

The Lost Pleiad: Wife of Sisyphus

Mice with empty bellies gnaw at my feet and the cold breath of death begins to burden my warmth, when you finally return to the bottom of the hill, knees shaking and fists alabaster. Perhaps grief has turned me insane, but when you say my name, lips trembling under glossy eyes, I pray that it is blood still flowing through your heart, somehow, and not shades.

“Dear, dear husband!” I leap towards you, knees buckling down to the floor, “I have come to visit you. Take my wretched palms so I know that it is you.”

But you wrench my wrists away, lungs giving forth a ghastly groan. You scoff at me, before turning back to your dreadful fate — your rock. Gypsum wrists straining and twisting against an unyielding boulder. Still, finally seeing you again feels like sweet ambrosia.

A selfish man you are, and yet, tears I shed. How do you bear to suffer all that you do? Loyal to your pride, ambitious to a fault; caught and punished, your hubris now rewards you nothing but a burdensome rock that gnaws forever at your palms. My heart grows hollow as I helplessly watch.

But you were neglectful, whose own pride tainted your role as a husband. Even when you were alive, your presence had always been as hollow as when you're dead now. My children, who mourned you, after I had tossed your body into the public square, cursed me with the bitterest words because I had been the one to thwart you a proper burial. They continued to spurn me, even when you came back from the dead, where you lived the rest of your life happily with them. Where was I? Under the gloom of your shadows – framed as the one who had corrupted your burial. I carried the weight of indictment willingly; I loved you, truly, and would have never tarnished your image for my own. But why am I so severely punished for a deed done out of honour? Have I not simply followed what you had asked me?

The stench of that memory poisons my blood like flowing water. The accusations still ring. Dreadful drums in my desolate ears.

“You do not even love me, my beautiful Merope.” You had whispered. Tears barreled down my face as I shook my head, but again, and again, you coerced me.

“How can I believe your love, if you are so cruel to my wishes? Do you not honour your husband?” I wailed back in protest like a dying dog.

“I have given you everything, Merope. Do this, if you are truly a worthy wife.” How foolish I had been, to shred all morals merely because I had loved you.

“Once I die, Merope, do not bury me, no matter how sacred the duty is. Do not prepare my body. Do not mourn me. Discard me. Leave me to rot in the public square.”

My lips, before they could speak, hung loose as I watched Death chain you up right at that moment. Baleful shadows caged you in, your arms threaded behind your back. Shades of stygian billowed across your flesh, putrid blue veins bulging out like mangled branches, crawling up your neck. No light in those eyes. Only rusty pearls stared back, and a limp tongue black as onyx.

Our house echoed when you hit the floor. There was a cloud of death, thick as smoke, which lingered ominously around your body. Maybe I was going mad, I thought, and that this was all some twisted dream, until the blood started pooling from your head. Crimson; the smell

singed my nostrils, like hot metal. As if an iron rod went down my throat, I choked on terror, my repulsion so rancid I believed I would die. But I always had been faithful to my honour - my role as a good wife, a perfect mother. I gathered all the falling pieces of my shattering heart, and shoved aside my own selfish grief. Ordered by compulsion, I held you by the arms, and oh, how tears surged from my eyes! Your warm, tender skin, still blooming with love and light! Helios' amber wreath kissed your ivory flesh, and I weeped unto it. The city held its breath as it watched me drag you. Through the umbrous streets, your crumpled corpse followed my hands like a pale shadow. I stopped to leave you by the market. No coin in your mouth, no anointing with oil. I left you there, naked and bruised, your back wilting against the mudbrick wall, like a cernuous flower; tainted in blood. With intractable sobs I forced myself to walk away. The hem of my cloak burgeoned a glaring red as my fists clenched it. Roaring cries of horrified crowds couldn't cut through my own thoughts, for they only echoed with your voice.

Shunned, avoided, and isolated, I was the malicious wife of Sisyphus. Even the women condemned me, calling me the most dishonourable wife, praying for my inevitable curse. Indeed I took the role of a slave one day and wandered the market streets, alone and unprotected, yearning to perhaps find a soul who was willing to soothe the awful tear in my heart. My frail feet stood bare on the sun-baked path. I relished in the amber warmth, indulging in nature's power. Earth embraced me dearly, she was a blanket for my forsaken skin. Yet the eyes of my fellow creatures were not ones of respect. They burned with scorching hatred.

And when you finally returned, having tricked Persephone herself, I recall, over the many fruitless years, how my children rejected anything I had offered them, and I had tried to offer them everything. I would weave tapestries embroidered with gold for them, but then walk upon shredded and torn linen on the floor. I would watch them watch you with the greatest fondness, while you stiffly sat beside them, lips quivering with so much guilt, but never enough courage to tell them the truth.

I stare at you now, rolling your punishment for eternity. All because you believed you were greater than the gods, you really thought you could trick them. I knew they'd come back for you. When you were allowed to return from that world of shades and live out the rest of your cheated life, I knew something sinister was coming. I waited for something to strike, for the gods to punish me, spurn me, scorn me. I waited for an inevitable horror. While you soaked in all the praise from the townspeople and our children. You bathed in all this adulation, as I had to endure all this grief for you. Peppered in glory, you thanked them graciously for waiting for your return. I hid in your shadow, waiting for when you'd acknowledge me too.

King of Ephyra, you are the man who angered Zeus himself. Still, I loved you. I loved you, even the things I didn't understand. For my heart was so open, my soul so foolish. I am left to toil, my feeble limbs carrying all that's left of our family. What was all of your ambition for? What is the point in living forever, if your eternity is spent like this: pushing a rock you know will never reach the top?

Still, who am I to condemn you? How could I? You finally stumble to the summit of the hill, shoulders heaving, knees shaking – collapsing to the ground as you watch the rock barrel back down again, and I ask myself, how can I sneer at a suffering man, who is just like me? Perhaps there was a seed in me that believed you would return the love, and I let it grow. Perhaps that was why I bore that harrowing routine since you were gone. When I had

walked the streets of the market, I let the townsmen spit at me. When they had all spread rumours, I kept silent. When our children had gripped onto my cloak, bawling at my cruelty, I begged for their forgiveness. I never told them your shadowy secrets. I carried my rock. Held it on my back. I betrayed what dignity was left of me, simply because I had loved you. One would be a fool to say that I don't love you even now, for I still descend these stairs of Persephone's kingdom. You still call me your wife, and that has always been my purpose. I love you, and that is still my ambition. A howling dog I am; loyal to my honour, faithful to a fault.

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