

Dying Gaul

by Dac A.V. Nelson

David Wolf flung a bottle of beer at a newspaper rack to cap the night of his fortieth birthday. Foamy rivers spiderwebbed and hissed across the plastic window above a headline that proclaimed the final peace of '09 between Iraq and the United States.

He caught a cab home and slipped under the cool covers of bed alone. Eighteen years of desert sand flooded his mind. David tried to calculate the value of that treaty in terms of his own life. What had been the sum of breathing contaminated air from one warehouse? Of pulling out and interrogating soldiers who had had no desire to hide information, who had, more often than not, dropped their weapons at the first sight of U.S. forces? What of carrying tar in his lungs for eighteen years? Of hiding it away to avoid being discharged, just so he could go to Burma and Indonesia before doing it all over again in '03? The war, the preemptive strike, and the "peace" of half a decade of killing had finally totaled. It had killed him eighteen years ago. He just needed to finish with death. Instead of the dignity of an incendiary battle-death, the new peace turned him into a euthanasia case. It ended his life because it extended his life. What kind of value was that? What kind of dignity?

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David settled back and began the long, slow process of trying to fall asleep. He fought the panic that issued forth from his heavy lungs as they adjusted to a horizontal position. He knew by now that the rest of his symptoms were psychosomatic. With enough carefully placed questions, he had distilled Gulf War Syndrome forward and backward. But knowledge did not erase the feelings of sickness. His lungs did not actually burn, so they just *felt* like they were on fire. The smell of burning oil was actually trapped memories in his head, not trapped gasses in his body. That's what he learned. That's what others were told. The other stuff—diarrhea, night sweats, muscle twitches—that stuff, yes, it was real. But heavy lungs? Burning, smoldering itchy lungs? Nobody heard of that.

The routine in falling asleep was simple. It took him years to perfect the process, but he had plenty of time while dying. Go to bed. Lie in bed. Stare at the dark ceiling. Invent a problem. Work it out. Think of the past. Think of the future. Think about tomorrow. Stare at the ceiling some more. Invent a new problem. Curse God. Praise Jesus. Toss. Turn. Breathe in a pattern. Lie back. Lie still. Lie like the dead. Wrap up like a mummy.

Get up and go to the bathroom. Stare in the mirror. Watch until the light blacks out the face. See the skin come alive, morph into a brownish demon breathing smoky diesel through an

enormous bellowing nose. Blink. The eyes return to blue. The thick, black fibers of stinging, whipping death fade to harmless, limp blond hair. Snap off the light.

Go back to bed.

Start over.

Panic. Smell burning oil. See the ocean on fire. Feel the waves of fiery water tightening in the chest and take a deep, hot breath. Relax and remember the program.

Something moved on the edge of the bed.

David froze.

A mouse maybe? A huge spider? He felt weight on the bed, even if he did not see a shape as his eyes adjusted to the dim room. It was the weight of a body. It was not his imagination. If he jumped up and snapped on the light, he would see nothing. He would be alone, and he knew this. It did not take away from the realness of the presence. Not any more than the realness of a memory could trigger a physical reaction.

The air had changed with this new presence. It was not warmer but less cold. No foreign aromas hung about the room, no movement betrayed a form. It was simply that air had moved to make space for something that should be there.

It moved again. Something was on the bed.

Whatever pressed against his sheets remained motionless for a long time. Minutes, maybe? It seemed like hours. He refused to

turn his head and check the clock. No mouse could have kept still that long—a spider maybe—but it would have to be a huge spider to take up that much space. His heart pounded unmercifully against his lungs. Its pulsing pushed the tar into his throat, until he breathed phosphorus and choked on salty fumes. When his nostrils began to burn, and the smoke smothered the passage of air, he jerked his hand from under the cover and reached across the bed. He felt for the presence. His fingers reached fingers. They stretched into a hand. The hand was light and long and graceful. The hand of a woman. It wasn't real, not in the sense of the bed being real, but it was undeniably there. His nostrils opened back up and he sucked in clean air to suffocate the bad.

She stayed long enough to leave him something. A golden neck collar. Or, more to the point, a semi-real golden neck collar. She bent it around his neck and then left his presence. The pain in his lungs was suddenly acute. He sat up and snapped on the light. He could feel the collar, though when he looked in the mirror it left only impressions and echoes of existence. He snapped off the light and disappeared. The collar came to life. He touched it. Wherever he placed his finger on the collar, that part of its reflection disappeared. He reached out then, touched the mirror, the collar image, and the air moved and the woman returned. The light that came off the collar teased and danced

around her face, but she remained invisible. He turned, certain he would not see her, until they would have been facing.

She breathed fresh oregano, sea salt, and olive oil into his lungs. He closed his eyes and thought back to his childhood and a woodpile in the backyard. Here, he first forced himself to leap a distance over air—to float for the first time—and he lands in a Cobra helicopter in Vietnam.

The night is so overcast he can't see his hand in front of his face. He's flying blind, because even though God created the Instrument Panel, He didn't make it bulletproof. A frantic call comes through from what's-it's-fuck Alpha Company, and believe it or not, they want extraction. Two Hueys are already en route to the coordinates, and he thinks he's only five miles away. The troop carriers have no gunship protection, but he's low on ammunition and lost his wingman on the last run. Despite his better sense, he clicks his radio, "This is Rebel Two Eight. Pick-up is only five miles. Have visual contact. Proceeding to target. Over."

Alex's helmet swings back and forth below him. "Where do you see it?"

"Shut up."

"Negative Rebel Two Eight. Return to base and rearm. Over."

"Roger that."

For luck, he touches the pocket at his knee that holds

Cathy's picture. He ignores the command and heads for the pick-up sight. At this point his ears are ringing—Alex is yelling at him, but he doesn't care. He's in battle mode now. Silent death. He sees the green tracers first, snaking along the sides of his own widow maker. He makes a run, fires off his last rocket into the hill and banks south to set up a return run. While racing east, he sees the distinct red and green lights of the Hueys, on approach from the south.

He swings around again. Alex is shitting his pants and screaming, but he knows that sound. Alex is with him now, "Light 'em up, Wolfman!"

David smells burning oil, and watches more green tracers from the side of the hill float past him like bugs. They're terrifying and beautiful. A rocket screams past. He comes on, Alex raking the hill with grenades and miniguns, when it's suddenly daylight around them. "What the fuck? Those aren't VC!"

His bubble cockpit flares and melts, impossibly because that kind of heat would kill a man...

David's eyes snapped open. He was back. He was back in bed, where he closed his eyes to recall the face from the picture. "Catherine," he whispered. The air shifted.

Yes, Catherine was her name. He could almost see her outline next to him. He rolled toward her. The image danced around the fullness of his hands. She was a mirage disrupted by

his attempt to see her with his eyes, though he could almost feel her with his hands. A hint of light defined her. It painted her in brushstrokes too minute to comprehend. He fingered the electric current of her outline. His arm tingled while he caressed her cheek and traced her lips.

Catherine's hand moved to his lips. He closed his eyes and almost sensed her fingertips. There, along his jaw, across his ear and down along his neck. She put her hand on his chest and for just a moment, for just an instant, David's lungs felt young again. He opened his eyes and saw her through eyes that were no longer just eyes. Catherine faced him on the bed, almost as real as he wished to be unreal. She placed a hand on the back of his head. She drew him close. He watched a ghostly blush tint and shimmer across her lips. Her face took shape through shadows. Long, acute shadows. They were not quite an outline. It was not quite a face. But he could imagine it.

If he kissed those lips he would taste them. So he leaned close—to kiss for the first time—and tastes the intoxicating flavor of cigarettes mixed with whiskey from her tongue in a speak-easy.

She spins across his arm and they pick up a quick-time Foxtrot. He swings her out and she throws her head back as they turn. He pulls her into a hesitation step while a semi-celeb, Albert Kashellek, drifts by with one of his mistresses.

Catherine shakes her midnight black hair, scandalously uncovered, and wraps her little arms around him, breaking form. She is like a hummingbird inside her dress.

"You're moving like you're twenty again," she says.

"Even with the limp?"

A storm passes over her tanned face, betrays that powerfully subtle emotion which only Hellenic features can produce. He first sees this look on her last night, right after he tells her cousin Sebastian about the night he spends in a muddy no-man's-land in France. He's unable to crawl to safety on a cleaved patella and praying the mustard gas won't seep through the mask clutched to his face. He's praying, even more crazily, not to fall asleep or unconscious before someone can drag him to safety. Dave taps his knee, "I think I'd prefer the mustard ... next time."

Catherine gives him that face and leaves the room. He finds her in the kitchen later, crying about his leg as if she were the one who replaced bone with shrapnel. As if it is her limp. "I hate your jokes about *that night*."

He tells her once, but only once, that he vaguely remembers a conversation about the smell coming off his leg in the hospital. Even though it turns out to be someone else's gangrene, she's so horrified her face turns white and she chokes on her food. Because of that, he never tells her that the mask

had slipped that night. He never tells anyone. But it does wake him at nights, and by now, he supposes that she knows.

The sum of these night frights and caddy jokes adds up in her squinting eye now. He watches her jaw tighten and her cheeks suck in—displaying the pain and panic she endures every time he snaps awake clutching his chest. He sees this all, and then dips her against his bad leg, just to show her he can do it. She melts back into his arms. She's almost ready to laugh. Her neck flushes. She whispers that she's ready to go home.

Kashellek ruins the evening by offering Catherine a ride home in front of Dave. He's Bugs Moran's boy, James Clark these days, and considers himself above the law. He is, in a way. Dave calls him Kashellek just to get under his skin. Kashellek answers the subtle insult by sending a dozen roses to Catherine. There's a thirteenth, a black one, at the bottom.

A week later, Dave's skills as an information officer in the Army finally pay off in his civilian life. He manages to find out about a certain illegal purchase taking place in a certain warehouse. He takes this information to a friend of a friend who knows "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn. He points out that it's a chance to change the direction of this war, but he wants to be there.

On the night of February fourteenth, Dave walks in with five men dressed as police. They pull the men out of chairs and

line them up on the wall. Dave points a pistol at Kashellek's right eye. "Do you see me? Say good-bye to North side," he says and squeezes the trigger. He limps out of the warehouse while Tommy guns make three surgical passes behind him on the wall—head, chest, waist.

Three days later, cops on Al Capone's payroll arrest him. Except they're not taking him to jail because he knows about the O'Bannion and flubbed Moran hits. Dave lies in the trunk bleeding to death and wonders if Catherine will ever be afraid again ...

She brought him this with a kiss, their first, so real but immaterial. It lingered over open space, as believable as the tension between Adam and God in the Sistine Chapel. Quiet moments stretched into timeless moments. Catherine teased him with a ghostly finger buzzing across his cheek and he traced ions down her fleshless arm. Physically separated, they still moved toward something, as they had always done. The longer she stayed the more real she became, and the less solid he felt.

He missed the way her smell lingered on his clothes after she wore them. He missed the gloves or handkerchiefs, usually with her initials plainly legible, lying about his house in forbidden times. They were never married. She owned him, as he owned her, and they stood away from others in owning each other. He missed her wrists, which he'd kissed a hundred thousand

times. Her shoulders, he'd caressed as much. Every passing moment made her more real. And with that, the memories increased.

David d'Loup died happily in her arms just after the successful rout of an English garrison, which led to King Charles V's support of the Gascon nobles in 1369. In 569, von Wulf Saxons joined Alboin's Lombards near the Po Valley. In their push toward Rome, he and Katrina were killed by a Papal vanguard that overran their defenses one night, near the summer solstice.

It was true that David and Catherine had wept over one another's bodies for generations, and yet these were the small parts of their existence. So much more were the sensual pleasures. The thousands of nights of lovemaking and drinking and swearing. The hundreds of nights she had crawled on hands and knees before a fire, all silhouette and flashing eyes. He could see her neck fill out as she laughed, and watch her blush as he undressed her. He tasted the salt on her belly and inhaled honeydew and cinnamon mixed with smoke from her nocturnal hair. In every age, she was every woman. Sometimes she fought with him. Sometimes she died with him. But always she kept her hip against his thigh and slept with her head upon his chest. She followed him from east to west, always there to trace a finger down his spine when they could not see. Or flash a sign, in that semaphore that only lovers know, when they could not speak. He

had never known another woman, yet each time her fingers were a different shape.

The birds outside told David that this night was nearly spent. And yet, it meant more that the slow years of dying had allowed him to reach this formless night with Catherine. He would live those years over, a thousand years for every one, if it meant one night with her in body. She was not real enough and he was not enough unreal. There was only one way to be together. Whatever the cause of the last lonely forty years, wherever Catherine was and he was going, he had learned a few tricks about their mad existence. He whispered his oath, "No God, no man, no obstacle, no shackle, no wine, no bond, no promise, and no word."

He drank in the oath, even as he spoke it. She was the cistern of their memories. She was the monument of their history.

David dragged himself out of bed and staggered to the bathroom in a predawn light. He ran the hot water, but it came out cold. He rinsed his razor blade and decided to ironman it, so he held himself up by the other hand and endured the sting of the metal edge on his sensitive skin. Dawn broke and a single ray of sunlight burned through the bathroom. The angle left the rest of his apartment shrouded in misty, foggy darkness. His silhouette grew in the glass, charged with the momentary energy of that light.

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He observed his cheek in the mirror, where it bled from an accidental gash. He dropped the razor and pulled a spare blade from the medicine cabinet. The mirror reflected his blue eyes, red veined from lack of sleep, yellowed from the sickness not so hidden in his lungs. It did not matter if he was clean-shaven. Only that he did not miss. So, he slid the razor up his right wrist. The shaking began, though he tried to control it. The razor slipped as he tried to change hands and his heart began to race. He reached for the blood soaked instrument, had to try twice to pick it up because his fingers were cold and numb. The razor lodged itself a couple inches deep in his left wrist and he could not move it. His vessels began to throb painfully. His foot jerked out from under him. He fell to his knees and slammed his head on the edge of the sink. He pulled himself up to the toilet with a reserve of strength Army Rangers never lose, and then collapsed across it, his right arm trailing into a pool of blood.

David reached out—to remove the blade from his wrist—and his hand twitches in Pergamon.

A Scythian horseman scrapes his sword up Devyn's left arm, but the wound is not deep. Devyn moves through the fighters using a short bronze sword to hack low, and an iron long sword to slash and defend. From his height, he can see enemy Kelts pushing back the Pergamenes, but the real threat are the riders.

His Greek allies can hold against fighters on foot.

Another Scythian rides past and launches himself from the horse's back. He crashes into Devyn before he can bring up his weapons. Their feet tangle with the legs of a dead horse and they both roll over the bulk of the animal. Devyn hears a humming in his ears and leaps to his feet. With two strong swipes, the Scythian stops struggling. A pocket of space grows around him and the humming drops to a low buzz. The chieftain, Kaveh al-Çatalhöyük, rides at him now and Devyn of Wulf holds out both swords to challenge. A moment before they meet, a flash, and thump. Another sword swings up and cuts his breastplate in two, knocking him back to the ground. He cannot breathe. The sky appears to be finally coming down upon him.

He turns his head and looks into the dying eyes of the Scythian he just cut down. In the reflection of those eyes, he sees Pergamon fall. He sees Rome fall. He sees Persians perish. Keltoi divide and fall. He sees an end to all things. The buzz is gone. The hum is gone. The battle is gone. There is nothing but those glassy eyes. They speak his end. The killing blow comes from the dead hand of a man who's last grasp is up, through the furrows.

Aikaterina appears before him. "I am dead," he tells her. "Do not weep."

She pulls him to a sitting position. The battle rages

around him, but he is protected by death. Aikaterina drops her shield and picks up his swords. She kneels, shield bent over them and offers them hilt first. He takes them. She finds her lance and regains her feet. He follows her, as al-Çatalhöyük reels to return for Aikaterina. Her shield explodes in splinters of wood and throws her past Devyn.

Devyn reaches himself from the depths. He floats toward the chieftain on a thunderhead. He is fire and sparks. Bronze sword runs down iron, finding an edge, filling his ears with the Valkyrie wail. The Scythian chieftain is unmounted by the sound alone. Battle freezes. Devyn of Wulf rides Kaveh al-Çatalhöyük out of the air, skewering him on both swords, bending each with the force of his blow. They dance around each other, as Devyn finally comes within reach of al-Çatalhöyük's legendary strength. The chieftain holds his throat with one hand and beats Devyn with the butt of his golden scimitar. Devyn drags the swords back and forth, through him, waiting for death to come. This infamous killer, this man said to have murdered with a glance, to have spoken successfully the death of another across leagues of impassible desert, this man now shows fear to Devyn. And though he will not release the grip on his throat, he passes the scimitar over to Devyn. Only then, does he release his grip.

The Pergamenes pull Devyn back as Scythians rally around their fallen leader. Devyn has cut the chieftain in two, and

they swarm into a battle frenzy that he grows to match, cut for cut. Three more horsemen fall and Devyn nearly cuts down two of his own men before the flat side of a sword smashes across his forehead and brings on night.

He awakens in the afternoon. They have stripped him and oiled his body so his wounds cannot dry into his clothing. Wine is poured into his mouth until he waves them off.

"Is she dead, Aleko?"

"Is who dead, Devyn?"

"Aikaterina. She was thrown."

"No, they did not reach the walls. They were stopped at the river. You stopped them."

"I was struck. I saw Aikaterina. With a shield and spear."

"Can it be?" Sebestyen cries. "Athene has fought for him?"

Devyn sits and nearly cries out. His head throbs as the heat digs claws into his brain.

"It could have been Nike," Aleko offers.

"You do not believe me? Aikaterina was there. She fought with me. In my moment of dying, she took up the sword. I live. I must know why."

"I will find her for you." Aleko calls Sebestyen to him.

"Find my sister. Bring her."

Devyn falls back and closes his eyes.

"But—"

"If we can accept help from Romans or allow Keltoi to fight with us, then we can allow women to be with their men!"

"Your father will not allow it."

"My father must."

Blackness overwhelms Devyn and he loses the rest of the conversation. He drifts through darkness. There are pains. There are sharp jolts. It is an uneasy darkness. It is an uneasy quiet. He feels a drip. It is cool, but clammy. Cold, wet. Slippery. He has fallen. A breeze brushes against his mustache, brings him the flesh of oregano, sea salt, and olive oil. "You resurrect me," he whispers.

"I help you float. It was the Aegis. That is all. We will meet between the pillars."

"Let me taste again."

Aikaterina kisses him again.

"Then I must be alive."

"You must be alive."

He opens his eyes and Aikaterina's face is before him. He will never leave this sight. He has escaped existence and elevated himself, above Roman or Kelt, Greek or Persian. He is in the place where Aikaterina exists. That is all he cares to know.

Devyn recovers slowly. A hideous gash from al-Çatalhöyük's scimitar will not heal along his right ribs, but it does not

seem to seriously harm him. The wound fascinates her father, Epigonus. After several months of musing, he asks Devyn if he will model for a sculpture.

"I will, but not with another Nike. She is too fickle. Depict us as we are."

Epigonus seems to understand. Devyn insists that Aikaterina stand in as the wife. He agrees. This too, he seems to understand. They begin on the steps of the theater, the next morning. Periodically, Devyn scratches his open wound with the sword point. Epigonus gives him a foul look. Devyn laughs, because that look has been passed down to daughter and delivered in different circumstances. He winces, but the smile lingers.

"Stop laughing. This is a tragic moment. You're committing suicide, not acting out a comedy."

"Epigonus, I cannot stand here, with my arm falling asleep, and give in to bad humors. Laughter is the only thing which protects me from them."

Epigonus looks up from his roll, "Whose fault is that? You traveled across the known world just to sell yourself to the first army you came across. And then you fought your own people. Can you blame these actions on some other?"

Devyn snorts. "I am hostage to Romans, not slave. They educated me, and allowed me to travel here when Attalus asked for them. And besides, neither of those tribes were *my* people."

"Hrumph. You're all barbarians, so you're all the same. Even Romans."

"Maybe, but their legions are fierce. They have discipline. They're like Spartans but better, because they've learned the secret to wellness. In government, as well as campaigning."

"And what is this, Devyn of Wulf?" Epigonus pronounces his name with a *ph*, rather than *v*, sound.

"Why invent what can be stolen? Stolen customs, stolen laws, stolen ideas, stolen tactics, and stolen Gods. Those are Romans. Trust me, you have more to worry about than another attack from Keltoi. It won't be long before Rome decides to stay. They will dress like you, they will talk like you, they will act like you, they will laugh like you and they will call you friends and brothers. But the moment you make them angry they will slay."

Aikaterina's head falls back against his hip. Devyn drops her arm and loses his hand in her hair. She closes her eyes and asks him if she should dye her hair red. "Why?" he asks in a whisper.

"To change the subject," she answers.

Devyn looks at Epigonus. "Are you done with your sketches? I'm getting cramped."

Salt-filled Zephyr from the western sea hangs thick and light as the God's touch around them, and pushes Epigonus' salt-

and-pepper curls around. The old Greek wrinkles his nose and mutters, "Warrior ... pah! More like a woman." Devyn sits on a stage table as Aikaterina stretches her long body against the marble step. Epigonus yells, "No, no, no, no, no. Stand back up. I'm not through."

Aikaterina lifts a leg to Devyn's knee and he puts his hand over her ankle. The faint odor of olive oil reaches him as he caresses her copper foot. She slaps the tip of his sword on the table, it balances upright in the air, then the hilt falls forward into her hand. Devyn gives the sword a slight kick and she flips it back to him, which he snaps out of the air, and accidentally widens his wound. He drops the sword on the table. He looks under his arm as it bubbles yellow and red bile. Aikaterina babies him with a scrap of linen, dabbing then rinsing it in salt water. She tries to bandage it again, but he refuses. A warrior bares his wounds. They demonstrate the wellness of the fighter.

Over her shoulder she says, "Father, you're driving him to an early death."

"This is the most important piece, all the more because I have a Kelt to model. Can you imagine what this means? No, I don't suppose you do. You're a silly little girl, that's you."

She drops her head back and breathes deeply. Devyn is suddenly lost in the display of her neck. So perfect, compared

with the black bruises and cuts from his torque and the fingers of al- Çatalhöyük. Aikaterina is soft and smooth, like the inside of a bowl. He is rough and hammered, like its exterior decorations, inscribed by different kinds of craftsmen.

One leg of the table hangs over the step, so he uses Aikaterina's hip to balance it. His blond hair is still slicked back with butter in the manner of his people, and some runs in a trickle down his back. He gave up his heavy beard in Rome, but among the Pergamenes, he feels better with a mustache. Only his gold torque adorns him, though even this makes his neck sweat.

The heat, and exhaustion from his wound, suddenly hits him in a wave of nausea. He releases Aikaterina's hip and catches himself on the edge of the table. His head drops and his left hand falls to his right thigh like a dead weight. Epigonus yells, "Devyn! Stay like that! Do not move." He scratches madly on a new piece of parchment. Devyn obeys Epigonus only because he cannot defy him at this moment.

Aikaterina moves to look at her father's sketching. She is silent for a long time. "He makes you look pitiful, Devyn."

"Pity is a good word for warriors."

"It does not fit with your warrior mind. Why pity animals who carry the heads of their enemies? Better that they be hated. Better yet, feared."

"Do not pity the animal?"

"Do not pity the barbarian."

"But fear them? You see there was nothing to fear in this raid. They did not reach the walls."

"They did not reach the walls, Devyn, because of a more fearful barbarian."

"Doesn't that all seem pitiful, then? Barbarians who fight barbarians, at the request of Kings and Publicans?"

"Pity doesn't quite fit."

"It fits exactly, Aikaterina. Can I lift my head Epigonus?"

"Yes."

"Why do you stare at me like that?" Aikaterina asks.

"You believe I am invincible."

She blushes. "No Devyn. I believe you can be killed."

"You will change, you will see that I live forever."

"If you can live forever, you cannot change my belief ... nor my fears."

"Do I frighten you that much?"

The sun is on Devyn's back, burning off the butter and reddening his shoulders as Aikaterina squints at him between her words. She has just come between two pillars, inside the shadow he casts. The theater closes around them and Epigonus fades. Aikaterina's strange silhouette is trapped between the sun from the sky and an oracular fire. She loses shape in the shifting stillness of that illumination. She turns her back to him but

beckons with a green flash of her eyes before turning her head. The space around them falls silent as the tomb. He reaches for her shoulder. She slides the light fabric down to her waist. He draws his hands down her arms, until he reaches her wrists. She pulls his hands to her belly, and falls back into him. She seems to melt but Devyn's leg fails. He drops to his knees.

Aikaterina turns and bends over him. She slides the backs of her fingers along his spine, feeling every ridge, stopping at occasional welts and scars, fingering each. They are crouching now, she supported by he, he taking strength from she. He reaches up and slides the rest of her robes to her ankles. Aikaterina presses her hip against him and he breathes in sea salt and olive oil. She promises to be his cairn, as she pulls him to his feet and unwraps the belted tartan from his waist. She loosens his Roman sandals and stands again, looking up at him with firefly eyes. He stays her hand when she reaches for his golden torque. This he will not remove.

She sets him amongst their clothes on his back, near the fire of the oracle. She slides her bronze leg along his crisscrossed milky thigh, and then her hips press his. Devyn's wound flares open, burns a blue and yellow path along the marble floor and encircles the dish of red fire. She balances against him and her onyx hair absorbs the radiating light. The sun wraps a veil about her form. He speaks his oath,

"No God, no man, no shackle shall bind me
Obstacle met, nor wine design me
No bond, no promise, no word shall be kept
From these fingers that touch as the first time they've
met."

A storm in his ribs throws them against the wall. He jerks about, as if skewered. He is pushed up a pillar, raked against the capital and sent into the sky. One prong of a trident holds him by his ribs. But Aikaterina is with him. She has not let go. Her arms are tight about his neck and she is breathing heavy into his ear. From passion or from fear, it no longer matters. Each is the same.

He watches the sky ride toward them as the trident lifts their bodies higher and higher. "So this is what it's really like to have the sky fall down upon you."

Aikaterina melts into him until he is sure their separate existence is indistinguishable. The love he feels for her now is equal to the pain he feels in his ribs. Devyn sees a truth. These passions are the same and yet of a different kind. He laughs. It is a choking laugh. One that threatens to fill his body with nothing. And then the trident is gone and they are floating, for the first time. Aikaterina's face is marble white and streaked. She clutches at him, but he laughs and it is contagious. She blushes from ankle to forehead, and then she

too, laughs.

In her laugh, Epigonus returns. The theater expands and the fires puff, then fade.

"I see it is not me. If you must fear something, Aikaterina, fear this—fear the absence of the warrior. To be a warrior is like the pleasure and the pain. We exist singly for your pleasure, at the expense of our pain. We doubt that we will see another night of peaceful rest. We doubt that the next day will even bring another night. It is the fact of our existence. Other classes may endure some aspect of our harsh lifestyles. None endure *all*. We see our end at the tips of our swords. Life and death are as real as poured concrete and easy to see from our vantage point. We suffer without reward. No matter how much you trade or how far you spread this civilization, no matter what peace you work with Keltoi or Romans—you will always require defenders. You will sometimes require aggressors. Civilization is built on the warrior. Surely as Vulcan's hammer will take down these temples—and with way this ground rumbles, it will—our existence is infinite. We exist outside Time, but only in increments. That seems to me pitiful, not fearful. But even this is not what your father will sculpt when he finishes those sketches. Do not mistake uplifting the ideals of the warrior for the inevitability of the warrior's life. In his work, he's showing what we do best."

"What is that? Kill?"

"No, Aikaterina. It is not killing that we do best."

—The End



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