

Home is where the Heart is

He remembers the story when he became one of the 12 Olympian gods. The day he returned home.

It was a simple plan.
Get to the last place where I am yet to be recognized.
Show them, and fight them if they do not see. Establish my place in the Olympic pantheon. Chop chop. Simple.
But you know how home is like.

The women required minimal persuasion, and really I was glad of it. I detest the process of forcing anyone to me.

“What are you going to do about Pentheus?”
Agave sits on the grass, cross legged, fidgeting with her fingers.
“It’s all on him I’m afraid. I cannot do much, not here.” I say.

“Please.” She says, lifting her eyes to look at me.
“If you must punish someone, let it be me and not him.”

Under the light of evening sun and the shade of the nearby trees, her face is half shrouded in shadow. A grimace split down the middle. I wonder how many features of her face are also Semele’s, if her lip would curl or her eyebrows crease in the same manner when she was distressed or afraid.

“You abandoned me, when what I needed most was for you to be at my back.”
“I know, and I’m sorry. Truly.”
She pauses.
“It’s not like he doesn’t understand, it’s just-he...” she breaks off in frustration, unable to find the words to describe what exactly her son was.
“I know it’s not because he doesn’t want to accept you.” She says at last,
“That much I am certain of. Please, I know he doesn’t-”
“It’s alright, I understand what you mean.” I say,
“I will go and talk to Pentheus. As for the specifics, it really is down to him I’m afraid... Maybe we’ll talk, maybe we’ll fight, maybe we’ll play a game, like we used to do before.”

He would frequently play pranks and tricks on me, some harmless and benevolent, others less so.

But even as he gave me the occasional nightmare, he was also the most interesting thing around the place, and I couldn’t help but seek him out again and again whenever I had the free time.

Sometimes, he’d tell me the story of an ancient god, someone come from the depth of the wilderness, from the mysteries of the past.

This wasn’t like any of the other times though.

We were out on the grass near the forest. I was talking to him-I found myself sharing a lot in his presence-about what I felt in regards to the prospect of becoming a future king. I mean, it’s all good and all, but I am nervous I suppose, that it wouldn’t be like what I imagine. I mean, I’ll have much less time to hang around out here with him for one thing. And then he looked at me, and a strange expression came over his face, like he was staring right into my soul, and had found something there that bothered him that he hadn’t taken notice of in the past. Before I had seen that look in his eyes, I had thought nothing could be scarier than when he got bored and decided to up the level of mischief on his pranks. But this was no longer a

game, no longer a joke. What was he seeing? What could possibly be so wrong that it could disturb him?

I didn't ask. I didn't know what to do, I just stared right back.

After a while he seemed to snap out of it. He stood up, shook the curls to his back.

"I'm going to go on a journey soon, so I won't be able to see you be crowned king. But, um," He paused as if searching for words, but when he next spoke the sentence didn't make much sense anyway,

"In the case that it's not like what you imagine, you need to know that I'll be back for you. I want you to know that I'll come back for you."

I nodded, still very confused, but it seemed that he did not need any kind of response at all, hardly casting another glance to me before heading off in the direction of the house.

And I guess that was the end of that day's game.

"I guess I truly am mad. I had intended to go ahead with what I'd previously planned, and put the whole possibility out of my mind, but then I remembered that a certain someone had said they'd come back for me." It is the first time the king is talking to me properly, down in that dingy jail cell. He'd come inside right when I was beginning to get bored.

In the darkness, I feel the intensity of his gaze even as I cannot see his eyes.

"It really is you." His voice is trembling.

"Oh all those years! It seems I have been in a dream. But I see now. You were real. So he is real too, the old god."

"It's not too late. I can still change this. You can go outside, we can turn this around." I tell him.

"No, I'm not going back! If I should go out now I will never wake up. All those years when I was trapped by my own folly-I see it now. I'm going with you to the mountain."

"You know what will happen if you come with us?"

Slowly, he nods.

"It is strange. I don't think you've ever told me outright, but I feel like I do know. I feel like I've known all along. In my dreams. It happened over and over. Ever since you told me that story, as a child."

We lay in the grass, and he tells me the story of an old god who would tear people to pieces.

"Why would he do that?" I asked, utterly horrified.

"To let them be free. People who found that they could not be so in any other way, went and found him, and asked to be torn apart."

"That's ridiculous." I said. That night, I had a nightmare.

But when the dream came back to me many years later, it was almost like a gift. I clung to it, a fantasy that I harbored in the solitude of my nighttime thoughts. The idea scared me, but it fascinated me, and I could not let it go. And whenever the sun rose the next morning, I would be horrified yet strangely relieved.

I wonder if Cadmus knew, or even Tiersias, wise as he thinks he is, when they looked into my eyes the first day of the stranger's arrival, and called me mad for rejecting him, that their youthful king who ruled with an iron fist dreamed of being ripped to pieces at night.

"I wish I were here sooner. But it is hard to think about home when one is away." The god says.

"This is okay." I tell him. Strange that it is almost as if he is the one who needs my reassurance, but even mad as I am now, I like to think that his remark had been sincere, and the empathy I heard in his voice not a mere figment of my imagination.

“Were those always there?” He nods at my horns as I reach to brush a lock of hair out of his eyes.

“I was always the same, but you are different now. So you see.”

“Alright. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

The first thing I see after I wake up are the stars overhead.

Leaning over me, a slightly sheepish expression on his face, is Dionysus, son of Zeus.

“There is a part I didn't tell you about.” He says, in the same tone as he used to tell stories to me as a child.

“...about the old god. The part where he brings people back to life.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

He laughs, guilty but shameless,

“It had seemed a nice prank at the time.”

And serious again.

“I'm sorry.”

I flex my fingers, feel the newfound vitality that flows through them. I no longer need to return to the palace, and if I did, it would be of my own choice perhaps for the first time.

Anything is possible now, anything. It's exactly as I'd imagined.

“It's okay.” I tell him,

“It's alright.”

His hand cups my face as he turns to my mother,

“Your son may no longer wish to be king or to be associated with the family. Return or journey with us. It's your choice.”

He used to hold me like that. After I woke up crying from one of my nightmares, a prank of his gone too far. When he'd light a candle to my bedside, and tell me the other half of the story. That the monster was actually a son, that the fallen bird would actually fly once again. And perhaps he had told me after all, the one about the old god, and I had simply forgotten. It is not farfetched to think so. In fact, I can almost hear his voice now.

With a steady hand, he places the candle down by my bedside, looking tactfully into the flames as I hurriedly wipe away my tears in embarrassment.

“You know, I don't tell this to a lot of people, but I like you, so I will tell you.” He says, grabbing my attention, his voice low.

“That old god, after he tears people apart, he puts them back together.”

“He does?”

“Yes. So that they can truly be free.”

“Free.”

“Like the birds overhead. Like the wind itself. But don't tell anyone about this part of the story.” He smiles, mischief creeping back into his face, and gives me a wink,

“It's a secret.”