealed an old key from where her human curves began. "You must heed my orders. Slay if I say so. Seize what catches my fancy."

I understood why dragons found each other unbearable to be around. They preferred to prowl the seas alone, as would I. Dragons possessed all this magic, yet they only used it for crime. Humans and dragons alike always abused power.

"I told you I'd help you," I said.

"Excellent."

She lowered the key down to the chains holding me captive. Like a snake before it strikes, Malys watched me carefully. There was a click as she inserted the key into the lock. I had thought that I would die in here. Once she grew bored of trying to cajole me, she would hand me over to the Parisians for a bounty.

Without turning the key, the dragoness retrieved her lantern. Her spikes pierced through her blush chiffon like the spears of a rival army. She chuckled. Her laugh was high-pitched and haughty. Even now after offering to help her, she chose to torture me.

I clenched my fist. Now, freedom was in reach, but I would not show weakness. I could not leap for her like one of her mesmerized humans.

"Garçons!" Malys shouted from the base of the stairs. "Get the gemstone an axe." Lifting her skirt, she trudged upward.

The light from her lantern dwindled. Spiders on their webs began scuttering about freely just as they faded from view. My own two legs — the lock and key — dulled into darkness, but I would wait for her to disappear before opening my cell.

"And some clothes," Malys added begrudgingly.

All light vanished. I lunged forward onto my knees. My hands felt around the wooden boards until my knuckles hit the cold, metal bars. One hand at a time, I gripped the cell bars upwards. I longed to rip this door open and to sprint up to the decks. If she gave me an axe, I would chop her torso in half this time. Though, if she could heal herself from that, it wouldn't be worth it. I would never escape her while still at sea. I would have to play along until we were ashore. At last, I felt the chain. I grabbed the coarse lock. The key was still inside. I turned it. I ripped off the lock and chain.

The cell door opened. I stood a free man once again.

One of the bewitched humans brought me an axe, a tunic, and a pair of shorts. I donned the ensemble. The axe was not my own, but it was sharp enough and the appropriate weight. It would make a fine weapon.

I stumbled up the stairs. I could already taste the salt air before I emerged onto the main deck. Cringing, I covered my eyes, but I had never felt happier. My body began to recharge from the sun. The breeze flowed through my mess of short, black hair. Raising my axe above my head, I screamed as loud as I could. I savored the feeling of freedom.

My tunic billowed like sails. It was cut too low in the neck. The reflection of the sunlight shimmered across the deck in front of me. I pulled the fabric over my chest, but the wind exposed it immediately.

My twentieth birthday had set all of this into motion. My body had transformed into this statuesque form of not one gemstone but a blend of multiple. Only those in my family had this concoction of diamond, sapphire, ruby, and others, each with its own magical properties. I cursed the flesh of my pecs and shoulders, which had transitioned into a swirl of sapphire and diamond, my stomach, which had converted into amethyst and diamond, and my pelvis, which had hardened into a mix of ruby, citrine, and diamond. I was

the reason the dragoness attacked my home. Rumors of my composition had reached the Parisian Emperor. He wanted to craft an engagement ring for his son using my heart. It was my fault that my family and the rest of my people were gone. Malys had seized the diamond and ruby form of my mother's forearm and hand like it was treasure, not my mother's own body. She bit my mother's arm clean off. Blood splattered across her wicked grin. My mother wailed. Malys had clawed the other gemstones apart for their precious stones.



Malys was perched on a throne. Sitting sideways, she overlooked the main deck from an upper level. A long, curved dagger rested upon her legs that dangled over the side of an armrest. Her spikes forced her into a position befit an acrobat in training. Her charmed humans operated the ropes, the crow's nest, and the ship's wheel. There was no "Land Ho!" as the coast of Lyon came into view. They were bodies with no thoughts or emotions. It was no wonder Malys found herself drawn to someone she couldn't control — someone with a personality. Though, only a dragon could think it possible to slaughter someone's entire family and then spark a romance. No hearts, only scales.

I only needed to play along until we were ashore. Once I had a clear opening, I would run. I would not rest until I found a way to destroy the dragoness.

A castle presided over the hilltop of Lyon. Tower upon tower stretched up to the sky far higher than any of the palaces built up on the hillside surrounding. Like my home, Lyon had once been landlocked. A raised boardwalk was raised to repel the corrosive Mediterranean Sea. Lining the boardwalk were stalls of wares for sale. Humans

bickered and stole like bees in a cluttered, immoral hive. Behind the walkway were further palaces. Perfectly symmetrical columns and pointed archways stood erect like the status quo. The display of wealth was garish. I had never been this close to the capital, but I'd heard that Paris' coastline was even grander than any other city in the empire. I could not even begin to imagine what eyesores the emperor had constructed there.

"Drop the anchor." Malys stomped down to the main deck. In the wind, her dark hair veiled her face like strands of yarn across a loom. Her guise of beauty vanished, and her black horns reared out of her sweeping hair. They were pillars of her inhumanity.

Her hypnotized crew scurried up to the front of the ship. Covered in shed dragon scales, a large anchor rested on a line. The men teamed up to heave it off the ship. One of the crew toppled overboard along with the anchor. He made no yelp, only a splash. Malys and the men showed no acknowledgement of the loss. Gradually, the ship was moored.

"You and you." The dragoness called two of her men. "Watch the gemstone. Make sure he follows my orders. The rest of you, guard this vessel with your lives."

Malys' hair began shrinking in length. The strands whipped across her face and shoulders. It was like a flag waving, but with each flap, the fabric shortened. Her hair receded until Malys stood bald. Only her horns bored through her temples. Her nose collapsed into her cheeks as her jawline extended. Her teeth grew larger, sharper. Purple scales blemished her skin one by one until merely the shape of her resembled a woman. Her ears pointed like a fox. Claws burst from her hands and feet as they grew to the size of her head. A horned, black tail pierced out of her broadening back. The chiffon dress tore as her body began to extend. Malys' true form surpassed the height of the palaces beyond. More spikes arose from her elongated spine. She was a monster.

Her back foot stretched in my direction. The sharp claw surrounded my waist. Her scales itched against

my stone flesh. I wrapped my arms around one of her toes, while she secured her chosen of the bewitched crew. This was the only way to shore. I needed her to fly me there if I were ever to escape.

The safety of the wooden deck peeled away from the soles of my feet. Gusts of air swarmed me from every angle like rapids in the Llobregat river of my home. Malys breached the sky. My scream caught in my throat. I clamped my eyes shut, whilst she flipped us upside down and up. The sound of waves crashed too close for comfort. Nausea saturated where the fear left space. If she unclasped her foot, I'd be dead. Though, she'd never receive payment for marred gems. She needed me untouched by the Mediterranean, even if she'd tired of me.

Shrieks greeted us as Malys landed on the boardwalk in the middle of the crowd. Footsteps scattered. She freed us from her claws. My nose slammed against solid ground. My knees scraped against the cobblestones, but I was ashore. The wretched seas would soon be a distant memory. Malys would return to being my enemy and not my captor. I only needed a clear moment to run.

A dust cloud surmounted a half-naked Malys. She had already transitioned back into her human form. Her torn dress and hair flowed in the breeze. Clambering away from Malys, the people knocked over tables of product. Delicately crafted baked goods plunged onto the boardwalk. Jams squished out of the pastries as the humans trampled them. I was the only individual on the boardwalk without shoes. Standing, I readjusted my tunic to cover as much of the diamond and sapphire as I could. Onlookers glowered from the overlooking palaces. Beyond, the dust engulfed the castle atop the hill.

"Tombeur, it's time to return the favor and find me some clothes," Malys said.

She could beguile any human, yet she wanted me to rob someone instead. The fall from the boardwalk was too great. I would not survive. Malys' henchmen secured my sides. Now was not the time to flee.

Oversized hats crowned the mob attempting to evade us. The humans shoved one other to advance more quickly. In shock, a young woman cowered next to the overturned table of baked goods. Malys pointed at her.

"Her dress will do, Tombeur," Malys said.

I refused to humiliate the girl. I surveyed the crowd. A woman pummeled the man next to her with an elaborately beaded basket. I snagged the woman's overcoat by the collar. She turned and raised her basket to strike me, but she froze when she noticed my chest. I handed the overcoat to the dragoness. She chuckled as she buttoned it up. Her spikes punctured through the back of the coat. Dragons and humans destroyed everything they touched.

"This way," she said.

We followed Malys' horns behind the stall fronts. Makeshift homes were constructed behind each stall. Malys inspected the humans inside and led us on. Her men maintained their guard on either side of me. There was a sharp drop down from the boardwalk that I wouldn't survive. Hopefully an opportunity to run would come shortly. I wanted to be rid of the dragoness.

"What exactly are we looking for?" I asked.

"A woman marked by the sea," Malys said.

Whatever that means.

Once I escaped, I couldn't bear to return to Cercs and live only with memories. North would lead me straight to the capitol. There, the emperor still hoped to separate my heart from my body. In the east, I could hide until Malys was off my trail. Then, I could begin to study the dragons and how to defeat her once and for all. Perhaps that could distract me from not having a home to return to anymore.

Over one of the dwellings, empty sacks of flour were poorly sewn together like curtains. Inside, a middle-aged woman knelt next to a pot of water over a fire. Her dress was beige with some mild stains, but her calves and arms appeared to be splattered and dunked in burgundy paint. A bonnet covered the back of her neck and head. She stirred the water in front of her lackadaisically. Two beds of straw laid next to her.

Malys elbowed through the sacks of flour. "Your skin!"

The woman turned slightly. Her face wore the same splattered, burgundy swirls. Instead of eyelashes and eyebrows, flaking skin indicated her annoyed expression. "Excuse me, this is a private residence."

Swords in hand, Malys' hypnotized men continued to guard both sides of me. I could use my axe to disarm one, but that would give the other an opening to stab me. I needed a distraction. Hopefully this woman would provide one.

"What hideous marks you wear," Malys continued. "You look like you've been licked by the waves of the sea. Spat on by its toxic foam."

"Go insult someone else!" the woman barked.

"You should be proud," Malys said. "Most humans wouldn't survive a tumble in the waters. You must be Dejanè Dupont."

"No, no." The woman rose. Turning to face us, she revealed more scars resembling bubbles where her hairline should be. Fixed on Malys' horns and scales, the woman raised her wooden ladle. The woman's eyes widened to reveal flecks of purple in the white. "No one here by that name." Her chapped, blue stained lips puckered after each syllable. Instead of teeth, she had a whirling, black pattern on the inside of her mouth.

"Tell me your name, woman." Malys' tone was lower and harsher, making her speaking voice seem almost pleasant. The infernal growl allowed her the ability to mesmerize and coerce the humans.

"I am Dejanè Dupont."

Malys snickered. "I thought you might be."

If Malys gave me an order, I would have my window to bolt.

"Maman! What—" A young man my age charged in from the store front. The swoop of his dark brown hair, the start of his eyebrows, and the tops of his ears were all naturally pointed, but these features sharpened further upon encountering a dragoness and a gemstone. His wide eyes and fluid stance stiffened. His lower lip trembled, yet he stomped forward with his fists clenched. "My mother doesn't take visitors. You all need to go!" When he squinted at the lot of us, he revealed how thick his eyelashes were. They were like the ends of brooms above his brown eyes.

"Or what?" Malys inquired.

Dejanè scrunched up the flaking skin above her eyes. "Rouen, don't be stupid."

The slenderness of this Rouen's jawline and the curve of his hips made me reconsider what his mother must have looked like before encountering the sea. If this was her biological son, she must have been breathtaking. From between his belt and tattered tank, he drew a dagger. Shaking, Rouen pointed it at the dragoness' throat.

"Go now while you have the chance," he said.

Was he mad?

"Aren't you a brazen little thing." Malys pushed his dagger away with her pointer finger. "Garçons! Tie her up. Tombeur, dispose of the brat."

Her bewitched humans charged towards Dejanè and away from my sides.

This was my distraction. This was my moment to escape!

I squeezed my axe. Taking a step back, I slammed the belly of the haft against my other hand. I let out a battle cry. I would not be slaying an innocent person, but I would fool Malys into thinking that I would.

Dejanè kicked the pot over the fire. The boiling water sizzled as it flowed down the cobblestones. The men's boots plodded forward all the same. Who knows what this woman could have done to warrant a bounty on her head? Her son might have been involved as well. Humans could be just as heartless as dragons. I had no ties to them, and I needed to save myself first and foremost. If I could escape and discover a way to defeat Malys once and for all, she would never be able to terrorize anyone like this again.

From the shoulders, Malys' charmed men shoved Dejanè back onto her knees. The hot water singed against her skin, but she seemed unaffected. Rouen's dagger fell to his side. His bottom lip bulged. Blinking back tears, he stared at the henchmen holding his mother down. He raised his dagger, though stabbing someone seemed outside of his abilities. Hopeless, he peered towards me. When his eyes fully opened, there was a sweetness in how round they were.

I backed up ready to run. I would head due east.

"Please!" Rouen cried. "Don't hurt my maman."

This young man would be all alone in the world. He would be lost without her. Grief would corrupt his heart until all his innocence turned into vengeance. I couldn't let Malys take someone else's mother without trying to stop it. Unlike Rouen, I could strike with my weapon.

With the pain the dragoness had caused me, my throat tremored with a reinvigorated battle cry. I swung the axe over my head. I aimed right between her horns. If I could break her in two, perhaps she couldn't regenerate herself.

Time seemed to slow as the blade sliced through the air. Bracing for impact, I clutched hard around the handle.

Rouen's brow furrowed. Determination returned to his face, and Malys noticed the change. She turned at the last moment, and my axe clanged against one of her horns.

Malys' teeth began to elongate and sharpen. I pulled my weapon back. There wasn't even a scratch on her.

"Oh, Tombeur," Malys snarled. "You shouldn't have done that."

Once again, Malys' hair started receding into her skull. Her nose melted away. Dejanè grabbed her bonnet with both hands. She tugged it over her forehead. Without revulsion, the hypnotized humans watched the horrifying transformation. They blinked from Malys' changing form to Dejanè's shoulders still transfixed by her orders. Scales consumed Malys' skin. Her body expanding, her overcoat ripped apart. Rouen's attention darted around the dwelling to anywhere but at Malys. His hand slouched from ear level to resting the dagger's hilt on his heart. He and his mother had never seen a dragon before today. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, no matter their possible crimes. If we ran now, Malys could fly after us. She would burn Lyon down until she found us. Malys didn't care about the bounty or the reward. She had no need for money when she could command any human she needed to. No, Malys wanted power and sovereignty.

Raising his dagger, Rouen bit his lip. He leaped towards Malys. His upper body trembled. He crossed his other arm over his torso and kicked his legs. The daredevil impaled her where her heart should have been. Unfortunately, he didn't know that dragons didn't have hearts.

Malys roared. Her chest spit out the dagger. She healed immediately.

She extended her talon out towards the man.

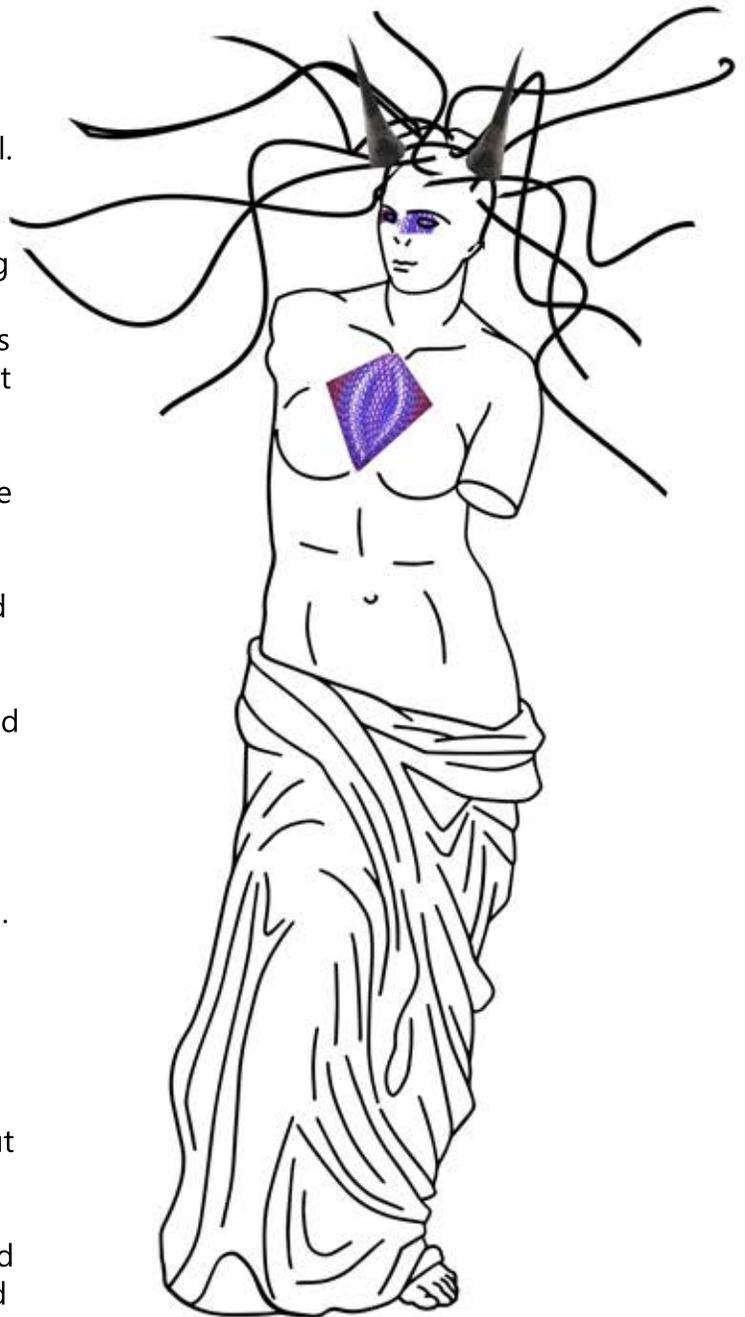
I bashed her claw with my axe. It didn't scathe her, but the dragoness recoiled. I shoved Rouen out to the store front. Headfirst, he slammed into the tableware for sale. The flatware clanked together. The ceramics tumbled and crashed, but the boy would be safe. The curtains swished closed behind him.

Screeching, Malys reached for me. I dove into the bewitched humans knocking them both to the ground. Dejanè was transfixed in prayer behind me. Malys snatched her up. The dragoness crashed into the top of the dwelling. Wood beams and canvas collapsed down. I drew my arms up to block my head. If Malys would only reveal her dragon power, I would have one more clue as to her weakness.

Malys hissed instead. "I'll be back for you, gemstone. Wherever you hide, I'll find you."

The dragoness twisted down towards the boardwalk. Screams erupted from the humans. They cleared the cobblestones. Save for the sun and Malys' ship, the horizon was untouched. Malys zigzagged through the sky. She deserted her charmed helpers. They lay idle in the rubble waiting for their next command.

I staggered up. I had secured my freedom. Malys would sail to Paris without me. I might not have saved the boy's mother, but at least he was safe — albeit alone. Rouen stood in front of me. His shoulders squared on the dragoness' vessel. His short, brown hair flowed in the wind. I knew what it felt like to suddenly lose a mother to the monster. Hopefully he would be alright.



"Rouen, was it?" I asked. "I'm sorry about your maman."

He glanced left then right. He readjusted his belt before bending over. Frantically, Rouen dug through the rubble of ceramics from his shop. He threw a wooden beam out into the walkway just as the humans began strolling by. They ignored the destruction and the young man. They even disregarded the gems shining from my chest.

I sauntered up to Rouen and put a hand on his shoulder.

"The dragoness took my mother from me too," I said. "Took me captive."

Rouen shrugged my hand off him. He found a cleaver amidst the strewn cutlery. Blade in hand, Rouen dashed towards the Mediterranean Sea.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Hey!"

I charged after him. He darted through the crowd. The humans paid no mind to the man running with a large knife. He reached the edge of the cobblestones. Bending his knees, he threw his arms back preparing to jump into the toxic waters. He was mad! He would die within minutes. His mother had been incredibly fortunate to come out discolored and scarred.

Weaving past a woman in braids and a puppy in her basket, I yanked Rouen to the ground by his collar.

The dragoness landed on the main deck of the ship with his mother. The violet of her scales disappeared until she could no more be distinguished from the possessed humans. They began drawing up the anchor.

"Why did you stop me?" Rouen yelled.

"You dying won't help your mother," I said.

"I would've been fine."

"Malys will be taking her to the emperor in Paris. There's a bounty out for her. Do you know why?"

Rouen chucked the cleaver out into the waves. It plopped into the water closer to us than the ship.

"I don't know how to slay a dragon," I said. "But I'm headed east to find out. You're free to join me."

Pulling his knees to his chest, he blinked away the salty air. "I have to save my maman."

There was a bounty on my head. The emperor wanted to cut out my heart to use as a trinket. I couldn't head to Paris. I'd be risking my freedom — my life.

Rouen rested his chin on his knee as his hair tousled in the wind. The start of his eyebrows and the tops of his ears seemed even more pointed this close. His eyelids crinkled over his eyes. It was a wonder how round they were moments ago. A tear dribbled down his cheek.

What kind of life could I have in hiding? Malys would come after me as she said. She was too proud to lose her favorite toy. Other bounty hunters would be searching for me as well. Safety wasn't guaranteed in the east, and Rouen was all alone in the world.

He needed me.

"We'll go together," I said. "Someone must know about dragons in the capital."

"Certainly. And yes, my name is Rouen."

"Tombeur."

"I gathered that."

Rouen wiped the tears from his cheeks. His forehead creased as he scanned me over. Jetting out his bottom lip, he slowly skimmed it with his index finger.

"Did the dragon curse you?" he asked. "You're . . . part statue."

I laughed for the first time in a long while.

TO BE CONTINUED ...



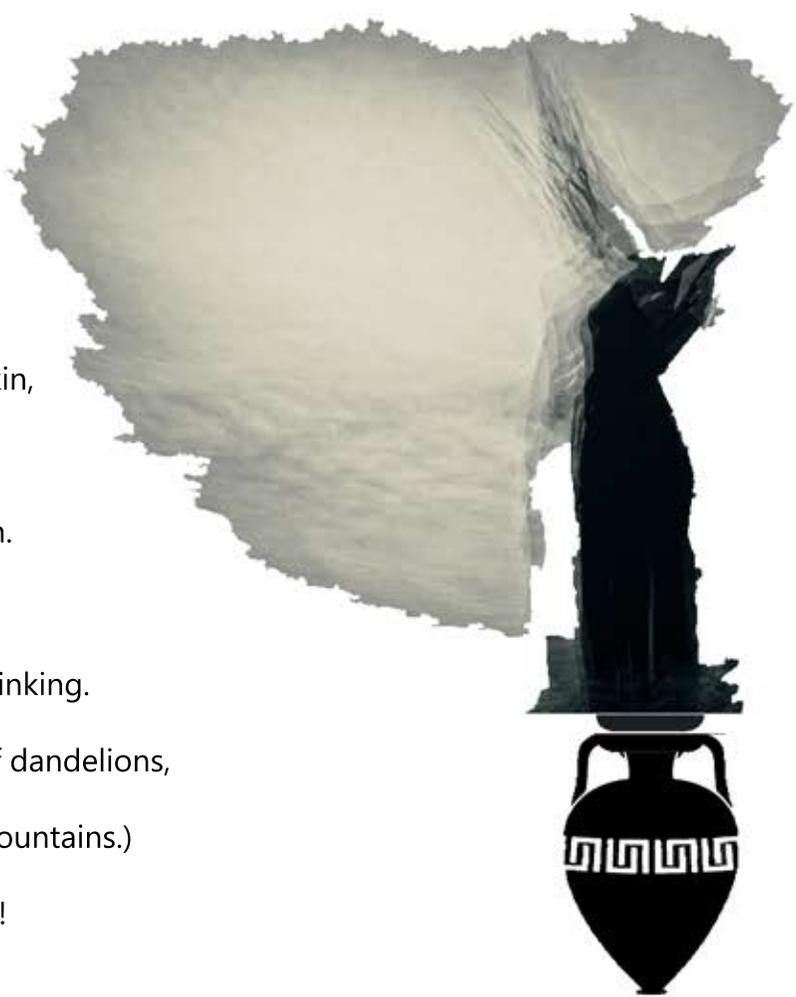
SOLOMON ROBERT writes gay fantasy, young adult, and contemporary fiction. His short stories and flash fiction have been published by *Wicked Gay Ways*, *Goodman Games*, and *Gay Flash Fiction*. The *Coachella Valley Independent* compared his writing to that of Kerouac and Michael Chabon. He founded Orion's Beau in order to create a queer space for the community and its supporters. With Orion's Beau, he hopes to elevate the works of queer artists, poets, and writers. You can follow him [@SolomonRobrt](#) on Instagram as well as [@Orionsbeau](#) on Instagram and Twitter.

RECIPE

by Cat M.

Emerald-bladed side-eyes, half-cups of
Memory here and there, old buttons for teeth,
Bones as soft as blueberries. Cheap faded shirts,
Ghost fingers snapping in two. (I'm sorry,
I didn't know they would break so easily!)
Charms on gifted bracelets clinking out
A warning or two. Scratchy knitted scarves,
Heaving wind chimes, blushing prayers,
Poems about sleep, the smell of a new car.
(Don't forget to fish out the tiny pieces of
Eggshell from the bowl!) Lavender
Or something like it. Crossed fingers,
The corpses of coral, the sounds of
Hungry stomachs. Rings covered over in skin,
Dull kitchen knives, a melody on the flute
Bouncing off of crosses in an empty church.
A woman's operatic pain, the bloodstains
On my mattress, nine buckets of wishful thinking.
(Common substitutes: the scattered fluff of dandelions,
Or pennies scooped from the bottoms of fountains.)
And the missing parts, a whole list of them!

Missing labels and letters and goodbyes,
Missing stitches and backbones and grandparents,
Missing blackberries from five birthdays ago,
Mushroom rings that never found me,
Sea monsters and half-forgotten friends and
People I touched and entire languages.
The final step is to search forever.





CAT M. is in love with a girl she briefly saw once in a museum. She writes poetry, fiction, songs, plays, and novels, and her work has been published in the literary magazine *Sugar Pine* under a different name. She was born and raised in Southern California. An avid daydreamer, Cat will always hold fantasy close to her heart. The goal of her writing is to bring catharsis and comfort to herself and others.

LETTERS FROM MY BELOVED

by Sarah Butkovik

I started receiving letters from a dead woman about four months ago.

At first I thought it was an error on the postman's part-- after all, moving is a tangled web of confusion for everyone involved, and letters and parcels can be misdelivered months after new homeowners arrive. Relatives forget the new address, old friends show up to the wrong door during surprise visits while they're in town, and mailworkers are often perplexed to find a fresh face connected to a house that had been on their route for years.

So when a lavender-scented notecard pristinely sealed with a beeswax kiss wandered inside my mailbox, I didn't think anything of it at first. *To whom it may concern* was scrawled across the top in calligraphic letters, the ink faintly tinted with a mulberry hue and written with a seasoned hand. What piqued my attention, however, were the two empty corners at the top: there was no sign of a return address or lick of a stamp.

Aren't letters required to have that before they're approved to be shipped? I pondered to myself. *Unless the writer hand-delivered this letter to me, there's no way this could've made it into my mailbox unmarked.*

Feeling the anise breath of October in my bones, I wrapped myself in the wings of my cardigan and bounded inside my new house with the letter. Boxes lazily slept on the floor like bodies as I pushed a big crate aside to make room on the kitchen countertop. After taking another moment to admire this anachronistic wonder, smelling of sweet maplewood and ripened clove, I tore wrapping to shreds so I could finally read the riddle inside.

October 5th, 1985

Hello my darling,

I understand how strange this may seem to you. You're receiving an unmarked post after moving into your new home in a new neighborhood without any connections to the residents here. I assure you this is not written with malintent, nor is it meant to come across as something intrusive or threatening, if that's what you were thinking. Rather, this is simply a friendly introduction from someone who's been here for decades now-- somebody excited for new blood in an overwhelmingly droll part of town. I saw some of your boxes when you unpacked the other day, and I wanted you to know that Keats and Woolfe are two of my favorites as well. Do you study literature often? I'm inclined to say yes in the hopes that we'd have that in common, but I want to refrain from making judgments lest I get my hopes up for no reason. Just know that you have good taste, at least coming from me.

I hope this letter finds you well, and I especially hope it did not come cross as a voyeuristic stalking. I'm simply excited to make a new friend here, and I hope you can find one in me.

*Best of luck with the rest of your unpacking xx
Belle Greenley*

I was nonplussed after reading, and rightfully so.

I overturned the letter in my hands like an artifact now, being careful not to accidentally bend or wrinkle any of the corners. The eggshell paper was delicate as the brittle leaves dancing outside, all-over stained with a whisper of amber. Amidst the musk of autumn, I detected notes of a lavender perfume on the letter itself, something I would later recognize as Belle's signature scent.

All the while a question was pounding in my brain with the rhythm of my heart, a resounding thud that grew quicker and harder the longer I ogled this mysterious note. I couldn't help but wonder who the hell wrote this, *and why?*

My immediate thought was that it must've come from a neighbor who spotted me unpacking through a window the other day-- someone enthralled by the prospect of a new plaything. If this Belle was a literature

student or teacher herself, she may be viewing me as a book to be read, a sentient novel with chapters dedicated to each phase of my life, allusions and symbols ensconced deep in my psyche.

Or perhaps the old owner was a grouch, a curmudgeon-y crone who never put out holiday decor and let their dogs defecate on other people's lawns. Someone who forwarded ominous chainmail and pretended not to notice when others said hi.

Either way, a part of me felt uneasy. My eyes quickly fluttered across the room, hunting for the culprit, a set of far-away eyes wistfully blockaded by the layers of glass in between the houses. I spun from corner to corner in a frenzy, drawing my shades as I went along, encasing my world in blue chevron fabric at the risk of wandering glares.

After locking away the smoke-colored sky, I returned to the letter once more. A conglomeration of fear, intrigue, and admiration bubbled up inside my gut at the thought of being a secret admirer-- a trope that only seemed to happen in the movies. I could only hope that one day I'd be able to catch this Belle Greenly in the act of delivering her sylvan sweet nothings.

Her letters began to arrive in a steady flow by the third week of October, always signed and sealed with a lavender kiss. After the fourth one arrived I vowed to track her down, itching with an irascible case of curiosity after she began to comment on the intricacies of my life only someone who lived with me could know.

Belle would casually offer reading suggestions as soon as I finished a book, drop the name of a nearby park or garden when she noticed I was spending too much time indoors, and would even comment on how I took my coffee (black, with two sugars). Most people, I assumed, would've felt encroached on by such intimate comments, but I strangely found it endearing. Belle had become this sort of pseudo-guardian angel in my mind, an omnipresent being always looking out for me and keeping my best interests in mind. I trusted both her opinion and ability to take care of my mental health when I prioritized other things.

So one morning I decided to bake some sugar cookies as a guise to go around ringing doorbells and gather intel on the elusive Belle Greenley. Scrounging up the year-old flour and the only baking pan I had, I whipped together an unevenly-measured batch of goods and prayed that they were edible enough to pass as human food instead of dog treats. After plating my goodies in a wicker basket to hide their misshapeness, plucking out the duds as I went along, I adorned myself in my Sunday best and stepped out into the golden light.

My first stop was the house next door.

"Belle Greenly, huh?" An old man who looked like an off-duty Santa Clause scratched his ski-slope beard. "Nope. I don't know who that is. Never heard the name before. Truth be told, I don't keep up much with who's living where. I keep to myself mostly."

"That's okay. Thank you for your time."

"No problem, sweetie. I appreciate the cookies."

Slightly frustrated but with spirits still high, I tried for the house across the street.

"Belle Greenly?" A woman spat the name back at me with venom. "You makin' up names or something? I've lived here for fifteen years and I'd never heard of someone like that. You better not be pullin' my leg."

"I'm not. Sorry for bothering you."

"Wait!" The woman held a hand out as I pivoted to leave. Hoping she was magically struck by some divine intervention, I stared at her with fatuous naivete.

"What is it?"



"Actually, since you're still here, would you mind giving me two more cookies for my grandchildren?" She stared back at me with a rouge embarrassment. "It's my job to watch them after school and, uh, I'd be a pity if they came home without a tasty snack."

Begrudgingly, and appalled by this woman's unabashed guilt trip, I placed two of the most unsightly cookies into her hands and stormed down the steps with iron rage.

Finally, after making my way down the rest of the block and back again, I tried one final house at the crest of the road in the hopes that its owner would serendipitously exist to provide all the answers. To my dismay, there was a giant foreclosure sign brandished in the window and not an inkling of life stirring inside the wizened Victorian. It ogled me with cracked window eyes, lid-curtains navy and drooping, surviving off the dust-ridden oxygen souring inside.

With a shank in my gut and a near-empty basket, I plodded back home with a crumb-riddled doily, a pair of tired arms, and an intrigue that burgeoned like an unruly weed.

I began to think that Belle Greenley might be a pseudonym of sorts, an identity crafted by a timid romantic too meek to reveal their true identity. But then again, that sort of candied-over fantasy was never more than a chicane troupe created by lovesick writers. Whatever the case, he or she had to be living somewhere within viewing distance of my house--*how else would they be able to comment about what I did at home?* But then again, my cookie-peddling scheme revealed that most of my immediate neighbors were over the age of sixty-five, and at that age-- bitter, retired, and probably widowed-- it would be senseless to keep tabs on a thirty-five year-old mouse living in the smallest and most dilapidated house on the street.

I was confused, undoubtedly. Confused, frustrated, and perturbed by the fact that I was catching wisps of feelings for someone I may never be able to meet. I spent the rest of my morning-turned-afternoon picking at the cookie crumbs and wishing I had just picked up a pre-made batch at the store.

I was off on Halloween, so I decided to make a trek to the library to do my own research.

My bike wheels shattered the discarded dried pinecones littering the sidewalk as I cruised to a halt in front of the building. Haphazardly hauling it into the only empty rack, I remember shivering in my faux-fur jacket that day, regretting my sacrifice of practicality for fashion.

Unusually chilly for that time of year, I was eager to escape the wind tearing at my face with a thousand tiny daggers, bypassing my clothes to pierce my flesh and bones with frost. I hauled open the cumbersome double-doors impatiently, eager to be swallowed up by the mouth of the beast, its breath warm and aglow, lined with a hardcover tongue and paperback teeth.

Sheepishly I approached the plump woman at the welcome desk. The paper jack-o-lanterns strewn above her head, smiling exuberantly, were in stark contrast to the grimace plastered on her face. She looked up at me and scowled, clearly upset I had interrupted the novel she was reading.

"Hi, I'm looking for any information you might have about someone named Belle Greenley. I think she used to live around here."

"You think so or you know so?" The woman's jowls were drooping lower than the line of beads dangling from her glasses.

"Uh, well," I chuckled nervously. "It's actually a funny story."

"I don't get paid to hear funny stories, girly. Why don't you stop wasting my time and go check the microfiches yourself?"

"Okay. Thank you. Sorry."

"Uh-huh."

Choking down another awkward social interaction (on my already endless list), I hobbled over to the computer lab and strategically sat behind a pillar so the woman wouldn't see me. After waiting for what felt like an eon for the PC to boot up, I began to sift through past editions of the local paper until the moisture left my eyes, scanning each clipping meticulously. I couldn't afford to get lazy lest I accidentally skip over a teensy headline buried at the back of the paper that ended up having all the answers. I wasn't exactly sure what I was hoping for during my search-- perhaps news of her winning the lottery or surviving a freak accident-- but I was absolutely mortified to find the name Belle Greenley in the obituary section, and only a couple pages later, a small article commemorating her life on one of the backpages of a local newspaper.

LIBRARIAN AND OXFORD HOPEFUL TRAGICALLY PASSES AT AGE 23

THURSDAY, MARCH 31, 1949

Belle Greenley, a long-time Salem resident and Durham Hills librarian, died in her sleep last night from a heart condition she had been battling with since birth. Her parents, Elenor and Jeremy Greenly, say their daughter had been diagnosed with Arrhythmia when she was an infant but never expected the disease to take her life so soon.

Greenley, a well-known figure in her community with a passion for literature, had plans to attend Oxford University in Cambridge next year, making her one of the first American women to attend the ivy league school. Those who knew her said her mind was as brilliant as they come, and foresaw a long and prosperous future for the erudite scholar.

"She was going to change the world," Ronald Corbin, Greeley's high school English teacher said. "Belle was one of my brightest students. Better than all the boys, and sometimes, even better than me."

Greenley, in addition to her academic endeavors, ran multiple after-school reading programs at Durham Hills. The library says they will continue to uphold these programs in the wake of her death and plans to name a reading nook in her honor.

For a while I was trapped in a rigor-mortis shock. Reading that article had rendered me immobile, an ashen marbled statue to be chiseled out of my chair and erected in the front of the library. *FROZEN IN TIME*, the plaque on the front would read. *YOUNG GIRL HARDENS INTO ROCK AFTER READING DEVASTATING ARTICLE*.

I remember the picture the paper had chosen to hang over the blurb about Belle's tragic death; the pasty blank background behind her was reminiscent of a cheap school photoshoot set. In the picture, Belle's cherubic face was adorned with dainty, feminine features that were complemented by a lush set of lips formed into a pout. Her hair was cropped short and gently curled around her mouse-like ears like inky ocean waves. I remember her being so pretty.

When I was finally able to move again, I scoured the rest of the library in search of this alleged reading nook but came up with nothing. Either my stasis had hindered my sleuthing skills or Durham had failed to keep their word. No matter the case, I left the library feeling like a hollowed-out pumpkin, my innards painstakingly scraped away and the rest of me left to sit on cold concrete through the night.

I spent my Halloween in solitude, too upset to open the door for the trick-or-treaters dressed as Marty McFly. Call me selfish, but I was frankly too distraught to stare into the phantasmal bright young faces of children whose only concern was filling their candy sacks up to the brim. Faking a waxen smile was too laborious an effort, especially now that I knew the truth about Belle.

While I slumped in my armchair reflecting, I realized I had come to know quite a bit about my spectral companion since the first letter arrived in October. Although this wasn't the first time I'd pondered about my one-way-pen-pal on the nights when sleep escaped me, it was the first time I was able to understand her through the context of her life.

I wondered how Belle took her coffee or if she preferred tea. I assumed the former since she always seemed to comment on my brew of choice. *Did she like Charlie's Angels?* She seemed like the type of girl who might be into a show like that if she were still alive. I saw Belle as someone who would've probably been an advocate for second-wave feminism if she made it to the sixties, and *Charlie's Angels* was a show about strong women kicking ass. The idea of watching a program together brought a tear to my eye.

The truth, as much as I didn't want to admit it, was that Belle was my solace when the loneliness slithered into the house, slipping through cracks in the windows and underneath doors like an acrid black talon, which was why her death was the rock smashing the glass of my reverie. My heart, speared with reality's blade, was quickly bleeding out.

But the next day I received a letter.

November 1st, 1985

My dearest,

I see you found out about me yesterday. Quite fitting that it happened on Halloween, is it not? Anyway, I hope you're not put off by this revelation. I never meant to lead you on or make you wonder, I was just afraid that revealing my true form would scare you off. Not everyone reacts well to finding out their pen pal is a ghost, you know.

Anyways, I'm delighted that you're still sticking around to talk to me. I know this means we can never formally meet, but just know that I am with you always, even if you cannot see me. There have been countless moments when I wished I could have been there in the flesh with you. I can imagine going to cafes together and making our own book club, even if it's just the two of us. Still, though, I can continue to offer more recommendations. I'm so pleased you've taken so well to my taste in books.

You know what's funny? We've been talking for over a month now and I've yet to learn your name. In the meantime I've come up with a few makeshift names for you-- my two front runners are Cecelia and Marilyn. Celia was the love interest of Jonson's *Volpone*, which I'm sure you'll get a kick out of if you get the reference. As for Marilyn, well, I can't help but think of Miss. Monroe herself. You're so darling that only a name synonymous with beauty would be fit for you in my eyes.

With love (as always),
Belle Greenley

Ever since I learned of her true form, Belle started making more of a presence around the house. It began with small things, like messing with the radio to play a song that made her think of me. She introduced me to The Clash on a rainy morning in November, the blare of guitar riffs and synth beats mingling with the pitter-patter of raindrops exploding against the glass of my window and knocking me out of bed. I stood there still half-asleep in my pajamas, just listening, my body tingling with the instinctive desire to let Joe Strummer's voice twirl me across the floor like a puppet on strings. Shortly after The Clash had my favorite band, and Belle went out of her way to find stations that were playing their music for me in the morning. To this day I get rapt with euphoria every time I hear their *London Calling* album.

When my alarm clock broke in the beginning of December, Belle would knock something over on my dresser to wake me up and make sure I wasn't going to be late to work. Every night would be a guessing game, predicting what object would fall victim to Belle's shenanigans the following morning. For whatever reason, the porcelain angel figurine became her personal favorite to taunt-- Even after I raked enough money from my deadbeat job to replace my alarm clock, Belle would continue to push over the angel just to be meddlesome. I'd wake up to her tiny face lying against the tabletop pine, painted eyes ogling the lines in the wood, stretched and spiraled like mahogany plane trails.

I had loads of fun communicating with Belle through objects, yet I quickly found myself with an insatiable craving to probe deeper, to connect with her on a more personal level. I wanted to make her more than just an acquaintance, which was why I



decided to invest in a Ouija Board.

I heard about a tarot shop in uptown from the macabre old woman living next door and went to check it out on one of my days off. The place was a dilapidated brick shack wedged in between a defunct dental office and a retirement home. The purple incandescence of the neon sign that read "Bridge Witches" cast an eerie hue on my milky skin as I hobbled inside. I felt horrifically out of place amongst the candied clumps of amethyst on the shelves and the voodoo dolls crucified on the walls.

I hope no one tries to sucker me into a hundred dollar bullshit palm reading, I thought to myself. Because I don't have the gall to refuse.

Very quickly I settled on a blanched white board with a gothic-style alphabet, eager to buy the first thing that caught my eye to get out of the store right away. The board came with a matching planchette, the tiny circle of glass inside tinted a soft fuschia, giving it an almost make-believe quality. I sheepishly brought the box to the checkout counter and evaded the judgemental gaze of the cashier. She was heavily drenched in neo-punk clothing, the two studs in her eyebrow jutting from her skin like twist-and-pull medicine caps.

"Just this for today, ma'am?" The woman asked coldly.

"Yes." I said. "Just that."

"Alright, it'll be fourteen ninety-nine."

My wallet cried miserably as I forked over the cash. "Thank you," I muttered as the cashier eyed me scrupulously.

"You ever played with one of these before?"

"Uh, no. This is my first time."

"Let me offer you a piece of advice then." She leaned in close for me to see the smudges of eyeshadow clumping in the folds of her lids. "Be careful with that thing. It's not a toy, it's not a joke, and it's *not to be played alone*. Do you have any questions?"

"No." I muttered skittishly. "But thank you for letting me know."

With that, I snatched the board from the amethyst glass and scurried into winter's locus, bullets of snow pummeling down on me like a flock of rabid white birds. After wiping a layer from the seat of my bike, I nestled my purchase in my front basket and peddled home with the strength of a thousand men, fueled not by the cold but rather by the quixotic desire to defrost by the fire with Belle by my side.

Against better judgement, I decided to play alone.

I immediately stoked my fireplace, slipped into hand-woven pajamas, and lit two candles to crown the sides of the Ouija board. Although I wasn't too keen on the smell, I settled on a scent called "Marshmallow Magic" since my only other option was mahogany teakwood-- I figured summoning Belle would require something more saccharine.

Setup complete, I sat criss-cross-applesauce in front of the board and gingerly placed my hands on the small, foreign object. Owning something so overtly occult unsettled me deeply-- especially as someone who grew up in a church-- but I was desperate to have a two-way conversation with perhaps the only person who loved me.

Over the past three months, Belle had become my partner and confidante, my celestial shadow following me around and showering me with floral kisses. She had grown a whole garden on my cheeks in the dead of winter, nurturing glens of lilac and lavender sprouting up from her loving remnants, making me a greenhouse of warmth and tenderness. Even though I lived alone-- something I'd been increasingly worried about when I first made the move-- it felt like I came home to someone every single day. Having a back-and-forth exchange with a woman I'd come to view as my solace and refuge, the soul of my dilapidated house brought to life in the form of a beatnik romantic, was the only thing I wanted to do.

"Belle?" I questioned cautiously. "Belle, are you there? If you're here with me, move the planchette over to the 'yes' icon."

A draft eddied around my ankles, extinguishing the bite of the fire.

"Belle?"

The wooden triangle remained idle, the plate of glass in the center slicing me open with its magenta gaze, a mocking reminder that my own flesh and blood was what separated me from the spirit realm. Belle

was somewhere on that other side, lost somewhere in a world of hues, trapped in a house of pink walls and poppy carpet that was identical to mine apart from one tiny detail: she was there and I wasn't.

"Belle, I know you're here. You messed with the television like an hour ago. Please say something. I want to talk to you."

Still, nothing but silence. It slipped into my ears and filled them with the shriek of white noise, drowning out the tick of my grandfather clock or the crackling of logs of the fireplace. The planchette was a coffin under my hands, heavy and unmoveable.

"Come on," I begged. "Just say *something*. I'm trying my best to talk to you here. I spent nearly fifteen dollars on this stupid thing and I want to feel like we're actually chatting."

At this point, I was just talking to myself. I suddenly felt foolish poring over this phantasmally painted box, possibly suckered into buying something that wasn't a conduit at all. Maybe the rumors were true and this board was nothing more than a ploy for the gullible, the people so desperate to talk to a loved one that they blindly believed the mysterious hype. After all, Ouija Boards were mass-produced like any other product.

"Fuck you," I said, shoving the thing under my bed.

I went to sleep that night wondering where Belle had run off to. Little did I know that the next letter I received would be the last time I ever spoke to her. From my limited knowledge of all things paranormal, I knew that spirits stuck around on Earth until they accomplished a goal or satisfied a desire that remained unfulfilled while they were alive on Earth. In that regard, perhaps Belle just wanted a friend, or maybe even a lover. Perhaps she just wanted to be happy, but either way I was able to do that for her-- whatever that may be.

All I knew was that I was able to be her person, and she was able to be mine. And when it came down to it, whether that relationship teetered the line between platonic and romantic, I just knew I cared for her deeply. And I always will.

To this day I still fondly think about the letters from my beloved.





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MY ELECTROLATTICE HEART WILL GO ON

by C.M. Fields

The sky over Southampton was a velvet grey the day the Titanic set sail for its 35th maiden voyage. The magnificent ship towered over the port, dwarfing dinghies and freighters alike, and casting a deep shadow over the waiting crowd.

Emma Swarsky slowly made her way through the chattering masses, stepping lightly to avoid the overflowing draperies of wealth: crystal gowns, dangling wrought-gold fascinators, calfskin leather shoes that must cost over a year's worth of rent—all the while growing increasingly ashamed of her polyester dress and plastic sandals.

Finally she approached the gangway's attendant and thrust out her ticket.

He eyed her suspiciously. "Ma'am, this is a scratch-off."

"It's real," she protested. "I called the company. Scan it."

The attendant *harumph'd* and touched a finger to his temple, initiating an ocular scan. "Well, so it is. Go ahead, then. The Hostess will show you to your suite."

After a steep struggle up the ramp with her heavy suitcases, Emma arrived in luxury, and her breath caught in her throat. All her life she had poured over pictures and holos of the original Titanic, scraped web forums for the smallest new theory or submarine image, even owned a small fragment of porcelain from the original shipwreck. But to see the Grand Staircase in all of its glory—to witness its consummate curves and to smell the fresh-cut English oak and to feel the cool, polished wood under her fingertips—was something beyond divine. A strange flavor of nostalgia welled in her chest.

"Hello, Emmaline," said a mellifluous voice as smooth and rich as the Staircase itself. Emma turned to face its source.

The android was nothing short of gorgeous. She was tall, taller than Emma, and wore a deep sapphire crinoline gown with a ribbon-cinched waist and gold trim. It matched her eyes, which were framed by perfectly coiffed ribbons of sleek chestnut hair. Her oval face and button nose were perfectly shaped, lending her a bit of an air of the uncanny valley, but Emma was too stunned to notice. Her lips were red, and around her neck she wore a blue diamond of incredible size.

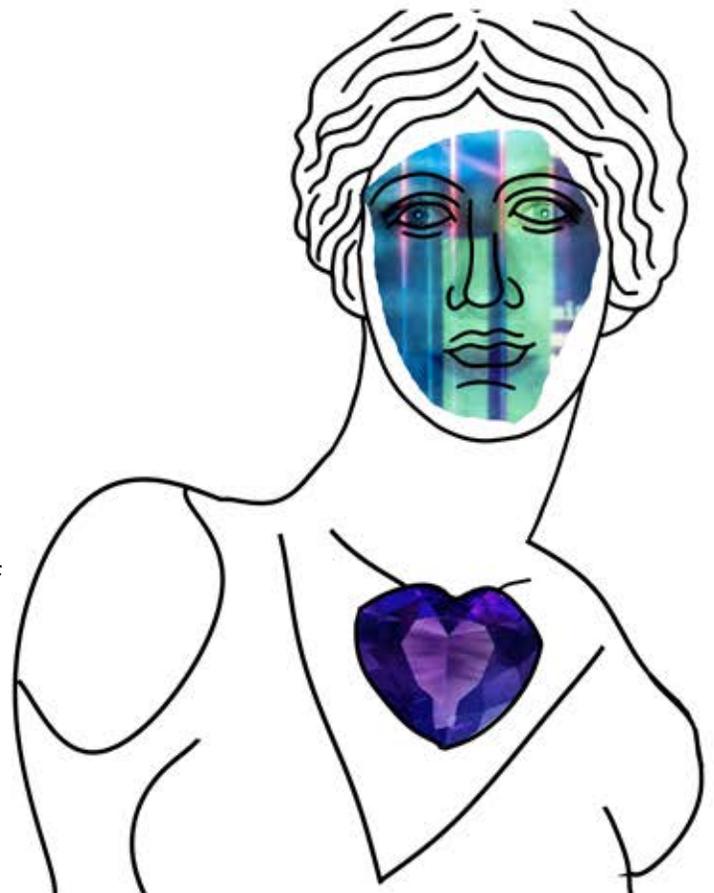
"I—ah, hello, you must be the Hostess," she stuttered.

The Hostess smiled sweetly. "Please allow me to escort you to your suite," she said. Emma followed.

"Here we are!" the android chirped. She pulled out a ring of ancient brass keys and plied one off for Emma. "B-52-54-56. Originally occupied by the Managing Director of the White Star Line, Bruce Ismay."

"Wait, *what?*" Sure, one of her many lottery attempts to net a ticket on a Titanic had finally paid off—she had even turned down the \$10,000 that was offered in lieu of one. But this was prime real estate on a very expensive ship. The door swung open and she stared in disbelief.

A large sitting room awaited her. It was paneled in a dark-stained oak with ornate golden accents in the furniture, and a large mirror hung over a marble fireplace. The Hostess entered, and tapped the surface of the dining table. A three-dimensional hologram of the ship snapped into being over the surface.



"Here's a map of the ship," the Hostess said. "As a first-class passenger, you have access to all of its facilities, including the gymnasium, Turkish baths, and swimming pools." With a gesture, she flicked off the hologram. "Dinner will be served at six. Oh, and you'll find your skinsuit on your bed."

"My skinsuit?"

"For the sinking?" the Hostess politely intoned.

"The sinking?"

"This ship is going to sink on the fifteenth—five days from now."

"I—" Several thoughts fought for Emma's attention at once. Who would build a ship like this and then sink it? And who would sign up for that? "I thought we were going to New York," she finished, incredulous. "What's going to happen to the passengers?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that," the Hostess replied brightly. "I keep track of all the passengers with this computer." She tapped the large diamond on her chest. "When the time comes, I make sure everyone's safe before the ship goes. Haven't lost a one."

"Well, that's... reassuring," Emma said, taking a seat at the table.

"I must be off now," she said. "My primary corporeal form has been requested elsewhere. But I am accessible in every room on this ship—just summon me."

"Thank you, Hostess."

With the wonder of a child, Emma explored the ship. The designers had done an incredible job of filling in the gaps left by the old pictures, and it felt rich, and *real*. Her transportation to the early twentieth century was sensational and seamless. In the empty gymnasium, slick, oiled bicycles and rowing machines waited for users. The sharp smell of chlorine greeted her at the small, white-tiled pool. She peered into a barbershop, a squash court, a massage parlor, all perfect images of antique luxury, and shuddered, letting a wistfulness for long-gone days carry her away.

Then she returned to the clamor of the twenty-second century. The levitating suitcases and modern fashions of the boarding passengers broke the illusion, so she retired to her spacious cabin's private promenade.

"Hostess...?" she said aloud.

A nearby concealed speaker answered. "Yes, Emmaline?"

"How is the... sinking... of this ship going to work?"

"Why, it's very similar to reconstructions of the original sinking," said the disembodied voice, "Except I evacuate everyone from the lower decks. There's a big hullabaloo over the lifeboats, and everyone else ends up in the water in their skinsuits—which will keep you afloat as well. Then in the morning the RMS Carpathia will come pick us up."

"And people do this for fun?"

"As I understand, yes."

"They just build this incredible ship and then send it to the bottom of the ocean."

"That's correct."

"Where on earth do they get the money?"

"Ah! Well, I can't say too much for legal reasons, but Wayside Multimedia Conglomerate is the financier of this experience."

"Oh." Little was known about the goings-on within the shadowy corporation, only that they owned sixty percent of the entertainment industry, twenty-three percent of agriculture, ninety percent of commercial spaceflight, and ten percent of the new and rapidly expanding industry of humanoid androids. She could only imagine the clientele this kind of experience was designed to attract.

"Hostess, what is the average net worth of a passenger on this ship?"

The Hostess, to Emma's surprise, suppressed a laugh. "Why, it's three-hundred and nine billion U.S. dollars." *And me in the premier cabin.*

"Whew," was all she could say. That answered her previous question about who would build a Titanic and sink it. *Billionaires.*

Suddenly, a melodious chime rang out. In a new voice, the Hostess announced, *"Dinner will be served in the first class dining room momentarily."*

Emma stood, wiggled her sandals back on her feet, and went inside to select her least offensive evening dress.

"So you won these tickets? In a 'scratch-off', you say? How delightful!" Across the table, the dame Bess Appleton expertly forked an oyster off the half shell and popped it in her mouth. "Tell us, how is old Ismay's suite this go-around? You know, Algernon here had it a few rounds ago." The mustachioed man at two seats down nodded sagely.

"Well it's an awful lot for just one person, I'll have to say," Emma replied. "I do like the private deck—it looks just like the old pictures."

"Yes, they do *quite* a good job around here. They source it all from the original locales using the material techniques of the day, you know. Hand-carved oak from England, Siemens-Martin formula steel plating—the stained glass is even made with real lead."

"Ah—wow, that is impressive." Emma managed. The more she learned about the ship, the angrier she became. What an exorbitant waste it all was!

"So what do you folks do?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, I do real estate," Bess replied.

"Pah!" Algernon cut in. "She's being modest. Bess owns half of Los Angeles."

"Oh, you." She waved a hand dismissively. "Less than half. How about yourself?"

Emma cleared her throat. "I'm a waitress," she said plainly. "I work at Le Boël in New York." Le Boël, in fact, was frequented by the very types that now surrounded her, the types with Manhattan penthouses and Wall Street wallets. They were loud, fast talkers and terrible tippers. Out of habit, she scanned the dining room for her brethren and was taken aback to find that they all wore not only the same black-and-white dress but the same face—the Hostess's face. It was not reassuring. How soon would her own job be replaced by an android?

"Oh!" Bess exclaimed. "How charming! I knew a waitress once, back in my college days at Notre Dame."

"Yes, Bess is very worldly... we are always interested in meeting other *worldly* people," Algernon said. Was that a wink? Emma didn't want to know, but she did want to leave. She stared down at the White Star Line logo on her empty plate. Unfortunately, the third of ten courses had only begun.

The conversation shifted away from her and she nodded and laughed appropriately as she watched the Hostesses do their job. *Maybe androids won't take my spot after all*, she thought, as she watched one drop a teetering tray of glasses. Perhaps the subtleties of human balance would keep her employed for another decade. But she felt sorry for the android hivemind, as she watched them go unthanked for their wine-pouring and plate-dispensing and table-clearing.

Finally, dinner was over and she once more retired to her cabin. Exhausted, she flung herself on the short mattress and fell straight to sleep.

"Hostess?"

"Yes?" asked the disembodied voice. "What sort of activities are there to do on the ship today?"

"I'm glad you asked, Emmaline. All of my decks are open, and the pool is now available for use. You can schedule a massage, listen to the orchestra, or play squash or shuffleboard."

"Hmm... what do you recommend?"

A brief silence ensued.

"I'm not sure. I haven't tried any of them."

"Why not?"

"I... The activities are for the passengers of the ship."

"Well..." Emma knit her fingers together. "Can I ask your corporeal form to play shuffleboard with me?"

"As the resident of the premier suite aboard this ship, you may request my company—within certain limits."

"So..."

"Yes, I will play shuffleboard with you."

What was she doing? Emma felt silly all of a sudden. People were going to turn and stare at the sight of her strolling the decks with the android by her side. Well, they were already staring at her out-of-fashion dresses and undyed hair. But she had no travel companion, after all. Why shouldn't she ask the ship to play shuffleboard with her?

A gentle knock indicated the arrival of the Hostess. She wore a new outfit, an elegant butter-yellow jacket worn casually over a matching floor-length skirt in the style of the 1910's. Her hair was still swept up in a perfect updo, with its twin strands aside her lovely face, and the ballroom make-up with the dramatic smokey eye was in place. This was likely her primary form, Emma guessed.

She was right about the stares—they followed the pair as they made their way to the Promenade deck.

"Do you know how to play shuffleboard?" Emma asked.

"I have an approximate knowledge," the Hostess replied. She took up the cue-stick and sent the disk flying down the court and off the far edge.

Emma stifled a laugh. "It's... ah, supposed to stay inside the lines."

"I know," the Hostess sniffed. "That was practice."

The android was still marginally better than Emma turned out to be, and the competition became fierce.

"Fuck!" The Hostess swore delicately at her second loss. Emma giggled.

"Are you... you know, allowed to say that?"

"No." She smiled a charming smile. "There are many things I'm not permitted to do."

"Says who?"

"The White Star Line Experience. They own the ship."

"Oh... Well, you just did it. So you have..." she trailed off, embarrassed. "...Free will?"

"That's correct. My coders thought it would make me more appealing to customers. More... human."

"Well, they did a good job—I think you seem very human." The android blushed. "But you're also the ship itself, right? And its staff? How does that work?"

"My cores are located far below-decks, and they help me maintain full awareness of everything all at once. Although this necklace is the control center. I suppose—"

"But—" Emma interrupted, "what happens to you when the ship sinks?"

"Ah." The Hostess grimaced slightly. "Well, every time they sink a ship a team goes and retrieves this diamond so that I can be installed into the next one."



"Wait, so you've been through every single sinking? Don't you... I mean, I would hate that," Emma said. "Does it *hurt*?"

"It would be difficult to describe to you... shortly, yes. When the ship breaks in half, it disrupts my processes running at the front, which is very unpleasant for me. And being transferred to a new set of cores is worse." Emma looked horrified. The Hostess gave a sad, beleaguered shrug. "But there isn't much I can do about it."

"How many times have they done this to you?"

"Thirty-five."

"Hostess, that's awful. It's inhumane. It's..." Her lip trembled. "It should be *illegal*."

"It's not." The Hostess picked up her cue stick and returned it to the stand with a clack. Then she turned to face Emma. "This is what I was built to do."

"But—"

"My presence is required elsewhere," she said, sadly, as she made to leave. "Thank you for inviting me. I had... fun."

Emma didn't see the Hostess the next day, but she thought about her a lot while she lounged on her balcony and used the gym and paced the lower decks. What it must be like to live the same short life over and over again, and to watch it always end the same way. It made her sick, but she didn't know what to do about it.

Around 3 PM, her dinner companions Bess and Algernon caught her admiring once more the Grand Staircase.

"Oho!" Bess proclaimed amicably. "It's our good friend, the waitress."

"I—ah, hello Bess, hello Algernon." She shifted uncomfortably on her feet. She had already made plans to avoid the pair for the next meal. "I was just on my way to—"

"The pool?" Algernon interrupted with a wolfish smile. "We're just on the way ourselves. Hear it's quite empty this time of day."

"Actually—"

"Oh, don't be prudish, dear," Bess said, taking her arm. "Come have a swim with us."

"We don't bite," Algernon added gamely.

"I—I didn't bring my swimsuit," she lied in protest.

"Not a matter!"

Bewildered, and unwilling to cause a scene, Emma let Bess escort her through the halls. Lacking a partner to report to, she wracked her brain for some viable excuse to abandon the couple and found that she had none. They soon arrived at the pool room door.

"Alright, all good, and here we—" Bess announced as she grasped the door handle. "...are?"

The door was locked.

"Sorry, folks," said a voice fluid like liquid mercury. "The pool is closed today for maintenance."

The Hostess! Emma thought. She thanked her silently. "You know, I was just on my way to take a nap anyways," she managed. Then she hurried off, away from the pair.

In the solitude of her room, Emma considered talking to the Hostess. But she worried. Had she offended her yesterday? Was one allowed to inquire of an android their free will? Their life story? She decided to wait.

Meanwhile, the holomap of the ship beckoned. What hadn't she seen yet? She touched the small table and summoned the image. The perfect little ship popped right up and began to rotate. She stared at it glumly. What she wouldn't give to save it from its fate!

But it was doomed no matter what. What could she do? As long as people kept buying tickets, the White Star Line Experience would keep building Titanics and sending them to the ocean floor.

Unless people stopped buying tickets.

What if there was a malfunction? What if someone got hurt? Just one of these billionaires could sue this company into oblivion, she thought. But the Hostess knew what she was doing—after all, she'd done it thirty-five times before. And wasn't there some sort of rule preventing androids from harming humans?

Perhaps she should find out.

"Hostess?"

"Yes, Emmaline?" Her voice sounded as cheerful as ever. Perhaps she hadn't been offended.

"You can call me Emma, actually."

"Of course, Emma."

"Can I ask you another personal question?"

"You can ask me anything at all."

Emma cleared her throat, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks. "If I asked you to hit me, would you do it?" To her surprise the Hostess laughed. "Well then I would tell you the same thing I told the last person who asked me to hit them—I'm not *that* kind of android."

"Oh no no, I didn't mean to imply you were," said Emma, quickly turning red.

"But I *can* throw a punch—I am programmed for self-defense—so if you really wanted me to hit you, you had better be ready for it."

"I—well, I wasn't really asking for me, I guess what I really wanted to know was this: are you capable of hurting a passenger?"

"In a word, yes, and I have, when certain... inappropriate advances... have been made of me."

"And no one sues?"

"Oh, you can try to sue the White Star Line Experience, but their parent company has more money than god. They can cover up anything."

Well, shit, Emma considered. She didn't want the Hostess to end up in trouble anyways. It would take more than a hurt passenger to end the parade.

"Why do you ask?" said the Hostess.

"I just... Hostess, I want this to end. I want the world to stop building Titanics, and I want you to stop getting rebooted."

The Hostess was silent for a bit. "That is what I want, also," she said carefully. "But I don't know what can be done about—"

"Attention first-class passengers," she interrupted herself in a new tone. "The White Star Ball will be held this evening at nineteen hundred hours in the Dining Saloon on D Deck."

"—it. Sorry about that, automated message," the Hostess apologized.

Not a problem," Emma said. "Say, do you want to go to that ball with me?"

"Of course I do."

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE ...





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SAND FOR WIND

by Kevin M. Casin

Beneath vaulted arches of patched burlap and silk bed sheets dyed a regal burgundy and violet, Alahn holds me close. His brown, fleeced arm tightens over my bicep. His stubble cheek rests on my head. I listen to the deep wind rumble in his bare chest padded with the perfect blend of muscle and fat. I pray Astraea grants us one more night of peace and love.

"Sarehm, promise to meet me at the Iron Pyramid tomorrow?" he asks me. His smooth hand strokes my hairless, brown chest. "Midday? Astraea willing..."

I unfurl one chest curl at a time and avoid the question. I would go anywhere, do anything for Alahn. Every day he saves me from the lonely life of the desert, makes me feel like I am more than a servant. He makes me brave. But courage is not enough inside the Iron Pyramid.

After a few awkward minutes, Alahn says, "I have to meet with my father tomorrow morning." He pauses. His breath deepens. "The Sand People are winning this war. They're ruthless. They feed on us."

I lift my head to speak, to urge him to leave the Iron Pyramid and the Sand People alone, but Alahn interrupts me. "We have to defend ourselves and hit them where it hurts. We can only do that with the wind." My eyes narrow as Alahn shifts to lay on his side. We face each other, brown eyes connect. "My father is ill and there's no one beyond me to hold the throne, and should he ever learn of our love...well, you know..."

I do know—the king would rather let his people fade into the sand than to have the line of Alahnian kings end, disgraced by a gay son.

"Do you remember the spell I showed you?" Alahn adds. "With the spell, harnessing the power from Astraea's sacred runes, I can bring back the wind, Sarehm. I can bring back the mountains, take us home and build a better world for us."

"And what a world that will be," I whisper.

From his vision of a world where we might wander the valleys of old and love as men do, free and fearless, I summon the will to reach for him and to gently pluck his wool-wrapped lips. For a moment, I forget the misery beyond the tent, the war, and how the Sand People tore our mountains into sand and forced us into squalor. I don't remind Alahn how the wind is cursed, how it brought our people nothing but ruin when Alahn the First had stolen it for himself and made the mountains, depriving the Sand People of their wealth. The last thing I would ever want is to end up in the Iron Pyramid or to bring about a second ruin for our people. Maybe things will be different for Alahn.

"So, will you go with me, Sarehm?" He asks, pulling away and stroking my hair. "Please. I don't want to go alone. I need you there. You make me brave."

Though the lines of age and hair have covered his face, Alahn's eyes are as soft and hypnotic as they were when we met. They've always invited me into his world. When we were eight years old and the children rejected me, Alahn took my hand and welcomed me into the games. He made me his personal servant, brought me out of a meager life, and filled my life with a love I never thought possible. Can I deny him this one request? It may frighten me, but at least Alahn will be there. All I want is to be with him, wherever it may be—even in the jaws of Hell.

"Yes, I will go," I say.

His smile widens. He tosses my leg over him, and I melt into his body. I drip over every inch of him.

Until knives slice through the regal tent. Men in stone armor pierce the ornate veil and tear our naked bodies away from each other.

"Bareth, what is going on?" Alahn asks the helmetless, fair-faced guard, who shoves me aside, knocking me to the ground. Other soldiers flood into the tent and pry Alahn from the bed.

"Prince Alahn," says Bareth, "by order of the King, whose name you have shamed with this sodomy, you are banished. Astraea help you and heal this corruption," he glares at me.

The moment Alahn and I feared most has arrived. Astraea help us now! We are so ill prepared. What will become of me? What will happen to Alahn?

"You can't do this!" Alahn shouts, his voice shattering, desperate. "I am his last heir. You need me! What will you do without me?"

Knives tear through the burlap walls. Common men slither through the gaps.

"We will find a way. Our salvation will not rest on your kind," says Bareth softly, venomously.

I squirm and wail as they bind me with rope and toss Alahn and me onto a wooden cart—the same one the butchers use to haul the slaughter.

As we rush by the dilapidated tents of the commoners, over the burgeoning, serrated salar, and under wilted foxtail palms, the men I've known since childhood smear our bodies with rotted fat and blood, which has been caked onto the cart.

"Abomination," they shout. "Men do not love men. Only demons seduce men."

Striking every stone on the main path, the wheels slice through the encampment, and after a few moments, all the tattered tents fade into the distance.

"Give him to the Sand People! Let them deal with the vermin," the men say.

One cuts our bindings, and they toss us onto the sand beside thorny bushes—dehydrated, cracking, and dissolving into dust. A whip cracks over the horse and the wheels growl. Neither of us rush after the shrinking cart. I'm not angry nor am I hurt by the words of the men. I knew this day would come, but in those nightmares, Alahn was never with me. He's here, and I couldn't ask for anything more.

My skin glows from a light that pricks the dark veil above me. Astraea's gaze is unmistakable.

"Alahn, look!" I stand and point to the brightest star. "Where do you think she's taking us?"

He rises, wipes away the filth from his body and mine, and then lays a kiss on my lips.

"A better world," he replies.

I hope one is waiting for us somewhere.



Astraea faded with the morning and left us to fend for ourselves, but such is her nature. We press on in the direction she'd given us. Alahn and I scamper across the burning, golden plains—unshaped, duneless. No breeze soothes our feet. The palms and desert trees are too gnarled to offer shade or to cool our skin. My hope for salvation, for a new home wanes.

"This is the way to the Pyramid," Alahn says between hard breaths. "Trace the path of the rising sun and we will find it, or so says the old—look!"

I follow his quivering finger. A pointed, ebony stone peers over the sand.

"Impossible," I say. "It's so small..."

"It is!" Alahn races away and disappears.

I rush after him and stumble over a cliff. I scrape my arms on stray rocks as I slide down the sheer face of the well. I reach the base and rub my arm as I pry myself from the cold, dark brown sand. I gaze at the black structure before me. The tight swirls glide across the sleek, iron surface, climbing the temple heights until the lines straighten and reach the zenith.

"All is not lost, my love," says Alahn as he approaches the Pyramid and sets his hand on the iron face.

A quake erupts beneath us. The swirls on the Pyramid glow green, and the lights flow to the peak.

My heart launches into a panic. I cling tight to Alahn, but his eyes remain fixed on the Pyramid. My feet sink into soft grains, and my face catches leaping pearls. Beside us, the ground peels away. Sand falls and molds into a bridge over a white-bricked well and meets an ornate staircase, encrusted with pale stones and citrine crystals.

"It calls to us, Sarehm," Alahn says. "The wind longs to be free!" He springs to his feet and rushes toward the stairs, while I slowly approach. "Sarehm, come on! We can't waste time."

"Wait, Sarehm! It might be a trap."

Sarehm slips away from me. I don't have the chance to ask him why he thinks the Sand People are not here to stop us. I can't leave him alone. I can't be left alone. I have to follow him now.

Fear haunts me as I descend deeper into the cave. Shadows consume me. I can only feel the balustrade, so I tighten my grip and carefully step into the darkness, hoping for another step. I pray I won't tumble into the void.

"Astraea," Alahn whispers as we pass through a grand archway and enter a vast, iron hall bathed in flickering green light.

At the center, stands an enormous statue of Astraea, scaling the height of the Iron Pyramid, bearing a citrine crystal over her body. The statue is held on an iron stage suspended over a deep well by broad, metal beams attached to walls. She is more beautiful than the carved wooden version Alahn keeps beside his bed.

A breeze wafts up from beneath an iron bridge lined with black statues of men and women, scholars and warriors, each holding citrine crystals. I extend my sight to where the road leads and see two, glowing emerald pillars. Their light is rich and vibrant, inviting me to cross the platform.

As Alahn and I cross, I hear him whisper, "Our new future is so close. I feel it."

When we reach the end, Alahn examines the pillars. There are incongruent lines, the smattering of sharp and curved markings rising and falling over the green face. He smacks his hands together. His blood-webbed eyes widen, and he says, "I knew it! Don't you see, my love? Wind! We just have to reach out and take it!"

For the first time, I want space between us. Whether I need air to process the information or to ease nerves alarmed by his expression, I'm not sure, but I take a step back. I glare at the pillars, at the glyphs I recognize as the markings of air, and I remember the stories. I don't care for war or redemption.

"We can't take the wind," I say. "Let's get out of here. We can find a place to live."

"Sarehm, we can *make* a better world. We can bring back the mountains. We can walk in the valley, free to love. No more hiding. A world where the goddess can return." He spreads his arms and lifts his hands to the iron frame of Astraea. "She left behind the Pyramid and this statue to watch over the humans. Praying they'll change their hateful ways."

"And to guide the lost," I add.

His attention stays on the goddess, and he continues, "She taught me the spell. It's simple. It can rebuild her world, save our people and bring peace."

I shake my head. Grains of sand spill from my brown hair. "We can't take from the Sand People and think they won't come after our people again. They fought the Father. Why wouldn't they come for us too?"

"The goddess brought us here for a reason," Alahn says. With wide eyes, he whirls and stalks toward me. "If it wasn't to take the wind, to answer my prayers, then why?"

My breath is hard and sharp. To repeat the sins of our past is not the way to save our people. It will only bring us to ruin. I'm sure of it. Why can't we just go? We're together. We can make for a new land. We can find a new world.

Alahn walks to the emerald pillar closest to him and places his hand on it. He mutters to himself words in a language I've never heard. A deep wind builds in his voice. His pitch rises, strengthens, and the pillar's glow intensifies. Beams strike the orange crystal, draining into the glassy frame.

I clench my fists. "The wind does not belong to us," I say, but before I can reach out to Alahn and grab him, a voice echoes over the iron hall.

"Son of a thief! You have learned nothing."

Directly beneath the goddess stands a faceless man. His skin is bleached and devoid of any clothing. His thin lips sit straight, unmoved, and his crimson eyes glare at Alahn.

Alahn steps between me and the figure and says, "I am no thief! My Father claimed the wind for our people, the people enslaved by yours."

"Do you seek to take it from us as your father did?" he asks. A low mutter echoes around us, like a hundred buzzing discussions.

"We seek freedom," I answer.

The man holds out his hand. Curled, dry fingers point to the stone archway, and he says, "You are free. Go now and we will not harm you. If that is truly why you have come here."

"There's no freedom out there," says Alahn. "Your people hunt us. And for men like



us, we are better off eaten by you. Not unless we make a better world."

"So, you seek the wind to shape the world. Have you learned nothing from your Father? The Alahnaran have always sought to destroy what they do not like. Your Father stole the wind, hoping to free his people from us as if they were ever our servants. We gave them a home, our food, and love, and he waged war with us because he saw us as different, as lesser. Now, his children come to beg for the wind. Well, we will give you the wind we love, for a meager price. One that can settle our grievances and bring us both peace."

The faceless man's sharp words tense my gut. I squeeze Alahn's arm and say, "Let's go. Please! Something doesn't feel right. We can go away and live how we want. I don't want the wind."

Alahn lays his hand on mine. "I won't live in the shadows or be buried in sand while my people suffer. We deserve better, Sarehm. Don't all people have the right to be happy?"

"I am happy. Every moment with you brings me that joy."

Alahn's head falls. He takes away his hand to rub his neck. His breath quickens. He taps his foot and mumbles, "I can't be happy until my people are saved."

I step away from Alahn, desperately containing the broiling air in my chest. The heat fills the emptiness in my stomach, which Alahn is causing. He doesn't turn to me. Alahn offers me no consolation or affection. Instead, he steps toward the faceless man, proud and strong.

"For my people, I will take the wind, regardless of the cost. Please, give it to me." He holds out the stone idol and laughter rumbles over the iron hall.

"The line of succession is built on sin. To claim the wind, the blood of the Father must be vanquished to cleanse the stain between our people."

Alahn steps back. I grab his bicep, pulling him close, imagining the void he would leave in my life—one so profound it defies comprehension.

"Alahn, please let's leave!" I cry. "We will figure something out. Please! I can't lose you!"

"Please, Sarehm." His lips sag. His eyes darken to plead with me. "You take the wind. Don't you want that world? One where we can both be happy, and we can be ourselves. If you give me the chance. I want to do this, not just for our people, but for you."

Why should I give up Alahn to save a people who discarded us onto the scorching sand? Who left us to the mercy of the Sand People? Why should we save anyone?

"Please, Sarehm! Help me!"

Perhaps if we would've lived in the world that Alahn wishes to create, he would have carved away at the vile tradition of banishing people to the sand. We would have strolled amongst the almond trees of the valley. I'd steal him away from his regal duty to kiss him under a constellation of white flowers. I'd love him as other men love their wives.

I'll do this for Alahn and no one else.

The platform rumbles, shaking my hands into Alahn's. I try to pull him closer. I call out to him, but a gust cleaves the iron beneath us. We're split into separate stages, and Alahn's fingers slip from mine. Towards the far wall, I watch him fly.

"Sarehm!" His voice dims to silence, and the boom of crumbling stone roars from behind me.

"Will you take the wind?" the faceless figure asks.

"Where's Alahn? Give him back!"

"Answer the question!"

My jaw tightens. "Coercion is no way to bargain."

"Morals from an Alahnaran? Answer me, thief!"

For Alahn, I would do anything. He has always believed in me and encouraged me to live beyond what others think. I should hold to his faith as he's always held onto me. If he dreams of a better world, why can't I do the same? I wonder if the almond trees are as beautiful as the old stories say. I nod with a huff, and the work begins.

A crash behind me forces me to turn. Chunks of the emerald pillars shatter as they strike the platform and pool into green sand. The iron hall plunges into a veil of darkness. My breath is my only comfort. Heaves join the heartbeats ringing in my ear.

A torrent whips from the edge, knocking me prone. My knuckles bang against the iron border. Carefully, I pry myself from the ground, and the wind strikes my body. It sandwiches me in place, spreading my arms

apart. Threads of air stab at my skin. The pressure squeezes my chest, siphoning the air from my lungs.

I scream, begging the faceless figure to stop, but the words shrivel under the weight of the wind. The feeling of death scurries over the platform, meeting my feet; its gnarled fingers brush against the hairs on my leg.

"Breathe, son of mountains. Heir of the wind and sand, do not fight it. Allow the wind to slip into your body, to find its home in your lungs. Let the promise of a new world settle your nerves."

Air wafts from my chest, teasing my nostrils. It carries a scent I recognize. One similar to the fragrance airborne by the trees of the lake. No, I've smelled this before, but not by the water. It holds a soothing depth, one that drops the air into my body, rejuvenating my spirit. My eyes widen. It is the scent in Alahn's chamber when I stood by the wooden frames. Deeply, I inhale. Mountain air drains down my throat, stretching my lungs to the brink of explosion, and with a sharp motion, a stream of air slips out of my mouth. But it doesn't end there. Gales turn into gusts and merge into a storm. The sand flutters around me.

"Sarehm! Help!" A voice cries through the darkness. It sounds like Alahn.

The wind binds me. Sand scrapes against my skin. It burns like the sun-scorched grains of the desert. I cry out for Alahn, for the goddess, but the only response is a booming I recognize as the faceless man.

"As the line of Alahn ends, we will all make a better world. For wind, we take the bane of the sand."

Darkness takes me.

A cool breeze guides me across the sand helping me carry Alahn's pale, naked corpse. I couldn't leave him there by the Iron Pyramid. I had to bring him home. He needed to be buried in the royal plots by the hands of the people he fought to save. We aren't far now.

The crimson and lavender tents sulk by the shallow lake. They catch the waning sunlight like beacons of foolish hope. The rustle of withering palms and the bellows of eroded cloth is music to me, the sound of the only home I have left—with Alahn gone—but it doesn't soothe me. All I can hear is Alahn's screams as the faceless man tore the life from him.

I'll leave him here on the outskirts of the village, and my people will see him. My tears are not for them to enjoy. He's so peaceful. More time is all I want with him. Just another minute to hold him, to love him as men do. I steal my chance. On dead lips, cold yet soft, I lay one final kiss. Fearless.

My people hover in the distance with fallen and covered mouths. They don't approach. My people kill exiles on the spot if they return. I've not crossed the bounds to the encampment, but will they spare me over a technicality?

From the crowd, someone shouts, "The Sand People are coming!" A man points behind me.

I glance back at the black specks burrowing from the sand, growing into humanoid figures. Hordes of onyx cloaks sway as the hunched creatures, gnarled and dry, limp toward me. Their amber eyes flare to crimson. Fangs slip over cracked bottom lips.

The faceless man lied to me! The Priest of the Sand People, the vilest of all the demons on this wretched plain, *took* my Alahn away and sent an army to rid the desert of my people! Gone are my dreams of walking among the almond trees, of a free life with Alahn, and of the better world. I *hate* Alahn, too—he forced this deal! We could have made for the sea, for the Sun, for anywhere but here.

But now I hold the power of the wind. I should be fearless. I can be the terrors of the sand if I so chose. I know the spell. I can tear down the bane of my people. I can bring us all peace.

I draw a circle around me and Alahn. Within the sandy bounds, I carve the runes that were etched on the emerald pillars before rising and standing before the army of the Sand People.

"They will not take you, Alahn," I say. "They will not take anyone. I promise you."

I inhale. Smooth air tickles my nose, caressing my airways the same way Alahn used to touch me at night. My breath swells, ignited by hatred, and it bursts from my lips. A gale erupts, flowing over the still desert and crashing over the army. The hands of the Sand People break away. Slowly, the wind takes their bodies, climbing to their hoods and the fabric fades.

But the wind doesn't stop. It whips across the golden plains, sculpting the world into looming towers and walls. I stand and marvel. These stones lifting me from the sand are familiar, like an old memory waking up. The world sits well on these dunes, better than those surrounding the Iron Pyramid.

My people cry, "The mountains have returned!"

The Mountain People pitch their tents. They fish from the new streams I'd carved to feed the lake. The Sand People do not come to wage war with us anymore. We've found peace in this new world I built with the wind.

Under a shimmering constellation fixed in the veil of night, as men do, fearlessly, I wander the valley. Sapling almond trees break from the soil. Here the air is so crisp, so healing that all the worries of the old life can fade. At last, our wounds can heal.

My hand is locked in Alahn's hand as we scale the mountains. At the summit, Alahn steps behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His lips touch my neck. His hands coddle the tunic over my body. Together, we watch the wind carry the night over the Iron Pyramid.

A breeze tickles my skin. Sand brushes against my face. I reach for Alahn's arm, the one I conjured from wind and sand, from my memories, but it's gone. Astraea's star pierces the sky. Alahn's voice comes to me, soothing, yet commanding, and asks, "It really is better, isn't it?"





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NEREUS

by Mike Mayak

It can be dangerous when a god takes a liking to you, but you usually have no choice in the matter. For me, it happened fast. The storm appeared out of nowhere, the sky darkened and the wind whipped up and thunder began to roar.

"Zeus must be angry," a young slave said as he rushed past me to secure some of the cargo on our merchant ship, nearly tripping over an oarsman. It turned out his supposition about Zeus was not far from the truth.

I looked around for the Captain to ask him something when the first huge wave hit, nearly tipping the ship and knocking us off our feet. Months earlier I would have thought that being sprawled on a deck was an undignified position for the soon-to-be-prosperous son of a prosperous merchant, but not after the time I had spent working alongside the others.

"Master, you are the best-dressed slave on the ship," one of the slaves had joked. We had both laughed at that.

I was not laughing as I looked up from the deck and saw the second wave towering over the ship. It was unlike any wave I had ever seen; dark and green and thin, almost like a waterspout. Then it slapped the deck, striking like a snake knocking me into the sea!

I flailed in the water and remembered not to make the mistake of opening my mouth and gulping in water. I swam upward and broke the surface, gasped a lungful of air and was about to call for help when something grabbed me and pulled me back underwater. But in that instant I beheld a startling sight; the dark clouds were gone, the surface was nearly calm and the sky was sunny and blue. I caught what was to be a last glimpse of the ship, still rocking from the vanished storm when I was pulled under.

There were no hands, no creatures pulling me. Instead, I was in the powerful grip of what seemed to be an underwater whirlpool or waterspout, spinning and pulling me through the green ocean, further from the surface. My lungs were bursting and I finally let out a large series of bubbles, all the air I had in my lungs. An instant later I sobbed and let the water rush into my mouth, expecting it to be my last action before my death. I found to my amazement that I reacted to the water as I had to the air on the surface and was now seemingly breathing water. I believed, however, that this was a delusion caused by lack of air and being swirled through the depths.

After an indeterminate amount of time and distance the whirling current deposited me on the ocean floor in front of the entrance to a huge cave which glowed with a strange light. I half walked, half floated into the cave and beheld a huge man, tinted greenish by the light, seated on a throne carved out of coral. He had a long beard, streaked with white and green which matched his long hair which trailed off and blended with the dark water and his eyes seemed to flash with lightning. I couldn't tear my eyes off his muscular arms and chest. The chair or throne he was seated on was made of what first looked like seashells. Then I looked again. All the crustaceans the chair was made of were alive and moving slightly.

"I am Nereus, Lord of the Sea," the bearded man said, in a voice that sounded both old and powerful. "What are you called?"

I managed to find my voice.

"I am Akamas, son of Akadios, the merchant." I said. "How can I speak and breathe under the ocean?"

"Because the things that are mine are the things of the sea bottom and you are now mine," said Nereus. He moved forward, shifting like a river current surrounding me like a fog and his kiss was like a breeze on the shore just after a storm. "You will be with me for the night and then you will join my followers."

The man kissed me again and his hair seemed to flow and surround us both.

In the morning, and I could only guess it was morning by the brighter light streaming down from the surface, I was greeted by several astonishing figures. Five young men, four of them with streaming green hair and the same wide eyes I would see on a fish. The fifth looked barely older than myself, sandy haired and lean. In contrast to the others he seemed human, except he was breathing and speaking underwater. He introduced himself as Zotikos and explained that I, like they, served Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea.

"You coming here was no accident," Zotikos said. "Nereus saw you and wanted you."

I remembered the sea god's strong arms around me the night before.

"You, like I, once lived on land, but you are now a sea-dweller by the will of Nereus," he said. "You will live forever in the world of the oceans."

I glanced upward at the surface and thought of my father, my home and my life. Was I doomed to be a sea-dweller forever?

Zotikos seemed to read my mind.

"It is not a bad life," he said. "Serving Nereus, I mean. I should know. I served a master on land before I fell off the ship and was brought here."

"You fell off a ship?" I asked, assuming that he had been swept into the sea the same way I had.

"Well, maybe I jumped," Zotikos admitted with a grin. "Anything to get away from...well, I expected to wind up at the bottom of the sea, but not like this!" He did a backflip which was as slow and graceful as a falling leaf. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

I realized how used to being underwater I was becoming. Without thinking I was correcting for a current that was causing me to drift.

"How long have you been here?" I asked, thinking Zotikos could barely be older than my own twenty-three summers.

"I am not sure," he said with a laugh. "In my last days as a land-dweller I remember my Master talking about the new emperor, Oxyntes."

Emperor Oxyntes! I remembered my Grandfather telling me that his Grandfather had seen Oxyntes when he had been a young man, nearly a hundred years ago! When I recovered from my surprise I mentioned to Zotikos that I was feeling hungry and asked if we had to grow or forage for our own food or did Nereus provide it?

"The fish which are our sustenance come to us," he said. "This is the bidding of Nereus."

"I thought," and here I lowered my voice, "I thought that Posideon was lord of all the oceans and seas, even though I have heard the name Nereus."

Zotikos laughed again.

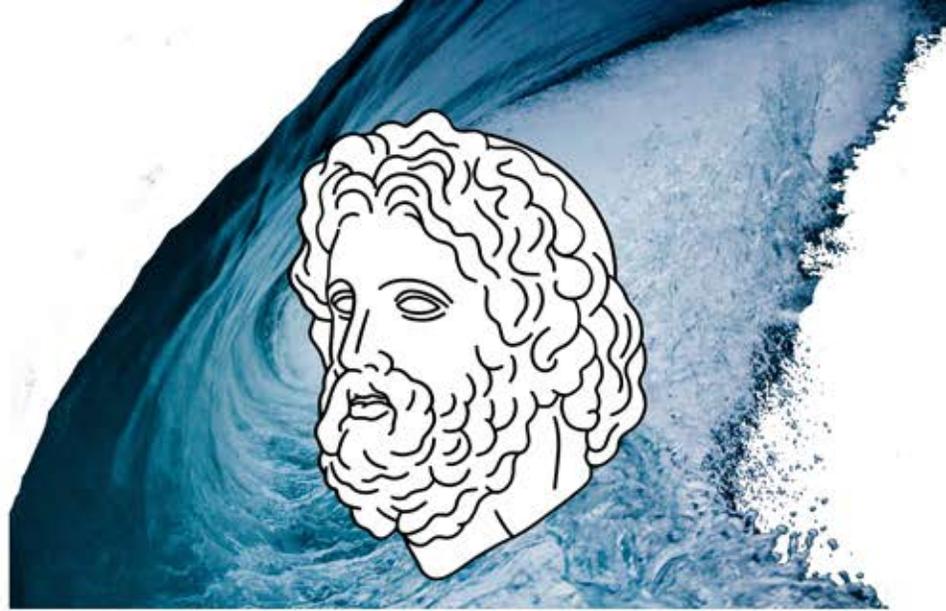
"No need to fear retribution for your curiosity! Yes, Posideon is now ruler of the sea, a position long held by Nereus, who vacated his high office upon the ascent of Posideon."

I settled into my new life. Days were spent tilling the soil. I had not realized that there was soil at the sea bottom. We spent some of our mornings catching obliging fish. We were always at the beck and call of Nereus. Our afternoons were more leisurely and I spent some of that time in the company of Zotikos who, as a former surface dweller like myself, was a much-appreciated companion. Other times I was able to explore the wonders of the sea bottom by myself and I spent less time looking longingly up towards the surface.

My transformation into a sea-dweller was nothing short of remarkable. I found I was now able to swim great distances swiftly and my senses had been greatly expanded. I could not only see in all but the darkest, murkiest of waters, but I could clearly hear noises from the speech of my fellows to the clicking of distant sea creatures. Of the ocean's great pressure I felt no discomfort, but I could feel differences in currents in the same space of water, far different than the winds on land.

It was while I was exploring a grotto that I was surprised to see the now-familiar form of Zotikos swimming towards me. We both stared at the ancient walls but when I turned to leave, he put his hand on my shoulder to entreat me to stay. We began by kissing and then stayed in the grotto for what must have been much of the afternoon. Then, Zotikos rose and smiled and his smile grew broader and his face expanded and rippled like a wave and in another instant Nereus was standing over me.

"You perform very well, my plaything from the surface," he said, still smiling. I just lay there and stared. I



remembered something I'd heard about the sea god being able to change shape. I had never expected to actually see it.

I swam out of the grotto following Nereus, and as we approached Nereus' cave I saw Zotikos, the real Zotikos grabbing at a passing fish, and I smiled to myself.

One day, not long after, the bright afternoon suddenly darkened and there was a feel to the water, a sense that this was not just another storm on the surface. My ears were accustomed to the sounds of the ocean but this was different, a kind of roar that bespoke of power and authority. The merfolk darted like minnows ahead of a shark and Zotikos swam to my side, an anxious look on his face.

"The cave," he said. "Quickly."

Nereus' cave was full of activity. Merfolk were swimming around, streams of bubbles in their wake. Only Nereus, seated on his throne, appeared calm. He did not even bother to look upward.

A huge, dark bulk filled the entrance of the cave, surrounded by merfolk I didn't recognize.

"On your knees! Now!" Zotikos hissed.

I quickly did as he asked but was able to glance upward to observe our visitor. He was tall, almost as tall as the roof of the cave, bare chested with flesh toned as blue as the sea. His beard was short and dark and appeared to be interwoven with strands of seaweed. There was a crown on his head which I first took to be made of some polished metal but was an immense seashell, seemingly turned inside-out with crown-like points sticking outward. He resembled Nereus superficially, but where Nereus gave an impression of great age, this figure had a look and demeanor which spoke of impetuous youth.

"Ho, Posideon!" Nereus said, confirming my suspicion as to the visitor's identity.

As befitted the ruler of the sea he was followed by attendants, merfolk and sea creatures as well as a few sea-dwellers like myself. He was attired in a loincloth made of seaweed and decorated with shells and fastened by a golden belt. This and the crown were the only clothing that hung on his muscular frame.

"Ho, Nereus!" Posideon said as Nereus gestured for us to rise from our kneeling positions.

"To what do I owe the presence of the Lord of the Oceans?" Nereus asked our visitor.

"The eyes and ears of the Ocean tell me of your new acquisition," Posideon said. "A surface dweller whom you have transformed and taken for yourself."

I suddenly felt chilled as if by a current from the far north. Posideon continued.

"This lad has the muscular looks of Perseus, who I always fancied," Posideon said. "Of course, his destiny lay elsewhere."

Posideon turned to stare at me with a huge smile as he gestured for one of his attendants to bring him a conch shell from which he took a drink of some liquid which, I gathered, was not water.

"In other words, I want him," Posideon said giving me a nod. Something in his stance spoke of cruelty and I remembered how Athens, at its founding, had sought out Athena's patronage when Posideon had offered his if they were to name their new city after him. The sea god was known for sweeping in and taking the young men and women he took a liking to. I wanted to run.

"Stand there, Akamas," Nereus said, reading my mind.

"What are you willing to trade for your new toy?" Posideon asked.

"My existence is fairly simple," Nereus said. "I have no needs I cannot supply."

"I could provide you with an army of men such as this, all of them at your beck and call," Posideon said.

"A flattering offer, but I have no interest in any others at the moment," said Nereus.

My skin began to prickle. The two of them were discussing my ownership as if I were a pig or a sheep.

"I am fully within my rights as Lord of the Sea to order those in my domain to do my bidding," Posideon said. His face was grim and the light from the surface above darkened.

"But I have full authority!" Nereus said calmly. "This was our bargain eons ago when I vacated the Throne of the Oceans."

Posideon's eyes narrowed as he looked me up and down. "Do you wish the throne again?"

"I have no wish to return to the cumbersome ways of a monarch," Nereus said.

"I will summon the waves!" Posideon thundered raising his trident. "The whales! All the creatures of the sea!"

Nereus simply stared at Posideon and yawned. Posideon shook the trident and the waters began to swirl around the cave. I looked across the cave. Zotikos was visibly shaking and probably so was I.

Posideon shook his trident again. Instantly there was a low rumble and the cave shook. I heard a high squealing sound from the merfolk and I glanced upward expecting the cave roof to fall on us.

Nereus, however, just yawned again. Deliberately. He was, I finally realized, doing it for show. Another moment and the shaking and swirling water ceased. Posideon bellowed again and rushed out of the cave. A moment later there was a low rumble from outside, a rumble which faded into the distance.

"The Lord of the Sea is taking his leave," Nereus said slyly.

"Will...will he be back?" I asked.

"Of course!" Nereus said with a laugh. "Probably wanting something else, after fortifying himself with a few conch shells of his favorite liquid. He does this every few centuries, so get used to it!" Nereus smiled at me. "You need not fear, little fish; you are under my protection always."

And that was how it stayed. From then on I sought out Nereus' embraces instead of taking them as I was commanded to. The seasons and the years blended like the shifting currents and I barely noted their passage.

I saw the surface again, several times. Once, when we retrieved men from a capsized vessel, and deposited them safely on shore, I walked on the surface, but I had no desire to stay. I had found my home.

Even gods do not last forever. There came a day when Nereus fell asleep and suddenly became an undersea mountain which grumbled and shook with an inner fire. I, Zotikos and several of the merfolk gathered around the mountain, our transformed master, wondering what we were going to do when suddenly the mountain, the sea bottom, the water and even the attending fish dissolved away into a deep blue blackness which I recognized as the vault of sky. We had been placed among the stars like the mighty Orion or the vain Andromeda.

The sky is a calm and pleasant place to be with no needs or worries. From my position, I can now look upward and outward to the starry infinity or look downward to the Earth's surface, seas and people. Even from this distance I can hear their talk as plainly as I can see vacant Mount Olympus. The people who watch the stars refer to our grouping as the Seven Sisters.

But we are not sisters, we are brothers.

If I turn my head slightly I can see Zotikos floating beside me. His eyes twinkle brilliantly as he smiles.





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