

# The Pursuit of Zoe

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Long ago Zoe<sup>1</sup> entered a certain valley in order to make it her home. The valley was grey and void and she found no neighbor there, only rocks and dust. Zoe wept for the emptiness of that valley and from her tears sprung forth a stream to water the parched earth. She was dressed in resplendent green silk, and where her hem draped upon the newly moistened ground there grew up verdant grasses and radiant blooms of wondrous variety. She danced and kicked her bare feet in the cool stream, and in response fishes came forth, splashing and swirling and dancing with Zoe.

In her emerald dress Zoe strolled over the new-grown meadow. She stooped to touch the soft loam, and as she lifted her fingertip a sapling followed. Before her eyes the young tree grew into a tremendous oak, spreading out its mighty branches and lofting up into the sky. She did the same throughout the valley, bringing up birches and maples, dogwood and roses until a lush forest grew all about.

Zoe looked around at the meadow and the wood and the stream in the valley, and her heart was moved to joy. When she laughed and sang, her happiness echoed back to her from every branch, on which perched bluebirds and sparrows, cardinals and doves. Zoe reveled in the song and ran through the wood like a rushing wind, her honey-gold hair and gossamer skirts trailing behind her. Soon there joined her sprint deer and foxes, rabbits and squirrels, and every kind of creature that could run.

Zoe now had peace of heart in this valley and called it her home. Soon there came to live with her human creatures: men and women, children as well. These made a village beside the stream, and to give thanks for all that Zoe had given, they built also for her a grove and a house of finely carved stone. To her table they brought their gifts: berries and nuts, fruits and grains at harvest. They burned candles in her house and perfumed her chambers to Zoe's delight. Man and beast of every kind loved Zoe and bade her to stay and smile upon them in that valley. In turn Zoe loved them all and called them her own, and her heart did not stray.

All things loved Zoe and they watched her and followed her wherever she walked about in the valley. Soon, though, she gained the affections of something of another sort. Its name was Thanatos<sup>2</sup>, and he was no creature that Zoe had brought into her valley. Nevertheless, he pursued her with a hunger and a thirst unlike any other. Thanatos was dark in form and sad in demeanor. He crept like a wisp of smoke and stalked among the shadows, always watching Zoe and always desiring her for his own.

One evening in the cool twilight Thanatos approached Zoe to make a proposal of marriage. When she looked upon his face she caught her breath and stood silent. A tear rolled over her cheek for

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<sup>1</sup> Greek, ζωη means "life," that which animates creatures.

<sup>2</sup> Greek, θάνατος means "death."

## THE PURSUIT OF ZOE

the pitiable state of the dark phantom, but Zoe's heart was neither moved to affection nor desire for her suitor. His hunched form shrank from her radiance and his eyes dared not meet her gaze, yet Thanatos departed not. He had anticipated difficulty in his quest for her hand and so had many plans for how to woo her.

Thanatos summoned into their midst a great elk. His coat gleamed as white snow; his majestic antlers swept the tree branches as he emerged from the darkened wood. The elk's chestnut eyes shone warm and soft upon Zoe's beloved face but turned timid and unnerved at the sight of Thanatos. The mighty elk approached the two with dignity and grace that was marred by a limp. He held his head high and proud but the fracture in his hind leg was easily marked where bone pierced hide.

The skin of Thanatos' hand was like oily coal as he gestured to the lame beast; his voice was like grinding stones as he spoke: "My Beloved! I have watched you many days and nights. I note that you have filled your valley with creatures of wondrous variety, and this fills your heart with happiness. But does not an injury such as this trouble you with undue sadness? My Dear, if you would pledge me your hand I would take away his suffering and that of any other. Would that not relieve your sorrow?" After speaking thus Thanatos reached out his hand and touched the bull elk with one char-black finger. Immediately, the towering animal fell to the ground, cold and lifeless.

"Depart from me, Dreadful Curse!" roared Zoe in a flash of anger, "Thanatos shall be no husband to Zoe! Go now, and leave me to be with my fallen one. You have wrought enough evil in this place!" In bitter tears Zoe stooped down to embrace the limp body. With her own fingers she clawed away the mud and laid the elk in a shallow grave. She buried the once regal creature beneath the sod and spoke a blessing over the place so that a fruit-bearing tree grew rooted in his bones. This she did so that the work of life would cover over the work of death.

When Thanatos witnessed these things he fled away into the night and brooded in his secret hollow for many weeks, churning in his mind over how to win Zoe's hand.

A month passed, the stars shifted, the sun went round the sky. All the while Thanatos listened and listened, watched and watched until he found an opportune moment. He presented himself once more to Zoe, just before dawn, in the village center where she made ready for the work of the day. Before she could protest he begged forgiveness for his offense and beseeched another hearing for his cause. "Radiant Love, Priceless Treasure to my heart," he rasped, "I see you work life, you heal and mend, and all who know you love the gift of your touch. Yet the balm for the body which you give might often escape the pain-stricken soul. Hear me now. I have listened. I have learned. I'll tell you what I know: Time is a bandit to the heart of Man, stealing away what is held dear, little by little through change each day. Listen now! Do you not hear? They quarrel even now at the breaking of the day..."

Zoe listened and heard the shouts of a father and his daughter, his only child. The strife swelled to the point that they both burst out the door and stopped cold to see that they were not alone. The man and girl were locked in Thanatos' stare and he bade them join the conversation. "Tell me, wise Father," he rattled, "what is your complaint against this lovely maiden?"

“Lovely maiden she is; and dearest child of my heart! She loved me once as I love her still, but each day we now grow apart. My word was the sun and moon to her in times past. Now she lives only to thwart my every effort to seek her good. Woe to every father of a daughter, for in time she will break his heart!”

Before the girl could make defense or plead true love for her father Thanatos gave his dark reply, “Good man, your lament is true; for what once was yours now is not, stolen away piecemeal by the treachery of Time! What if I could give back what you long for? What if you could hold on to what slips away? What if I gave your daughter into your hands to hold forever and to keep in your heart as you remember?”

“Sir, if you could do this favor, I would be most grateful!”

At that, Thanatos stooped down and kissed the girl’s head as tenderly as her father would do when she was small. The man’s daughter then fell, breathless, at his feet, serene youth painted forever upon her face.

“What have you done? You have not given me my little girl; you have taken away my only child forever!” Her mother, too, came out, and all their neighbors; and the entire village was consumed with mournful wailing.

“A second and final time I command you to depart, Thanatos!” thundered Zoe, “These ears will not hear your grave voice again; and if I set one eye on you I will deal swift justice for all your crimes! Go now, and never return! Thanatos shall be no husband to Zoe!”

With a shriek and a hiss Thanatos fled away to his dark chamber in the secret place he only knew.

Zoe tenderly picked up the child and brought her into her sacred house. She laid the girl on a stone bed carved into the wall and set a candle at her head to keep silent vigil. Zoe consoled the husband and wife and drew them close to her bosom. “I will mend your hurts as well. Fear not, for your daughter will be safe in my keeping.” Zoe wept with every creature until their tears turned from bitter to sweet. Grass grew green and flowers bloomed under the warm-glowing sun. And so the hearts of Men were warmed as they frequented Zoe’s house to pay honor to their fallen. Their gifts abounded of food and incense; and the love between Zoe and her Dear Ones grew ever stronger.

Meanwhile, Thanatos seethed in a rage. “Zoe must be mine!” he screamed in the cold, cavernous dark of his abyss, “but she will not be mine so long as she loves those filthy, crawling things! If she did not have them, her heart would be free. But, if I slew them all – that she would never forgive. No...but if they turned from her, she would certainly leave them! And where would she run but to my loving arms forever!”

With this in mind Thanatos crept out under the black of midnight to find what creatures he could persuade to his ways. To spiders and snakes he gave fangs dripping with venom. To the wolf and

## THE PURSUIT OF ZOE

lion he taught a thirst for blood. Even some wayward men he lured into his dark counsel. He showed them the power of force and the cunning of deception. He taught them to coerce, to steal, to lie. He ingrained in them a lust for power, possession, and fear. These robbers roamed the forest and raided the village, taking their fill and more at the expense of any who stood in their way.

The valley that once resounded with the song of newborn life now grew dark and sullen under the tyranny of these death-mongers. Every creature of field and forest was at war with its neighbors and the villagers cowered in their homes. Zoe's house came to be filled with the slain. She wept day and night for the dead; each one she knew by name. A hushed lament now haunted the trees and death hung over the valley like a shadowy mist.

Below a thin crescent moon Thanatos was tutoring a poacher in the art of deadly traps one night. While they grinned over a victim writhing in a pit full of spikes he caught the pale face of Zoe with the corner of his eye. He made ready to flee but was stilled by the one solitary word: "Stop!" Her voice still held a fervor and import that she meant for her hearer to do as the command said. Yet the edge was gone, worn down by tiredness and tears. She did not order, but pleaded rather with the desperation of a broken heart – a sound which tantalized Thanatos' ears.

He turned and looked upon her face, sallow and drawn, bereft of the fire and flash that had sent him away from their last meeting. "I see now, Thanatos," Zoe began to entreat, "that you will not stop this ruin and destruction until you have gained your prize. Therefore, not out of any love for you, but in pity for those you kill, I will consent. I pledge my hand to you in marriage. I will submit to be your wife, only this one condition you must meet: take your mark from upon this valley, depart to your abyss, and never return. No longer will anyone pay a price for my freedom with that which I gifted to be their own." The parties agreed to these terms, with the poacher as witness. Zoe departed to prepare herself for the wedding. In one week's time Thanatos would come to collect his bride from her carved-stone house.

Zoe walked through her valley with eyes cast down and bade farewell to her creatures and kin. Men beat drums and beasts thumped the earth in a somber knell all that week. Her amber locks were shorn clean from her scalp – given for a gift of harvest wheat. Her flowing green silks she forsook to the stream of her tears; there they clung to the rocks as moss and slime. She painted her naked flesh with dust and soot and wore as her gown coarse sackcloth and rope. And she wept like cold rain that soaked the earth.

One by one all brought their votive gifts to her, but she ate naught nor slept; neither did she sing or laugh. Zoe only waited and watched until the appointed time. Then she stood ready at her door, shivering in the quiet, still night.

With cackle and howl and drunken songs of filth her bridegroom and his party broke into that night. Thanatos was arrayed in all that he thought to be splendor. His face was smeared with blood which he drank from a great horn chalice. He wore a cape of raven feathers, and men's skulls adorned his chest. His feet clinked in iron boots and his path was strewn with cracked bones. In this way

Thanatos marched with his attendants through village and to Zoe's house. There he held out his hand with a feign-reverent bow.

With a breath Zoe placed her hand into his, her fingers, smeared with ash, now looked as his own. Triumphant as a king home from battle, Thanatos led his bride down the lane that was flanked with all those who kept vigil over the Departing. Step after step she passed farther from home until no more familiar faces looked on. Through the night they walked on, his hand owning hers, until they halted at a stone mountain face. With the wave of his hand a hidden door opened to Thanatos' realm. He drew Zoe into the dark and shut the door fast behind them.

As Thanatos led her down into the earth Zoe's eyes accustomed themselves to the dark, strange world that enveloped her. Upon the floor were strewn the remains of countless victims given in ransom from death's dominion. The air was frigid and caught in her lungs with each breath. The walls and ceiling shown back a dim, pale blue so that she could see the tunnel was bored through solid ice. For what seemed like half a day they walked down ever deeper, the air ever closer, the floor ever colder. Zoe's limbs grew numb, but down and down she followed. When she could hardly lift a foot or grasp with her hand the tunnel finally opened to a wide chamber which she guessed to be the abode she now shared. The silence of the chamber was palpable to her cold, ringing ears, yet she saw they were not alone. Without a sound there scurried about what appeared to be the servants of Thanatos. Hideous and diminished creatures, they were gray and eyeless with huge ears and grotesquely curled fangs. In the midst of all these stood two thrones of ice and rock. To this place she was led, and there Zoe took her seat beside the lord of the hall.

Thanatos called out and summoned his impish slaves for inspection. He smiled as he presented them as a wedding gift to his bride, but his smile did not last long. The creeping things were behaving quite wrongly from how they had been trained. They did not stand upright and dignified, but writhed and quaked and turned about. They were not silent, but shrieked as tortured captives. And they would not look upon Zoe even when he ordered them to do so. Though every last one of them was completely blind it seemed they beheld in their lady a brightness and radiance as unbearable to them as the sun itself.

Zoe was taken by surprise, yet her shock turned to awe when she realized that her own presence had aroused such a response. She then thought back to her journey through the cave. Without lamp or torch to light the way, how had she seen to make out her surrounding, but by some light she bore in herself? Indeed now the walls about glittered as a gem and she could see her own skin burning with warm light!

Thanatos was distracted from this fact by the wild dance of his servants. He knelt before Zoe and pleaded with great embarrassment, "Forgive me, Love, for their wretched insolence! I assure you that I shall find new servants, ones more worthy to wait upon you; who know how to show respect for the noble woman that you are!" He punctuated his supplication by taking his bride's hands in his own, but no sooner did he touch Zoe's fingers than his own oily skin ignited and the fume of his breath burst aflame.

## THE PURSUIT OF ZOE

“No! What have you done, Foul Temptress? I have coveted you as my greatest treasure, and will you be my undoing now?” And he twisted in fits of rage and torment before her.

Zoe no longer felt cold now, but warm as midsummer. Her bare skin was wet; the drip of the melting ceiling washed away her grime and she burned ever brighter. Here in the belly of the grave, in the darkest depth of death, the light of life shone within her brighter than ever before.

From the heat of her flesh and her burning groom the very pillars and roof that house then began to groan and crack. She leapt from her seat just as a great boulder crashed down upon the thrones. Thanatos was trapped beneath, his fire extinguished, his body crushed. All he could do was look on as his prize finally eluded him.

“Thanatos shall be no husband to Zoe,” she remarked and turned one last time from his eyes. She left her grave clothes behind and ran through the tunnel as a blazing star. When she reached the door it shattered before her, and she emerged back to her realm as the dawning sun broke overhead. She stepped out into the sunlight free and fearsome and set her face toward home.

Zoe made her way quickly through the forest, but the thawing trees and singing birds broke the news ahead of her coming. When she entered the village its citizens bowed before the sight of her. No longer was she arrayed in gentle modesty; Zoe now adorned herself in the full glory of her own light, beautiful and blinding as the sun.

Zoe came to the door of her house and entered in. There she looked about at all the breathless sleepers on the cold bed. And from within her there arose a song of such sweet and hopeful tones as none had heard since she first walking into that valley. She walked to each bed and with a hand upon their heart she kissed each slumbering head as a mother rouses her own child. The waking eyes met her own as one long parted from their love and she bade them up and back to their homes.

In like manner Zoe passed through forest, meadow and stream, even all the bounds of the valley. There she mended with a touch all that Thanatos had marred and called to peace every quarrel. In such a way was every shade and hint of death vanquished from the valley that Zoe called home. Man and beast and bird of the air, every creature joined in festal jubilation to hallow her victory. And throughout all the days that followed every one of them dwelt in peace; neither pain nor sadness would touch Zoe’s realm ever again.

The End