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**THE  
PRETTIEST  
THORN**

**Colleen Hoover**

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**ONE**

**Roses. They're remarkable when you think about it. All across the world, people present them to the ones they most adore. Not as a mere gift, but as a tangible symbol of sincerest love.**

**A cynic might call such a universal gift 'uninspired'. After all, it's common knowledge that the gesture is replicated millions of times across the world, every year. Yet the vast majority of people who receive these humble offerings will feel truly special in doing so. To hold one between your fingers is to feel the very affection it represents. Their innate ability to express what is so often inexpressible transcends the borders of spoken language, politics, wealth and even time. Have you ever wondered why they have such a natural connection to the magic of love? The answer**

lies in a little-known tale that has never before been recorded for posterity. An ancient tale, that lovers share while embracing naked beneath the stars. A tale of a man named Epimonos. Epimonos was not a mighty warrior, nor a hero of the great epics. He was a diplomat of no consequence -- a minor envoy dispatched by the Athenian assembly to assist with their governance of Corinth. There came a point in his journey where Epimonos noticed the road to Corinth was becoming overgrown. Within an hour, he had lost the road completely amid the long grass. With no path to guide him, all Epimonos could do was continue walking in the direction of the setting sun. Epimonos' wandered across hills and fields until he came upon a lush grove at the foot of a small hill. Trees and bushes of all types and sizes stood all around, yet with enough space between them for a person to move about freely. Melodious birds filled the air with their song as they fluttered between the branches of the taller trees. The ground was covered with grass that was greener than any he had ever seen in his life. The beauty of this place was almost otherworldly. For a while, Epimonos worried that perhaps he was trespassing on Olympus itself. Some distance away, behind a dense bush, Epimonos heard what sounded like a soft, distinctly feminine sigh and a simultaneous huff of exertion. As he tentatively ventured towards the odd noise, he was stopped by the most extraordinary sight. Before him, countless patches of clover instantly blossomed into full flower, as if the motions of springtime had suddenly rippled right through the grove. Epimonos stared at the landscape in sheer amazement, unable to believe his own eyes. He wrestled with confusion until a figure rose up behind the bush where he'd heard the noises. Forgetting about the clovers for the time being, Epimonos strode briskly towards the figure. As Epimonos came within just a few feet of the bush, the obscured figure suddenly twitched as if it had heard him approaching and been startled. A moment later, it bolted towards a nearby tree, giggling sweetly as it ran. Whoever or whatever it was moved with impressive speed. Epimonos only caught a brief glance of the figure. But it was definitely a humanoid creature and judging by its slender proportions and

hourglass curves, it was female. She seemed to be stark naked and, oddly enough, her shoulder-length hair was the same color as the grass. Upon arriving at the tree, the creature leapt up the trunk with inhuman swiftness until she had climbed to one of the lowest branches, several yards above the ground. Driven by curiosity, Epimonos followed her. As he came a little closer he noticed the wide brown eyes staring down at him keenly, from atop the branch. Epimonos was a little uncomfortable being watched from on high like a hawk's prey. Yet somehow he felt the creature meant him no harm. A second figure arose from the same place the first one had appeared. However, this one moved at a more relaxed pace. As he stepped out from behind the bush, Epimonos could clearly see that this being was just an ordinary man. The stranger was tall, with a robust physique and looked to be mid-twenties in age. He was cloaked in a toga that he was still in the process of wrapping. "Hail and well met, friend," the stranger said as he raised his hand in greeting. "I am Odigos of Thermopylae." "Hail! I am Epimonos of Athens," Epimonos replied with a nod. The slight bulge in the middle of the stranger's toga made Epimonos uneasy. He hoped it wasn't a sign that the stranger had a carnal interest in him. "You, too, have come to partake in the hospitality of the great dryads, Epimonos of Athens?" Odigos inquired with a smile. "Dryads?" Epimonos repeated in surprise. So that's what that flighty creature must have been: a dryad, a legendary tree nymph. He turned his head to see if she was still watching him from her tree branch. She was. "Uh, no..." Epimonos continued. "It would seem I am lost. I am an envoy making my way to Corinth." "Ah! You haven't lost your way so much as you've been led astray," the friendly stranger chuckled heartily. Upon noticing the confusion on Epimonos' face, he elaborated, "Many of us have travelled far and wide seeking this garden. Tales abound of its many beauties and pleasures. But then some visitors come to this place without ever seeking it. They are drawn here deliberately by the dryads, with their magic." "But why? What would they want with me?" Epimonos asked. "They want from you what they want from all of us, friend; to mate," Odigos explained with a jolly smile. "Every



year, at the dawn of spring, the great dryads bring a handful of mortal men into their garden to be their lovers." Epimonos now understood why Odigos had had an erection when they'd first met, and was relieved to notice that by now it was almost completely gone. Odigos continued, "These dryads are the mistress spirits of all plants. In order for their species to bloom, they each need a man to fertilize their womanly valleys. We couple with them and flowers all across the world open as we fill them with new life. We are here to bring about spring, and I assure you, friend, it is a most agreeable task." Epimonos was speechless. Nymphs were notoriously very attractive and very uninhibited creatures. The dryad sub-class was no exception. To be 'chosen' as a consort for a tribe of these women was a marvellous prospect. Yet, an overwhelming one in some regards, also. "I mean you no disrespect, but it would be foolish to spend any more time conversing with a man, when there are many sweet maidens around willing to offer their company," Odigos said. He was already walking off towards some other area of the grove. "Go! Explore the garden! Enjoy its bounty. There is ample food and fresh water and many comely dryads still waiting to be seeded. The ones who have already been tended are not frigid, either," he advised, before turning his back on Epimonos and leaving. "Th... Thank you," Epimonos absently replied, after Odigos was already out of earshot. He turned his gaze up into the towering tree nearby once more. The dryad was still up there, gazing at him. She flashed him a flirty smile before turning and climbing higher until she disappeared among the leaves. With a bemused sigh, Epimonos left as well, deciding to take Odigos' advice and explore the grove for himself. He found the lovely birdsong that flowed throughout the garden particularly charming. As he made his way through the garden, he passed dozens of dryads, with their numbers seeming to grow denser the further he explored. Every single one of them was the archetypal ideal in terms of feminine physique. They were all slender, with long legs and fine hourglass figure. Their breast sizes varied, ranging from almost cantaloupe-sized to being virtually flat-chested. But each one knew how to carry her body



in a way that made her extremely attractive. They all moved with confidence, and an enticing sway in their hips. Epimonos' maleness began to grow firm after only a few passing glances at some dryads. The dryads' were quite varied in their shades of skin (if one could call it skin). Some were as fair as pine timber, some were as dark as ebony, some were lime green, and there were all manner of shades in between. Yet regardless of her color, each dryad had a 'grain' running all across her body, like one would see on a plank of timber. Some even had swirling dark 'knots' upon them in place of birthmarks. In many regards, they had the appearance of wooden sculptures. Some even had a few leaves or small vines growing from their bodies. Yet they moved with the flexibility of a fit human woman. The breasts of the more buxom dryads were a paradox unto themselves. They didn't jiggle as the creatures walked, suggesting they were solid. Yet Epimonos discovered another human man locked in heated foreplay with a dryad, and he could see her breasts yielding to the man's caress like tender peaches. Most of the dryads wandered around nude, but some of them wore flimsy brassieres and loin coverings fashioned from large leaves and held together with thin strands of creeper. Their faces were each unique, yet similar in their faerie-like sweetness. Their features were delicate and they had doe-like eyes that would captivate any man who gazed into them. As he explored the garden, Epimonos noticed many of the dryads watching him with bedroom eyes. It seemed that satiation for his sexual cravings would be easy to find. Apart from the dryads, Epimonos had also noticed many fruit-bearing trees along the way. Some of which bore fruit significantly larger than their mortal-world counterparts. He had also seen several other human men. It seemed that fertilizing every plant on earth was a process that required many sires. He had not actually seen the fresh water that Odigos had mentioned. But he had heard the sounds of a babbling brook on a few occasions. The garden catered to a man's every essential need. It provided nothing more than the simplest comforts, which in a way was what made it so appealing. Epimonos was sure he would be very happy there. Even though he had not yet

seen the entire garden, he had satisfied his curiosity for the time being. He thought about seeking out a comely dryad to proposition. But before he had a chance to do so, he was distracted by the distant sounds of harp music. Suddenly, his curiosity was piqued once more. The prospect of a harp seemed out of place in a garden that spurned civilization. Epimonos set off to find the source of the music. He soon realized that the sonata was in perfect harmony with the singing birds. As the notes became clearer, Epimonos found the melody more and more delightful. His investigation brought him to the top of the small hill at the back of the garden. A tall ash tree with a wide trunk grew at the summit. Just in front of it stood a squat bramble bush that looked almost like a couch in shape.

Epimonos could see someone sitting on the 'couch,' with their back to him. At first, he assumed it was yet another dryad. But then he realized that this creature was unlike any dryad he'd seen thus far. A long, sharp spire protruded from each of its shoulders and the outer sides of its arms were lined with many smaller spikes. The creature's back was likewise covered in many pointy spikes, each between 3 and 4 inches in length. Its hair, which reached partway down its back looked like dark brown pine needles, yet somehow seemed far more hazardous, like porcupine quills. Epimonos kept following the music, soon realizing that the mysterious creature and the music's source were one and the same. Before the spiky creature sat a shiny golden harp, which she elegantly plucked at with her long, pointy fingers. As he approached her, Epimonos realized that the creature had much in common with the dryads. Her body was distinctly feminine in shape, with an ample bust swelling above her slender waist. Her olive skin tone had a wooden grain running all across it, too. In fact, the only marked difference between her and the dryads were the spikes all over her body. Like some of the dryads, the harpist wore a botanical and brassiere and loin covering. Her bra, however, looked like it was made from the tough shell of a seed pod. The cups were covered with thorns, like a prickly pear and the entire neckline looked as if it had been bevelled down to a razor-sharp edge. A skimpy, yet

husky plate of bark protected her nether regions. It, likewise, had a razor-sharp edge on top, to cut anyone foolish enough to try to reach inside. The harpist must have sensed Epimonos' presence as he came within a few feet of her. The music ended and her head whipped around with anxious speed to look at him. Her face had foreboding characteristics much like the rest of her body. Big, hook-like barbs curled down and away from her cheekbones. A smaller pair protruded from the sides of her chin. The ends of her eyebrows twisted into long, straight spikes that extended several inches away from her face. Yet beneath those deterrents, her features were just as gentle and sweet as any of the other plant spirits Epimonos had seen. Perhaps even more so. Her wide, hazel eyes gazed up at him in alarm. "I... I'm sorry," Epimonos apologized. "I didn't mean to startle..." Before he could finish his sentence, the creature sank into the bramble couch and seemed to dissolve into its tangle of thorny vines. "No! Please, don't be afraid," Epimonos humbly protested to the brambles. He wasn't even sure if the creature was still inside. "I mean you no harm. I just wanted to see who was playing that music," he explained. There was no reaction whatsoever from the botanical couch. The sudden silence seemed somewhat eerie compared to the pleasant melody that had accompanied Epimonos up the hill. Even the birds had stopped chirping. "Please come back," Epimonos pleaded. "I won't hurt you. I promise." He stood there for almost a minute, waiting patiently for the mysterious being to emerge from her thorny sanctuary. Eventually he decided that she had either magically disappeared to some other place, or that she still felt threatened despite his assurances of peace. Feeling disappointed and guilty for scaring the poor creature, he started back down the hill. A few minutes later, as he wandered the garden, the music resumed. Epimonos smiled. ----- Gilt in the silvery moonlight, the garden possessed a sense of ethereal serenity. Here, the darkness that fell from the canopies was, oddly, not at all threatening. Most of the dryads had returned to their trees and fallen asleep shortly after dusk, but a small number of them seemed to prefer the cool of night. The prickly harpist had



certainly not retired as Epimonos could still hear her wonderful music. If anything, it was even clearer in the still night air. Several of the human men had gathered at a small rock formation in a clearing, where their dryad lovers bought them sweet and juicy fruit to dine upon. Epimonos had joined them. "...Of course, fire is forbidden here, because dryads are made of wood," Afigitis of Marathon explained. Afigitis seemed to be something of an expert in dryad folklore. "That's why men can only be here between the first and the last quarter of the lunar cycle. Otherwise, we would get lost in the darkness." Epimonos gazed up at the moon overhead. It was more or less full. If the stranger's words were true, that meant he would only be able to stay in the garden for seven more days. Afigitis continued, "But even though men would technically be able to exist here during the light halves of the lunar cycle all year round, the great dryads typically only welcome visitors at the beginning of spring, because that is the only time they crave our seed." "I disagree," Mataios of Cyprus replied, "Even if you are correct and the gods remove us from the garden come the moon's last quarter, I shall just return at the next first quarter. I am certain that these maidens will eagerly await my return, as they shall miss the satisfaction I give them," he boasted while caressing the thigh and ass of a smiling dryad who had brought him a pear. "You may journey as long as you like, friend," Afigitis retorted with a broad smirk, apparently amused by the Mataios' pride. "Having been to the garden does not mean one can find his way back here. It is not actually where you discovered it. It is not anywhere. And yet, it is everywhere. "The entrance remains hidden, until there is a yearning among the dryads to be seeded. Then it opens exclusively for the men who seek the great dryads' affections, as well as some who exude an aura of impressive fertility. But otherwise, it is impossible to find. Even if you have been here before," the knowledgeable man explained. The proud Mataios seemed downcast. "You'll have to find other maidens to satisfy till they crave your seed again," Epimonos joked. "Oh, I wouldn't count on being invited back here next spring," the knowledgeable man corrected in a serious tone. "The great dryads are not

known for calling on old consorts, no matter how sexually adept they are. They take a new collection of lovers every year. Or so the legends say." "But you said the garden admits for those who seek the dryads?" Epimonos queried. "And if we are enjoyable lovers, why would they reject us when they wish to consort?" "That is the way of things in nature. The seasons come and go," Afigitis remarked. "A generation mates to bring forth new life and then its purpose is served and it disappears from sight and mind. The next season comes and it is time for the next generation to fill the role. "The dryads take great delight in mating with us, as you say. But by next year we will have served our purpose as far as they are concerned. We will be relics of a bygone season. And there will be no shortage of virile men willing to fill their wombs with the stirrings of spring," he explained. A solemn silence came over the small party. "Savour these days in the garden, friends," Afigitis declared, raising a half-eaten apple in a makeshift toast, "for we may never return." Several of the other men raised their fruity dinner in agreement. The conversation drifted into other subjects after that. Once all the men had had enough to eat, it was time for 'the hunt,' which Epimonos learned was an erotic game the nocturnal dryads liked to play. Essentially, the dryads would tease the men with sensual displays, so the men would chase them through the moonlit garden. Ideally, the chase would culminate in a night time liaison. Epimonos chased three nubile dryads hither and thither across the garden. But the tree maidens played for keeps and Epimonos wasn't able to catch any of them. The occasional bursts of loud, feminine moaning he heard echoing through the garden suggested that others had better luck claiming their prey. Eventually, exhausted from all the running, Epimonos paused to rest a moment against a sycamore tree. Within a few minutes his eyes were closed and he was fast asleep. ----- Epimonos awoke to the lively chorus of a flock of birds, perched in the branches above him. Twinkling specks of the golden sun winked at him through the shifting leaves of distant trees. The garden was bright and well awake. Many of the dryads were already up and about. Epimonos noticed several of them sunning themselves upon the tops of

trees; their backs arched, their pert breasts jutting proudly before glorious Apollo. A sense of contented awe chimed through his heart. Never in his life had a moment felt so perfect. Even the music was breathtakingly beautiful. The music. There it was again. Those crystal clear chimes of harp strings sweeping through the air. Epimonos remembered the spiky harpist and felt a renewed urge to praise her wonderful talent.

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## TWO

Once again, he climbed the small hill where the harpist played. Today, however, he made sure to approach her from the front. He was certain that if she could see him coming from some distance, she wouldn't be startled and flee.

He neared the summit with a friendly smile. His eyes met with those of the harpist's at a distance of about forty yards. This time, instead being afraid, she glared at him in displeasure. That didn't deter Epimonos. He would eagerly make amends for yesterday's intrusion if need be. By the time he was within ten feet of the spiky creature, she was scowling in annoyance. She stopped playing and once again descended into her bramble seat. "No!" Epimonos called, breaking in to a jog "Wait! Please don't go!" The harpist's retreat wasn't so urgent this time. Epimonos was actually able to see her legs and torso 'fraying' into dozens of bramble stems as she sank into the couch and became one with it. But she was still completely gone by the time Epimonos reached her side. He sighed in frustration. "I mean you no harm! You have my word!" he reiterated to the motionless bush. "I came to tell you that your music is wonderful. I like it very much. "Please come out and play some more," he requested. "I don't want you to be afraid of me. I'd like to be your friend." No response. He waited patiently for her to realize he spoke the truth. He was certain that she was somehow inside the bush, and that she'd heard every word he'd said. While he waited, he took a moment to admire her



magnificent harp. The workmanship was superb. A floral bas relief had been forged into much of the solid gold frame. Against the tall side of the frame, a figure of busty dryad leaned forward with a seductive smile. Epimonos reached out to feel the careful detail of the decoration. But just as he made contact with the harp, a rapidly-growing bramble vine snaked out of the bush and coiled tightly around the harp. Its branches encircled the frame and weaved between the strings, ensuring an unshakable hold upon the harp. Epimonos' hand quickly recoiled as the vine all but consumed the harp. He looked over to the bush and saw two hazel eyes imbedded in the stems of the bush, glaring furiously at him. All the leaves of the bush rustled wildly, though Epimonos had felt no breeze blowing. The sound was distinctly threatening. "You're right. It's doesn't belong to me. I shouldn't have touched it," Epimonos conceded as he looked directly into the bitter eyes of the bush. "I meant no harm, but it was wrong anyway. I'm sorry." His apology did nothing to soften the harsh gaze of the bush. It was clear the bramble spirit didn't trust him in the least. Epimonos realized that continuing to violate the creature's personal space would only make her angrier at this point, so he calmly stepped away from and returned to the main garden. ----- Epimonos' guilt lifted a little when he heard the harp music once more. It had taken her longer to resume playing today that it had yesterday. Epimonos imagined that she must've been hunkered down in that bush for over half an hour. He felt terrible for unsettling the timid creature so. He wondered why she was so defensive. Was she like that towards everyone? Or was there something about him she didn't like? "Here you are, my lord," a breathy feminine voice declared, as a bunch of red grapes appeared before his face. "You must be hungry." It was a dryad making the offering. She was pale green, with nice B-cup breasts and a long mane of grass-like hair. "Oh... Thank you," Epimonos said as he accepted the gift. "It is my pleasure, my lord," the dryad replied with a nod and a keen gaze. "We all wish you to be content while you share the garden with us." Epimonos felt something brushing across his right temple. It was a leaf on a thin vine that had somehow curled over his

shoulder and around his back without him noticing. A moment later he realized that the vine was actually part of the dryad, growing like a tail from just above her ass. She caressed his face teasingly with her tail, before slowly withdrawing it, stroking his back and waist along the way. Then, with a lingering glance, she turned her back and walked away, with a seductive sway in both her hips and tail. She turned her head and gave Epimonos another inviting look a few seconds later. Epimonos followed, already feeling the blood beginning to collect in his manhood. The dryad quickened her pace and Epimonos did likewise. She was soon racing away from him at a lively dash, giggling mischievously. Epimonos tried for a little while, but he could not possibly match her speed. The brief chase happened to pass by one of the human men, Mathima of Thebes, whom Epimonos had met the night before. He was resting on a small mound of earth. "It seems her flowers are not yet ready to bloom, friend," Mathima laughed. His mirth faded a little when he saw the confusion and frustration on Epimonos' face. "Don't feel bad. Many dryads have no interest in certain men. It's a common occurrence. Be assured that there are many more comely dryads out there who will gladly lay with you," he told Epimonos. "A delightful thought indeed," Epimonos agreed. "But I felt certain that that dryad was offering herself to me. She caressed me with her tail, she brought me these grapes," he said, holding up the dryad's gift. "...And she looked at me in a way that seemed... hungry." "Perhaps she expects proof of your virility before she will accept you," Mathima suggested, "Many dryads will refuse to mate until their suitors show that they can be hard enough to bring the dryad to climax. Though normally, such dryads will provide an erotic exhibition to help their suitor achieve the stiffness they desire." "You saw for yourself -- she fled before I had a chance to prove my 'virility,'" Epimonos countered. "That's true," Mathima agreed. "Tell me, did she accept your offering?" he asked. "Offering? What offering?" Epimonos replied in confusion. "The courtship offering," Mathima said. "You do know about the courtship offering, don't you?" Epimonos shook his head. "Nobody has told you of it?" Mathima asked with surprise.

Again, Epimonos simply shook his head. "By the gods! What a horrid lapse!" Mathima exclaimed as he sat up, now taking Epimonos' predicament more seriously. "My friend, before a dryad will consort with a man, he must present her with a gift," he explained. "It's a courtship ritual that no dryad neglects, no matter how wanton she is. "They may have admitted you into their garden, but that merely means they were impressed with your virility, or virtue, or perhaps some other characteristic. If you wish to be invited into a dryad's sex, you must impress her with your manners. Come to her with offering that will please her, to show that you respect and admire her. If she finds you attractive, too, she will present herself to you and you may take her as a lover," the man instructed. "I see. And what forms of offering do the dryads find pleasing?" Epimonos inquired. "Water," Mathima answered. "Water?" Epimonos repeated, surprised by the simplicity of the answer. "Are you surprised? They're tree spirits!" Mathima jovially replied with a shrug. "Their only needs are water and sunlight!" Epimonos nodded as he considered the logic of Mathima's words. "And, as I said before it's not so much the water itself the dryads desire, but the respect you show by offering it to them," Mathima added. "Some men would seek to simply 'take' a dryad, as if she were a belonging to be used. But this act is abhorrent to them and they resist any man who does not appreciate them. "There are many bowls along the banks of the brook that runs through the garden," he continued. "They are communal; all the men are welcome to take them so they may make their courtship offering to a dryad they desire. Just remember to return it to the brook after you have sown your oats." "Fine advice, indeed. Thank you, my friend," Epimonos replied with a gracious smile. -----

----- A slight sneer grew upon the harpist's face as she noticed Epimonos approaching her once again. Cupped within his hands was a large stone bowl of clear, fresh water. It was heavy to carry and Epimonos had to walk with greater care than usual to avoid spilling too much. Following his informative conversation with Mathima, Epimonos had hoped that a kind peace offering of water would cool the spiky harpist's temper.



Alas, she seemed just as unwelcoming as ever. When he came within six or seven yards of her, she again retired silently into the bramble couch. Epimonos made no effort to deter her this time. He simply continued over to the bush and gently laid the water bowl right in front of it. He acknowledged the bush with a polite smile and then stepped away. He walked over to the large ash nearby, sat down in front of it and relaxed against it. He stayed there, keeping his eyes trained as best he could upon the brambles. He amused himself with various daydreams, some of which were highly erotic encounters with a pretty dryad that he'd made up himself. He also pondered the fact that the birdsong sounded so ordinary without the harpist's accompaniment. It took over an hour, but Epimonos' patience was rewarded. With a gentle rustling of the bush's leaves, the prickly harpist slowly emerged, looking just as miffed as when she'd disappeared. "Hello," Epimonos greeted with a friendly smile. The creature maintained her frosty glare. "I missed you," Epimonos said, almost as a tease of the creature's constant rebuffs. His remark yielded no response from the creature, irate or otherwise. Epimonos was sure she was pretending to ignore him. The harpist gazed down intently at the stone bowl full of water at her feet. For a second, Epimonos thought he saw her expression soften. But then she turned and stared him straight in the eye, with a defiant smirk. She gently pushed the bowl well aside with her foot, pointedly rejecting his peace offering. Epimonos' felt a little hurt, but made an effort to continue smiling as the harpist took her seat and prepared to resume her playing. The harpist began her melody with a proud smile on her face, as if she had somehow beaten Epimonos. What she didn't know is that her lovely music swiftly quashed his disappointment. He leaned forward and gazed upon her, watching as her dainty, yet sharp fingers plucked perfect ripples of sound from the harp's strings. All ten of her spindly digits, along with her arms, moved with such grace, as if they were dancing upon a spring zephyr. He noticed she defaulted to an expression of blissful serenity, closing her eyes while she played. She surrendered herself completely to her music, letting it pulse through her body like a

human's heartbeat. Epimonos was captivated by the spectacle. The harpist was such a pleasure to watch, engrossed in her art. So much so that it virtually obscured her unsettling features. The harpist noticed Epimonos' gaze and seemed amused. No doubt she assumed it was just another futile attempt to make friends with her. But gradually, she became irritated by his unfaltering admiration. The minutes flew by for Epimonos as he listened to her play. He didn't even realize that a couple of hours had come and gone since she had returned to her harp. Eventually, he began to feel tired and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. He closed his eyes, but not his ears. Several minutes later, the sonata the harpist had been playing came to a natural end. As Epimonos waited leisurely for her next tune to begin, he could've sworn he heard a soft swallowing sound... and then another. He opened his eyelids ever so slightly and peeked through the sliver of vision. Just as he suspected - the harpist was holding the stone bowl and drinking deeply. She drank until the bowl was empty, and then licked the last cool drops slowly from her lips. Epimonos tried to remain nonchalant, but he couldn't stop himself from grinning broadly. The creature had finally accepted his gift. He'd suspected earlier that she found the water enticing, as she'd taken such care not to spill any when she pushed it away. If she'd sincerely been offended, she would have simply kicked it over. The harpist noticed Epimonos smiling. "Must you sit there and gawk at me all day?" she snapped in a strong, profoundly feminine voice. "No," Epimonos replied in a playful tone, delighted that she was finally speaking to him, "I can stand here and gawk at you, if you prefer." The harpist let out a loud huff and looked up at the sky, as if to implore the gods to eject this fool from her hill. She stomped back to her couch, sat down and launched right in to an exciting, fast-tempo symphony. But it was more like she was playing to ease her frustration, rather than for Epimonos' entertainment. Her melodies became more tranquil as the day went on. After a while, she seemed to have almost forgotten Epimonos was around. Later in the afternoon, Epimonos felt hungry, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the graceful harpist. There was plenty of delicious fruit

down in the garden, but the music wasn't as clear down there. As the sun was setting, the harpist creature played a final ambrosial lullaby, before retiring into the bramble patch for the night. She shot Epimonos a parting glare as she disappeared. Already missing her and her wonderful music, Epimonos stood up awkwardly and staggered forward. His ass was asleep from sitting on it all day long. He limped down to the garden for some much needed dinner. He was famished! He joined the other men again for the nightly banquet. During a lull in the conversation, he asked them what they knew about the harpist.

"That creature?" replied haughty Mataios. He spoke as if he was surprised anyone would care to ask about the thorny woman. "No doubt she's just some minstrel who plays for our amusement."

"Yes, but what manner of creature is she?" Epimonos asked. "I don't know," Mataios answered, "Some accursed beast, no doubt. But what does it matter? The attractive women are all down here in the garden. Why concern yourself with such a disturbing creature? It's clear from her barbed skin that she's meant to be avoided. Spend your time with the comely women who will fulfil your sexual desires, not the pronged one who will tear through your flesh." Epimonos didn't pursue the topic any further. He felt sorry for the poor harpist, being talked of so coldly. It occurred to him that this was probably the typical attitude visitors to the garden had towards her. It saddened him that someone who beautified the garden with such lovely music could be so under-appreciated. By the time the nightly erotic chase began, Epimonos felt very well fed and tired. Having had nothing but a handful of grapes to eat all day, he had eaten heartily at the banquet. He tried pursuing some of the nimble, giggling dryads through the garden, more so because it was expected of him rather than genuine arousal. But it was very tiresome trying to run on such a full stomach. Before long, he had curled up beneath a stout oak and soon drifted off into a deep, peaceful slumber. ----- The harpist shook her head in exasperation as her bothersome fan climbed her hill again the next morning. He was carrying another stone bowl full of water. Epimonos gently laid the bowl on the ground, just a couple of



feet away from her. Without the slightest interruption to her tune, she peered over to inspect the bowl's contents. She huffed and flashed him a stern glance before turning her attention back to her harp. Epimonos stepped back with a sly smirk. The harpist thought she was discouraging him with her expressions of displeasure. But she had slipped up... She had not retreated into her couch today when he had come within arm's reach of her. It was her friendliest welcome, yet. Epimonos returned to the comfy patch of ground where he had been sitting yesterday and gave the sublime musician his complete attention. Later in the morning a small party of three dryads leisurely sashayed their way to the top of the hill. They gathered around behind the harpist, but stood so that Epimonos had an unobscured view of each of them. The dryads danced to the flowing rhythm of the music, swaying their hips and caressing their naked bodies. They showed off their luscious busts by mashing their breasts together to create deep cleavage and they teased Epimonos by slowly petting their gyrating snatches. As they danced, they would look at him with 'come hither' eyes and a feisty pout. Epimonos enjoyed their exhibition very much. It was an erotic accompaniment for the harpist's performance. He loved the way their motions perfectly followed the melody. It was as if the dryads had been just as captivated by the music as Epimonos himself. Epimonos soon bore a mighty erection beneath his toga, yet oddly, he didn't feel compelled to get up and seek release with one of the lovely dryads. The harpist's music was such bliss to listen to; even the seductive tree nymphs couldn't tempt him away. With lust in his blood and an achingly hard cock, Epimonos began to see the brilliant musician in a different light. He noticed the way she rocked to and fro to the sensual tempo of her sonata; the way her slender, feminine arms rolled gracefully over the strings; the way her closed eyes and absent smile betrayed how she was lost in the rapture of her own music. For the first time Epimonos found himself having physical feelings for the creature. But they lasted only briefly, before being quenched by the sight of the dangerous spikes that lined her entire body. After dancing through several sonatas, the dryads seemed to realize,

with disappointment, that they could not steal Epimonos' attention. One of them noticed the bowl of water at the harpist's feet. She spoke to the harpist in a strange, inhuman language that consisted of high-pitched chirps and soft clicking. The harpist replied in the same tongue and another dryad entered the conversation. From the body language, Epimonos gathered that the dryads had asked the harpist why she had a full bowl of water at her feet. The harpist had given some unflattering answer regarding Epimonos and the dryads asked her if they could have the water, assuming she didn't want it. The harpist indicated that they were welcome to it. One of the dryads lifted the bowl and drank from it with a delighted giggle. As she continued with her tune, the harpist shot Epimonos a defiant glare and a wicked smile. What clearer message of rejection could she give him than giving his gift away? Epimonos felt hurt by the gesture. The dryad with the bowl passed it to her sister, who also drank from it. Pleased with their prize, the three dryads returned to the garden, laughing and sharing the bowl between them along the way. Not long after, Epimonos stood up with a heavy-hearted sigh and wandered away in the same direction. A beaming grin washed over the harpist's face as he passed her. "Finally, I'm rid of him!" she thought. But only a few minutes later, she watched in disbelief as her doting fan ascended the hill once more, with yet another bowl full of cool water. The expression on her face was priceless: like she felt she was caught in a bad joke. Once again, Epimonos laid the bowl by her feet with a gracious smile and a bow, before returning to his usual spot on the grass. A few minutes later, the sonata ended. With a whimper of surrender, the harpist bent over and grabbed the bowl. Soft moans of delight escaped her as she drank. To plant spirits, water was evidently a very satisfying treat. The harpist was probably extremely tempted by his first offering. It must've taken all her willpower to refuse it. A second temptation was simply too much for her.

### THREE

Epimonos chuckled triumphantly at the sight of her enjoying his offering. While she drank, he bit into a nectarine he'd been keeping in the folds of his toga. While he was down in the garden, he'd taken the opportunity to retrieve two of them, three apples and another full bunch of grapes, so that he wouldn't go hungry again today.

Once she had drunk all the water, she glared at Epimonos in frustration again. But this time there was an elusive softness in her eyes. Some quality... perhaps the bitterness, wasn't there anymore. Epimonos gave her a friendly smile, still intent on forming a cordial, perhaps even fond connection with her. The harpist's gaze dropped to the ground, as if she felt ashamed for treating Epimonos so rudely before. The harpist took her seat and immediately began a slow, sweet sonata that warmed Epimonos' heart. Nightfall came. On this night, the harpist continued playing well after sunset. When she finished her last sonata for the day, she gave Epimonos a look as if to say, "The show's over. You can go now." There was no malice whatsoever in her eyes this time. Epimonos gave her an understanding nod. "Tell me something," he said to her, just as she was about to disappear into her couch. "What are you?" he asked, as he stood up and approached her. "You seem to be a plant spirit, like the dryads. But your features aren't like theirs." The harpist seemed to take slight offence at this observation. She stared at Epimonos reluctantly, as if she were inclined not to respond at all. "Please tell me," he pleaded. The harpist still hesitated. "You know, the other tree spirits give men a moment of their womanly favors in return for an offering of water," Epimonos remarked, prompting a look of shock from the harpist. "All I ask from you is one answer for a simple question." The harpist seemed humbled by his logic and nodded in agreement. "I'm a great dryad, too. Just like all the others you've seen," she told him. "Okay. But how come you're so... spiky?" Epimonos asked. "You have your one answer," the harpist bluntly retorted, before descending into the bramble tangles of her couch. "So I have, dryad," Epimonos nodded with amusement. "So I have." -----



----- No more than ten minutes had passed since the harpist had begun her first sonata of the morning, when her tenacious admirer came to her with yet another bowl of water. He left the water at her feet as usual, but this time he stood close by, waiting expectantly. When she'd finished her sonata, the harpist picked up the bowl and consumed its contents. "So?" Epimonos said with a smile as the harpist licked her lips. "So, what?" she responded in confusion. "Another bowl, another answer. Why are you so different to the other dryads?" Epimonos asked, calling back to his question from the previous evening. "Is uniqueness so confounding to you? No two dryads in this garden are identical," the harpist answered defensively. "Maybe not," Epimonos conceded. "But none of the others are covered in sharp prongs." It seemed to be a tender issue with the harpist. She hesitated a moment before answering, "They protect me." "Okay," Epimonos nodded. "Protect you from what?" "From you!" The harpist snapped, glaring at him sharply. "From man! You are an arrogant and dangerous animal! You are merciless in your pursuits of senseless ambition! You care nothing for the suffering you cause, or the emptiness you leave in your wake! You wish to subjugate the entire world, and every life in it, as if it belongs to you alone! You look upon us and think only of how you can bend us to your service. You take what you want from us and give nothing in return..." "I brought you that water," Epimonos softly countered. The harpist responded only with cold silence. Epimonos noticed her hands were clenched tightly around the frame of her golden harp, as if she were afraid it was about to be taken from her. "I don't understand," he continued. "My only ambition towards you has been to extend you a compliment, perhaps even a friendship. Have I done something to offend you?" There was an awkward pause before the harpist told him, "Your question's been answered." Without a word, Epimonos grabbed the empty bowl and headed briskly back to the garden. The harpist knew precisely what he was doing. He would soon be back. All the same, she was glad for the few minutes of solitude she would have to play her music. Sure enough, Epimonos returned to her before she had finished two sonatas. His water

bowl had been refilled. Just as before, he left it by her feet and waited for her to finish playing. "Why do you dislike me so much?" he asked her, almost the instant she'd finished drinking. "Was it something I did? Something I said?" The harpist sighed sadly. "I first met your kind long ago," she began. "They came to my grove when I was just a small shrub. They came with their axes and hacked away at the trunks of the great elders of my home; the gentle giants who used to lull me off to sleep with the rustling of their leaves in the evening breeze. "My tree folk had spent centuries reaching toward the clouds, and the men - your kin, felled them in less than a day. They cheered as the great ones came crashing to the earth! "Then they dragged the corpses off to carve them up for their 'catapults,' their 'fortresses,' their 'mighty triremes.' And as a parting insult, they trampled me into the ground as they left. "With Persephone's blessing, I survived and recovered. I hated the men for the gentle spirits they so callously murdered - I still do - and as I grew, I sprouted thorns which grew longer and sharper every day, until I became dangerous enough to ensure the cruel men would never encroach on me again," she explained in a solemn voice. "So, that is why I dislike you, man. Have I answered your quest..." the harpist looked up and was silenced by what she saw. The sorrow in her admirer's eyes matched her own. It looked as if he were on the verge of tears. She was astonished that a human could show such empathy for the death of a tree. "I... I'm sorry," he croaked. "Truly sorry," he emphasized, a little louder. Stinging from revisiting her painful memories, the harpist didn't respond. She simply turned back to her harp and began an impassioned battle hymn with aggressive slices across the strings. It would have been a rousing performance, were it not for the bitter grief so obviously haunting the musician. Epimonos tentatively picked up the empty bowl and went back down to the brook in the garden. He took his time, wanting to give the harpist some space. By the time he returned to her, the music had softened to a slower, calmer melody with a chorus that made Epimonos feel a little sad. He held the bowl of water in his hands as he waited patiently for her to finish. She took the bowl without looking at

him -- accidentally grazing his fingers with one of her spindly digits. She drank the water slower than normal, like she didn't have much of an appetite. "So?" she asked, dryly. "What do you want to know now?" "Nothing," Epimonos answered solemnly. The harpist looked at him, seeming confused. "No questions. This is just something I want to do for you. No conditions. No charge." The harpist was touched by his genuine kindness. "Would you like some more?" Epimonos asked. "Uh, Yes. Please," the harpist said. "It's very refreshing." "Okay," Epimonos said with a warm smile as she handed him the empty bowl. As he started down the hill, the harpist began a new sonata, much more uplifting than the last. He soon returned with the bowl refilled. Once the harpist had finished it, he made another offer to fetch her some more water, which she graciously accepted. After consuming the next bowl, Epimonos asked her for a third time if she would like some more. "Not at the moment," the harpist answered politely. "You've been marching up and down the hill with a heavy bowl full of water for most of the morning. Why don't you sit and rest a while?" she suggested after an awkward pause. "Thank you. I believe I shall," Epimonos agreed. He settled in to his usual spot and watched as the harpist played a gentle melody that filled Epimonos with a wonderful sense of tranquillity. He sat there enjoying her music in silence for almost an hour. Then as she came to the end of a sonata, he spoke. "May I ask you a question?" he asked. "Must you?" the harpist replied, with more facetiousness than impatience. "Do you have a name?" he inquired, gazing at her intently. The question seemed to catch the harpist by surprise. "Few of you men-folk care to know our names," the harpist quietly remarked, almost to herself. "I do," she replied in a more engaged tone. "I am called Ponane." "Ponane..." Epimonos repeated with a kindly smile. "Such a lovely name for a dryad." "Really? And what would you call an ugly name for a dryad?" Ponane replied, deadpan. Epimonos paused for a moment to think. "Cerberus," he answered with a decisive nod, referencing perhaps the most fearsome beast in all of Greek legend. He noticed the smirk of amusement that Ponane failed to suppress and felt a little proud



of himself. "Ponane. Ponane, Ponane, Ponane..." Epimonos sighed dreamily, letting the name grow on him as Ponane began her next sonata. "My name is Epimonos." A thoughtful look washed over the dryad's face as she heard his name. Epimonos closed his eyes to focus better on Ponane's new sonata. He didn't see her lips softly mouthing his name, and smiling. -----  
----- By the time the sun had climbed to the middle of the sky, Epimonos felt hungry. He picked up the empty water bowl and politely excused himself from Ponane's presence. "I'll take my leave to go fetch some fruit, but I'll return as soon as I'm done," he promised. "Oh, I'm sure you will," Ponane replied in an exasperated tone as she plucked the beginning notes of her next sonata. Epimonos smiled. He had a feeling that Ponane had grown fonder of him than she let on. With the bowl in-hand, Epimonos made his way down the familiar trek to the main garden. He gathered a variety of fruits from the plentiful trees, at first storing them in the empty bowl, until he had collected enough for a satisfying lunch. Then he headed for the small brook, where he transferred the fruit into the folds of his toga and filled the bowl with water. Having not had anything to drink all day, he drank several mouthfuls of the cool, fresh water himself, before topping the bowl up and starting back to Ponane. As he walked through the garden it struck him just how perfect the harmony was between Ponane's distant melody and the songs of the birds in the trees. He continued to muse on this as he approached Ponane, thanks mainly to a flock of chirping sparrows in the large ash towering over her. Epimonos gently laid his offering of water at her feet as he'd done many times before. Without interrupting her sonata, she turned to him and gave him a friendly smile; only briefly, before feigning her usual non-nonsense demeanor. It seemed she had come to enjoy Epimonos' company. But it also seemed she was averse to acknowledging such feelings, perhaps even to herself. Epimonos simply returned a warm smile of his own and returned to his usual position, where he began eating his lunch. The sonata was fairly long and concluded with a lively chorus from the sparrows in the branches above. When the music stopped, Ponane drank

from the water bowl. "One of your finest pieces yet," Epimonos complimented. "If you say so," Ponane replied, seemingly indifferent to his opinion. "I do," Epimonos said with a jolly grin, still undeterred by her distant attitude. "I think it's marvellous the way you follow the birds so precisely." Ponane guffawed, almost mockingly. "No, I do!" Epimonos asserted in a much more serious tone. "I can appreciate how difficult it must be!" "I do not follow them. At least, not very often. I compose for them. They are my choir; they carry my notes all throughout the garden and beyond; they share my melodies with all the wilderness of Greece," Ponane explained. "Surely you jest," Epimonos incredulously replied. "Those tiny birds sing on cue like rehearsed bards?" "I speak the truth!" Ponane insisted, slightly offended by Epimonos' suggestion to the contrary. "It's the magic of the harp," she said, stroking the golden instrument lovingly. "Its notes resonate within the spirits of the birds, guiding their song, even if they are many miles away." "Really?" Epimonos asked, still doubtful. "See for yourself," Ponane replied in a clever tone. She extended her hand towards the tree and a large blackberry suddenly sprouted from the heel of her palm like a blister or a wart. Then she sang to the tree canopy with short bursts of musical scales in flawless pitch. Before long, a little sparrow fluttered down and landed in her hand. He gobbled up the tempting blackberry on her palm and then Ponane gently tipped him on to the frame of the golden harp. He bounded merrily up to its apex, and then whirled around to watch Ponane, as if awaiting instructions. Smiling fondly at the lively little bird, Ponane plucked a sequence of three strings. When she had finished, the sparrow mimicked her notes perfectly, in both tone and duration. Ponane played another brief tune, this time faster, and with seven notes. Again, the friendly little sparrow repeated her melody back to her. Finally, Ponane played a complex interlude of no less than two dozen notes. The sparrow trilled the exact same tune right back to her. Ponane bowed graciously to her tiny singer, then turned to Epimonos with a sly smirk and eyes that said, "See, I told you so!" "Amazing!" Epimonos muttered under his breath as he nodded in concession. Ponane

proceeded immediately into her next sonata: a slow, enchanting piece. The little sparrow followed her for several bars, before leaping off the harp and fluttering back into the canopy, carrying Ponane's song to his flock. Remarkably, the flock was able to maintain the natural chaos of many birds singing sporadically, while somehow maintaining a harmony with Ponane's silvery strings. ----- "So how is it that you come to have such a magnificent harp?" Epimonos inquired. The sun had sunk low in the sky. The western horizon was already developing a golden glow. "It's quite an oddity -- the only man-made object in this otherwise untouched grove. And made of solid gold, no less!" Ponane glared at him with a frostiness Epimonos hadn't seen from her for nearly the entire day. It lasted only a moment. But it was clear that she was suspicious of his sudden interest in the precious harp. "It was a gift," Ponane answered in a casual tone, "from Hera." Epimonos' brow rose with intrigue at the mention of the queen of all Greek gods. Anticipating his obvious follow up questions, Ponane continued, "It was at the dawn of spring. My sisters were finding mates and blossoming. Hera heard that I could not take a lover. So she visited me, here in the grove and conjured up this enchanted harp. She said that if I would not bloom like the others, then I could have the honor of playing the melody of life." Ponane smiled with a subtle sense of pride as she spoke those words. "...No doubt because my fingers are so well suited to plucking harp strings," she surmised, holding up her unusually long, spindly digits to illustrate her point. "I doubt that's why she gave you that harp," Epimonos softly remarked, shaking his head. "Of course it is! They're ideal for the task," Ponane argued, once again showing off her inhuman fingers. "They're ideal for plucking the cords, I agree," Epimonos conceded as he rose to his feet and slowly approached the dryad. "But you aren't simply an adept harpist, Ponane, you're a musical prodigy. The songs you play are utterly sublime - without exception! I think Hera gave you that harp because she sensed the remarkable depth of your soul," Epimonos said in the sincerest of voices. Ponane's gaze broke from his and plummeted to the ground as a look of distress grew



upon her face. "Surely she must've been aware that you had it in you to compose such ambrosial music; that you were capable of pouring it upon those strings constantly, from dawn till dusk," Epimonos argued. "Hera wouldn't have gifted such a magnificent harp to you, simply because of your fingers. Because how could those fingers do that harp justice, if you had no songs in your heart?" "You are far too kind," Ponane replied in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I am simply a gifted freak. One with deformities that just happen to be as practical as they are unsightly. "It's the harp that makes this... 'ambrosial music', as you call it. It's magical and very well forged. I simply pluck the notes from its strings. I can't take credit for their sweetness." Standing right beside the shy dryad, Epimonos simply shook his head with a thoughtful smile upon his face. He was sure her modesty was sincere, but he was also sure it was misplaced. "No," he argued. "I can't believe a mere instrument could create such marvellous music, no matter how divine the spells upon it are." Ponane didn't respond. "Earlier, when you called that little sparrow down from the tree, you sang to him," Epimonos recounted. "Only a few notes, but they were lovely. "Would you sing one of your songs for me?" he asked, after a long pause. Ponane seemed horrified by the request. There was an awkward off-key bar in her sonata, but she quickly regained her composure. "No," she asserted, shaking her head in denial while lifting her gaze to look Epimonos straight in the eye. "I'm a harpist. I play songs. I don't sing them." "Please?" he responded. The warmth in his smile was unmarred by her refusal. Ponane said nothing, but her eyes became sterner. Epimonos sighed. Still smiling, he bent over and picked up the empty bowl at Ponane's feet and began walking back towards the garden. Predictably, he returned with the bowl filled several minutes later. He laid it at Ponane's feet and although she didn't want to accept it, she couldn't resist the water's promise of delicious refreshment. When her sonata was over, she picked the bowl up and drank. She drank slowly, savouring every mouthful, for she knew that this drink came with a heavy price. Once she was finished, she placed the bowl back on the ground and turned to

Epimonos to await his inevitable request. "Please?" he repeated, humbly. Ponane could tell that he wouldn't have been grossly offended if she refused him yet again. But things were different now than they'd been when they first met. She no longer harbored that harsh resentment towards him. She didn't want his gesture of kindness to go unrewarded. "Very well," she agreed with a huff of displeasure. "Thank you," Epimonos softly replied. He took his seat on the ground, just a few yards in front of Ponane, while she psyched herself up for the performance. Her lips remained sealed while she plucked out the introduction. Then soft peeps began to slip out. Epimonos furrowed his brow at her feeble effort, goading, almost teasing her to overcome her insecurities. With a hint of frustration, Ponane raised her volume until Epimonos seemed content. Now singing at a very audible level, she accompanied her harp music with a slightly different tune that nonetheless maintained a harmony with the harp. Her transitions were a little awkward -- as if she was overthinking each note. Yet Epimonos was already captivated by her grace and absolutely perfect pitch.

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## FOUR

As the song proceeded, Ponane slipped into a more natural demeanor. Epimonos had noticed earlier that she often seemed to lose herself in the moment as she played. Before long, Ponane's self-consciousness had melted away and her voice became utterly incredible as it found strength and smoothness she never knew it had.

She sang as if no one were watching her, yet delivered a performance worthy of an audience of the gods themselves. Epimonos sat and listened with bated breath. Tears welled up in his eyes and his body was covered in goosebumps, from the sheer beauty of Ponane's song. He was so consumed by her that he could physically feel himself being lifted and lowered as the notes rose and fell. Her song carried him like a boundless eagle

from the heights of happiness to the darkest depths of despair, to the breathtaking dashes of exhilaration. With her wordless melody, she eloquently conveyed tenderness and dignity, wonderment of nature's glory, suppressed sensuality, aching loneliness and dreams of love that never were, and of course, the pleasure and pride of playing the finest music. Epimonos lost all sense of time as he savored Ponane's song. When she eventually finished, he was left reeling from the emotional ride she had taken him on. Ponane opened her eyes after plucking the final string of her song and watched Epimonos expectantly, visibly apprehensive of what his response to her intimate performance would be. Epimonos simply gazed at her, motionless, his mouth gaping in awe. "You..." he eventually croaked, in a barely audible voice, "You are the most beautiful woman... ever." Ponane's gaze recoiled from him as she turned aside, shyly. For a brief moment, it looked as if she were trembling. "You should go," she uttered in a calm, yet clearly upset voice. "Ponane..." Epimonos gently tried to protest, but was swiftly cut off. "You have to go. Now!" Ponane asserted in a much harsher tone. "I didn't mean any offense," Epimonos assured her. "You were summoned here to fertilize the sisters, not harass me with your tiresome gawking," she ranted, almost to herself. "You wasted all these days, when you were supposed to be bringing forth the spring. "Go! Go down and mingle with the dryads who actually want you around. Go gratify yourself against their seductive bodies and bring them to flower. Leave me alone," she said, coldly. "Ponane, I don't understand," Epimonos countered in exasperation, marching over to her side, trying to get her to look at him. "We were getting along! I thought you liked me?" "I don't want to like you!" Ponane snarled, rising from her couch and staring Epimonos square in the eye. "I don't want to be fond of you! I don't want to have feelings about you! I don't want to want to have se..." she hesitated, awkwardly. "I don't want to want something I can never have. Look at me, Epimonos. I'm not made for affection, I'm not made for companionship; I can't get close to anyone. I'm covered in spikes. I'm meant to be avoided. "I don't know why you are so slow to realize that, but whatever the



reason, it's a quality that I can't bear any longer. Go find a spirit who can indulge your advances. I... I don't want to see you again," she declared, turning away once more. Epimonos didn't respond at first. He was stunned by what Ponane said... and what she hadn't said. Eventually, Ponane, who was shuddering like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown spun back toward him and snapped, "Have you gone deaf? I said..." Epimonos wrapped his hands around her face, instantly lancing the flesh of his palms on the thorns of her cheeks and pricking his fingertips on the quill-like hairs above her ears. He winced in agony as he pressed his lips amorously against hers, silencing her mid-sentence. The feel of her warm, yielding lips filled him with intoxicating bliss that quickly numbed the pains in his hands. A confused series of delighted and distressed whimpers escaped Ponane's mouth as her tongue instinctively reciprocated the caresses of Epimonos'. "No, please! You can't do this," Ponane implored, as soon as the kiss broke. "I could hurt you so mu..." Again, Epimonos silenced her with a passionate kiss. He could feel the many spikes of her body prodding him through his toga as he encroached upon her. He knew they were only a couple pounds of pressure (if that) from puncturing both the garment and his abdomen. But that no longer mattered to him. No injury from those thorns could be worse than the terrible thought of never touching, never holding this remarkable, gorgeous woman. "No, Epimonos. Don't! Please. Please," Ponane wept when the kiss ended. Her spindly fingers were tenderly stroking the side of his face. By now, thick pools of blood were welling around Epimonos' hands. Epimonos lunged forward for a third kiss and the sudden movement caused Ponane's sharp index finger to make a bleeding scratch along the side of his forehead. He brought his body even closer to hers and felt the sting of a couple of spikes from her belly breaking his skin; small prices to pay for the tenderness of her kiss. Despite her protests, Ponane couldn't stop herself from wrapping her other arm around her admirer for a tentative embrace. "You have to stop. We can't do this!" Ponane whimpered, softly shaking her head. Epimonos gasped in pain as he lifted his hands off her thorns. "See?"

Ponane said, noting the blood smeared all across his palms. "You have to go, before it gets any worse!" Epimonos responded only by tilting her chin up with his finger and leaning in for yet another long kiss, during which, he scratched his chin on a thorn from Ponane's chin. More of her bodily thorns made shallow wounds upon him as he moved even closer to her. He felt the many spikes from her husky bra pressing against the fabric covering his nipples. Luckily, the close concentration of those spikes seemed to create a 'bed of nails' effect that prevented them from breaking through the toga. Ponane's resistance dwindled and she embraced him more intently. With her other hand, she cupped the back of his head as firmly as she dared. By the end of their next kiss, she had given up asking Epimonos to see reason and instead simply gazed at him pleadingly. By the end of the following kiss, her eyes were filled only with apprehensive longing. The conflict inside her was maddening; she desperately wanted to be with him and she desperately wanted him to be safe, but she could not have both. Epimonos wrapped his arms around her. He caressed her back with intermittent bouts of care between moments of reckless abandon. He cut and scratched his arms countless times on the spikes growing from Ponane's back and sides, yet his desire for her only grew stronger. His hands bravely persevered past every hazard that assaulted them, determined to discover every single place where they could safely be intimate with her. Their kisses grew longer, hungrier. Epimonos' grunts of pain whenever he injured himself became indiscernible from his sounds of arousal. Ponane was swooning and moaned accordingly. Her embrace was quite intense now and her sharp fingers and barbed arms snagged and eventually shredded Epimonos' toga. As she continued adoring him, her fingertips accidentally made long scratches across his back. They were so close to one another. A subtle turn of Ponane's leg was all it took for one of her long spikes to make a three-inch long cut across Epimonos' thigh. They'd been kissing for what seemed like ages when they finally paused. Their breaths were ragged, their bodies possessed by impractical urges that neither of them could resist any longer.

Epimonos set about removing her shell-like brassiere. He cut his fingers on its sharp edges and pricked himself on several of its thorns just trying to get a workable grasp of it. Eventually, with no little exertion, he managed to tear the sturdy coverings asunder. Ponane's breasts were full and extremely pert, yet delectably lithe to the touch. Shallow nipples were centered on her large, chestnut brown areolae. Much to Epimonos' delight, her breasts were unmarked by any prongs or sharp edges -- it seemed that her bra had been all the protection they needed. They kissed passionately some more as Epimonos cupped and fondled her erogenous tits, which up till now had never even felt the caress of a gentle breeze. Her nipples tightened and hardened after just a few seconds. With their mutual arousal rapidly building, Epimonos soon abandoned Ponane's breasts to remove her botanical loin covering. They were of a similar nature to her brassiere: hard, bark-like with many spikes and razor-sharp edges. Though his previous efforts with the brassiere were a helpful guide, he nonetheless cut and scratched his hand and forearms numerous times before tearing the garment away from her sacred slit. The smell of Ponane's arousal made Epimonos' heart pound like a drum. It was the most magical aroma he had ever smelt - floral, mildly sweet and bracingly erotic. It elicited the fondest thoughts for this hazel-eyed nymph and redoubled his yearning to be as close as possible to her. It took all of Epimonos' reason not to pull her body right against him right then, likely skewering himself on her bodily spikes. He caressed her mons in a circular motion, working his way down to her nether lips. His maleness, already throbbing with anticipation, quickly grew to full erection as he gently massaged the outer folds of her sex. Ponane seemed even more excited by his vaginal teasing. By the time he began to slip a finger inside she was moaning intensely and shuddering. "Are you okay?" Epimonos whispered, a little unnerved by her overt reaction to such timid foreplay. "I think... I don't know -- I've never..." Ponane panted in excited confusion. Then she noticed the reluctance on Epimonos' face and cast her uncertainty aside. "Yes! Yes!" she asserted, sealing it with a kiss. "Don't leave me... Don't stop," she



purred against his lips. Epimonos was quick to resume his foreplay and briefly caressed Ponane's womanhood a little more before moving his hand around to squeeze her shapely butt. By this point, much of her body was already painted in streaks of his blood. Meanwhile, Ponane peeled off his partially shredded toga, taking care not to damage it any further. Now both completely naked, the virile man and virgin dryad kissed and tenderly embraced a while longer, until they gazed into each other's eyes and knew it was time to share the act of love. Ponane layed down upon the ground and Epimonos knelt before her. She parted her thighs as much as she was able; hoping to give Epimonos safe access to her opening, but a couple of thorns from her inner thighs remained in hazardous positions. Epimonos wasn't deterred. With a smile he shuffled up between her legs and placed the head of his cock upon her glistening hole. The clearance between the thorns and his hips was no more than an inch on either side. Ponane gasped and arched her back slightly as his ample maleness filled her quivering snatch, inch by blessed inch. The sun departed beyond the horizon, leaving the couple to relish Aphrodite's spell. Epimonos began to gently thrust against Ponane's loins, leaning over her slightly and bracing himself with his arms. It was a precarious position. One slip and he would fall right on top of her, impaling himself upon her spikes, which would likely prove fatal. But sharing this moment of closeness with her was worth that risk. Her barbs and brusque manner no longer disturbed him. He could see the lovely, vulnerable soul hiding within and he was smitten. Ponane began to writhe and sigh as pleasure welled within her nether regions. An uncharacteristically delighted grin washed over her face. After a while, she sat up and stole kisses from Epimonos -- tender kisses, which soon became incongruous with the vigorous motions of his hips. The thorns of her inner thighs scratched him periodically, as his gyrations became more careless. Epimonos' breath became heavy and Ponane could tell that he would climax soon. She layed back down, to savour the final moments of her first sexual experience. The heady warmth that had spread throughout her body had plateaued nicely. It

elicited a sense of contentment in her heart as she felt Epimonos filling her, stroking her most personal depths. Then, it happened: for the first time in her adult life, she let her defences down. It wasn't even a conscious decision. But after all his unfaltering patience; all his respect and kindness; his romantic bravery in simply touching her, she couldn't bear to let her wall of distrust remain between them for another moment. She submitted to him completely, letting him bring her to any physical or emotional sensation, no matter how frighteningly intense. The stirrings of coital rapture began to envelop her almost immediately. With her emotional defences gone, her outward ones soon followed. The thorns all across her body rapidly became dry and frail, eventually crumbling to brittle slivers or dropping off like dead twigs. The tremors of their sexual activity shook the last splinters of the spikes from her belly. The long, rigid quills of her hair collapsed in an instant, becoming as loose and innocuous as regular human hair. Even the gruesome, elongated tips of her fingers broke off to leave agile, rounded fingertips. Within seconds her body was as smooth and luscious as any other dryad in the grove. Their eyes met for a brief moment and Ponane caressed Epimonos' face with her new fingers. Her look of gratitude spoke volumes. Although he didn't fully understand the process, he realized that their feelings for each other had somehow caused her transformation. Epimonos began to pant ominously as his maleness throbbed with irresistible excitement. Ponane cooed and squirmed uncontrollably as her womanhood teetered on the brink of something wonderful. Three short gasps precipitated her magnificent climax. It began with a spasm in her sex that rocked her entire body, leaving a wake of unbearable ecstasy. She let herself go and dissolved into a storm of pure sexual energy. Her arms and legs seized around her lover -- clinging to him desperately as tears seeped through her clenched eyelids. Epimonos came with a bestial roar. His cock surrendered immediately to the orgasmic embrace of her womanhood and unleashed his hot load in a frenzied discharge. He buried his throbbing organ inside with all his might, spilling his essence into her deepest flesh. Ponane's manic moans

echoed throughout the sacred grove, much like her enchanting melodies, except for its chaotic manner. Her song excited many of her dryad sisters so much that they sought out a human companion for immediate release. A few were so aroused, they preferred to share a convenient partner rather than prowl any longer. Ponane and Epimonos trembled as their mutual orgasm smouldered into a state of warm, blissful exhaustion. They absently nuzzled each other as they struggled to catch their breath. Ponane was the first to fall gently back to earth, followed soon after by Epimonos. He padded soft kisses upon her shoulder and gently caressed her heaving bosom for a few seconds, before rolling away to recuperate by her side. "We... we made love?" Ponane asked with an air of disbelief. "Mmm, Yes," Epimonos happily confirmed. "I never dreamed I would ever get to make love," she confessed, emotionally. She sat up and gazed down at her lover, at first with unspeakable gratitude. But the sight of him quickly became horrifying as she took stock of all the damage she had inflicted on him. His entire body was covered with bloody scratches, scrapes and punctures. Many of the wounds were weeping significantly, though not enough to be life-threatening. She almost broke down at the realization of all the pain her stupid bitterness had caused this wonderful man. But before she could, he reached up and tenderly caressed the side of her face with a loving smile. His forgiveness only humbled her all the more. As the carnal cries of men and dryads periodically sounded from distant points of the garden, Ponane cleansed Epimonos' wounds with her tears of joy and bandaged the most serious ones with the shredded remains of his toga. After every injury had been tended to, she layed down and snuggled up to him. Epimonos wrapped his arms around her lusciously smooth body and held her close -- now able to do so without injuring himself. As they rolled around the grass, kissing, they kept their bodies pressed firmly against one another, so that not even the smallest gap of air divided them. Then when they were ready, they shared the adventure of sex a second time, before falling asleep in each other's arms. -----  
---- Ponane and Epimonos remained close to each other for the



following three days. Their days continued much as before, with Ponane playing her harp and Epimonos admiring her as she did so, taking occasional breaks now and again to make love. At night, they would curl up together under the large ash tree and express their profound feelings for each other with physical intimacy. Epimonos didn't even need to leave to fetch food or water. The other dryads bought him offerings of fruit and water throughout the day, as a sign of their immense gratitude for freeing their reclusive sister from her aching loneliness. It was an adjustment for Ponane to play her harp without her spindly fingers, but after a brief learning curve, her natural talent shone through once more. Epimonos didn't hesitate to point out how the absence of her long fingers had no noticeable effect on her wonderful music. Their conversations flowed far more freely than it had in the beginning, as Ponane was now most eager to engage with her friendly fan. They shared many thoughts and memories of their own different worlds. Ponane shared many mythic tales and erotic legends known to few but dryad kin. Epimonos talked about the many marvels and fascinating complexities of civilized society. In particular, he made numerous attempts to persuade Ponane that although man had some brutal flaws, he more often than not endeavoured to be good and honourable. Ponane listened considerately to her lover's every word, but she still felt he was mistaken. Some wounds run too deep to ever truly heal. Yet for all the flirtatious, humorous and solemn words they shared, they didn't speak the most important until their last night together. After a filling dinner of apples and figs, Epimonos layed beneath the stars with Ponane by his side and they spoke sweet nothings to one another and watched the constellations roll across the heavens. At a late hour, Ponane fell unusually quiet. Without a word, she rolled on to Epimonos and began kissing him with growing ardor. They kissed and cuddled until Epimonos rigid shaft was straining with all its might against Ponane's pliant mons. Then she sat up and lowered her soaking pussy onto his meaty lance. She gyrated rhythmically upon his cock -- deeper and deeper, faster and faster. Epimonos became transfixed on the sight of Ponane's

ample breasts heaving to and fro and reached up to fondle them with one hand while delicately brushing her clit with the other. Ponane's persistent rocking left Epimonos no time to calm down and before long, her heavenly fissure was milking his maleness of every ounce of cum. As the climatic excitement ebbed into a pleasant afterglow, Epimonos began to slowly massage Ponane's thighs. But Ponane soon put a stop to the affectionate gesture by slipping her hands into his and gently squeezing them. He gazed up at her and lost himself in her doting hazel eyes. "Epimonos," she said, in a voice that was happy and sad all at once, "I love you."

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## FIVE

Epimonos grinned broadly.

"I lo..." he began, before being overwhelmed by extreme drowsiness. His beloved harpist became a blur as he struggled to keep his eyes open. The last thing he saw was the last-quarter moon... climbing to its zenith. It was time for him to go. -----  
----- It only seemed like a moment later when Epimonos opened his eyes, except now it was broad daylight; two or three hours past dawn, judging by the position of the sun. He was no longer in the dryads' garden. As a matter of fact, he hadn't the slightest clue where he was. He noticed that there was a paved road nearby - a road in the same style as the road to Corinth. Could it be that he was in the same area from where he'd been led astray by the dryads? As he pondered the situation, he noticed two small bramble leaves caught between the fingers on his right hand. He brought them up to his face. They smelled like Ponane. Epimonos hung his head in despair. He'd lost her. He remembered the words of knowledgeable Afigitis, "Having been to the garden does not mean one can find his way back there. It is not actually where you discovered it." He'd lost her forever. And he never even told her... He sat by the roadside, broken-hearted,

until late in the afternoon. Eventually, something, some deep craving for a purpose reminded him of the journey on which he'd been despatched by the Athenian assembly. He had noticed shortly after waking up that his sandals and all the remnants of his toga had been left by his side. He put his sandals on and fashioned a makeshift loincloth from the largest segments of his toga, to cover his genitals. Then he summoned the will to stand up and began a slow march west -- the direction of Corinth, assuming he was right about his location. He was too upset to be hungry, too depressed to tell the difference between fatigue and his loss of motivation. Hence, he had no reason to stop, so he kept walking until well after midnight. His mood improved over the next couple of days, though not by much. When he finally arrived at his destination, the Corinthian council were appalled by his dishevelled state. Epimonos told them that he had been mugged by brigands during his journey, as an explanation for his injuries and ruined clothing. Several months passed before Epimonos was tasked with reporting back to the Athenian assembly. The road took him through a dense forest during the first day of his journey. As he passed among the trees during that stretch, he noticed the song of some lively birds off in the distance. Even though there was an elusive sense of sadness within their calls, Epimonos felt his spirits lifted for the first time in weeks. They brought back memories of the brilliant composer he had once held in his arms, which made him smile. Eventually, he became so enamored with their singing that he felt compelled to seek them out. He stepped off the smooth, paved road and ventured into the untamed woods in the direction of the birdsong. He stumbled his way through thick brush and endless trees. The birds' song became clearer with every step he took, yet its source became harder and harder to pinpoint. Just as he began to feel hopelessly lost, he heard the most unlikely sound - the dulcet tones of a distant harp; a harp that seemed to be playing in perfect harmony with the birds themselves. Scarcely able to believe his ears, but daring to nonetheless, Epimonos began to follow the music. His walk became a trot and then a dash as the notes became louder and sharper. Eventually, he



found himself back in the enchanted grove, moving among comely dryads who seemed mystified by his presence. He raced up the familiar hill towards the source of the music and ran into the arms of his dear Ponane, who was equally overjoyed to see him as he was to see her. And so, for the rest of his days, Epimonos was able to find his way back to the dryad grove during the lighter half of the lunar cycle. No matter where he was, he was able to recognize Ponane's music amid the sounds of nature and follow it to its source. For her music was the rhythm his heart beat to. Many strangers visited and left the garden over the years, never to return again. Often, they would wander to the top of the hill to investigate the source of the music they heard. Ponane's distrust would resurface with the approach of every human stranger and her body rapidly sprouted the same thorny defences she had long relied upon for protection. However, her thorns always crumbled to dust before Epimonos' gentle touch, when he returned to her. Ponane no longer fled from the strangers. She stayed by her harp, offering them the chance to prove to her that they were trustworthy. More often than not, however, they would balk at her unsightly visage and return to her more attractive sisters down in the garden. In the weeks following her first night of love with Epimonos, Ponane's belly grew large with new life and she soon gave birth. Not to a human child, nor another dryad, but to a small, thorny shrub. Ponane named her daughter Rosa, meaning "red", after the color of her floral crown, which had been permanently stained by the blood her father shed during the act of her conception. And that, dear reader, is why Rosa, or as we call her, "the Rose," is so well understood to be the quintessential symbol of romance. While her sister flowers are expressions of free sexuality, which is a wonderful force in its own right; the thorny rose is the very embodiment of true love. It is easily admired from afar, but difficult to obtain, and if you are bold enough to reach for it, you can get hurt. But if you are patient, and approach it with care, you may get to possess the purest, most beautiful thing: something that excites your senses and provokes potent bliss. Something that can bring two souls together, no matter

**how powerful the force that would try to divide them, nor how unlikely a pair they might seem. The End**

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**FIVE**