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Psyche and Cupid (excerpt)

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was brought into workshop in progress. Because we operate under a workshop model, we see value in an unfinished piece.

Psyche and Cupid (excerpt)
Continued from the 17X chapbook

They rode to an old fortress of grand stone and clever sculpture. It looked impossibly old, and the princess briefly entertained the idea that it had simply grown out of the mountain on its own, a monument of nature to both grace and power, capturing her imagination in a way the freestanding, mostly-wooden structures of her home never had.

The rider led the princess and horse both into the entryway lined with unlit sconces, and rang a bell which rebounded and echoed around the cavernous hall.

"This will be your home, if it pleases you. You may have the run of it, but there are few servants to assist you."

"I am not afraid of work," the princess answered. "Am I to reside here alone?"

"There is a woman, my stewardess, who keeps this place for me. And I—it would please me to visit you. If you wish it."

"Neither am I afraid of loneliness, but I have enjoyed our exchanges."

The rider took the princess's hand, clasping it gently between the soft leather of two riding gloves, and held her gaze with the same tenderness.

"As have I."

Something flickered in the princess's heart. "I should tell you—there is no man whom I can love, aside from that manner in which I honor my father and brothers."

The rider's eyes crinkled, as though the scarf hid a wide smile.

"That is something which we have in common."

Something in the princess's heart burst into flame.

The stewardess could not have been older than the princess's own mother, and though her voice graveled against her tongue when she spoke, her body had a servant's strength and a baker's muscles. Her hair was strangely bright, skin almost sickly pale, and her eyes wandered aimlessly around the entrance hall when she attended the rider's summons, though her head swung toward them when the horse snorted.

"Now then, mistress! Wasn't expecting yin today."

"I have brought a guest," the rider—not the servant's master, but her *mistress*—responded, still grasping the princess's hand, who could feel nothing else but that pressure. "Please show her the kindest of our hospitality."

"Certainly, certainly. Nice to meet ya'."

The princess returned the nicety with a smile, then the rider shifted her gaze to the princess, and the princess barely breathed.

"I must away—I am expected elsewhere. You are free to do here what you like, but I ask you light no lamps. My—the people who neighbor these lands know I am often in the field—"

"And that nosy lot know it's only me here, getting on blind as a bat," interrupted the stewardess. The rider finished her point with a fond smile, "I would not raise their curiosity, nor suspicion with lighted windows in these troubled times."

The princess acquiesced to this request, accepted a kiss on her hand, and remained in the entrance hall as the rider galloped off, until she could see her no more.

"Now then, child," the stewardess broke into the princess's thoughts by placing a hand on her elbow. "I don't suppose you're hungry?"

"I—yes, if you have something you can spare."

"Pish, they keep me comfortable here. Come along, and we'll see if we can't get you cleaned up a bit, too."

They descended into the kitchens, lit only by the oven fire, and filled with strong and sturdy furniture, all far too large for only two people. In no time at all, the stewardess had pushed the princess into a chair and set in front of her a dish of dried fruit and hearty cheese toasted on bread. The princess devoured it, ravenous, meanwhile marveling at the confident, accustomed way the stewardess navigated the space.

"That's a girl. Now tell me, where'd the mistress find you?"

The stewardess sat across from the princess, with no plate of her own. Even in the ill light, she was close enough for the princess to see the milky film that clouded her eyes, the gray hairs woven through the strange red hair. The princess's first instinct was to balk at the maternal tone, but the stewardess's face was so kind that the princess found herself answering instead.

"I was on the holy mountain to offer myself to the gods, when the—your mistress came upon me."

"Offered to the gods, eh? What for?"

"My kingdom didn't want me."

The stewardess paused, and when the princess gave no indication of being anything but in earnest, she *tsked* loudly.

"Seems the mistress did, anyhow."

The princess thanked the gods the stewardess could not see her blush.

"It'll be a nice thing, for her to have someone around," continued the stewardess. "It gets good and lonely for her, being who she is."

"Who she—what do you mean?"

"I'm sure you can imagine. How many women are in your armies?"

There were no women in her father's armies. Even the queen did not attend war councils. "She fights?"

"Like she has everything to lose."

I lost everything. The princess couldn't quite say it, couldn't swallow enough of her pride to throw herself upon the pity of a woman she had only just met. The tears would not fall, the sobs would not sound, but she sniffed, and the stewardess heard.

"Oh, child. It's hard to lose a home, innit?"

The princess nodded, before remembering the unhelpfulness of a gesture. "Yes." She was struck again by the foreignness of the stewardess's coloring, the knowing tone of her voice as she spoke.

"Let's get you washed up," the stewardess continued. "You'll feel better then."

The bathing cavern was entirely dark, leaving only the gurgling and lapping of the spring at the stone floor to reveal the presence of a pool. The air pressed down, full of warmth and moisture, as though the princess had stumbled into that interminable moment of time before a summer thunderstorm breaks open the sky and the stillness is chased away by winds and rain. The stewardess took her leave after pointing out the small pots of scented oils which lined the pool, and the princess, used to splashing her arms and face with cold water and scraping sweat from her body with sand to bathe, spent several wonderful hours swimming in the dark waters which were so deep she could not touch the bottom.

She emerged refreshed and disarmed enough that she left her travel-soiled dress on the floor of the bathing cavern.

