

How Things Get Worse

Dionysus, god of fun, has been pouring wine down Zeus' mighty throat all night. Cupid, god of sweet loving, makes suggestions on the fine arts of seduction and prods Zeus: *Zeus is hot. Zeus is hot. Zeus is hot. No, Zeus says. I'll tell you who is hot. Hephaestus is hot. Hephaestus is a fucking forge.* Everyone laughs. Zeus is the life of the party.

Eris, god of sass and mischief, is bored. He wants something fun to happen, so he points out the nymphs sloping down the field into the stream. *Look*, Eris whispers to Zeus. *Supple and delicious.* Zeus cranes his neck to see well. Eris says, *Look at the one in the middle.* Eris knows Zeus' tastes. In the middle of a knot of nymphs is one woman who seems to anchor the flow, more beautiful by leagues than anyone else; she laughs frequently and her smile is crooked and unparalleled. *Why haven't I seen her before?* Zeus asks. He closes his eyes. Momentarily, Zeus is tired. He has known many women and forgotten many faces and sometimes it runs together for him. For a moment he asks himself, *Why do I need more?*

Eris notices Zeus turn pensive and, not wanting to lose his entertainment, sidles his advice up next to Zeus' elbow. *Maybe you want to go slow*, he says. *Nymphs like the slow approach. Why do you think they like Apollo so much?*

Apollo? Zeus sits up straight and looks—eyes wide—over at where the golden god plays his harp, surrounded by a crowd of enthralled men and women. A thin crackle of lightning plays

over Zeus' brow. *Apollo? The pansy? He sits around all day playing music, hoping that someone will seduce him.* Eris shrugs and raises his hands, palm up.

Slow approach, Zeus mutters. *A real god takes what he wants.*

He looks again to the nymphs. This one has dappled hair. One moment it's a deep, earthy chestnut, and then it's catching the sunlight and it looks like running water. Her hair spills over her body and obscures it from Zeus' eyes. There's something mutable about her, something fluid. He can't pin her down.

Eris murmurs, *They say she is the nicest, the sweetest of all the nymphs. I wonder what she wants?*

I'll tell you what she wants, Zeus says. *I'll tell you what she wants. She wants a little bit of the king of the gods. That's what women want and she, my little friend, is a woman.*

Eris nods as if Zeus has said something wise.

What's her name? Zeus asks.

Nemesis, Eris says.

Nearby, Zeus' regal wife Hera is laughing vastly at something Aphrodite is saying. *Distract her a while,* Zeus tells Echo. Echo, nymph, is always hanging about near Zeus. He always says, *Echo, my favorite, distract my wife for a while.* And she does. She wonders, as she has wondered before, why he's always running after the other nymphs if she's his favorite. Maybe she should say no. *No I won't cover for you one more time while you go fuck someone.* She stomps over to Hera, puts on a chipper grin and says, *You'll never guess the gossip I have.*

Zeus struggles to his feet. Athena and Hermes, reasonable and tired of the fracas that boils up every time things tilt in this direction, try to step in his way. Zeus—bigger, stronger,

majestic—brushes them away and brushes his hand over his wet mouth. His teeth are wine-soaked. He smooths his wild eyebrows. *My Nemesis.*

Echo, all appealing smile, tells Hera a story about a mortal boy she has spotted who might just be as beautiful as Apollo. She gestures with emphatic hands. Hera, enchanted by the story, watches Echo intently. She doesn't see her husband's big, staggering steps as he heads down the hill. Zeus is not exactly subtle, yet Hera never sees him running off.

Zeus builds up speed. He's too inebriated to resist accelerating. The nymphs scatter like game birds flushed out by a hunting dog. Zeus stays focused and heads straight towards his Nemesis. Nemesis, terrified, explodes like a runner from a crouch.

Ho ho, she runs! says Zeus.

Why always with the running? he wonders. *Why these games?* He is the king of the gods, the one worshipped by all. Is he not a man who can cut the testicles off his own titanic father and stuff them down his throat, take his throne and imprison him with chains the size of mountains, deep in the earth? Why would women run from one so majestic?

And yet, he's been here before. So many women and men, so much running.

Puzzling, that's what it is.

Europa ran. Zeus had to turn into a bull and carry her across the ocean to Crete.

The beautiful titan Asteria ran all the way across the heavens before jumping from the sky and changing to an island to get away. And who wants to fuck an island? In that case, Zeus felt he'd lost the game. But he made sure that Asteria remained an island forever. So in that sense, he felt he'd won.

Eurymedousa kept eluding him until he transformed into an ant; she didn't even see ant-Zeus coming. Zeus doesn't brag about that because ants aren't majestic. Nonetheless, he won by doing it, and that was what mattered. She bore his ant-son, Myrmidon.

Ganymede. Alkmene. Kallisto.

Mortals run because they like games, he concludes. He likes games too.

This one is lithe. But he is the father of gods. He is only a few strides behind her. She veers towards the river. She'll have nowhere to go, he thinks, disappointed that the chase will be over soon. She's at the river. His hands can almost grasp her waist.

But she doesn't stop. Instead she leaps off the bank of the river. His hands close on air. He pulls up short and watches as she transforms, mid-leap, into a trout. She slices into the water and powers upstream.

For a few seconds Zeus just stares at the fish form swimming away. *A nymph who can transform on her own? This is new*, he thinks.

What fun!

He splashes into the water and he is a beaver, pushing after her with his mighty tail. He swims and swims and swims. Sometimes he gets closer, sometimes he lags. He is not catching her despite his best efforts. He finds it frustrating and very exciting. He has a beaver erection.

Hera is growing tired of Echo's storytelling. Echo's stories all sound the same, like she's repeating herself. Dionysus, who was initially interested in Echo's stories, is now bored. He takes over. He claps a hand over Echo's mouth to shut her up and then he tells a joke. Midway

through he kicks his legs up and falls on his back to emphasize a point, but who's clear about what his point is? Echo pouts. She liked her story. She liked her story. Hera looks around.

Where's Zeus? she thinks.

Where's Zeus? she says.

Zeus? Echo asks. She looks at her feet.

Hera stamps her foot. Not again.

Tell me he hasn't run off after some other woman, she says. She pulls Echo close to her face.

He hasn't run off after some other woman, Echo says.

Hera throws her to the side. People are watching now. Hera straightens her shoulders.

What do I care what my husband does? Hera says, as dignified as possible.

But she does care. She always cares too much, every time.

You, she says. She points at Echo. *I'll deal with you later.*

Nemesis and Zeus are long out of sight around the river's bends. Nemesis can feel the beaver following her. It's awful. *He can't catch her.* Zeus has stayed right behind the zig-zagging trout and made up ground, and now his long beaver teeth almost have her but at the last second she jumps like she's leaping up a waterfall. She lands on the riverbank on galloping hooves. She's now an antelope.

No! says Zeus. He was so close!

His beaver paws touch the bank and he becomes a lion.

And so it goes. Every time he gets close enough to almost touch her, she surprises him with a new form and then he's playing catch-up again. She changes to a dragonfly; he changes to a swallow. She's a hare, he's a fox. Bat, albatross. Mole, vole. Through endless fields and meadows, up mountains and down streams, into the vigilant sea, through air, under the ground. It goes like this for hour after hour.

Zeus was enjoying the game, but he is enjoying it less and less. No one has ever run away from him for this long. There is a nagging, annoying feeling in his brain that maybe this woman is running because she doesn't want him to catch her. He shakes his head to clear away these ridiculous thoughts. This is why he doesn't much like it when the wine wears off. Questions press in like headaches. Zeus hates questions.

But it's too late. Zeus is thinking. He remembers being chased once, by the titan Typhon. Typhon pursued him around the world trying to kill him. Zeus couldn't escape because Typhon was taller than a mountain. The titan cut off the tendons in Zeus' arms and legs and then stuffed him in a cave. Zeus had never been as helpless or irate as he was in that cave, unable to move. After Hermes stole and restored his tendons, Zeus raised the entire Mount Etna over his head and cast it down upon Typhon; that is how mighty Zeus is.

But he has lost a step since his tendons were removed. Sometimes the old wounds ache. Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night with a start and he wakes Hera so she can get him a cup of milk with a spot of honey and massage his arms and legs.

Things are changing. Is it possible he is not as great as he once was? He doesn't like that. His father, Cronos, overthrew his grandfather, Ouranos. Zeus overthrew Cronos. Could someone come along and overthrow him? Maybe being king of the gods doesn't mean always being king of the gods. Could these mortals ever stop caring about him? Could they ever see him as weak?

He would have caught his Nemesis easily in those days before his tendons were removed. Feeling helpless, he decides, is the pits. The thought makes him so angry he could smite a goddamn tree, or rock.

Why do things get degraded? he asks himself.

Hera marches into her palace with loud feet. She is so angry. She is the angriest. Why does this happen again and again to her husband? Hasn't she proven to these slutty sluts what will happen if they get on her bad side? Callisto is now a bear. Semele burned to a crisp. Io is a cow in exile.

Iris! Hera says. *Where's Iris?*

Iris is at her side. Fleet Iris, rainbow goddess, Hera's messenger.

Hera collects herself. She takes a deep breath. She flattens down the silk front of her peplum. *Iris. Dear.*

Iris knows the sharp knife-edge hiding behind Hera's sweet tone. At moments like this everyone tries to be the least noticeable person alive.

Hera says, *Iris. Dear. Find Zeus.*

Again? Iris thinks. This is what it means to be immortal: *nothing ever changes. It's the same fucking thing day after day. We'll be doing the same thing two thousand years from now.* Of course she says nothing. With a nod she flies away, trailing her rainbow behind her through the air. She will find Zeus. She always does.

Zeus is getting fed up. He's done. He hates helplessness and all helpless things. *I should flood the earth again and kill all the powerless creatures*, he thinks. That makes him smile a little.

And right then Nemesis stumbles.

She has been weaving through the forest as a reindeer—Zeus is following as a stag—when she trips, falls to her front knees, picks herself up, and keeps running. Zeus gets closer. He's close enough to smell sweaty reindeer scent with a hint of blood. Little spots of blood dot the ground. It is so mortal of her to be bleeding. So very weak. So very vulnerable. He is at the same time disgusted by her mortality and intrigued.

She stumbles again. She is getting tired, Zeus can tell. She will give up soon and then he will have won. Again.

Nemesis and Zeus break out of the trees into a grotto. The water of the lake reflects the brilliant blue of the sky. The lake is bound on one side by cliffs and a waterfall tumbles over wet-moss walls, throwing mist into the air. There's a rainbow overhead and a few ducks startle at a reindeer and a stag barging in on them, but they settle back down on the other side of the lake. Nemesis will not slow down. She will charge across the lake. She will keep going. But then it's too much. She is too tired. The grotto is too beautiful. *This is where it has to end*, is what she would think to herself, except that she falls asleep. She is running and then her body accepts its utter exhaustion. She collapses mid-leap, and her momentum carries her out over the water. She transforms as she falls and lands, a woman, facedown in the water.

Zeus pulls up next to her. He snorts and pushes her with his hoof. The game is over. He's the winner. He turns back into the father of the gods. The ducks are impressed. He turns Nemesis over so she doesn't drown, and still she doesn't wake up. Even unconscious and filthy from endless running, she is beautiful. Now is the time she will enjoy his godly presence. He tells himself that he is very excited. He is certain she will enjoy it too. He is the king of the gods. He is the king of the gods.

He pushes her towards the shore. The ducks, who have drawn close in their curiosity, scatter and then gather in close again. They worry about Nemesis. Animals have always had an affinity for her. She is bleeding from her elbow.

Zeus sees Nemesis's blood ribboning out into the water. He steps back from her but he doesn't know why; normally, he'd be having sex by now. But for the first time he doesn't want that. For the first time he feels something other than lust when he sees a nymph's vulnerability. For the first time he has a faint tickle of understanding, or compassion. He doesn't like it. He doesn't like this new sensation of doubt. It is much less fun than having no doubt. He closes his eyes and tries to get himself fired up. But then he looks at Nemesis again and she looks so small and cold.

Zeus notices that a breeze has picked up and is blowing the mist from the waterfall towards them. Clouds are building overhead. The rainbow has disappeared. Zeus shivers. The ducks draw close to Nemesis; they press against her to warm her with their feathers. Zeus is touched by how they care for her. What would it be like to take care of someone? What would it be like to comfort someone?

He realizes he doesn't want to have sex with Nemesis; he wants to protect her. He wants to wrap her up and warm her. He wants to watch over her as she sleeps, for days and days if needed. He wants to be like the ducks.

And that's it. He knows how to protect and warm her. He becomes a swan. He is huge. He is shockingly white. His neck is long and regal. He swims out to Nemesis and presses against her. He covers her with his broad wings. He pulls her close to his body. His feathers are so soft and so warm. He will keep her safe. Her elbow will heal. She will be strong. He doesn't understand how this is better than the sex, but he knows it is.

Iris didn't see Zeus turn into a swan. But she did see a stag chasing a reindeer. And she did see a reindeer collapse into the shape of a woman. Iris has learned what to look for. She goes to fetch Hera. Zeus will be busy for a while.

When Iris returns with Hera, they find a swan pressing a young, sleeping nymph to its breast. The swan is preening the nymph's hair. If there's one thing that Hera recognizes, it's her husband. If there's another thing that Hera recognizes, it's her husband after sex. Sometimes sex relaxes him enough that he acts tender for a few minutes. Sometimes he will rub Hera's back a little, or look her in the eyes and stroke her face.

She lands her chariot next to the swan. Zeus had his eyes closed, enjoying this odd feeling of closeness, but the loud *ki-wao* cry of the peacocks pulling Hera's chariot jolts him awake. He pushes Nemesis away quick as he can, as if saying *How did this woman get here?* Nemesis lands in shallow water and wakes. She is infinitely confused. She remembers running

and running and running. But then there was darkness. She remembers her fear, but she also remembers warmth and comfort. She doesn't understand why a giant swan is backing away from her, and a woman is getting out of a chariot. Hera. She knows Hera. Hera is coming towards her and Nemesis doesn't like it. There is something stormy about Hera, although she is approaching calmly. Nemesis backs away.

You. Little one, Hera says to crab-walking Nemesis. *Have you been sleeping with my husband?*

No, Nemesis says. *No no no. I don't know where I am.*

Are you saying you didn't sleep with my husband? Hera points at the trying-to-look-inconspicuous swan.

A swan? Nemesis says.

You don't recognize the king of the gods?

I was tired and fell asleep. He'd been chasing me for hours. Days. I don't know.

Is this true? Hera asks Zeus.

Zeus shakes his entire long swan neck.

Of course it's true. Hera isn't stupid. And she's not angry. Not exactly. This has happened too many times to get angry again. She knows all these nymphs and mortals aren't at fault—she knows Zeus is a monster. She would love to let these women off scot-free and punish Zeus instead, but that will never happen.

She is a goddess and a queen. What would happen if she didn't display her power again and again? Zeus isn't the only one who has nightmares of titans and giants. One does not become the queen of the gods by changing easily, by being flexible. One gets to the top by always being right, even when one's wrong. It is one thing that Zeus and Hera share.

Hera is tired. Everyone is tired. She doesn't like any of this. But this is her job. She runs her fingers through Nemesis' hair. Nemesis is shaking. This poor woman. So scared. Hera can't forgive her, but at least she can give her a present. How can she know that Nemesis doesn't want her present? Who wouldn't want a present from a god? Hera is the goddess of childbirth, so she will give Nemesis a child. Hera will then hate this child, because that is part of the equation.

She grabs Zeus by the wing and drags him to her chariot. He is dreading the scene when they get home. Hera doesn't know if there will be a scene. She's exhausted by it all. Nemesis fall to the damp leaves and weeps. Then she sleeps.

She will have a child, a daughter. From an egg, like a true swan-child. Her name will be Helen. Helen'll be fairly pretty. Some things will happen. Some ships will sail. A generation will die. As sometimes happens with swan-children. You know.

Nemesis hates all of them. People will pray to her for retribution. She always listens.

Zeus does not realize that he set this war in motion when he ran down a grassy hill towards Nemesis. Mortal men are made to die. He still remembers feeling good when he protected the nymph. He could end this war in a second. Maybe it would feel good to protect all these tiny creatures running around with spears and shields. Do fathers of gods show compassion? He wants to. He wants to. But won't the other gods see him as weak, feeble? Won't one of the other gods replace him, and cut off *his* testicles?

He rubs his temples. He doesn't know how to make sense of it all, and it makes his head hurt, so he goes outside to hurl lightning at things.