**Glory**

**By Kristen**

This story takes place in the 5th Century BC. Justin discovers what should be let go, and what is worth holding onto.

**Chapter One**

There are certain phases of love which bring perfect happiness only in their pauses and intervals, as water grows clear when one's progress has ceased to stir it. --Mary Renault

Athens, 491 BC

As I recall, that day began as many others had. I walked out of my father's house and stumbled over a basket of saffron crocuses. They made my eyes water worse than any other type of flora known to man. But Leontiskos couldn't be expected to know about that.

Irritated, but nonetheless dutiful, I stooped down to pick up the small scroll embedded among the blossoms. Glancing about the lane, I saw that no one was nearby, and could read with emotions undisguised.

Justin,

"Here lies my heart in yellow blooms,

Though fragile yet, my hero does these florets strengthen,

To bear the winds that cruelly loom,

From cold his wintry mountain."

--L.

He needn't have abbreviated his name, I thought; his intentions were secret to no one. My teeth ground together inside my mouth and I returned the scroll to its bed of crocuses. I had been in a pleasant mood that morning, and wished it not disturbed. I put the poem out of my mind, and continued down the lane in the arch crispness of morning.

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I have always been beautiful. Or, if one's beauty is measured by the reactions it inspires, then I have been beautiful at least since I was old enough to understand what others were saying of me. In early youth, I was proud, even straying here and again into arrogance. Never did I dream it would become such a burden.

My mother is Macedonian, and though she has lived here most of her life, she is visibly different from most Athenian women. I, it would seem, took on her traits over my fathers'. Where most other boys in Athens have dark eyes and sun-warmed skin, mine are light. My hair, too, is quite fair, and the source of much attention, from women and especially from men.

Even at an early age--too early--I was conscious of comments made about me to my parents. Determined not to let me grow up conceited, my mother sheltered me from many of my would-be admirers. And she would only allow me to attend parties where my father was already to be present.

For a time, being a willful child, I resented her interference. But as I got older, and the nature of the attention began to alter and intensify, I came to understand her wisdom and foresight. But by then it was no longer appropriate for her to be sheltering me.

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I pondered these thoughts as I navigated the narrow high-walled streets of our neighborhood, toward the home of Ampelos. A long-time friend, Ampelos and I had been close throughout our days at school, though his talents ran to athletics, and mine to the arts. But where he was able to use his skills after leaving school (Ampelos was a candidate for the Games), I was being forced to relegate my talents to a mere hobby.

My father had already defined my tract as a politician, to follow in his footsteps. Within the next year, I would turn eighteen and become an ephebe. Then, after my two perfunctory years of military training, I would marry and begin my political career in Athens. Knowing as little of me as you do now, it might still not be difficult to imagine that I wished to delay these events as long as possible.

"Good morning," Ampelos greeted me at his gate. "Shall we go?"

We walked companionably toward the palaestra, my friend visibly anxious. I knew it by the way he chewed on his fingernails, face near hidden under his mop of dark, curly hair.

"Calm yourself," I recommended. "Your legs will go stiff if you worry like that."

"I know," he answered distractedly.

"Have you had a run this morning?"

"No," he replied. "One should never run the morning of a race. Only eat, heartily. And that I did." He smiled, and patted his stomach as though there was anything there but tightly bound muscle.

"You'll do splendidly," I coaxed. " And you need only to place third to make it to Olympia, not win."

"IF I can place."

"Ampelos, you are the best runner in Athens. You could stop halfway through the stadion, take a nap, and still finish with time to spare."

"You're a good friend, Justin." He smiled and made to put his arm around my shoulders, before pinching the back of my neck. "If somewhat soft-headed."

I laughed and chased him up the road.

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The day grew hot and arid--the sort where insects buzz at a deafening pitch. The palaestra was crowded but not full; only the runners' friends and sponsors were interested in the qualifying rounds of competition. Once the victors were chosen, and the Olympic team officially named, then would all of Athens take notice.

Fortune smiled upon Ampelos that morning, as the runners drew lots, and he was assigned the first heat. Nerves were his only enemy, and being able to run first meant little time to sit and worry.

I parted from him to join the audience, and saw Anaxandros in the stands, waving me over. I climbed up to sit beside him, and he patted my hand in the sort of fatherly gesture of which he was fond. As Ampelos' patron--and recently, his lover--he was nervous as well.

"I have nothing but confidence in him, sir," I said, gesturing to where Ampelos was stretching by the field.

"Nor I," returned Anaxandros with a smile. "He is a constant source of pride for me."

I could not help but observe the love in his voice, and I felt an instant pang of envy, for a feeling I'd yet to experience. I took in his learned, gentle face and short black hair laced with grey, trying to see him as Ampelos must. "I know he is very happy to have you," I said, awkwardly.

"Thank you, Justin," he replied. "And how about you? Have you anyone for yourself yet?"

"No, I'm afraid," I answered, long accustomed to the question.

"Well, I'm surprised. A youth with your looks and good name must have dozens of suitors."

I blushed uneasily at the compliment. "I have nothing to complain about, sir."

"As I thought," he smiled, nudging my arm knowingly. "It is only a matter of choosing one from the many, then, is it not?"

"I suppose," I said, hoping the conversation would end.

It did, finally, as the first group of runners took to the course. Ampelos' dark eyes searched the crowd of spectators, finally alighting on us. We waved down to him, and I could feel my own pride rising to match Anaxandros'.

The sun beat mercilessly upon the field; I became quite grateful for my light tunic, not envying the runners in their exposure to the sun. Their oiled skin gleamed in the light like the surface of the sea.

Finally, the line of golden bodies took their marks, every runner's calf and thigh muscles taut and bulging. A drum sounded and the cord snapped, each man springing forward at inhuman speeds. I closed my eyes just for a moment, a quick devotion to Hermes on my lips, and when I opened them again, Ampelos was far in the lead. He finished seconds later, outpacing the other runners by an almost laughable margin.

"Broke his own record!" shouted Anaxandros gleefully, having timed the race in his head. We cheered from the depths of our lungs, until we were nearly hoarse and the runners from the second heat were already beginning to take their places.

"He has nothing to fear now, it seems," I said, nearly lightheaded with happiness. "Could any of these other runners hope to match that time?"

"It is not likely. But...there is still Brian, the magistrate Kopris' nephew," he replied, reservedly. "He is slated for the third heat."

"Is he very fast?"

"He has been to the Olympic Games once already, and to the last Isthmian Games. Both times he placed second in the stadion."

"Then he is hungry for a win," I reasoned. "Is Ampelos concerned about him?"

"Not very, nor should he be. Brian is capable of tremendous feats, but he is inconsistent, and growing more so in his age. He is nearing thirty, and everyone agrees that he should have given up after the last Games. But he seems obsessed."

The second heat ended, no runner having come close to Ampelos' time. The next heat was the last; and unless three men managed to beat his record, Ampelos would be on the Athenian team.

"Will you point Brian out to me?" I asked as the third-heat sprinters took to the field.

"There," he pointed, "the man with the scar on his left thigh."

I peered down to the man he spoke of, and from my distance, could see nothing exceptional about him. His body was like that of all the others: built for running, though perhaps a bit taller than usual. His hair was an auburn made of many different hues, like the inside of a split tree trunk. I could see little of his face, but his most notable feature was indeed the long scar that ran from his hip half way to his knee. It was pale, and long-since healed, but was distinctive nonetheless.

We watched the heat begin with little interest at first. Then, as the runners were clustered about half-stadion, Brian took off like a palomino, as though he'd been holding himself back until just that moment. He flew across the field, his long legs barely in contact with the ground.

The crowd's voice was deafening, and not entirely supportive. Everyone rose to his feet as he crossed the finish, and we remained frozen in anticipation until his time was called from below. Only Anaxandros sat, already knowing the outcome.

"He's bested it," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Amazing."

After the race, we went down to meet Ampelos, congratulating him in turn on his second-place finish. Fortunately, he was disappointed little by Brian's win, and concerned only with what lie ahead. The very idea of representing Athens at the Games next year! Ampelos was soon to be celebrated as a local hero.

Many, many people began to gather round us, congratulating Ampelos and Anaxandros. Some of the older men I recognized; several had tried to court me at one time or another. I avoided their eyes, not wishing to speak to any of them. They'd all received the same answer: that I wasn't ready, but humbly grateful for their interest. Most had backed down graciously and moved on to the next youth who caught their fancy. Some, though, were more persistent...And of course, fortune would have it that the worst of them was there--and moving towards us.

As far as I knew, Leontiskos had no connection to the world of athletics, but he knew of (and distrusted) my friendship with Ampelos. Though I'd given him no overt encouragement, he still managed to harbor an immense possessiveness toward me. So naturally he would be here, if only to corner me into talking to him. Perhaps he'd seen the basket of crocuses still on our front step that I'd neglected to take inside.

I leaned quickly over to Ampelos, and whispered in his ear, "I must go."

"Why?" he asked, before following my gaze to where Leontiskos was weaving through the crowd. "Oh," he sighed. "I can't understand why you're so cruel to him. He may be rather ugly, but he's up for magistrate next term! You're too picky, Justin."

"I know. I just... I can't stay here, Ampelos. Congratulations. I will call on you later." I hugged him quickly, and shrank into the crowd.

Meandering swiftly through the swarm of bodies, I headed for the colonnade. Once out of the crowd proper, I glanced behind me to see if I'd been followed, and then turned again, plowing face-first into the chest of another man.

"Forgive me," I stuttered, looking up into the face in front of me. Brian.

He looked strangely at me for a moment. "It's alright," he said softly, and turned to go.

I watched him as he exited the gate, already bathed and dressed in a simple white tunic. He carried his cloak and a satchel over his shoulder, and seemed to be entirely alone. I wondered immediately why there had been no crowd of well-wishers detaining him, as there had been for Ampelos.

"Wait," I called after him, and ran out of the gate to catch up. I felt an irrational, urgent compulsion to talk to him. He didn't slow down, so I struggled to match his stride. He was much taller than I had guessed: almost a full head above me. "I...I wanted to congratulate you."

"Did you?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes. You were the victor, after all. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you are Ampelos' friend."

I stopped in my tracks, surprised. "How...?"

"I saw you with him," he replied soberly.

Before my mind could process the implications of his statement, he was several paces ahead of me, apparently not desiring of my company. After a few more steps he glanced back over his shoulder, a wry smile on his lips.

"Thank you for your heartfelt congratulations," he called, and not without derision.

I stood dumbfounded in the center of the square.

**Chapter Two**

At home that afternoon, I faced a mental distraction that had been heretofore uncharacteristic of me. I attempted to play the lyre, and could not muster the concentration for even the most basic songs. I sought out my mother's calming drinks but they served me little. Unable to eat for fear of being ill, I still could not place the cause of my sickness. I felt confused, agitated, disoriented. And, in the folly of my youth, I could not fathom why.

Later that evening, I managed to summon the presence of mind to dress, and call on Ampelos. When I found him, his cheeks were flushed with merriment, and with what must have been several cups of congratulatory wine. He invited me into his father's house, and we retired to the courtyard to talk.

"How do you feel now?" I asked.

"Exhausted. Excited. Most of all, relieved," he answered. "Now, I can train seriously with my thoughts focused only on Olympia."

"You deserve nothing less," I said sincerely.

Ampelos embraced me briefly, before pulling back. "I nearly forgot! Anaxandros is holding a symposium tomorrow night to honor the new Olympians. Will you come?"

"Of course."

"Good," he smiled. His eyes spoke of a contentedness I could not match.

Suddenly, my stomach turned, and my mind followed soon after. "May I ask," I began tentatively, "Will Kopris' nephew be there?"

"Yes, I would think so. If you're wondering whether it will be difficult for me to be around him, you needn't. I bear him no ill will for winning."

"No, of course I didn't think that! I was only curious. Do you...know him well?"

"Not very." said Ampelos, his dark brows knitting in the manner of one who is struggling not to be unkind. "I ought to try, though, if he's going to be my teammate, and my competition. I do know that he's not well liked by the other athletes. Brian has an... unfavorable... reputation."

I felt disappointed, and unreasonably distressed. "Why, do you imagine?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I see him often at the palaestra, but he rarely speaks to the other athletes. And he is prone to hubris. Although I must consider that a fortunate thing for myself, since the gods will never favor a man that is too proud!"

"Yes," I replied, lost in thought. My picture of Brian grew still more complicated.

**Chapter Three**

The evening of Anaxandros' gathering, my stomach was in knots. I felt a trepidation such as I'd never experienced before, which curiously translated into an obsession over the tiniest details of my dress and preparation. I spent the better part of an hour trying to decide between two tunics, finally settling upon my original choice. And worse, my hands were too unsteady to curl my own hair, so I had to have my mother's slave help me. Fortunately, he did a masterful job of it, and I fixed the style with my best lotion, scented of hyacinths.

As a result of my fussing, though, I was somewhat late in leaving for the symposium, and could not run for fear of arriving haggard. So I walked quickly, my heart pounding all the way.

When I finally arrived, Ampelos greeted me and ushered me inside. Though the event was partly in his honor, he served as co-host, being with Anaxandros. Like every facet of their relationship, I captured it in my mind, so that someday I might know all the duties of a good lover.

Anaxandros' home was large, and beautifully decorated. His wife (not present that night, of course) was said to be a quiet, gracious woman, and not prone to jealousy. (These being the traits that are prized by most men). Ampelos said that though he met her rarely, she had never been indecent to him. That, he explained, is the best one can expect from a woman in such a situation.

The main sitting area was already quite crowded, adorned with several couches and low tables. Servants navigated the room with figs, meat, and large bowls of wine. A suffocating plethora of perfumes hung in the air, thick where the lyre-player's song was light. Men were scattered among the couches and standing in clusters about the room, talking jovially.

Ampelos introduced me to some of Anaxandros' friends, most of whom I knew to be powerful politicians. They seemed also to have taken up sponsoring athletes as something of a pastime. Many of them knew and respected my father, and I was often greeted with, "Ahh, and here is Nikolaos' beautiful son."

I bore the comments and overtures as dutifully as one must, all the while feeling a throbbing in my stomach, as though my very heart were inside it, struggling to burst out. I had taken no food or drink all day and I felt nauseous and warm, the room seeming too loud, too close.

"Justin," called Ampelos from the periphery of my consciousness. "You are flushed. Perhaps you'd like some water?"

"No, thank you," I stammered, embarrassed. "I think...some air would serve me better."

He pulled me quickly through the throng, and out into the courtyard. Immediately the crisp blue night filled my nose with air and lightened my head. I breathed once, deeply, before I saw the silhouette of a person--two people--in the shadows of the colonnade. One, I knew immediately, to be Brian.

He stood jauntily against one of the pillars, his attention focused the servant boy in front of him. Brian leaned in to whisper something in his ear, and boy's face went crimson.

Horrified, I looked back to my friend, who had followed my gaze.

"He's a brute, Justin," Ampelos sighed, pulling me back inside the curtains. "He was drunk before he arrived. I must to be cordial to him for Anaxandros' sake, but you needn't. Don't let his behavior offend you."

"I...no, it's fine," I stuttered. "I am not so delicate as to mind a drunk man's antics."

"Good! For there will surely be a great deal more of that by the end of the night!"

I smiled, grateful that the true nature of my alarm had gone undetected.

"Justin, I must go and greet the other guests. My duty."

"Yes, of course," I replied, and he departed.

Only seconds thereafter, the servant boy pushed through the curtains, almost knocking me over as he bolted past. I watched as he picked up a wine-jar and stationed himself in the far corner of the room, close to Anaxandros.

I realized suddenly, terribly, that Brian was still in the courtyard. Alone. And despite what I'd just seen--even despite what I'd heard of him--I could not refrain from going back out there.

He stood where he had before, this time staring up at the stars, his arms crossed as though angry with them. When I approached, his head tilted slightly in acknowledgement, though he did not turn to face me. For a moment I stood beside him, watching the heavens as he watched them, unable to speak. I noticed, incidentally, that he did not seem drunk. Nor did he smell of alcohol, but rather of some subtle, pleasant perfume.

It occurred to me slowly that I ought not to have approached him. He was my elder, after all, and it was unquestionably improper. And further still, what had I to say?

"As I thought. My little swallow," called an unwelcome voice from behind us. I turned to look and there, to my dismay, stood Leontiskos. Before I could speak, or move, Brian pushed himself away from the pillar and sauntered back toward the house. He went inside without sparing me, or even Leontiskos, a glance.

A combined sense of outrage and disappointment festered inside me as I faced Leontiskos.

"My dear," he sighed, as though he had been waiting all night for me, "It seems you think me a bad poet."

"No, Leontiskos," I tried the humble approach, determined not dishonor myself by being impolite. "It is only that I am unworthy of your talents."

"I begin to think you are correct," he said with venom, "judging by those with whom you are choosing to consort."

His affronted air made him all the more ugly, I decided, taking in his menacing face and aged figure. I wished not to be called arrogant or overly proud, but I knew I could never be with him from the moment I first saw him. Now, his rudeness only seasoned the pot. He, of all people, would dare to criticize Brian's behavior! I could abide him no longer.

"I am sorry if I offended you, Leontiskos," I said, with feigned sincerity. "I never wished it." I turned and walked back toward the house.

"Yet while it is within your power to remedy my pain, you do nothing but sneer! " he shouted to my retreating back. I could still hear his shrieking voice even as I was inside the curtain. "You are a spoiled, conceited youth, Justin! May the gods not forgive your cruelty!"

Admittedly somewhat shaken, I sought out a wine-server among the crowd. I did not like being called cruel, or conceited, nor had I any remark with which to counter Leontiskos. It's true that he acted the buffoon, and few people if any would fault me for paying him no mind. But that was not what troubled me. For where I could feel nothing for him...likewise did I never feel for any of my suitors (though some of them had been courteous--and even handsome). I worried--often--that I was the problem.

I wandered about the room alone for a while, being stopped every so often to converse with an acquaintance of mine or of my father. But everywhere, at every moment, I felt myself looking for Brian. He always seemed across the widest gulf of the room, no matter where I went. And my vision of him was usually blocked by the crowd of people separating us. On the few occasions that I saw him, I always seemed to just catch his gaze for a moment before he would turn away. I grew obsessed, anxious, and it became difficult to converse with others.

Is this a game? I wondered.Is there something to this for him?

Or is it all in my head?

To quell my discontent, I sat on one of the couches. I could not see Brian from my position and was grateful for it. He...confused me. I could not place the feelings I got from him, but they were unpleasant and frightening. It seemed I felt sick to think about him, and even worse not to.

Seated next to me was a man I recognized: Kallianax, an old friend of my father's. He engaged me in light conversation, and I relished the distraction.

"When I last saw you, you were still in school. It has been many months," said he. I could tell that he was somewhat drunk, but not entirely so.

"Yes, Kallianax," I replied politely.

"Your father speaks highly of your abilities at debate."

"Thank you," I answered, not supplying that I had actually been quite poor at debate and oration, excelling instead at sculpture and music. But to speak so would have dishonored my father.

"And of course," he continued, "your beauty is much celebrated throughout the city."

I blushed at that, stifling a sigh at the tired sentiment. I looked down at the floor, a gesture he probably interpreted as coquetry. Suddenly, I noticed an unmistakable pair of lean, muscled legs before me, and followed them northward. Brian seated himself directly opposite us.

His arm lay on the back of the couch, behind the shoulders of a young man--one of the wrestlers I recognized from the palaestra. Brian's attention rested solely upon him; the man spoke animatedly and Brian laughed. My heart constricted in my chest.

"...So you see," continued Kallianax, "my first son has only begun to walk."

"Ahh," I replied feebly, having missed most of the conversation. Kallianax looked intently at me for a moment, then his gaze shifted subtly to where mine had just been. I felt my blood go cold.

"Justin," he began pedantically, "if I might offer you some advice."

I nodded, ashamed, and listened.

"Youth and beauty are no excuse for foolishness. Yours is an honorable family, Justin. You would do well not to entertain the attentions of...disadvantageous men."

"I know, sir," I whispered, equally insulted and humiliated.

"It is no secret that you have yet to choose a suitor," he went on, his voice quieter, and more gentle. "I should hate for your father to be disappointed when you do."

"Nor do I want that," I asserted.

"Good," he smiled genially. He paused for a moment, before placing his hand, palm down, in my lap. "Then, if I may officially suggest myself as a candidate..."

Startled, my first instinct was to look up to where Brian was sitting, and saw him staring straight at me. I was frozen in shame, and watched as his eyes glanced quickly aside. I forgot all decorum and fled the room, the party, the street.

I ran across the city, pushing myself faster than my body was capable. I did not stop until I had reached the steps in front of my house, beside which I fell to my knees and was subsequently ill.

**Chapter Four**

When one thinks back on the events of our youth, it seems impossible that we might have said or done certain things. But even more implausible are the things we seem not to have done, or understood, or realized. So now, as I write, it seems incredible to remember that time, that night, when I was too naive to know that I was falling in love.

To me, then, it seemed a sickness. A feverish delusion, such that I'd even worried I had been hexed, or that the goddess Ate was cross with me. I could think of nothing but Brian's face, his voice, his few words.

So, though I knew not the reason for my distraction, I could at least name the source. And while the most sensible course of action would therefore have been to avoid him at all costs, I was nevertheless compelled to do the opposite. I found myself becoming a regular at the palaestra.

Dear reader, by now you must think me foolish and soft-willed, or worse, prone to girlish fits of emotion. It is true that this situation threw me, but after the dust settled I remained, as was my nature, a sensible, levelheaded person. So in this vain I developed a plausible excuse for allowing myself to keep close to Brian. I wanted (in the interests of scientific inquiry, of course) to figure him out.

So I began my tenure as Ampelos' assistant, or something of the like. I would help to rub him with oil before his runs, and to scrape him down afterward. When he was otherwise occupied, I would help the other athletes, carrying towels and spears, or massaging twisted ankles. If any of them wondered at my presence, my friendship with Ampelos seemed to be reason enough. Or perhaps they imagined that I sought the vicarious glory of Olympia through him. In any case, no one questioned me.

Careful not to be overt in my attention to Brian, I nonetheless became conscious of the unique social dynamics inside the palaestra. Certain athletes were well liked, and others, less so. Still others were distrusted and watched guardedly. Brian was among this latter set.

Unlike Ampelos, and many of the other runners, Brian seemed to train entirely alone, and without patronage. In addition, he was always training. Ampelos would typically arrive at dawn, run until the sun was too high, and then relax with me in the colonnade, or in the gardens. Often we would walk out to the agora to eat, talk with Anaxandros or some of our friends, and then return to watch the wrestling matches in the afternoon. Brian, however, would be training all the while, and harder than anyone else. Still, in practice stadion races, Ampelos and he were always closely matched. Ampelos, after all, had youth in his favor.

Once, I stayed in the palaestra into the evening. Ampelos had long since gone, but I lingered behind, assisting those who remained. It had been a hot, dusty day, and many of the athletes complained of dehydration.

As I stood drawing water up from the well, I watched Brian rounding the sandy track. He stopped suddenly, and bent at the waist, his hands on his thighs. I could see that he was breathing heavily. I filled a bronze pitcher with water and carried it over to him. As I walked onto the track, I felt as though every eye was watching me. But when I looked casually around me, it seemed that no one had taken notice.

Brian straightened as I approached him, and took the pitcher tentatively.

"You should be drinking more," I said. "You are dehydrated."

"Perhaps I am done for the evening," he conceded, and we walked together back to the colonnade. I kept a respectful distance as he reached for his towel and strigil. But as he seemed about to disappear into the dressing rooms without another word to me, I felt I could not bear to leave it at that.

"Do you want any help?" I asked, over-bold. Too late, I realized that others were within earshot.

"No," he said flatly, and was gone.

I glanced around and saw others returning, all too quickly, to their tasks.

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The next morning, I pulled Ampelos aside and bade him walk with me awhile. We took to the grassy Hill of Theseion, and there I determined to open my lungs.

"Ampelos," I began, "I must tell you something, and hope you won't think ill of me for it."

"Of course not," he replied. "What is it?"

"I think... well... I've taken notice of someone."

"Yes, Justin. I think I know."

"Do you?" I asked, not feeling particularly glad for his reaction.

"Justin, I've been friends with you for too long not to notice how you look at him."

"Oh," I sighed. "I wished not to be so transparent."

"You have not acted badly," he went on. "I believe that I alone have noticed, and that is a fortunate thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Justin, please know that I speak as your friend, who wishes only the best for you."

"Speak, then."

"I think... your interest would be better laid elsewhere."

"But..."

"Justin, you have half the men in Athens running after you. I know that some have been overbearing, but most are good men. You don't appreciate your fortune."

I regarded him carefully, catching the added meaning behind his words. There was no point in denying that he had not been courted by so many men as had I. Though his face was good, he had rather undistinguished looks. The sort of beauty that makes up the grasses of a field: pleasant enough, but unlike a flower, which, in its relative rarity, tends to attract more attention.

"I do, Ampelos," I assured him. "I don't mean to seem aloof. But one cannot dictate where the heart finds favor."

"But why him, Justin? He's arrogant, self-centered, and rude--even to you. Worse, he has no family to speak of..."

"I thought he was Kopris' nephew. Kopris is a respected man."

"Yes, and he all but disowned Brian after his schooling."

"He must have someone," I reasoned. "Where does he live?"

"Alone, or so I've heard. He can't marry; no men will give him their daughters."

"He must be terribly lonely, Ampelos. How can you upbraid him so?"

"Justin, you are too good-hearted," said Ampelos sharply. "Ask the slave boys at Lycabettos' hill how lonely he is at night."

My tongue was paralyzed for a moment, and I felt my voice weaken. "Surely," I said softly, "after all you've said about him, you cannot fault him for resorting to that."

"No. I cannot," said Ampelos finally, his tone kinder. He looked at me with his large brown eyes, and I could read his genuine concern. "But Justin, you must now understand my apprehension. You belong with an older man, someone wise and accomplished. A man you can learn from, and be proud of. Not someone who will bring you down."

We continued our walk in silence, watching the sunrise over the eastern city walls. My head was a tempest of unformed thoughts and feelings.

I did not go to the palaestra that day.

**Chapter Five**

The next morning, I woke feeling heavy, as though I was under water. Now somewhat more knowledgeable of the workings of my own heart, I understood what was affecting me.

Ampelos' words had done nothing to alter my sentiment for Brian. Instead, they filled me with a sort of bitterness and sorrow. My feelings for him no longer buoyed me, but felt as a weight against my happiness. None of the intensity was lost in the transition, though. In fact, I felt still more drawn to Brian, like a man who clings to the mast of a drowning ship.

I walked to the palaestra with a newfound sense of purposelessness, which gave way to a long overdue examination of the facts at hand. I had made myself available to Brian with as much tenacity as I had previously used to keep my suitors at bay. But where Brian had ample chance to converse with me, he deliberately kept off. Or, perhaps I was flattering myself too greatly to think there was any deliberation at all. I finally realized that in all likelihood, Brian simply took no notice of me.

The day was cloudy, and fitting to my mood. Everything inside the palaestra seemed grey and dull, indistinct. Ampelos took advantage of the cooler weather and ran a few extra stadia. I sat and watched listlessly, with his towel and water jug, merely existing. It was because of my stupor, I suppose, that I did not hear Brian approach.

He sat down on the stone bench, beside me but from an appropriate distance. I offered him the water I had been holding for Ampelos. He refused it politely, but did not leave.

He continued to towel himself off in silence, and I could not help but steal glances at him. It was rarely that I was able to be near him, sitting still, for this period of time. And as I watched, I gave myself allowance for loving him as I did. He was utterly, utterly beautiful.

The long, golden legs I had seen perform miracles were now gracefully at rest, the prominent muscles lying together in fluid, steady bands. His back and chest were wide and strong and his arms... the mere thought of them wrapped around me sent shivers from my waist to my neck. And further down... I dared not look between his legs, but the skin of my face warmed just the same.

When he was done, I felt sure that he'd leave, but he remained in place. So shocked was I by this that I looked up at him, and saw him watching me.

"I thought you might have been ill," he said, his voice breaking through the silence like a thunder strike. "You weren't here yesterday."

"No," I stuttered, finding my voice. "I wasn't ill."

"I'm glad."

By the gods.

A few moments passed, as my mind struggled to order itself around the task of speech. A solemn call inside my head announced that this was the moment. It (if "it" was anything at all) had to be resolved, now. I placed my heart on the stone bench between us, and spoke.

"It was only that...I was no longer sure that I was needed here."

"By Ampelos?"

"No. Not him." I looked bravely into his soft hazel eyes.

He was silent for a long while, before looking away. He cleared his throat and gazed out at the field.

"I have often taken pride in needing no one," he said quietly, but with finality. He stood to leave, and I felt a desperation stronger than I'd ever known before.

"Wait. Please," I cried, not caring who heard or saw. The jug in my hands tipped, spilling water onto my legs. I fought to keep the tears behind my eyes.

"Justin," he turned back to me, his face solemn. "Running is all I have in life. There is room for nothing else."

"I would ask nothing of you," I pleaded. "Only to let me..."

"I have nothing to give in return. You would tire of that quickly..."

"No..."

"...and you should. You should want better," he finished softly.

I watched until his body disappeared under the shadows of the colonnade, and a similar darkness fell over my heart.

**Chapter Six**

"Justin, come in here," shouted my father, in a tone that I could feel in the tips of my hair.

I went into his rooms and took in the sight of him. He stood by the window, his arms crossed in unconcealed anger.

"Sit," he commanded, and I did.

"Justin, you will agree that I allow you a certain level of freedom, would you not? To spend your time as you please?"

"Yes, father."

"And in doing so I trusted that you would conduct yourself in a matter befitting my son."

"Yes, father," I replied, feeling that sort of doom that means the worst is right around the corner, if one could only slit one's own wrists now and be done with it.

"I have been told," he said, changing tactics, "that you have been spending each and every day at the palaestra."

"Father, Ampelos..."

"I know about your friend, Justin. And frankly, I think it right of you to be supporting him. That is not the issue. But he has a friend, Justin. Anaxandros. It is his duty to watch over Ampelos' training, not yours."

"He is often busy with other things."

"And so should you be!" he boomed, his voice echoing around the room. "There is much you've let slacken, Justin. You have only a few months before your conscription, and you are far from ready. Have you even been to a master-at-arms to see about your armor?"

"No..."

"And I know you haven't been keeping with your horsemanship, or your exercises."

"No, sir."

"Justin, this is the time you should be concentrating on all those things. I can't believe I have to explain this to you!"

"I'm sorry, father," I pleaded. "I'll be ready, I promise. I won't let you come to dishonor."

"It's too late for that, Justin," he said, more furious than ever before. He breathed deeply through his nose, as though trying to calm himself from the inside out. "I know that you've been throwing yourself at some runner."

His words hit me worse than a blow, and I felt the breath escape my chest. He paused, shaking his head, as though he couldn't begin to summon words fitting enough.

"The shame you've brought me, Justin," he growled, turning his back to me. I saw that he could barely stand to look at me, his shoulders shaking with fury. "I had to hear about this through Kallianax, who told me that the whole city is talking about you! I can't think of a worse...disgrace."

"Father..." I started, before realizing I had no words to match my embarrassment.

"I don't want to hear you, Justin," he said soberly, facing the window but not seeing out it. "You are never to return to the palaestra, under any circumstances. And tomorrow you will go to the street of the armorers, and have yourself fitted."

"Yes, father," I said quietly, feeling I had been let off rather easily. I felt no pain at being prohibited from the palaestra; indeed, after today I believed I could never show my face there again.

"Now go to your room Justin, and take off your clothes."

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Later that night, as I lay prone in my bed, I felt a sort of numb depression I'd not experienced before. It wasn't the beating that disturbed me; it was certainly not the first I'd received, though it may arguably have been the worst. Instead, I was sobered by the knowledge that I did indeed deserve it, and that I had brought dishonor to my father's name.

I felt, in one part, as though I hardly knew myself. And I wished that I had simply swallowed my airs long ago and chosen a suitor. Then, I might have been happy like Ampelos, and have a man whom I could introduce to my father with pride. But in another part, I was not ready to disavow what I'd felt for Brian. Even unrequited, it had been real. I was sure of it.

And so I wept, not for the stings in my skin, or the wounds to my pride, but for having already lost something I'd never even had.

**Entr'acte**

Marathon, 490 BC

I woke to a deafening buzz, as though some dissonant, monstrous instrument were being played, without pause, very close to my ear. I moved my head ever so slightly, pain shooting through my neck and shoulders. Gradually, I summoned the strength to open my eyes. To my horror, I realized that I could not see the source of the noise--or anything. The world was black. And wet.

I'm blind, I thought blankly, feeling I could endure a sightless life if only that infernal buzzing would stop. Slowly, though, I began to perceive light. Fuzzy, indistinct spots became more definite, forming into clear, tiny bits of white. The night sky, I realized.

I am on my back, and those are the stars.

With this discovery, I ambitiously tried to take into account my entire body. I felt dull, heavy pressure everywhere, and nothing would move. No-- There-- I could move my left hand. It seemed miles away from me, but I felt my spear, still clutched fiercely in it.

A light breeze then passed over me, bringing with it a smell I would have gladly forsaken. A soggy, putrid stench. One to which I'd grown sadly accustomed of late. The smell of rotting flesh.

Again, I tried to move my head, and miraculously, the buzzing ceased. Then, a slight tickle at my ear, and it was back. Gradually, as feeling returned to various parts of me, I realized that it had been merely a horsefly, settled precariously upon my ear. My face and neck were covered in them, along with a warm, sticky substance I could only assume was my blood.

I felt trapped, and realized with distant alarm that I was pinned under several wet, broken bodies, soft and bent where they should have been firm. Cold where they should have been warm. I attempted to shift out from under them, but to no avail. They moved and undulated like horrible wet sacks of flour, and I felt a fresh spill of blood on my neck. It was not my own.

Trapped thus for several hours, I merely stared up at the lowering skies, and thought: I have done it, Father. I am a man.

**Chapter Seven**

Naupactus, 489 BC

I stood on deck of the bireme in the gold light of evening, as we progressed leisurely across the strait. Boatloads of soldiers were passing us eastward, to cross the Gulf of Corinth and return to their homes in Attica. We who had battled at Marathon were to receive a week's leave in compensation. Most of my fellow hoplites had decided to journey home all the sooner.

I, on the other hand, was in no great hurry.

The past two years had been one of great tumult for Athens, and for me. My compulsory military service had quickly become a trial by fire, as I was among the first to be sent out against the Persian invaders. I had gone to battle with scores of fervor and steely resolve--virtues that are easily summoned in a young man with a broken heart. I had harbored great hopes that war would advance me quickly into manhood, and that I would be thus cured of the passions of my youthful infatuation. It was an easier task than I could ever have hoped.

I cannot pretend that I had forgotten Brian entirely during that time. But where you might imagine that I pined for him even on the battlefield, I can say truthfully that it was never so. He remained, not in my conscious thoughts, but as a dull, vague ache, so long present that it was difficult to remember how it was ever caused. I was weary, and hard-hearted, and cared for little.

After the second man I'd killed, I began to see Brian's face in my mind no longer. After the thirteenth, I'd resolved to count no further. In another time, a lifetime ago, I might have been affected by foolish notions of sentimentality. Or remorse. Now, I felt nothing.

Once the enemy had been pushed back, and the city secured, there was nothing left for us to do, but return home. Still having a few months of my service to complete, I would be stationed on defense of the city walls, and return home to my father's house. Life would continue, as it had before, with the only significant changes having occurred within myself.

You might then be able to deduce the reason that I was not entirely eager to return to Athens. Instead, I was using my week's reprieve to delay my return home as long as possible. And thus was how I found myself on that ship, crossing the Gulf of Calydon to Peloponnese. To Olympia.

**Chapter Eight**

I arrived at Olympia the day of the opening festival. Never having witnessed a celebration on so grand a scale, I was quickly overwhelmed. The Olympic sanctuary grounds, having lain dormant for the past four years, were now transformed into a sort of temporary city--enormous and crowded and--eclectic.

Even in my military travels, I had never seen such a vast assortment of people, from the highest to the lowest in society. High-ranking politicians and official representatives from every city-state were in attendance, rubbing shoulders in the crowd with even the poorest of slaves. I recognized stone-faced Spartans and weathered Argives, rich Megarians and even crudely dressed barbarians from the north. Tens of thousands of men and women of every shape and color were gathered; their diversity as interesting to me as the grand processions and religious rites.

That night I camped at Elis, along with many other foreigners who'd come for the Games. As I lay in bed, I looked inward for the first time in many months. I sought out the spirit that had once so enlivened me in my youth; still there, I assumed, but sleeping. Unresponsive. And so I slept as well.

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The next morning, I woke early to ride to the ceremony site before dawn. As was tradition, the first event was to be the stadion, and I wanted a good vantage point from the stands. If I was to be truthful with myself, it was the only event I cared to see.

The stadium was much larger than any I'd known in Athens, and as I climbed to the best seat I could find, I was dismayed at how far it still stood from the track. The audience filled in quickly, a noisier throng than I had ever seen, outside of battle. A fat Corinthian merchant sat down beside me, reeking of fish and worse. He tried to engage me in conversation, but I pretended not to hear. If one thing could be said of me in the last year, it was that I had grown unsocial, preferring solitude.

When the stadion runners appeared on the field, I felt a tickle begin at the back of my neck, as though someone were tapping me there from the inside, to get my attention. Like so many things, I forced it from my mind, and steeled myself.

I watched as the Athenians entered, to the adulation of the crowd. Brian, with his exceptional height, was unmistakable, and looked little altered from a year ago. There, too, was Ampelos, wearing a smile the size of Euboeia. They were accompanied by their third teammate, the young red-haired boy Xenippos.

I remarked suddenly at how remote I felt from them, as though they were characters in a play I'd read in my youth and had hence forgotten. So long ago did it seem that I was championing Ampelos' water jug at the palaestra, and delighting to find my ankles covered in the very dust in which Brian had run. It all seemed so shamefully insipient now. So worthless. And to think how many times on the battlefield I'd wished to have that summer over to do again. To do with it something useful, like learn how better to wield a spear. Or how one can land safest when thrown from a horse. But I had grown too old for regrets.

Grand as the stadium was, the runners seemed the size of insects, and I, like a part of the distant cosmos. I watched them take their marks, just as the stars must watch the human world from the firmament. Remote and unchanging, but unable to look away.

I followed Brian with my eyes, as he crouched at the north end of the stadium with the twenty other taut, tense bodies. For seconds, endless seconds, there was nothing but silence, when even the noiseless flags flapping above the stadium walls seemed too oppressively loud.

Then the drum, POW!, sounded in my chest, and the starting marks were lost in a cloud of brown dust. The runners seemed carried forward by the bellowing crowd, pushed faster and faster at its whim. Brian lingered at the rear of the pack, as was his custom. At mid-stadion I watched him with my fists clenched, waiting for that exhilarating moment when he would burst forward, outpacing everyone around him.

But the moment never came. I saw him struggle, saw his pace quicken and his hair stand out behind in a perfect horizontal wave. But the other runners were too fast, too well practiced. Before he had even reached the three-quarters mark, the heat had been won. I saw his gait falter, and he finished at a slow jog, dead last.

My chest constricted, as though someone with the hands of a giant had reached inside me and grasped my lungs. I stood, eyes searching wildly down at the other end of the stadium for him, but the finish line was a swarm of miscellaneous people. Finally, one head was raised above the sea of others: the victor, Ampelos, was being carried to his crowning.

**Chapter Nine**

I worked my way through dark, cavernous halls of the apodyteria, following the unmistakable sounds of shouting and merriment. Most of the changing rooms were empty; each had the same Spartan accommodations: one bench for stretching, and one chair for resting. Finally, as I turned a corner, I saw the source of the noise: one of the rooms had dozens of people literally spilling out of its door. I could not even get close enough to see inside, though I knew it would be packed from end to end as well.

"Is that Ampelos' room?" I asked one of the men standing in the hall.

"Yes, though you'll have to wait like the rest of us," he said, not unkindly.

I smiled and left them, not feeling too guilty at having abandoned his celebration. After all, he seemed to have more fans than he could handle at the moment. A part of me felt that I should have left, then. Fled the stadium, fled Olympia, and gone home to Athens. But I could not. My legs turned down another narrow hallway, to search the rooms I'd not yet seen. I had to find him.

It seemed an endless maze of dark corridors, so far from the exterior walls of the stadium that windows were scarcely to be found. I walked, as if backwards through time, back into the distant past.

The cacophony at Ampelos' room grew quieter and quieter behind me, until I turned yet another corner and it was silent altogether. One last room remained. I peered inside, and there I found him.

He sat on the floor in the corner of the room, in shadows untouched by the faint light issuing in from the hallway. His hands covered his face, elbows rested on his drawn-up knees. I saw that he was shivering violently.

"Brian."

He turned to look at me, startled, before I saw the glimmer of recognition in his eyes. I walked closer to him and knelt down, seeing that he was still covered in oil and dirt. He hadn't even bothered to scrape down.

"Brian, you're shaking," I said. "Haven't you at least had someone in here to rub you down?"

He didn't answer. From all my experience with runners, I knew that his entire body could grow cramped if he didn't act quickly, and was I sure that he knew it as well. It seemed he'd simply lost the will to move on his own.

I reached for his arm and forced him up. He came willingly, but disinterestedly, like a drunken man being dragged through the streets. I laid him out on the stone bench in the center of the room, and knelt on the floor beside his right hip.

Not pausing to think, I grabbed his leg at the calf and lifted it, placing his knee over my right shoulder. I worked his thigh with my hands, kneading and soothing his shaking muscles. All the while, I watched his face, turned stubbornly away from me, his mouth in a tight grimace.

"Leave me alone," he growled after I'd finished his thigh and worked down to his calf.

"Do you plan to massage yourself, then?" I asked, knowing he could not.

He dropped his head back onto the bench, his tone belligerent. "Why are you bothering with me?"

"Were you hoping someone else would find you?," I asked sharply. "You might have been waiting a while."

"There's no point," he said, more softly. "It's over."

"Brian..."

He kept his eyes focused on some invisible crack in the wall, his voice sounding distant and strange.

"I should have won last time," he murmured quietly, more to himself than to me. "Kephalos had had a weak year, and I should have jumped out sooner. I had him timed...he usually broke his gait after thirty-five paces, but he held for forty. And then it was too late. I should have anticipated..." his voice trailed off, and I realized that his eyes were growing heavy.

I stood, and moved around to the other side of the bench to work on his left leg. As I kneaded the shivering muscle in my hand, I felt an old curiosity overtake me. Gently, I fingered the long, puckered scar that ran the length of his thigh. But it no longer held for me the mystery it once had. I had my own scars now.

"I've wasted my life," he continued tiredly. "So many things I've denied myself..."

"Your life isn't over. You can do anything," I assured him. I felt my throat get narrower, my voice coming as a whisper. "All those things you denied yourself...you can still have."

"Can I?" he asked softly, turning to look at me for the first time. His eyes met mine with a physical force that nearly knocked me over. I felt my heart skip as old, long-dormant feelings came flooding back to me. My hands faltered, and I felt the room get warmer. He turned away again.

I continued to work on his left thigh, a thick silence between us. The closeness of our bodies, however, was finally beginning to get to me. The smell of his skin...the feel of it...how many of my hopeless dreams had ended in this?

The quaking of his muscles gradually stopped, and I watched his face to see if he had fallen asleep. His eyes were shut, and his chest maintained a calm rise and fall. For the first time, I seized the opportunity to glance down at the place I had been discreetly avoiding all along.

The juncture of his thighs met in a soft bed of dark hairs, from which extended his long, smooth member. It lay upwards along his belly, and from its state I could tell that he was decidedly not asleep. Not at all.

Embarrassed, I felt my skin flush, and sheepishly looked back at his face. But it remained turned away from me, eyes closed. I leaned forward, only slightly, and for the first time smelled...him...that kind of other scent that is not skin, or sweat, or oil, but something special entirely. And quickly I felt my groin begin to tighten and swell under my tunic.

I began to breathe more rapidly, feeling my heart throbbing nervously in my chest. I removed his leg from my shoulder, placing it gently upon the bench, but did not remove my hands. They began, of their own accord, to travel further and further up his thigh, ever so slowly. I worked them in small kneading circles, my hands slipping and sliding around in the warm oil, inching ever closer to that soft triangle of skin between his groin and his hip.

Once there, I ran my thumb across that space and felt him quiver slightly at the sensitivity. His member twitched and expanded right before my eyes. From there it was only a tiny movement before my fingers were grazing the stiff, damp hairs of his groin. I heard him exhale a shuddering breath, and saw that though his eyes remained shut, his lips were slightly parted.

With aching slowness, I reached out with the tip of my index finger, my heart beating maddeningly, and touched the thick base of his member. I ran my finger slowly up its underside, all the way to where the foreskin ended, and back down. Encouraged by his now-rapid breathing, I reached further, until my whole hand was closed around its width.

Made slick by the oil, my hand slid slowly up and down upon him, stroking the shaft with a warm, languid wetness. His legs gradually fell apart, revealing the tight, wrinkled sacs between them. I reached for them with my other hand, cradling them gently, and running my fingers softly around them.

I watched as the muscles in his stomach began to tighten, evidence of the slight arching in his back. I could see the pleasure etched on his face, and I began to grow lightheaded at the feel of my own blood pulsing in my groin.

I leaned in again, needing his scent, and licked my lips with a hunger that shocked even me. It was there, inches from my face, and even in my naivete, I knew that I <I>needed</I> it. How far would he let me go?

Please, please, let me do this...

I drew my hand to the tip of his member, making a tight ring with my thumb and forefinger. Then gently, I pulled the foreskin back, revealing the smooth, pink head and its tiny, dripping hole. I bent my head down slowly, slowly, and just pressed my lips to its tip, hearing a groan escape him.

Feeling bold and unsure, but unbelievably aroused, I opened my mouth and took it inside me. Pressing my lips to hold back his ring of foreskin, I ran my tongue around the wet, swollen head. My senses tingled at the taste of him: the combination of salt and sweet and olive oil that made me want never, ever to stop this.

I resumed stroking him with my hand, holding my lips tightly to him, and assaulting all around him with my tongue. I pressed the tip of my tongue to the little hole and heard him gasp, loudly. Suddenly my mouth was flooded with warm, thick liquid, and I felt a shock run through my body. It rippled out from my gut in wild, hot spasms, so intense I felt my knees knock against the stone floor.

Finally, when the shaking in my own body subsided, I swallowed the heady milk in my mouth, and collapsed against the bench. I laid my head down upon his thigh, panting in time with him, feeling the blood gradually resettle inside my body.

Several minutes later, when at last I lifted my head, he was really and truly asleep. I stood, looking around the dark room for a towel to wipe between my thighs.

**Chapter Ten**

"You're still here," called a disbelieving voice from the periphery of my consciousness. I opened my eyes, and realized that I had fallen asleep in the chair. And from the feel of my neck, I'd been sleeping for quite some time.

Brian sat on the bench, his elbows on his knees, watching me uncertainly.

"Are you alright?" I asked, feeling instantly young under his gaze.

He waited an eternity before answering. "I will be."

I yawned and nodded, feeling the uncertainty of the moment like a shroud around my shoulders. The air was thick with tension, but not unpleasantly. Instead, I felt relaxed. Somehow perfect. As though I'd resigned myself to fate's direction, and felt liberated by the lack of control.

Brian then stood and, to my surprise, moved slowly toward me, seating himself beside my feet. Gradually he leaned back, resting his head on my knees.

I began to run a tentative hand through his soft hair. The strands fell lightly through my fingers, each one a different shade of color. We remained like this for some time, both apparently feeling as though words were inadequate, damaging. I felt a warmth grow and spread inside me, and this time, was wise enough to know what it meant. It was not the overexcited infatuation of my youth, but the quiet, practiced realization of love--lost once and found again.

"I'm worthless now," he said after a time. "What would you want with me?"

"Everything," I replied, automatically.

He turned around to face me, searching my face for any sign of hesitation. I looked into his cautious hazel eyes, and moved to kneel down with him. "Everything," I affirmed. "I've loved you from the moment I met you."

I leaned in then, pressing my lips to his softly, quickly, before he could pull away. As I drew back, though, I saw something in his eyes that told me he would not pull away. Not ever again.

It was he that drew me toward him next, devouring me with a heated, open-mouthed kiss. His tongue filled my mouth and my body flooded with a warm, wonderful sensation: that of the imagined merging with the real. It promised love, the future, and all the glory of the heavens.

**End**