

## Stag

Soon, I would be gone.

Under the blossoming trees of Spring and the passionate winds that swirled through the kingdom in mockery of the streams running through the ground, light filtered onto my fashioned figure made to replicate divinity itself. In the distance, the ocean glittered brilliantly, shining so harshly I had to divert my eyes. It was as if the world was watching me, in every move I made. The people saw my death as a gift. In my passing, they would celebrate. They would throw my limp corpse on a pyre and watch as I erupted into flames.

They had dressed me in the finest white silks, clinging to my skin as a reminder of the fate I had been bound to, the product of my beauty. My fingers were tipped with gold, same with my sharp cheekbones and the length of my collarbone. It was not a tradition in most places, but this kingdom had been built and grown separate from the customs of the other nearby kingdoms, with whom they had very little contact. I was the image of purity. The perfect sacrifice.

Now, I waited. I sat beneath a cypress tree, one hand on its prickly exterior and the other fidgeting with the hem of my dress. In myth, the mortal Kyparissos was transformed into a cypress tree in the power of his grief, forced to mourn the stag he had mistakenly slaughtered. I wondered then, with the rough needles picking at my soft skin, if anyone would mourn me.

My parents were lost to a pile of things I didn't know. I would be childish if I thought they might spare me even an ounce of grief. The people of the kingdom would celebrate my death, but not in my name. They would celebrate their fields that would burst with life and their children that would grow old and strong, all because of my passing.

I pressed my palm onto the cypress tree, and it rustled gently in response. "Mourn me," I begged, feeling the heat of grief fill my chest and bleed from my eyes, dripping down my cheeks and smearing my golden makeup in a perfect line. "Mourn me."

The wind ceased, clearing the air so that I could hear the quiet crunch of uneven footsteps on the dirt path. I lifted my head, expecting to find a guard coming to retrieve me. Instead, there was a girl.

She had long blonde hair that tangled at the ends, and wore a short dress that dropped down to her knees. Her hands were pressed against her rosy cheeks, warming them. When she saw me, she stopped.

"Hello," I smiled at her weakly, bringing my hands to my lap.

She looked at me for a moment, eyes wide with curiosity, before raising a little hand in greeting. She could not have been over six. "What is on your face?"

"It is makeup. The people from the palace have given it to me."

My smile grew at the way her face lit up. Carefully, she stepped over the twigs and fallen needles that were scattered hazardously on the trail. Her bare feet were brown at the bottom after a long trek from the village. Clumsily, she flopped down beside me.

"Are you the sacrifice?"

My breath hitched. She said the word slowly, enunciating every vowel with care. It did not sound right to her youthful tongue. I wanted to wipe it from her mouth, to steal the word and throw it into the ocean. Instead, I just gave her a somber nod.

She fiddled with the leaves at her feet, plucking the needles off their stems. "My brother wants to watch it, but my mother says no," She explained simply. "Are you scared?"

I knew how I looked. The furrow of my brows and the frown that snaked down my face. I slowly attempted to correct my discomfort, but I still pondered the question from a distance. It was easiest to touch my fears of death with a ten foot pole, so that I could only face them when they had come to fruition. But now, I had to recognize that even she, a child, had questions and emotions that were not rooted in innocence.

"Yes," I replied, softly, "I am terrified."

She nodded in understanding, repositioning her body so that she could look closer at the shine on my cheeks and collarbone. She reached out a hand, and without request pressed her index finger to the top of my cheek.

"Are you scared 'cause it might hurt?" She asked, bringing her finger back to her lap but not removing her gaze.

I wanted to tell her about my fears and my hopes, about all the things I would miss. I wanted to tell her my name, so that at least my title could outlive my body, immortalized by the children I was saving with my death. The gods would see my passage as a gift, and they would breathe life into the creations of the villagers so that they would push on further than I ever could. They would grow wrinkles on their once bright, unstretched faces, and their minds would grow wise with time. I wanted to tell her that I was saving her.

But I could not. It was not her duty to be my Kyparissos.

Instead, I pressed my bronze hands to her pale cheeks so that the glittery paste on my fingertips spread onto her soft skin, making it golden. Looking back at me were her rare blue eyes that could only be that bright on someone of her age.

"The gods will take my death as an honor. I am not afraid to rest," I told her simply, my voice as gentle as the rustling rosemary that whispered in the breeze, "You will live for many decades as a gift from the gods. I am happy that you will live, so I am happy that I will die."

She blinked at me, making no moves to respond. She would not have been able to, anyways, because in the distance the gruff voice of a guard called out the word, "Aleka! Aleka!"

It was the name they had given me. It was not my true name, but I was in no place to correct them. It was better than them calling me "Thusia". Sacrifice.

I stood, my dress falling back to my ankles. The girl continued to sit, her knees tucked and her posture cool and relaxed. I was happy to see that she was not shaken by our conversation.

Her next words were nearly snuffed by the wind, but I was just close enough to hear her ask, "Is Aleka your name?"

I nearly thought better than to tell her, but I saw no reason why I could not. Perhaps if my name was spoken aloud it would travel through the girl to the village people who abstained from

preventing my death. In a sickly sort of revenge I imagined them hearing my name and weeping from the sudden rush of grief that would overtake them. Carefully, I knelt down so that my mouth was just by her ear, and said, "My name is--"

"Aleka!"

A man rounded the corner, his face obscured by a golden helmet. I could not see his expression, but from the twisting line of his mouth I could tell he was not happy with me.

He looked me up and down before abruptly taking me by the arm, his grip like iron.

"Look at what you have done, girl," He motioned to my dress, and upon looking down I realized the skirt was littered with grime. And after the tears and smudges, I was sure my makeup was no better. "Come then. You will be fixed at the palace."

He began to haul me off, tugging at me relentlessly over the prickly brush and sharp rocks that tore at the sensitive skin of my feet through my sandals. Despite his anger, I couldn't stop the swivel of my head as I turned to look back at the girl. But when I finally found her small frame, she was not looking at me. She had gone back to plucking at the needles that fell from the cypress tree.

I had stopped crying. Once put back under the care of the dressers at the palace, I quit resisting the way they tugged at my hair and scratched at my cheeks. When the dress was tied too tight, I did not struggle. They had given me new, clean silks that draped over my shoulders and tumbled down to my ankles in folds. They had adorned me with golden jewelry, thick bracelets on my wrists and large, jeweled necklaces resting on my throat.

My lips were sticky with red ochre, and my eyes had been darkened with a mixture of charcoal and olive oil. They had reapplied the gold on my cheeks, making it even brighter so that it could show over my bronze skin. I seemed to glow.

While I sat, I thought. I supposed they thought I should feel honored that I could be blessed with such a beautiful fate, to die in the name of youth, of prosperity. But I was not a soldier, nor a valiant hero who fought his way through battle. I was a girl, who found no pride in bloodshed. But still I felt the ugly venom of guilt pass through me as the image of the young girl's blonde tangles rushed through my mind. Buried within me was the tugging sense that I owed it to her. To the future that would come with my end.

It was not alleviated, even as the doors swung open and the evening light flooded the room. Even as they took me by my arms, dragging me outside to a tall altar and placing me before a crowd of what must have been thousands, eyes hungry with curiosity and anticipation.

I looked out at every person. My breath caught in my throat as I took in every feature of their glistening faces. Some children sat upon their parents' shoulders, wide eyes blinking curiously. A hollow thought passed through my mind as I imagined them holding their own children up many years in the future, as the cycle of sacrifice pressed on.

And suddenly, something hit me. Like a bolt of lightning straight to my chest, I was struck with a realization so pure and relieving that I nearly smiled, even under the pressure of my impending slaughter.

As I looked out at their faces, some old and some young, it became clear to me that their growth would not be stunted by grief. In the building of a great kingdom, they would be strengthened by the lesson of my identity. By my name.

A man spoke my false name to the crowd, and their cheers rose over the beating of my heart and shook the ground I stood on, high above them all. I knew what I had to do.

I was filled with adrenaline that was no longer fueled by spite. It overtook my fear, my guilt. I saw a future of smile lines carved into faces, not controlled by divinity and the carelessness of sacrifice, but by emotion.

I watched as the sun glinted off of sharp metal, the point hauntingly sharp. With so little time left, I inhaled evenly and stilled my whirring mind, standing tall above the people and imagining for a moment that I was a goddess, gifting them with something much more than life.

“My name...” My voice trailed off, overwhelmed by the sudden force of the cheers. They had not expected me to speak.

Before I could speak again, though, my core filled with heat and pain as a dagger stabbed into me, but I did not look down to see what spilled.

I took in a final, desperate breath, and called out, “Elaphia!”