



CHAPTER FIVE



“COME,” I SAID. IT was midday and hot, the earth crumbling beneath our feet. “It is very close. A perfect sleeping spot to ease your weary bones.”

He followed sullenly. He was always ill-tempered when the sun was high. “I do not like to be so far from my boat.”

“Your boat will be safe, I promise it. Look! We are here. Are not these flowers worth the walk? They are beautiful, palest yellow and shaped like bells.”

I coaxed him down among the crowding blossoms. I had brought water and a basket of food. I was aware of my father’s eye above us. A picnic, I meant it to appear, if he should glance our way. I could not be sure what my grandmother might have said to him.

I served Glaucos and watched while he ate. What would he look like as a god? I wondered. A little distance away grew a forest, its shade thick enough to hide us from my father’s eyes. When he was changed, I would pull him there, and show him that my oath did not hold us anymore.

I set a cushion on the ground. “Lie back,” I said. “Sleep. Won’t it be nice to sleep?”

"I have a headache," he complained. "And the sun is in my eyes."

I brushed back his hair and moved so I blocked the sun. He sighed then. He was always tired, and in a moment his eyes were dragging closed.

I stirred the flowers so they lay against him. Now, I thought. *Now.*

He slept on as I had seen him sleep a hundred times. In my fantasies of this moment, the flowers had changed him at a touch. Their immortal blood leapt into his veins and he rose up a god, took my hands and said, *Now I may thank you as you deserve.*

I stirred the flowers again. I plucked some and dropped them on his chest. I blew out my breath, so the scent and pollen would drift over him. "Change," I whispered. "He must be a god. Change."

He slept. The flowers hung lank around us, wan and fragile as moth wings. A line of acid was tracing through my stomach. Maybe I had not found the right ones, I told myself. I should have come to scout ahead, but I had been too eager. I rose and walked the hillside, searching for some crimson clutch of blooms, vivid, leaking obvious power. But all I found were common blossoms that any hill might have.

I crumpled beside Glaucos and wept. The tears of those of naiad blood can flow for eternity, and I thought it might take an eternity to speak all my grief. I had failed. Aeëtes had been wrong, there were no herbs of power, and Glaucos would be lost to me forever, his sweet, perishing beauty withered into earth. Overhead, my father slipped along his track. Those soft, foolish flowers bobbed around us on their stems. I hated them. I seized a handful and ripped it up by the roots. I tore the petals. I broke the stems to pieces. The damp shreds stuck to my hands, and the sap bled across my skin. The scent rose raw and wild, acetic as old wine. I tore up another handful, my hands sticky and hot. In my ears was a dark humming, like a hive.

It is hard to describe what happened next. A knowledge woke in

the depths of my blood. It whispered: that the strength of those flowers lay in their sap, which could transform any creature to its truest self.

I did not stop to question. The sun had passed the horizon by then. Glaucos' lips had fallen open as he dreamed, and I lifted a handful of flowers over him, squeezing. The sap leaked and gathered. Drop by milky drop I let it fall into his mouth. A stray bead landed on his lips, and I slid it onto his tongue with my finger. He coughed. Your truest self, I told him. Let it be.

I crouched, another handful ready. I would squeeze the whole field into him if I had to. But even as I thought that, a shadow moved across his skin. It darkened as I watched. Past brown it went, past purple, spreading like a bruise until his whole body was deepest sea-blue. His hands were swelling, his legs, his shoulders. Hairs began to push out from his chin, long and copper-green. Where his tunic gaped, I could see blisters forming on his chest. I stared. They were barnacles.

Glaucos, I whispered. His arm was strange beneath my fingers, hard and thick and slightly cool. I shook it. Wake up.

His eyes opened. For the passing of one breath he did not move. Then he leapt to his feet, towering like a storm-surge, the sea-god he had always been. Circe, he cried, I am changed!

There was no time to go to the forest, no time to draw him to me on the moss. He was wild with his new strength, snorting like a bull in spring air. "Look," he said, holding out his hands. "No scabs. No scars. And I am not tired. For the first time in all my life, I am not tired! I could swim the whole ocean. I want to see myself. How do I look?"

"Like a god," I said.

He seized me by the arms and spun me, white teeth shining in his

blue face. Then he stopped, a new thought dawning. "I can go with you now. I can go to the gods' halls. Will you take me?"

I could not tell him no. I brought him to my grandmother. My hands trembled a little, but the lies were ready on my lips. He had fallen asleep in a meadow and woken like this. "Perhaps my wish to turn him immortal was a kind of prophecy. It is not unknown in my father's children."

She scarcely listened. She suspected nothing. No one had ever suspected me.

"Brother," she cried, embracing him. "Newest brother! This is an act of the Fates. You are welcome here until you find a palace of your own."

There was no more walking on the shore. Every day I spent in those halls with Glaucos the God. We sat upon the banks of my grandfather's twilight river, and I introduced him to all my aunts and uncles and cousins, reeling off nymph after nymph, though before that moment I would have said I did not know their names. For their part, they crowded him, clamoring for the story of his miraculous transformation. He spun the tale well: his ill humor, the drowsiness that fell on him like a boulder, and then the power lifting him like cresting waves, granted by the Fates themselves. He would bare his blue chest before them, strapped with god-muscles, and offer his hands, smooth as surf-rolled shells. "See how I am grown into myself!"

I loved his face in those moments, glowing with power and joy. My chest swelled with his. I longed to tell him that it was I who had given him such a gift, but I saw how it pleased him to believe his godhead wholly his own and I did not want to take that from him. I still dreamed of lying with him in those dark woods, but I had begun to think beyond that, to say to myself new words: *marriage, husband*.

"Come," I told him. "You must meet my father and grandfather."

I chose his clothes myself, in colors that showed his skin to greatest advantage. I warned him of the courtesies that were expected, and kept to the back, watching, while he offered them. He did well, and they praised him. They took him to Nereus, old Titan god of the sea, who in turn introduced him to Poseidon, his new lord. Together they helped him shape his underwater palace, set with gold and wave-wrack treasures.

I went there every day. The brine stung my skin, and he was often too busy with admiring guests to give me more than the briefest smile, but I did not mind. We had time now, all the time we would ever need. It was a pleasure to sit at those silver tables, watching the nymphs and gods tumble over themselves for his attention. Once they would have sneered at him, called him fish-gutter. Now they begged him for tales of his mortality. The stories grew in the telling: his mother bent-back like a hag, his father beating him every day. They gasped and pressed a hand to their hearts.

"It is well," he said. "I sent a wave to smash my father's boat, and the shock killed him. My mother I blessed. She has a new husband and a slave to help her with the washing. She has built me an altar, and already it smokes. My village hopes I will bring them a good tide."

"And will you?" The nymph who spoke clutched her hands beneath her chin. She had been one of my sister and Perses' dearest companions, her round face lacquered with malice, but now speaking to Glaucos even she was transformed, open, ripe as a pear.

"We will see," he said, "what they offer me." Sometimes when he was very pleased, his feet turned to a flipping tail, and now it was. I watched it sweep along the marble floor, shining palest gray, its overlapping scales faintly iridescent.

"Is your father truly dead?" I said, when they were gone.

"Of course. He deserved it, for his blasphemy." He was polishing

a new trident, a gift from Poseidon himself. During the days, he lounged on couches, drinking from goblets large as his head. He laughed like my uncles did, open-mouthed and roaring. He was not just some scraggled lord of crabs, but one of the greater sea-gods who might call whales to his beck if he wanted, rescue ships from reefs and shoals, lift rafts of sailors from the drowning waves.

"That round-faced nymph," he said, "the beautiful one. What is her name?"

My mind had drifted. I was imagining how he might ask for my hand. On the beach, I thought. That shore where we had first glimpsed each other.

"Do you mean Scylla?"

"Yes, Scylla," he said. "She moves like water, does she not? Silver as a flowing stream." His eyes lifted to hold mine. "Circe, I have never been so happy."

I smiled back at him. I saw nothing but the boy that I loved shining at last. Every honor lavished on him, every altar built in his name, every admirer who crowded him, these felt like gifts to me, for he was mine.

I began to see that nymph Scylla everywhere. Here she was laughing at some jest of Glaucos', here she was touching her hand to her throat and shaking out her hair. She was very beautiful, it was true, one of the jewels of our halls. The river-gods and nymphs sighed over her, and she liked to raise their hopes with a look and break them with another. When she moved she clattered faintly from the thousand presents they pressed on her: bracelets of coral, pearls about her neck in strings. She sat beside me and showed them to me, one by one.

"Lovely," I said, scarcely looking. Yet there she was again at the next feast, her jewels doubled, trebled, enough to sink a fishing boat.

I think now she must have been furious that it took me so long to understand. By then she was holding her pearls, big as apples, up to my face. "Are they not the greatest marvel you have ever seen?"

The truth is, I had begun to wonder if she was in love with me. "They are very fine," I said faintly.

At last she had to set her teeth and say it straight.

"Glaucos says he will empty the sea of them, if it would please me."

We were in Oceanos' hall, the air sickly with incense. I started. "Those are from Glaucos?"

Oh, the joy on her face. "All of them are. You mean you have not heard? I thought you would be first to know, you are so close. But perhaps you are not the friend that you think you are to him?" She waited, watching me. I was aware of other faces too, giddily breathless. Such fights were more precious than gold in our halls.

She smiled. "Glaucos asked me to marry him. I have not decided yet what I will say. What is your counsel, Circe? Should I take him, blue skin, flippers, and all?"

The naiads laughed like a thousand plashing fountains. I fled so she would not see my tears and wear them as another of her trophies.

My father was with my river-uncle Achelous, and frowned to be interrupted. "What?"

"I want to marry Glaucos. Will you allow it?"

He laughed. "Glaucos? He has his pick. I do not think it will be you."

A shock ran through me. I did not stop to brush my hair or change my dress. Every moment felt like a drop of my blood lost. I ran to Glaucos' palace. He was away at some other god's hall so I waited, trembling, amid his overturned goblets, the wine-soaked cushions from his latest feast.

He came at last. With one flick of his hand, the mess was gone,

and the floors gleamed again. "Circe," he said, when he saw me. Just that, as if you might say: foot.

"Do you mean to marry Scylla?"

I watched the light sweep across his face. "Is she not the most perfect creature you have ever seen? Her ankles are so small and delicate, like the sweetest doe in the forest. The river-gods are enraged that she favors me, and I hear even Apollo is jealous."

I was sorry then that I had not used those tricks of hair and eyes and lips that all our kind have. "Glaucos," I said, "she is beautiful, yes, but she does not deserve you. She is cruel, and she does not love you as you might be loved."

"What do you mean?"

He was frowning at me, as if I were a face he could not quite remember. I tried to think of what my sister would do. I stepped to him, trailed my fingers on his arm.

"I mean, I know one who will love you better."

"Who?" he said. But I could see him start to understand. His hands lifted, as though to ward me off. He, who was a towering god. "You have been a sister to me," he said.

"I would be more," I said. "I would be all." I pressed my lips to his.

He pushed me from him. His face was caught, half in anger, half in a sort of fear. He looked almost like his old self.

"I have loved you since that first day I saw you sailing," I said. "Scylla laughs at your fins and green beard, but I cherished you when there were fish guts on your hands and you wept from your father's cruelty. I helped you when —"

"No!" He slashed his hand through the air. "I will not think on those days. Every hour some new bruise upon me, some new ache, always weary, always burdened and weak. I sit at councils with your father now. I do not have to beg for every scrap. Nymphs clamor for me, and I may choose the best among them, which is Scylla."

The words struck like stones, but I would not give him up so easily.

"I can be best for you," I said. "I can please you, I swear it. You will find none more loyal than me. I will do anything."

I do think he loved me a little. For before I could say the thousand humiliating things in my heart, all the proofs of passion I had hoarded, the crawling devotions I would do, I felt his power come around me. And with that same flick he had used upon the cushions, he sent me back to my rooms.

I lay on the dirt, weeping. Those flowers had made him his true being, which was blue, and finned, and not mine. I thought I would die of such pain, which was not like the sinking numbness Aeëtes had left behind, but sharp and fierce as a blade through my chest. But of course I could not die. I would live on, through each scalding moment to the next. This is the grief that makes our kind choose to be stones and trees rather than flesh.

Beautiful Scylla, dainty-doe Scylla, Scylla with her viper heart. Why had she done such a thing? It was not love, I had seen the sneer in her eyes when she spoke of his flippers. Perhaps it was because she loved my sister and brother, who scorned me. Perhaps it was because her father was a nothing river, and her mother a shark-faced sea-nymph, and she liked the thought of taking something from the daughter of the sun.

It did not matter. All I knew was that I hated her. For I was like any dull ass who has ever loved someone who loved another. I thought: if only she were gone, it would change everything.

I left my father's halls. It was the time between the sun's setting and my pale aunt's rise. There was no one to see me. I gathered those flowers of true being and brought them to the cove where it was said Scylla bathed each day. I broke their stems and emptied their white sap drop by drop into the waters. She would not be able to

hide her adder malice anymore. All her ugliness would be revealed. Her eyebrows would thicken, her hair would turn dull, and her nose would grow long and snouted. The halls would echo with her furious screams and the great gods would come to whip me, but I would welcome them, for every lash upon my skin would be only further proof to Glaucos of my love.

CHAPTER SIX



NO FURIES CAME FOR me that night. None came the next morning either, or all that afternoon. By dusk I went to find my mother at her mirror.

"Where is Father?"

"Gone straight to Oceanos. The feast is there." She wrinkled her nose, her pink tongue stuck between her teeth. "Your feet are filthy. Can you not at least wash them?"

I did not wash them. I did not want to wait another moment. What if Scylla was at the banquet, lounging in Glaucos' lap? What if they were married already? What if the sap had not worked?

It is strange now, to remember how I worried that.

The halls were even more crowded than usual, stinking of the same rose oil every nymph insisted was her special charm. I could not see my father, but my aunt Selene was there. She stood at the center of a clot of upturned faces, a mother and her baby birds, waiting to be crammed.

"You must understand, I only went to look because the water was so roiled up. I thought perhaps it was some sort of... meeting. You know how Scylla is."

I felt the breath stop in my chest. My cousins were snickering and cutting their eyes at each other. Whatever comes, I thought, do not show a thing.

"But she was flailing very strangely, like some sort of drowning cat. Then — I cannot say it."

She pressed her silvery hand to her mouth. It was a lovely gesture. Everything about my aunt was lovely. Her husband was a beautiful shepherd enchanted with ageless sleep, dreaming of her for eternity.

"A leg," she said. "A hideous leg. Like a squid's, boneless and covered in slime. It burst from her belly, and another burst beside it, and more and more, until there were twelve all dangling from her."

My fingertips stung faintly where the sap had leaked.

"That was only the beginning," Selene said. "She was bucking, her shoulders writhing. Her skin turned gray and her neck began to stretch. From it tore five new heads, each filled with gaping teeth."

My cousins gasped, but the sound was distant, like far-off waves. It felt impossible to picture the horror Selene described. To make myself believe: *I did that.*

"And all the while, she was baying and howling, barking like some wild pack of dogs. It was a relief when she finally dove beneath the waves."

As I had squeezed those flowers into Scylla's cove, I had not wondered how my cousins would take it, those who were Scylla's sisters and aunts and brothers and lovers. If I had thought of it, I would have said that Scylla was their darling, and that when the Furies came for me, they would have shouted loudest of all to see my blood. But now when I looked around me, all I saw were faces bright as whetted blades. They clung to each other, crowing. *I wish I'd seen it! Can you imagine?*

"Tell it again," an uncle shouted, and my cousins cried out their agreement.

My aunt smiled. Her curving lips made a crescent like herself in the sky. She told it again: the legs, the necks, the teeth.

My cousins' voices swarmed up to the ceiling.

You know she's lain with half the halls.

I'm glad I never let her have me. And one of the river-gods' voices, rising over all: *Of course she barks. She always was a bitch!*

Shrieking laughter clawed at my ears. I saw a river-god who had sworn he would fight Glaucos over her crying with mirth. Scylla's sister pretended to howl like a dog. Even my grandparents had come to listen, smiling at the crowd's edge. Oceanos said something in Tethys' ear. I could not hear it, but I had watched him for half an eternity, I knew the movements of his lips. *Good riddance.*

Beside me an uncle was shouting, *Tell it again!* This time my aunt only rolled her pearly eyes. He smelled like squids, and anyway, it was past time for the feast. The gods wafted to their couches. The cups were poured, the ambrosia passed. Their lips grew red with wine, their faces shone like jewels. Their laughter crackled around me.

I knew that electric pleasure, I thought. I had seen it before, in another dark hall.

The doors opened and Glaucos stepped through, his trident in his hand. His hair was greener than ever, fanned out like a lion's mane. I saw the joy leap in my cousins' eyes, heard their hiss of excitement. Here was more sport. They would tell him of his love's transformation, crack his face like an egg and laugh at what ran out.

But before they could say anything, my father was there, striding over to pull him aside.

My cousins sank back on sour elbows. Spoilsport Helios, ruining their fun. No matter, Perse would get it out of him later, or Selene. They lifted their goblets and went back to their pleasures.

I followed after Glaucos. I do not know how I dared, except that

all my mind was filled up with a gray wash like churning waves. I stood outside the room where my father had drawn them.

I heard Glaucos' low voice: "Can she not be changed back?"

Every god-born knows that answer from their swaddles. "No," my father said. "No god may undo what is done by the Fates or another god. Yet these halls have a thousand beauties, each ripe as the next. Look to them instead."

I waited. I still hoped Glaucos would think of me. I would have married him in a moment. But I found myself hoping for another thing too, which I would not have believed the day before: that he would weep all the salt in his veins for Scylla's return, holding fast to her as his one, true love.

"I understand," Glaucos said. "It is a shame, but as you say there are others."

A soft metal ping rang out. He was flicking the tines of his trident. "Nereus' youngest is fair," he said. "What is her name? Thetis?"

My father clicked his tongue. "Too salted for my taste."

"Well," Glaucos said. "Thank you for your excellent counsel. I will look to it."

They walked right by me. My father took his golden place beside my grandfather. Glaucos made his way to the purple couches. He looked up at something a river-god said and laughed. It is the last memory I have of his face, his teeth bright as pearls in the torchlight, his skin stained blue.

In years to come, he would take my father's advice indeed. He lay with a thousand nymphs, siring children with green hair and tails, well loved by fishermen, for often they filled their nets. I would see them sometimes, sporting like dolphins in the deepest crests. They never came in to shore.

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The black river slid along its banks. The pale flowers nodded on their stems. I was blind to all of it. One by one my hopes were dropping away. I would share no eternity with Glaucos. We would have no marriage. We would never lie in those woods. His love for me was drowned and gone.

Nymphs and gods flowed past, their gossip drifting in the fragrant, torch-lit air. Their faces were the same as always, vivid and glowing, but they seemed suddenly alien. Their strings of jewels clacked loud as bird-bills, their red mouths stretched wide around their laughter. Somewhere Glaucos laughed among them, but I could not pick his voice out from the throng.

Not all gods need be the same.

My face had begun to burn. It was not pain, not exactly, but a stinging that went on and on. I pressed my fingers to my cheeks. How long had it been since I'd thought of Prometheus? A vision of him rose before me now: his torn back and steady face, his dark eyes encompassing everything.

Prometheus had not cried out as the blows fell, though he had grown so covered in blood that he'd looked like a statue dipped in gold. And all the while, the gods had watched, their attention bright as lightning. They would have relished a turn with the Fury's whip, given the chance.

I was not like them.

Are you not? The voice was my uncle's, resonant and deep. *Then you must think, Circe. What would they not do?*

My father's chair was draped with the skins of pure-black lambs. I knelt by their dangling necks.

"Father," I said, "it was I who made Scylla a monster."

All around me, voices dropped. I cannot say if the very furthest couches looked, if Glaucos looked, but all my uncles did, snapped