

## Gifts from Greeks

Have you ever looked out to sea to marvel at its expanse and antiquity? It has existed in some form nearly since the beginnings of the earth, since the first rift tore open and belched out the first basaltic magma. As the newly introduced water reached the atmosphere from the depths of the roiling new planet by way of vicious and tormented volcanoes, it condensed and fell to form seas. And after millions of years of aimless drifting and a few magnanimous asteroid impacts, the continents fell into the shapes we have come to know.

This is a story about war and about men...cruel, blind rage and its inventor-victims. At the mercy of the tides, they are tossed about by forces unseen and unloving. Willfully mistreated at the hands of the fates, they piously persevered onwards to accomplish their predestined ends through means often pitiable if not downright dismal. How could such hatred boil in in great hearts? Is mercy a trait of the weak, or are they weak who destroy themselves in their relentless search for revenge?

There was a city long ago, rife with splendor and bustling with trade.. Its name was Carthage, and it was the favorite, amongst all mortal cities, of the goddess Juno. She loved it more than her birthplace Samos, and kept all of her most prized possessions there. There was something about the place that thoroughly enchanted Juno, and she had the highest of hopes for its future. As she looked down upon it with her austere locks of divinely auburn hair, and the frigid blue eyes that marked her as queen, she couldn't help but foresee Carthage at the pinnacle of the world, the ultimate empire, but then...

Word came to her of another race destined for greatness. Perhaps she could have come to accept the news, even though she learned that the people would someday level her precious city. Indeed, her dismay would have been small had the race been anyone but the Trojans. The magma that boiled up in Juno's finely-clad chest surpassed simple disappointment and rose beyond heartbreak even. She closed her blue eyes to the world, tore open her rosy lips, and released an eruption of blind fury. Another damned Trojan.

The Trojans were a happy people. They knew how to live, to laugh, and certainly how to love. But years ago, at a fine gala thrown for a forced wedding, one Trojan committed a grievous wrong, unavoidable though it was.

"This is quite a party," Jana said in the cool, collected manner that paralleled her features so finely. If you mistook it for arrogance, though, you'd be more right than wrong.

"Absolutely," Vera added in her playful voice that had most men drooling over her. She looked around the room, and seemed pleased with the less-than-moral merriment that had begun once the booze set in. "How's business?" she asked Jana.

"Charming as usual," Jana said, the emotionless tone making it impossible to determine whether she was being sarcastic or not. "The boys are in line, and the parents are paying...I'd call it a success."

"I'd never be able to run a boarding school," Vera giggled. "It's simply too much work."

Jana's look was less than pleased while Vera's face blushed, just about her cheeks. Her smirk remained as Minnie strode gallantly over to the pair.

"Why Vera, you look absolutely stunning," she said. "And Jana, you look...stone-faced as usual. Dearie, don't you ever smile?"

"When you've been through all that I have," she said with ambiguous displeasure or disinterest, "smiling is the last thing on your list." She glanced over at her husband Peter, pressed tight against a busty nymphet in what flirted with the boundary between dancing and other movements.

"Oh, lighten up," Vera sang. "He's just having a good time. We all are, right?"

"Speak for yourself," Jana grunted. Then something small and enticing rolled up and struck one of her heels.

It was a golden apple that had rolled up to the triad. And something about that gilded fruit was more enticing than any of the three could resist. What's more, it bore a bold message: *for the fairest*. Even cool-blooded Juno was overcome with desire for the trinket, and more so by the title that came with it. In reality, none of them would be able to resist, had even they tried. The apple was a trap set by Eris, lady of discord, who, because of her wily ways, had been omitted from the guest list. Being as vulpine as ever, and now wounded deeply, the vixen invented the enchanted apple to rain on the parade...whether or not she was aware of what discord it would *actually* cause.

The competition amongst Juno, Venus, and Minerva, although escalating clearly, was not getting anywhere fast, so the inebriated yet still commanding Jupiter stepped in with a plan.

Or rather stepped out... He stumbled to the door of the speakeasy, letting in a rush of cool evening air, and called out to whomever might listen, "Hey! You there, get in here!"

"Peter, shut the door. You're going to get a pig in here." Jana called over to him.

"Oooh...a handsome one I hope," Vera swooned... "Then again, it would be bad for business..."

"Vera darling, I think most people *expect* a match-maker to hang around places like this," Minnie said.

"Oh, you're right! Petey dear, if you're calling in a pig, find a big burly one for me!" Vera broke off in a giggle.

"You there! C'mere!" Peter called to someone outside. The figure was a youth, nineteen or twenty, and dressed well.

"Oh Jana," Vera whispered with butterfly words, "Isn't he one of your boys?"

Jana lowered her gaze... the situation had grown more interesting. "Indeed," she muttered.

"*This* is exactly why I could never run a boarding school," Vera snickered with Minnie.

"Come on in," Peter boomed. "We won't bite!" He pulled the boy into the middle of the room, in front of the three overwhelming ladies. Through his confusion and slight humiliation, the boy didn't notice Vera making eyes at him, nor at once did he realize that his headmistress was in front of him. "Lad," Peter went on, "Your task is a simple one. Just pick out which one of these fine ladies is the prettiest."

"Sir, I—"

"None of that, now. It's easy-peasy. Which one is the prettiest?"

"Well, I... It's just that..."

"What, has the cat got your tongue? I know what might help. Ladies, you're going to have to persuade him, given that you're not above bribes, that is."

"I'll start." Jana silenced the room, her tone confident and slightly impatient. "Percy Alexander," she said with a forceful tone. This made the boy perk up. He looked over to see who had addressed him.

"Mrs.—Mrs. DeWitt?"

"It is I, Percy. You know what I can offer you. Once you graduate, I'll send you to any university you please. Just say which, and I'll write the letter...it's a done deal."

"My turn!" Minnie cut in, excited by the game. "I can get you in with any firm this side of the equator...coal, steel, gold even! Now how about *that*?"

Vera started with a sensuous giggle. "I know what you want. You're a boy! And a fine-looking one at that." She paused a moment to look him up and down. "I could get you any girl you want...That's what *I'd* want if I were you. Am I wrong?"

Poor Percy had never been presented with such an opportunity before, and I'd wager to say that no one else in the world had either. He thought hard for a moment. The Alexander family exerted a fair amount of influence in this town. How else would he have been able to afford Mrs. DeWitt's boarding school? So any college of his choosing was within reach anyways. And with his father's wild successes in the copper industry, not to mention the resulting well-padded trust fund, there wasn't much need to worry about occupation. But girls? There was one he'd always had an eye for... Helen. She was the belle of every ball, and the most beautiful girl Percy swore he'd ever set eyes on. The choice was obvious...at least for his nineteen-year-old brain.

"You there, ma'am." He said and pointed.

"Why, I *do* believe he's pointing at me!" Vera giggled, and stepped forward. She approached the young man and gave him a lingering kiss on the cheek. Minnie looked glum, but Jana had grown a discernibly darker shade of pink, still keeping her cool, although it was surely a warmer cool than it had been.

In Carthage, Juno's enraged roar may have ceased, but it gave way to a frothy seething quite unbecoming of a goddess in any measure. In addition to Paris' judgment, there had been the whole affair of the war (a tale soon to be told), Jupiter's ravishing of the ravishing Ganymede (taken to be his divine cupbearer in place of her daughter Hebe, he did more with the lad than just look at him for sure), and now this worse than bad news. How much more could any living being take, whether mortal or divine? Somewhere deep inside, Juno knew that there was no stopping destiny—Clotho spun it out of the stuff of life itself and handed to Lachesis who measured out the length of each mortal life and determined the course of earthly (and heavenly at that) events. Finally Atropos received the measured and spun life, and with her abhorred shears and morbid imagination ended unchangeably the life of each human with a death she herself had cooked up. Juno knew she could not change fate, but in the name of Jupiter she was going to try her hardest.

The man unlucky enough to experience Juno's furor was Aeneas, a Trojan for whom the Fates had enormous plans. While his beloved homeland was raped and pillaged into a hellish fireball, and while his friends and neighbors were slaughtered violently and

mercilessly, Aeneas was convinced to abandon his heroic instincts and turn tail carrying a divinely crucial burden, the pious man that he was, and escape the wrath of the Argive Greeks. He slipped away with a small group of survivors, and it was, at first, smooth sailing. The happily-escaped yet mournfully-remembering clan camped upon the island of Sicily for a time, renewing their supplies and their will for life. Finally, they made a pleasant exit, and all looked well. But nothing would go well for a Trojan if Juno had any say in the matter.