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## Psyche and Cupid

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## Psyche and Cupid

There lived in ancient times a princess said to be more beautiful than the gods themselves. For much of her life, little else was said of the princess. No one felt they had cause to discover more, for her elder sisters still had yet to marry, and as long as this was the case, the youngest could not be courted.

However, their father, the King in the Shadow of the Mountains, wished to have all his daughters married off with all decent haste. Their kingdom, though prosperous, was small and reliant on alliances with stronger neighbors who might otherwise have viewed it as either prey or prize, and so as they came of age, the elder princesses were draped in white flags and sent away without complaint to become wives in foreign lands.

It's hard to say what the king would have accomplished with the marriage of his youngest daughter, for she steadfastly refused every proposal put to her. Men from across land and sea came, drawn to the spectacle of her beauty. Rich, poor, noble, common, athletic, scholarly, handsome, and plain they proclaimed their love for a girl they had never before met, and she refused each in turn. Frustrated in their desire, the men left, and as it became clear to them that the beauty of the princess was not theirs to consume, the things said of her began to transform.

They called her cold despite her bright smile and warm skin. They called her arrogant, though she knew the names and lives of every servant in the castle. They called her cruel and temptress and bitch and claimed it had been her flaws and not their own which prevented a union between them.

The princess did not waver in the face of their ridicule. She was not swayed by the pleas of her father the king to be reasonable. She listened calmly to her sisters tell her it was natural to be uncertain, but her snobbish rejections were simply a phase that would conclude with the offer of the right man.

The princess stood as firmly as if she were chained to the mountain rocks.

"I love our kingdom, our home. I wish to do all in my power towards its continued vitality. But to marry a man is a thing you cannot ask of me. There is no man whom I can love, and to try would be to betray my truest self, a sin of the highest gravity."

The battle of wills between the princess and her family stood at an uneasy truce while the affairs of the kingdom began to deteriorate. A dry year left half the land hungry, and the barbarians that populated the mountains grew bolder. Stories spread of their new general, fearsomely scarred and ruthless, who had shaped the disparate mountain bands for the first time into a disciplined threat. The sisters' husbands increased their duties on imports to stave off their own impending poverty, and began to talk of war against the barbarians, who levied ever more devastating attacks against their borders.

The princess saw the servants grow leaner, saw the farmers carrying their goods to the castle by hand after selling or slaughtering a horse to make ends meet. The kingdom in the shadow of the mountains could barely afford peace; it could not endure a war.

"Darling, won't you consider again the proposal of that island prince? His ships would be a boon to us if we must march against the barbarians."

"Father, if we march against the barbarians, we will already be doomed. Our people cannot feed an army; they can barely feed themselves."

"My daughter, in war we may count on the support of our allies. If you truly cared about our people, you would be willing to make sacrifices to bind another power to our cause."

The accusation stabbed at the heart of the princess.

“You say I am unwilling to make sacrifices?” The princess said, calm as ever, though tears brightened her dark eyes. “My love may not look like yours, but never doubt that it is just as strong. If all I am good for is selfless sacrifice, then let it be so. I will go tomorrow to the holy mountain and offer myself to the gods that they may grant our people a reprieve. I would give this kingdom my life, but it cannot have my soul.”

At this the king was struck too with grief, for it never occurred to him that his daughter could be unhappier in the life he imagined for her than she would be when faced with death. Yet he found once again it was not in his power to change the course of her mind.

The next morning, the princess bid the people a loving farewell, and in a small company of guards, rode to the holy mountain which overlooked the castle and the whole surrounding city.

“It’s a brave thing you’re doing, princess,” said one.

“Shame it has to be a pretty thing like you,” said another.

The princess said nothing; then they were at the top of the mountain.

And then the princess was left alone.

She prayed, but she knew not what to ask for. Though she did not long for death, she could not wish to return home, to the empty loneliness of being surrounded by others. Left with nothing else to do, she placed her tiara on the ground beside her and gave herself to the cold embrace of a dreamless sleep.

Hoof beats brought the princess back to consciousness, where the sight of a horse—large and dark as the night—and its rider greeted her. In the light of the moon she could see the horse was bare save for a thin saddle, while the rider had only boiled leather for armor. She shivered from the wind and the chilly certainty that this was one of the barbarians whom her father and brothers-in-law so feared—apparently with reason. Even her brief observations clearly explained how the guards of the kingdom, heavy and cumbersome in their full plate, had so rarely been able to apprehend any of the raiders.

The barbarian’s eyes glimmered, dark as the princess’s own, with the rest of the face obscured by hood and helm, a mysterious messenger of the gods. The princess did not ask how the rider had come to find her. She would ask nothing of this stranger who could, who might kill her. It did not become a princess to beg.

“What brings you to this mountain, lady?”

The words were recognizable, though colored by a rough accent; the princess was glad she would not have to admit to not knowing the barbarians’ own tongue. More than the pronunciation, the princess found herself noticing the regality of the speech—she wondered if the rider was of the nobility, and wondered again whether the barbarians even had such a structure.

“I traveled here, to the holy mountain, to give myself to the gods.”

“Do you believe I am sent by your gods?”

“I believe you do not come against their will.”

“For what purpose would they send me?”

“I cannot say, I am not a god.”

“No. You are not.”

The rider stopped speaking, and in the silence, regarded the princess. She was more than accustomed to stares, leers, glances, and gawkings, but the rider did none of those things. The tilt of the rider’s head looked rather thoughtful, and those dark eyes did not linger on her body.

“Do you wish to stay here?”

The princess met the rider’s gaze.

“I came for the gods. The gods sent you.”

“Then you would come with me?” The princess heard her own curiosity reflected back in the warmth of the rider’s voice.

This. This was what the princess had not known to ask for.

“If I can go of my own free will. I am not a prize, and you cannot own me.”

“We are not slavers.”

“So think all men.”

The sound of a laugh when muffled by a scarf is hardly more than a whisper of warm wind, but the princess saw amusement dance in the rider’s eyes.

“I promise no one shall lay a hand on you against your wishes. Do you need assistance to mount behind me?”

“Thank you, I shall not.”

The princess did, however, accept the rider’s offered hand as she swung herself into the saddle, muddy skirts fanning out like a blooming flower.

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.”

“I am not afraid of loneliness either, 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 hopeful 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.”

The thing 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 pale as milk, 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 ya today.”

“I have brought a guest,” the rider—not the servant’s master, but her *mistress*—responded, still grasping the princess’s hand, who felt 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 in 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 ya?”

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?”

“I was a princess and—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?”

“Surely you can imagine, girl. 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?”

“Och. Like she has everything to lose.”

*I did lose 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.

The princess spent the next few days exploring the fortress and learning the ways of its stewardess; she’d never baked bread before, as she confessed, but it felt good to acquire a new skill. In her wanderings she stumbled upon collections of fine statues, store caches of seeds and cheese and dried fruit, a well-stocked armory, and what seemed to be hundreds of empty rooms. The fact of their emptiness did not tell her nearly so much as the hints the stewardess dropped about the mistress’s preference for solitude and the difficulties she faced from her fellow soldiers—tantalizing hints, hints that left the princess ravenous to know more.

Caught up in such thoughts, the princess was surprised to come face to face with their subject while sweeping one night in the entrance hall. The sound of footsteps had her exclaiming in alarm and brandishing the broom in a most unbecoming manner, though it may be postulated that her hostess was charmed nonetheless.

“My apologies for startling you.”

“Please don’t apologize. I simply did not expect you this soon.”

“I will leave if you do not want me, but it was my wish to see you again as soon as possible.”

The princess met her host’s eyes. “I did not say that. It is simply...this is not something I knew I could want.”

“You needn’t decide in this moment,” her hostess said gently.

“I said that you may visit me. If nothing else I value your company.” The princess hesitated, but the fire in her breast burned like it would never die. “My room is more comfortable than this drafty hall. Perhaps we may converse there?”

“It would be my honor. Allow me to remove my armor, and I will attend you there.”

The princess made her way to her room, fully dark now the night had fallen, but she respected her hostess’s request and lit no candle. She sat with her legs under her on the bed, dressed in the unfamiliar and flowing garments favored by the barbarians—the mountain people—yet feeling more herself than she had since making her decision to travel to the holy mountain.

They two talked for many hours that night, and the next, and the one after, confiding histories and hopes until the princess learned the feeling of desiring another the way she was desired, the ease with which one could slip off the robes of the mountain people, the feel of callused hands running up her thighs, soft lips on her neck. How it felt to think of the woman who came to her not as a barbarian fighter, but as a lover, her beloved.

The princess was happy, yet haunted in a home that was filled with more echoes than people. During the days it seemed she had nothing to do but await her beloved, though she assisted the stewardess with upkeep and cooking and began the slow process of learning her

strange northern language. Still, the monotony crushed her as each day she awoke to find herself alone in her bed.

“My love,” she whispered into the darkness one night, her lover cuddled on her chest. “I have a request.”

“If it within my power.”

“I would like to see my sisters again.” She felt her lover go still against her breast, but she plunged on ahead. “My family has no way of knowing I live, and that I am so safe and happy. And perhaps I should not, but I love them, and I miss them, and I do not wish them to suffer if I am able to alleviate their pain.”

“I love you, my darling, and I would give you the moon if I could, but I fear what the knowledge of our love could do in the hands of another.”

“Bring them in secrecy, then—I know their accustomed riding spots, where you might set upon them with blindfolds and lead their horses here—but fear them not. They know I could never love a man, and though they do not understand, they will not be shocked at our circumstances.”

The lover acquiesced out of love, though it did not extinguish her fears. The warmth with which the princess greeted her sisters comforted the lover, as the princess’s happiness always did.

Neither the lover nor the princess could know how twisted the sisters’ hearts had become, frozen by the coldness of their marriages and hardened by the trial of preparing for war, how they were envious and yet horrified of the princess’s immersion in the unfamiliar, her apparent satisfaction at a set of circumstances that could never satisfy them.

In the lover’s absence, the three sisters kept each other company, and the princess could not help but wax poetic about her new life, so excited was she to share her joy. But the sisters, in their jealousy, loosed snakes and worms of spite to slither into the princess’s ear.

“It cannot be as you say, that your beloved is in fact a woman, for what woman could love another in the manner you describe? He is a man, as is right and true, and he has tricked you so you would not fear him in your innocence. Why else would he insist on hiding in darkness? Cast a light upon him tonight, and tell me I am wrong.”

The princess defended her lover ardently, but the poison of the snakebites could not help but spread, for a deep hidden part of the princess had thought from the beginning that her fate here was simply too good to be true. Though she staved off the doubt one day, than two, on the third night she succumbed.

The lover, knowing nothing of the change in the princess’s heart, came to her bed as was her custom. The princess lay for several hours listening to her lover’s even breaths; when she was quite sure her lover was asleep and she’d gathered some resolve that was rather like courage (though nowhere near as honorable) the princess slipped out of bed and grasped the candle she had hidden beneath the little table.

The candle sputtered before coming properly to light, and the princess held her breath, fearing the gasping of the flame would wake her lover. Yet the fear soon left her as she gazed down and sight overwhelmed all her other senses. Before her on the bed lay her lover, beautiful and prone. Her eyes followed the slight curve of her lover’s breast beneath the sheet, to the muscle of her shoulders, to the strong jawline exaggerated in the shadows. Long unber hair rippled across the pillow, the skin of her face only a few shades lighter—a beautiful face, a face with wild eyebrows and long lashes, a face the princess couldn’t take in— a face dominated by the jagged scar that cut across her nose and down one cheek.

Even reeling from epiphany, even with her lover unconscious, the princess saw how utterly regal she was—how utterly regal the infamous *barbarian general* was—the princess didn't know whether to throw herself weeping on the floor to beg her lover's forgiveness or rage at her until she did the same.

She was not given the chance to decide. At that very moment, a drip of wax from the candle fell upon her lover's shoulder, sickly pale in its betrayal. With a cry of pain, the lover awoke to see the princess holding the light aloft, bathed in the glow and guilt and gall.

"Wretch!" cried she, throwing back the covers. "You could not trust me, and leave well enough alone, but insisted on revealing me. Do you imagine a love such as ours comes without consequences?"

"How can you demand my trust when you failed to offer me yours?" cried the princess. "How could you expect—"

"I gave you everything—"

"But not the truth! Not your name. Unless you are not the monster who threatens my kingdom and pillages my towns without the barest mercy?"

The lover flinched, her scar twisting her face. "A monster? It is not for monsters to show mercy."

"But surely—"

"You think they deserve mercy, your people who would have left you on that mountain to die? You would expect mercy from me, scarred in reminder that I invite violence by existing? Do you imagine mercy is within my power when the power I do have has taken such sacrifice and hangs so precariously? No. Do not presume to speak to me of mercy."

The princess wept, she knew not for whom, as her lover stormed out. She did not confide in the stewardess, but remained quiet and subdued throughout the day, a departure from her usual cheerful energy. When her lover did not return that night, she wept again, hot tears bathing her face.

The next night was the same; her lover did not come to her and the princess alternately mourned and raged. Then again, another night came and went without the lover. On the third night, however, the princess did not cry. She left.

It rained. The princess did not count the days and nights she wandered, lonely, lost—as lost as one can ever be with no destination in mind. She found the group of men and their horses (or they found her, or the gods sent them to each other, or the devils did) huddled beneath a rock overhand, cooking some sort of animal, and her stomach reminded her she had also failed to count the number of days since she had last eaten.

"Good sirs, could I ask you to spare a bite for a hungry girl?"

The princess knew what she was staking against the odds that the men were actually good, yet hungry and heartbroken with a knife up her sleeve, she chose to have hope.

"By the gods, child, you're soaked! Come, come, sit by the fire, of course we've food to share."

The small kindness reminded the princess of the stewardess, and she regretted she'd not bade the woman farewell. She chewed the drumstick they handed her while the fire warmed her face and hands.

The men talk, hushed at first so as not to disturb her, but swelling genially until one would mutter *hush*, and the group would again self-correct. Over the course of the meal, the princess felt her strength grow alongside a certain suspicion.

"Hail you from the Kingdom in the Shadow of the Mountain?"



The men stopped talking at once and regarded her, eyes nervous and jaws set in a way that confirmed to the princess her hunch.

“I ask not out of mistrust, nor animosity. I simply spent some time there as a girl, and something about the style of your saddles seemed familiar to me.”

“Euh, we are of that region,” one said slowly.

“We *were*.”

“You don’t mean to say you are loyal to your land no longer?” she prompted.

“Aye, we’re loyal.”

“Don’t know whether the king and those daughters of his can say the same.”

Something in the princess went cold. “I have been gone too long. Please, what cause have you to feel so?”

The men exchanged glances, and, under the arbitrary assumption the princess could do them no harm, proceeded to admit they had been soldiers in the army for the Kingdom in the Shadow of the Mountain. Underfed, underpaid, and taking the brunt of the fight against the barbarians, they had deserted.

“I pledged my service to the King in the Shadow of the Mountain,” growled one, “not the stupid greedy bastards he sold his daughters off to.”

Her kingdom had only deteriorated since she left it, and the princess wondered why the things she loved always hurt her so, and why she continued to love them in spite of it. She didn’t have an answer, but, as she stood and threw back her hood, she knew what she must do.

“I thank you for your candor and generosity, and I would repay you in kind. I am the Princess in the Shadow of the Mountain, and I must return to my father and my people.”

The men gaped at her, perhaps stunned by her newly regal tone, or else wondering how heartache and wet hair could have obscured such famous beauty.

“Please,” the princess continued, “lend me a horse and a map.”

The silence stretched long, the sputtering campfire and driving rain the only sounds.

“I’ll take you there myself,” said the man who had first offered her food. “Wouldn’t do to have the princess come home alone on a deserter’s horse.”

“Thank you. In return, I promise you will not be punished for the crime of having your kingdom’s true interests at heart.”

The princess thought, but did not speak aloud, her fears that it would not matter, that her arrival would come too late, her abilities fall too short. She thought of her lover, and her lover’s strength and competence as a leader, and wished for those reasons and many others that her lover might still be with her.

But such a thing was impossible. The princess readied herself to do what must be done alone.

“I am the Princess in the Shadow of the Mountain. I gave myself to the gods, and the gods gave me back so that I might fulfill my duty here, to my kingdom and my people. I have returned to rule, to allow my father peace and rest in his illness, and to dedicate myself to the care of this kingdom, which I love.”

The poets were writing down this speech for their epics before the princess had even finished. Her father’s advisors were less enthusiastic, but with the king ailing and the princess having the best claim to the throne, they readily pledged their loyalty, certain that if it came to it, they would be able to influence the girl.

The princess’s sisters and their husbands, when word reached them, were entirely taken aback. Fracturing the trust between the princess and her lover had not sated her sisters’ jealousy,

so they counseled their husbands that she was stupid and silly. The husbands were happy to continue taking advantage of the smaller kingdom and the news that its leadership had weakened was welcome, if perhaps misleading.

“We beg the assistance of your might,” the princess flattered them. “Your armies are strong and brave; surely you can spare us a few battalions. Our great neighbors, share in our glory and show your friendship, as we have shown you ours.”

The husbands indulged her, certain that if it came to it, they would be able to control the girl.

The princess wasted little time. With the assistance of the good minister of agriculture she put her soldiers freed up by her brother-in-laws’ additional troops to work harvesting the kingdom’s wheat. Granaries were filled and mills set in motion. A young secretary to the minister brought a rationing plan for the princess’s approval, and having the support of the farmers whose names she still remembered, the princess implemented it.

It was her custom to hear any who begged her audience. An old woman brought to her attention the suffering of the soldiers stationed in the mountains who were unprepared for the chill of high altitudes. A thousand woolen tunics were commissioned from the weavers’ guild, dyed in the bright yellows of the kingdom’s standard and the sun.

Thus kingdom and princess passed a hard winter, but through stubbornness or wisdom or blind hope, they came out the other side together. The king’s health worsened with the cold weather, and the princess knew it would not be long until she was queen in name as well as reality. Even so, the fleeing months and seasons could not dull in her the pain of her lover’s abandonment, nor did it clear the shadow of war with the mountain people in the minds of her brothers and her subjects.

“Now is the time to strike,” the kings insisted, had been insisting ever since the spring thaw began and the mountain passes again became navigable. “Such a bitter winter can only have weakened these barbarians. Our armies are warm and fed. We must press this advantage and eradicate the threat to our kingdoms once and for all.”

“We should not be hasty. They are people of the mountains. They know the terrain and are hardly likely to allow us to challenge them in open battle,” the princess cautioned, knowing why she was loathe to bring war to the mountain people, but unwilling to admit to it.

“And you should not presume to equal our military knowledge, sister. Your people love you, but you are no general. Save that sweet face to inspire the troops, and let us lead them.”

“My father lies deathly ill, and my sisters are loyal now to you. I am the leader of this kingdom, and as long as that is so, I am leader too of my armies.”

“Such spirit is admirable, certainly, but you are no man. By the very will of nature, you lack the inclination, let alone the knowledge or experience for battle.”

“It is true I have no wish to preemptively slaughter an opponent as though we are no better than barbarians.”

The princess sat impassively as the kings urged her to understand how naïve such thinking was.

“These are my terms,” the princess said when they had made their thoughts known, and known again. “I will travel to the mountains under the protection of the gods, as I have done before. I will go peacefully to negotiate terms of peace. You shall have not a single troop from my kingdom until this solution has been tried in earnest and proved ineffective, and if an agreement is reached, you will abide by it and enforce it as men of honor.”

“You speak of honor sister, and yet you think to dictate to us despite the terms of our alliance.”

“The agreement you held with this kingdom is a relic of my father’s reign. I do not speak with his voice, but with my own, and I have made my decision.”

“And if we don’t agree to abide by your terms?”

“Forgive me my bluntness, but you will find yourselves fighting a war on two fronts.”

“Fine. We will give you ten days to attempt to treat with the savages, if they are even capable of civilized negotiations. After that we strike, and we strike with the full, combined might of our allied forces,” they said, speaking with sufficient haughtiness to soothe the sting of giving in.

“I accept those terms,” the princess replied, before turning to her steward and ordering horses and supplies be readied, preparing herself to journey once again to the mountains.

It is sometimes the ability of humans to act rather than to feel; the princess kept the pace of the horses at a gallop, rode with impeccable posture, and thought only of the best route to reach the site where scouts reported the mountain army was camped, not the person who surely led them. She thought of favorable terms for the treaty, not the one with whom she must treat.

It took far too long and not long enough to reach the mountain army. The princess who had been measuring her life in weeks and months suddenly felt the passage of seconds and minutes with painful detail. She and her party rode into the army camp, white flag streaming behind them.

“I am the Princess in the Shadow of the Mountain, representing my kingdom and her allies. I seek your leader, and peace for us all.”

The sentries did not appear to speak her language, but one among the princess’s party volunteered himself as a fair translator. The princess did not ask how he had learned the mountain language, only regretted she had never done so.

“They have sent for a negotiator, Princess.”

The princess did not dismount as they waited though her horse shuffled nervously back and forth. A man appeared with his own party of guards.

“You are not the leader of these people,” the princess said, looking down at him.

“What cause have you to say so?”

“It is said the ruler of the mountain armies is one with fearsome scarring, yet your face is smooth.” *Your speech is not regal, your arms are too weak. My heart does not jump about when I see you.*

“Clever girl.”

“I am not a girl, I am a princess and ambassador.” *A girl would have sought her lover in spite of everything.*

“Very well, my lady.”

“And how shall I address you?”

“I have no wish to stand on silly ceremonies, but I speak with my liege’s authority and have the privilege of acting as foremost military advisor.”

“Let us speak, then, my lord.”

“Do you wish to discuss these matters in the field, lady? Let us rather retire to a pavilion, sup together. Let’s have this be a civilized affair.”

By way of acquiescence, the princess dismounted and handed off her reins to one of her party, selecting three others to accompany her person. The advisor offered them a great spread of hearty cheeses and choice fruits, though the princess could bear the poignant flavors for only a few bites.

“We thank you for your hospitality, but we are not here to dine.”

“Then let us treat.”

War between them had been so long a foregone conclusion that discussions of peace did not come easily. Yet as they remained enclosed in the fabric of the tent, their dialogue expanded, and line by line a treaty emerged. Boundaries were settled, terms of restitution agreed upon, and promises of friendship extracted.

As the sun slipped below the horizon, both princess and advisor put their names to the document. The princess called for a scribe to create copies for her brother-kings, and the advisor called for wine.

“Let us raise a glass to our newfound amity, lady.”

“I drink to it with satisfaction,” said the princess. *My heart remains heavy*, thought the girl.

Copies and drinks finished, the princess took her leave. The constriction in her chest crept up her throat. Determined that none should see her weep, the princess did not cry out. She shed no tears, even as she grew faint and the scene before her began to blur. Silently she fell, choked by emotion and something else more nefarious. Cries of alarm came to her as though from a great distance until her consciousness fled altogether.

It is a shame there were no poets present to witness the vengeful appearance and wrenching cry of the princess’s lover, for it betrayed a love that was truly the stuff of legends. Alerted by the cries of the princess’s guards, the lover put her sword to the advisor’s throat, and he preserved his life only through speedy confession and surrender of the antidote to the poison he had put in the princess’s wine. The lover administered it with her own hand and cried aloud:

“Forgive me! I feared the appearance of weakness too greatly to see how much stronger we were together, and bound myself too tightly to the way things were to see what they could be. Come back to me, my love. Let us see it together.”

In this story, love wins. The princess opened her eyes to see her lover’s face surrounded by the stars, that beautiful face she had seen but once before, yet which she felt she could spend the rest of her life gazing upon (though she did allow her eyes to flutter closed as they kissed, and kissed again).

“I had no knowledge of this plot, I swear it,” the lover said when they broke apart. “I feel for you only friendship and love, though my behavior hardly earns their requital.”

“We shall lead our kingdoms to love each other by our example, then, for I have never ceased in feeling so toward you.”

Thus united, they two traveled together with the mountain army back to the Kingdom in the Shadow of the Mountain, where the brother-kings found themselves quite reluctant to refuse terms of peace with such a force upon their doorsteps and welcomed by their ally.

Soon after, the princess and her lover strengthened the treaty again. They were married as spring buds burst into bloom, and the king lived long enough to bestow upon them his blessing.

“My dear,” he said with his hand upon the princess’s cheek, “It brings me joy to see you so happy, and if it is love that has made you so, I apologize for sending you looking for it in all the wrong places for so many years.”

The stewardess carried her bridal train and confided, in quiet northern speech, “I did think it might go this way. But it sure is lovely, seeing you building up home together. Right beautiful.”

On her wedding day, the princess became queen of not just one kingdom, but two, and she and her lover lived—not always simple, not always happy—but always together, with love and respect between them. So they had sworn to on that spring day now so long ago, and so they did, for the rest of their lives.