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The Song of Achilles

Circe

GALATEA

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MILLER**

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Galatea

It was almost sweet the way they worried
about me.

‘You’re so pale,’ the nurse said. ‘You
must keep quiet until your colour returns.’

‘I’m always this colour,’ I said. ‘Because
I used to be made of stone.’

The woman smiled vaguely, pulling up
the blanket. My husband had warned her
that I was fanciful, that my illness made
me say things that would sound strange
to her.

‘Just lie back and I’ll bring you
something to eat,’ she said. She had a mole
on the side of her lip and I liked to watch it

while she talked. Some moles are beautiful and distinctive, like dappling on a horse. But some have hairs in them, and look pulpy like worms and hers was this kind.

‘Lie back,’ she repeated, because I hadn’t.

‘You know what I think would be good for my colour? A walk,’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘Not until you’re better. Feel how chilled your hands are?’

‘That’s the stone,’ I said, ‘like I told you. It can’t get warm without sun. Haven’t you ever touched a statue?’

‘You’re chilled,’ she repeated. ‘Just lie back, and be good.’ She was rushing a little by then, because I had mentioned

the stone twice, and this was gossip for the other nurses, and a breathless reason to speak to the doctor. They were fucking, that’s why she was so eager. I could hear them sometimes through the wall. I don’t say this in a nasty way, for I don’t begrudge her a good fuck, if it was good, which I don’t know. But I say this so that you understand what I was up against: that I was worth more to her sick than I was well.

The door closed, and the room swelled around me like a bruise. When she was here, I could pretend it felt small because of her, but when she left the four wood walls seemed to press towards me, like lungs that had breathed in. The window

did not help, for it was too high to see from the bed, and too small to take in much air. The room smelled sweet and sour at once, as though a thousand suffering people had lain sweating in it, which, I suppose, they had, and then ground roses into the floor with dirty feet.

The doctor was next, and he made noises at me. ‘Chloe says you have not been lying quietly.’

I said, ‘I’m sorry.’

He liked that, but he was also suspicious, because I had been apologising to him every day for a year. For his sake, I tried to vary it – looking down, biting my lip, twisting my fingers. Once, I burst into

tears, and that had been his favourite time. I was working on trying to faint, but didn’t have it quite right yet, for I needed to spend a long time breathing very fast first, and I hadn’t had enough warning that he was coming. But as soon as I did, that would be the new best time. And the doctor would tell my husband, who would shower him with golden coins, and everyone would be happy, except for me. Though I supposed I would be a little happy, for thinking of it.

‘What are you doing?’ he said, severely. ‘This is exactly why you are ill.’

I had got up, you see, while I was thinking about the fainting. The room was

smallest of all with the doctor in it, and he had had garlic that day, and what smelled like every day he'd ever lived, so I had gone to breathe by the window.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I just love the scent of the narcissus.' It was the first thing I thought of, but it only made him frown more, because there were no flowers here, since we are on the rocky edge of a cliff over the sea, so that if I tried to climb out the window, I would not escape but die. Also, I was not even sure narcissus had a smell.

'Lie down this instant,' he said. Then, when I obeyed, he took my wrist and held it. 'Your pulse is slow,' he said.

Of course my pulse is slow, because I used to be made of stone, but I didn't say that. I just made a sound, mmm, that tried to be contrite and interested at once. I thought that if I'd started breathing fast the moment the nurse had closed the door, this might have been the time I could faint. But I had not done it, and now it was too late.

I said, 'I think I would feel better if I could walk.'

'You are too weak,' the doctor said. 'What would I tell your husband if you hurt yourself?'

'I used to be stone,' I said. 'I can't hurt myself from just a walk.'