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FICTION

Prometheus Rebound by Elissa Malcohn

Even after this long the titan's pain remained fresh. Everything else had changed, but that didn't matter as the Aetos fed. The great eagle's talons drew the same thick blood as they punctured her companion's abdomen and held fast. Her industrious beak rummaged around his gaping side wound for the same, reconstituted morsels she'd torn from him the day before. Quick rips, bracing herself on thick, golden-feathered legs, as she had once done for 300 centuries.

Prometheus listened to the sound of his own howls, bored sick.

Someone in the middle of the room raised a tentative camera phone, but the guard was on him in an instant. The kid looked like a college student, armed with a tattered copy of Aeschylus. He whined futile protests about another wasted ticket as he was guided by the arm and dumped outside the exhibit hall, where a throng four times as large crowded a media screen and shoved their cells into the air, beaming blurry videos to YouTube.

Nothing to see from the back of that crowd but upraised arms. Who said the Hundred-Handed Ones were dead?

Prometheus yelled as more gore splattered from him. The eagle's beak mowed his innards like a scythe in slow time. Hephaestos could dump him in a forge and he wouldn't burn as badly as this.

Chains bruised his wrists and ankles as he thrashed and his agony rattled him to the edge of idiocy. Below his muscled, sweat-drenched chest a dun loincloth hugged his hips. It hid a disposable diaper filling with ambrosia gone south and sour.

The curator had cited tender sensibilities and endangered funding when it came to shit, otherwise the diaper and loincloth would be off and Prometheus would look much as he had on Mt. Caucasus. But the modern era balanced legend in one hand and urbanism in the other. The marble pillars enwrapped in his chains rose from trucked-in, New England granite. A smooth cataract peeked out from beneath a thick layer of enriched potting soil, enough to



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support the herb that sprang on twin stalks from his daily torrent of blood. Saffron-colored flowers tickled the soles of his feet.

Nothing else kept to form. Paying customers filled the gallery's white-walled room, held back by their own, milky plastic chain strung between teetering uprights. Even more ridiculous was the tether snaking from the Aetos's red-banded leg to a T-shaped, gold-plated perch, as though she were imprisoned as well. One well-placed tug and the whole stand would collapse.

It didn't matter that Prometheus was the eagle's only concern. The curator insisted on maintaining the illusion of a captive raptor. Better to have deception than lawsuits.

Deception that I taught you.

It was laughable, really. Look what he'd created. Look what he'd come back to.



Closing time.

The Aetos busied herself preening. A gilt feather drifted down, sailing over plastic and coming to rest on nubbly gray carpeting worn thin. She rested on her perch and clenched a dripping hunk of liver in one clawed foot, waiting. She'd already slipped her other foot free of its red band. Her tether swung like an anemic pendulum, giving little twitches as she flexed her wings. Her yellow eyes glowed with impatience.

Prometheus raised his bearded, tear-streaked face and blinked around wet ringlets. His voice scratched. "Yes, I know. She's late."

The bird fixed him with an imperious glare.

"She'll be here."

Horns rose in a chorus from the streets below. Rush hour gridlock. The titan closed his eyes and listened to shouts and laughter. Pigeons cooed and strutted on an awning. Squabs screamed for food and he heard the feathers behind him puff.

"Easy," he growled. "I want to get back to my young, too."

He was about to undo the chains himself when the elevator dinged in the hallway. Christine hurried into the exhibit hall. She still wore her scrubs.

"Lydia's out on a play date." Even breathless and agitated, her voice still sounded like honey. She shook blonde-tinted bangs out of her eyes as she freed his wrists. "We have to pick her up. I told her not to eat anything."

Oh, for the gods' sakes. No matter what he said, his wife would still find a reason to take their daughter to the hospital. It didn't have to be for imagined food poisoning or stress-induced indigestion. He kept his mouth shut, staggering from the pillars as links fell from his ankles.

"Can you stand?"

He couldn't squelch a smile. "I always stand."

His side was knitting together but it still throbbed as he bent to pick the flowers his blood had grown. They'd keep Lydia strong no matter what her mother inflicted on her. He still had plenty of gelatin capsules hidden in his sock drawer, enough to hold his pulverized herb. Lydia, innocent and malleable, still treated the ancient medicine as her private game with Daddy.

He gasped from a bad stitch as he straightened. Christine threw her arm around his waist as he struggled for breath.

Her sad gaze was a dark, Tethys blue. "I don't know how you endure this day after day."

"It's a living," he said.



His ex had possessed the foresight to leave him. But Pronoia had been the goddess of foresight. She couldn't have done anything else.

She must have known he'd shack up with a fellow martyr.

She must have known he'd become one in the first place.

Prometheus and Christine took the elevator down to a darkened lobby and gift shop, where he gave the guard a noncommittal nod. He had cleaned himself up in the men's room and retrieved street clothes from his locker, having long ago traded his linen tunic for denim jeans. The hooded Aetos perched on the titan's black-gloved hand and waited with eternal patience until they retreated to an empty alleyway.

He freed the eagle, standing amidst broken glass. The Aetos rose on wind-tunnel updrafts carrying smells of piss and vomit. Beside him, Christine shivered in her powder-blue scrubs.

Nobody recognized the god descending into the underworld. His props were gone. Soon the scars his flannel shirt hid would be gone as well, leaving Prometheus with a smooth muscle tone that had led to his being mistaken for Adonis on more than one occasion. But those occasions had been long ago.

He passed through the turnstile, leading with his uninjured side. New graffiti adorned the theater and museum posters on the platform, including the one for his show, the longest-running live art installation by a solo performer.

Suffering sells. It was hardly an original concept.

He noted with wry amusement that someone had scrawled a crude depiction of his generative anatomy over the loincloth. So much for tender sensibilities.

"Honestly," Christine said, "I don't know why that makes you smile."

Prometheus grinned at exaggerated body parts. "They flatter me."

"You're supposed to be a god, remember? Gods are supposed to be big."

He hugged her to him. How could he blame her for her inventiveness when she reveled in his own? How could he blame any of them for the ways they'd used the gifts he'd given them?

The platform smelled of cleaning solution but rats still scurried along the tracks below. Humanity waited for its train. Office workers bent double on benches with their heads in newspapers, while teenage boys strutted like cocky youths at an Athenian gymnasium. They ignored the coat-swaddled woman on the floor whose muttering had at last fallen silent. A kind sanitation cop would arrive at any moment to escort her off the premises, leaving her with the choice of finding a filthy shelter or trying her luck at another waystation.

Zeus himself couldn't compare with this kind of clay.

And Zeus was big.

But he was gone, like the rest of the family. They'd departed on their own, celestial train, while Prometheus stayed behind, unable to leave the creatures he had fashioned. Soon the fire he gave them would fly in sparks from the third rail as his ride swung a hairpin turn.

His hands had fashioned their ancestors' bodies and he had fed them on meat stolen from the Olympians. He'd imbued them with the powers of creation. These people were all his children, the punks and vagrants, secretaries and police. And Christine, whose imagination almost outraced the titan's own as she obsessively reinvented mortal flesh.

He couldn't help but love her, she frightened him so. Prometheus had never anticipated fearing his own handiwork. One of them would ultimately win the power struggle over the daughter they had produced together, the most precious clay of all.

The location of Lydia's play date was four subway stops away.



As usual, Lydia sat curled in her host's leather chair, watching the Eagle Cam on an old computer set aside for the children. Its yellowed keyboard bore fresh smears of chocolate. Prometheus crouched beside his daughter and gave her fingers a few deft swipes with his hanky before she hugged him around his neck.

He laughed and purred, "Miss me?"

Her enthusiastic nods tickled him. Auburn hair bounced.

She asked, "Did the Aetos get enough to eat?"

"Dear gods, yes." He glanced behind him, to where Christine negotiated the next play date with other parents. His lips brushed Lydia's ear. "We have to say goodbye to the chicks now, okay?"

"Okay."

He took one last look as the webcam refreshed. Three different cameras captured the Aetos in her nest box, regurgitating bits of his liver into the mouths of her brood.

Prometheus wiped the keyboard down, unleashing a barrage of pop-ups. He logged out and lifted Lydia out of the chair, grinning as she clung to him like an Aegean barnacle.



Ear infection. Colic. Flu. Rash. Abscess. Diarrhea.

He could see Lydia's medical record as clearly as the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes and the dimples in still-pudgy cheeks. And as clearly as the game her mother played with her now in their bedroom, wielding a digital thermometer and blood pressure cuff.

He made sure the bottle of rubbing alcohol truly held rubbing alcohol and not the bacteria it was designed to kill. But Christine was a nurse. She had other ways to induce illness.

Prometheus had his ways of warding it off, when he could catch the damage in time.

Some day Lydia would have the words to tell him what the private and amiable war between her parents meant to her. For now, she probably lumped it in with Three Little Piggies and Itsy Bitsy Spider. She giggled as the cuff inflated around her tanned arm and laughed again as it sighed out her measurements. She pouted around the thermometer, pretending to be a spy entrusted with dangerous secrets that would flit like little doves from her mouth if she opened it.

Prometheus was sure she'd love the word *Munchausen*. It was a mouthful of a name, big enough to let a thousand thermometers fly into the treetops. "By proxy" seemed piddly in comparison, however monstrous its intent.

Christine's skill at wielding the instruments of life and death at work hadn't satisfied her. What mother didn't want to be a savior to her child? How could she snatch Lydia from pain if no pain existed? The hospital doctors were modern-day gods and Christine had married a god, so wasn't it only natural that she should yearn to become one, herself? Each time Lydia was rushed to the hospital, Christine had managed to make everything all better, descending like a Fury on her bosses.

She laid the instruments aside on a spring green quilt and enfolded the girl in a fierce hug, her eyes as piercing as the eagle's. "Mommy has a night shift now, sweetie. You'll be okay?"

Lydia answered her with a sage nod.

"If you need me, just call me at the hospital. Daddy has the number."

"Okay."

The successive locks on their apartment door might have challenged even Herakles's strength. Did they live in a prison or in a puzzle box? Prometheus wasn't sure. He watched Christine's deft manipulation of deadbolts and latches, then added his nimble fingers to hers. He caressed her life line as falling chains slapped against molding.

She murmured, "Much more of that and I won't be able to leave."

Her tongue tasted like nectar. She favored his wound as they embraced, one suffering hero comforting the other.

He closed the steel door behind her. Prometheus waited as Lydia played with the lower chains, hefting weighted brass in her palms. In a moment she was racing to the barred window and shouting outside.

They had an hour of daylight left. Prometheus called behind him, "Yes, you may turn on the computer."

"I told the Aetos I was going to watch."

He smiled at Lydia's excited tremolo as her small shoes knocked against parquet. He didn't have the heart to say that the eagle and her nest box were located far uptown and not on the tenement roof next door.

Lydia was the daughter of a god. For all Prometheus knew, the girl actually communicated with his work mate and torturer, bonding over distance. She loved that golden bird.

So did he, despite the agony the Aetos inflicted on him. Like him, the eagle had found a mortal mate. Like him, she had offspring to nurture. His eternally-reconstituted liver ensured her family's survival, while the blood she freed from him grew the herb that protected Lydia. They were a team.

He secured the last of the locks and returned to the bedroom and his sock drawer with its hidden gelatin capsules. He fished one out and brought it to the kitchenette.

Sunsets were the best time for watching the webcam. The four nestlings were asleep by the time he reached his living room's small corner desk. Each refresh teased out new, gilded highlights from fluffy gray down.

All he had ever seen of the mate was an occasional flash of tail feather. The city wasn't eagle habitat. The Aetos was an anomaly simply by virtue of living in an urban environment rather than woodlands. Being part of an exhibit seemed almost secondary to her scientific value.

He and Lydia weren't the only people who loved the bird. The researchers loved her, too. Prometheus might be the eagle's meal ticket but she was his, keeping their act alive. He smiled back at the Aetos, who squinted at the lenses while light from the west turned her wings to stylized flames.

Beside him, Lydia said, "Pretty."

He nodded. He handed Lydia her pill and watched her swallow his healing Promethean herb with a few sips of apple juice. She clutched her Xena drink cup and peered at the screen.



He was whole again by morning, smooth-skinned and free of scars. Christine's lips traveled across his mended side. Their quilt shifted, its green striped by early light.

The puffed fabric was rougher than the silk of rose petals and kinder than a cardboard box on a grate. Filled with enough wine, Prometheus hadn't known the difference. After his family left there had been only Tartarus-on-Earth, followed by the Act.

And then by the miracle in the next room, the little girl already awake and gazing out the window by her bed. Lydia's half-brother Deucalion and her half-sister Aidos were long departed. He'd tell her about them when she was old enough to understand.

Sometimes Prometheus had trouble remembering that his other children were ever that small. Other times the memory of their cherubic faces wrenched him from sleep.

Sometimes Christine moved as Pronoia had, knowing all the tricks that drove him to rapture. He himself became clay, amorphous and helpless as she kneaded his senses from him.

For a time she seemed whole as well. Glimmers of happiness.

Had the gods left him behind or had he stayed behind? Prometheus wasn't sure. The eons of wine and sorrow had addled him too much. Perhaps he never really knew.

Christine peeked up at him from beneath the quilt. "You're distracted this morning."

He smiled at the sunlit bangs that half-blinded her. He ran his thumbs beneath her eyes, trying to erase the shadows.

He asked, "Have you ever fallen asleep one day and then awakened only to find the world completely different from what you'd expected?"

"All the time." She grunted a laugh. "When I can sleep."



Five years earlier he had awakened with guano in his hair. It was the cleanest part of him. He breathed brackish air as foghorns cut through a muzzy dawn and wondered, *What island is this?*

He flinched as more bird poop hit his cheek, but the screams of gulls were too distant. A loud flapping cast a vague shadow over him. Talons displaced a whiskey bottle as the Aetos landed.

Prometheus gazed into stern yellow eyes before his attention wandered to the eagle's breastbone. She held still as he eased feathers aside with trembling fingers, finding the entry point of the arrow shot by Herakles.

She could have been another drunk-induced mirage, but this time the titan heard early morning delivery trucks. Diesel exhaust filled his lungs. His Elysian Fields became a rusted steel bridge. His body crawled with six-legged nymphs.

He croaked, "Who brought you back?"

She turned from him and began to scavenge.

He realized that for all he had taught humanity, he possessed almost no skills that could help him now. Prometheus blinked bleary eyes at high-rises across the river. Automobiles vibrated the bridge span overhead, filling the air with a high-pitched hum. Headlamps and taillights shone in the distance.

He watched them wink out as dawn advanced.

For lifetimes he'd been worse than clay. A little blood-letting would help him clear his head.



His audience kept coming back. Regulars. The higher-paying patrons with early admittance tickets cheered as Prometheus emerged from the back rooms. They hailed him as they would a prizefighter who refused to lie down for the count.

After all this time, what else could they expect? What did they know of the cycle of eternal punishment and eternal reconstitution?

The Aetos also awaited his entrance as he shucked his street clothes and donned diaper and loincloth out of sight. The bird stood tall on her perch, ridiculously hooded, but that was also good for business. Otherwise her scrutiny would have distracted visitors from the titan's entrance.

He and the Aetos had honed their routine over the years. Gone were the actors dressed as Zeus and Hephaestos, one condemning and the other chaining him. Instead, a museum guard locked him against the pillars with scant ceremony. They exchanged pleasantries about the weather.

Gone, too, was the insipid voice-over detailing his legendary existence, with uninspired performances of snippets from the works of Aeschylus and Ovid and Shelley. Those who wished could read excerpts in the program book, when they weren't browsing the gift shop for a mélange of source materials and action figures.

Prometheus had long ago given up trying to address his audience. They were here to watch their champion get hurt. They were here to watch him come back for more. They took away from the Act what they wanted.

Some believed in his godhood. Some still swore Prometheus was a fraud, an accusation as ancient as he was, but the occasional investigation kept profits up. A fresh entourage of the curious and the macabre accompanied each new panel of experts flown in. His claims of authenticity remained intact, though authentically what he

was remained a subject of medical and philosophical debate.

He would be howling by the time the hall opened to general admission. Before then, he shared a few calm and intimate moments with patrons who were alternately well-dressed and scruffy but moneyed. Several already had tears in their eyes, though not, he assumed, for him.

He balanced himself on still-strong legs, grasped the pillars more securely, and took several deep breaths. Then he nodded to the guard, who squeezed his shoulder, pulled on an unnecessary leather glove, and plucked the hood from the Aetos. Titan and bird eyed each other to confirm readiness.

Her tether snaked behind her as she glided to his side. Her talons drew the first sticky lines of gore as she settled into position and a collective gasp rose, as if from within a deep pool. Compared to the rest, her grip felt like pinpricks.

The rest commenced, and for a little while Prometheus could picture the flowers her magic and his pain would grow. Soon enough even that luxury of vision would vanish, leaving only the eternity of the Act until closing time.



"Lydia?"

He had dreamed of shrieks, but they continued when he awoke and they weren't his.

Dear gods, Christine, what have you done now?

Christine's side of their bed was cold. Prometheus glanced around the room, registering the facts: uniform gone, shoes gone. No purse, no keys. Instead, only Lydia's bare feet pounded against the floor, back and forth and back again, frantic.

He ran in his musty nightshirt toward heartbreaking wails. The child barreled into him, clutching the cotton at his sides and sobbing into his chest as he knelt.

"Tell me what's wrong, sweetheart." He kissed wild hair and tried to banish nervousness from his hands. "Tell Daddy."

She howled, her face hot and red.

An extra glow leaked in from the next room. Prometheus lifted his daughter and cradled her to him as he stepped toward its barred window. The computer was on.

Other children watched cartoons in the morning. Not Lydia. She watched the Aetos and her chicks. For her, the World Wide Web started and stopped at the nest box.

This time only a black rectangle shone from the screen, a two-dimensional backlit abyss sitting inert above a news crawl. Prometheus read the headlines and almost dropped his daughter.

He whispered, incredulous, "She couldn't have."

Lydia didn't hear him. Prometheus clutched his child,

reeling under the onslaught of sweet-smelling skin and pudgy fingers curled into fists. He held innocence ripped apart. The forge of Hephaestus could have been clanging in the titan's chest, fanning the flames of tempered rage.

He was ready to erupt when the phone rang. Lydia hiccupped in his arms, her limbs rubbery. She crumpled when he lowered her to the floor.

"I just heard the news." Christine's breathless voice reached him from the other end. She sounded as though she'd run through all the wards, her concern nauseatingly sincere. "How is Lydia?"

Prometheus spat, "How bad would you like her condition to be? Aren't the chemicals you pump into her enough? Did you have to go after her best beloved animal?"

For one searing moment he wished Iapetus had never kept earth and sky apart. Prometheus's father should have let that pillar crumble into dust and let everything fuse together, inert and benign.

Lydia sobbed on the floor, the Eagle Cam flickered on its screen, and the room turned red. "What did you do, Christine? Hide your crossbow between bed pans in the storage closet? Scope out the tenement across from the nest box to find the best aim? Did it feel like one big syringe to you? One giant, glorious dose?"

His legs shook. Lydia had curled into a ball, huddled on the far side of the room.

"How deep did the shaft go in, Christine? Did you hit her in the chest, in the wing, in the head? Is she only a beast to you, or a prop? Or is she a rival now, too?"

Christine's voice was barely a whisper. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"*Of course you do!*" Blood roared in his head. He'd bring half the building down if he punched his fist through a wall. The titan hunched over a cheap plastic phone on a worn linoleum counter, everything around him fragile and crushable.

Who was he, a mere god, that he thought he could control his wife's sick little game?

"Sweetheart, I've been here at the hospital all night."

"You've lied for *years*, you damned harpy!" he thundered. "What makes you think I'd believe you now? Did you think I didn't *know* what you were doing to our daughter? How long ago did you realize what keeps her well? How long have you been planning to punch this hole through her heart?"

And his.

What condition were the Aetos and her chicks in? The cam window was black and blank and the crawl remained cryptic and inconclusive. Breaking news always was.

Lydia had turned silent. She looked terrified.

Christine pleaded, "Honey, it wasn't me--"

He slammed the receiver down.

They couldn't use him at the gallery. He had no Act any more. He had to go to Lydia and hug her to him, and wait in their apartment for news. The air began whining with sirens. Police and paparazzi would storm the building at any moment in a mixture of journalistic predation and compassionate voyeurism.

They had to get out. "Lydia."

She answered him with a whimper.

"Lydia, I'm sorry I yelled. I know you're frightened."

She whimpered again, until the sirens drowned her out and their apartment faded into mist.



Prometheus looked down at the child in his arms and then up at whitewashed walls covered in poster charts. He squinted at instructions on how to make figure-8 wing wraps and ball bandages, taped up beside depictions of tissue ulcerations and ruptured air sacs.

Metal counters surrounded them. Surgical instruments. Examination tables. One was too small for even Lydia, whose nightshirt had morphed inexplicably into her favorite, jungle-print dress and leather-strap sandals. She still sobbed against the titan's chest, but now she cried against flannel instead of cotton.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, "do you remember getting dressed?"

She shook her head, her face still buried.

He found the answer to his unasked question soon enough. The veterinary degree on the wall belonged to Asie Okeanos, one of Pronoia's more ancient names. Prometheus found a chair, tried not to collapse onto pink plastic, and eased his daughter onto his lap. He stroked her auburn curls while glancing helplessly about the room. "Lydia, we're near the Aetos and her chicks now."

The girl nodded, sniffing.

"A friend of mine is taking good care of them."

His daughter nodded again and hiccupped. She fell quiet and began to doze.

In a few minutes the door eased open, admitting a woman swathed in a leather apron and thick gauntlets. Pronoia pulled off her gloves and dropped them onto the metal counter before turning earth-colored eyes toward her ex-husband.

The goddess had traded her alabaster skin for olive. She'd lopped off her thick, dark braid in favor of a short wave that fell about her ears. Prometheus took in her mortal disguise. Like him, Pronoia had lessened her stature, painting her body with an occasional blemish and wearing a hint of crow's feet on her face.

A heavy sigh escaped her when she spotted Lydia. She

whispered, "The deeds you drive me to," then slipped out of her apron and reached into the pocket of her green scrubs. A golden arrow small enough to hide inside a fist clattered onto the larger table and grew to full size.

Prometheus gawked. "You shot her."

"Herakles shot the Aetos. I'm healing her." His ex-wife pulled up a chair, gesturing with long, tapered fingers as she sat. "She suffered a nicked keel bone and laceration of surrounding tissue. Her flight muscles have been compromised. It'll be weeks before we can release her."

His side began to ache. "The chicks?"

"We're caring for them in the nursery. They're doing well with ordinary food, pulverized rodents and the like." Pronoia smiled down at the sleeping girl. "Tell Lydia they're all going to be fine."

Her tone of voice sounded distressingly like Christine's. Prometheus angled his beard toward the arrow. "Who ordered Herakles to shoot, this time?"

Brown eyes flashed. "It's one thing to champion your mortals, 'Metheus. But freeing them from the gods wasn't enough, was it? You had to give them power over you." Her lips narrowed into a thin line. "Maybe now you'll recognize the abuse of your daughter without your accomplice around to help you cover it up." She stood and turned away.

He sputtered after her, "That was not your decision to make."

"Whose was it, then?" she answered softly, over her shoulder. "Christine's?"

The arrow vanished. In a moment the heavy apron and gloves faded from the countertop and reappeared on Pronoia like a set of ancient armor. She looked outfitted for battle.

Prometheus watched her depart for the mews.



How long ago had his first wife descended from the heavens? How long had she been watching the drama his modern family had become?

Did she sneak into the gallery, clad in furs like the morning VIPs or glittering with piercings like the afternoon coeds? Did she log online to watch low-resolution videos of the Act? Or did she use her Sight, spying on him from whatever celestial sphere the gods had resettled in?

It would have been just like her to return the Aetos to him in the first place, enough to sober him up before testing his fitness as a divinity. She certainly couldn't be testing his fitness as a mortal, no matter how dearly he favored his creation.

Why not? She had manipulated him as though he were mortal. Was Pronoia's hired violence against the Aetos any less brutal than Christine's violence against Lydia?

Prometheus cradled his daughter with one broad hand and his hurting head with the other. The foibles of gods and clay blurred together like the muddy colors of ill-dyed linen.

The jungle print shifted against his jeans. Lydia looked up at him, blinking sleepy eyes.

He cleared his throat and said, "We can visit the Aetos and her chicks now."

Her face glowed like the stars. He would be sick if her trust didn't enrapture him so.



"I'm sorry."

Yellow eyes stared back. Prometheus couldn't tell if the golden eagle was sedated or just resigned to a fate imposed from without.

Mortal birds surrounded them in the raptor barn, mysterious figures hidden inside closed-walled cages. The Aetos's wire enclosure lay away from the others, off-limits to volunteers and assigned to a single vet. Prometheus lifted a clipboard, where Pronoia's handwriting spelled out a language that only partially echoed the ancient tongues.

Clavulox for infection. Metacam for pain. Hydrogel with a hydrocolloid dressing.

Lydia pressed her face against the wires so hard that her cheeks already bore its imprints. She told the bird, "I love you."

"She loves you, too." Pronoia squatted beside the child. "Now that you know where she is, you can visit her in your dreams after you go back home."

"The chicks, too?"

"The chicks, too." Broad lips bowed into a smile. "We'll keep them safe."

Lydia frowned at bandages. "Does she have to stay inside?"

"For now. We'll move her to a larger cage and then into an aviary when she's feeling better." At Lydia's confused look, the goddess added, "A place where she can fly."

Prometheus studied the barn's dark boxes with their invisible occupants. More than half of the sick and injured birds were destined to die, and this was one of the better raptor hospitals.

And what of Lydia?

Pronoia straightened, brushing fluff from her heavy apron. She slipped a gloved hand around the titan's waist. "You have a beautiful girl, 'Metheus."

He nodded.

"You know what you have to do."

He laughed a little despite the knots in his stomach. "Trust the powers that be." The police. The therapists. The courts,

if it came to that. If his own power over Christine proved insufficient.

Pronoia added, "I'll remain here until my work is done."

He knew she meant more than just the bird.

He'd have to update his skills and find a way to get by without the Act. His family had to move beyond suffering. His daughter deserved a better world than the one made possible by his healing herb offered furtively inside capsules stuck in a sock drawer.

Without his blood to water them, the flowers would wither and die. He should dump the potting soil inside a community garden. Add his marble pillars to the more mundane yard statuary of kitschy angels and fake sundials.

He'd have to champion Lydia in the only way he had left. As her father.

He'd have to convince Christine to become the mortal she was or sacrifice her to mortal justice if he couldn't. Prometheus spied his wife with his Sight, her head bowed over weak cafeteria coffee, the gray in her auburn roots showing. The nurse gripped her Styrofoam cup with a frightened, faraway look in her eyes.

Beside him Pronoia asked, "Can you handle the press?"

He cleared the vision from his head and nodded. "I've done it before."

"Good." She squeezed his shoulder. "They won't become a nuisance until you and Lydia are back home."

Prometheus said nothing. One didn't question the gods, be it about impossibly clear passage or a bird's unconventional standard of care.

No, that wasn't quite true. He was a god and he questioned himself all the time.

Lydia was half divine and she never questioned her parents at all.

Pronoia said, "She's still young."

Prometheus smiled at the goddess, and for a moment they were all young again, stretched out on an Anatolian hillside while Aidos and Deucalian tussled in the grass in a picture of ancient domesticity.

But those days were long gone. It was time to say goodbye to the Aetos and goodbye to the chicks. Time to duck out the barn's back door and slip inside the silent, waiting cab for the long drive back to the city.



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