

{ This Tale Is True }

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Prologue

Juno's morning was long and ordinary. She'd risen early, as she always did, and dressed in a flattering caftan with coordinating gold sandals. Her chemically-enhanced jet hair was always worn up, the better to exhibit her elegant throat and regal profile. Mostly, though, she kept the 'do because the arrangement of this style to Juno's satisfaction killed a full hour of otherwise useless time.

After a light breakfast eaten in solitude, she scanned a selection of correspondence, returning the bulk of it to the *IN* basket for her lady-in-waiting to answer. Juno hadn't yet realized—or perhaps she simply refused to acknowledge—that the same unopened letters passed through her fingers day after day, or that the personal secretary no longer arrived to do the matriarch's bidding.

As was usual these days, there were no audiences scheduled, no meetings written in her daybook, and no pressing matters to busy her, so Juno whiled away the morning hours with a nap. Sometimes she missed the hustle and bustle that had once been the heart of court life, but she told herself often how lovely it was to be semi-retired and allowed a bit of peace. Generally her self-generated delusions were enough to satisfy the queen of Olympus.

She first noticed the symptoms when she reached for the delicate china cup that held her Earl Grey. The ivory flesh of her hand looked...different. She couldn't bring herself to think the more accurate word, refused to admit that the skin appeared loose and slightly crepey. She glanced out the window to be certain that the sundial was still positioned in full shade, then with practiced determination she dismissed the annoyance and went about the business of being royal.

After lunch she pattered around the palace, surveying her meticulous inner kingdom, plumping decorative pillows and poofing curtains. She thought briefly about remodeling the dining room but decided against it. After all, the entire palace had been re-done not so long ago, and she still found the avocado and harvest gold color scheme quite pleasing.

{It had actually been almost forty years since the last update, but to an immortal being mere decades pass in the blink of an eye; as a consequence, change comes slower and is harder for them to accept.}

At last, with every inch of her home inspected and approved, Juno devoted herself to the business of social obligations. She adjusted her chair, frowned at a smudge on the desktop, then pulled out paper and a gold-plated fountain pen to begin yet another official invitation to her upcoming birthday ceremony.

Ages ago, and through no intervention of her own, the mortals had picked up on the idea of an annual tribute to her birth and adapted it to a form that their little minds could comprehend. They called it Matronalia in honor of her *Mother* aspect. It was a sweet if misguided gesture, and one that made the goddess feel appreciated. As she should be.

Juno's festival, as celebrated by the Olympians, was in fact a ceremony of rebirth, the annual renewal of their youth that guaranteed immortality. Even if mortals could comprehend the nuances of the ritual, it never would do to let them in on the truth of it. No, not at all. And besides, they were happiest when they made up their own stories, weren't they?

Dearest Hathor, she wrote, before her eyes were once again drawn to the offending hand.

"Iris," she said, without looking up.

A rainbow appeared over her right shoulder then transformed into a luminous avatar of color. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I believe it would be best to conduct the renewal ceremony first, before all the other ritual folderol. Have Juventas visit me to discuss the change in schedule," Juno instructed. There was no need to add "right

away” to the command. It was understood that when the queen of Olympus called, her subjects responded instantly.

Iris curtsied and faded away, then fleet as the wind she regained her tangible form at Juventas’ small palace. She dreaded her mission. Poor Juventas had enough on her mind these days without having to cope with her mother. Every goddess knew that Juventas and Hercules had finally ended their rocky marriage; that was common knowledge. But Juno was in no way common, and her court took great care to keep her isolated from the harsh facts of reality. Because of that, Iris wasn't sure that Juno knew what Juventas had been up to lately. It certainly wouldn't be the first time a daughter had failed to share details that would cause her parents worry and serve no good purpose in the end.

As she always did when dealing with the Royals, Iris knocked politely on Juventas’ door. She waited an appropriate length of time, but there was no response to her knock, so Iris dissolved and reassembled herself on the other side of the door. It was a perk of her job; the Messenger of the Goddesses could travel anywhere. In theory, that is. She had the heart and integrity of a true goddess; it had never occurred to her to bend any rule or abuse any of her gifts in order to benefit herself. Iris lived to serve her queen. This is not to say that she was perfect, mind you, but she was kind and clever and someone in whom a goddess, a god, or even a human could place full faith and confidence.

There wasn't a sound, not even a whisper of air inside the palace. Iris called, "Juventas! Your mum sent me!" and her voice echoed through the building.

The palace—a smaller version of Juno’s own domicile—was as empty and lifeless as the day Juventas had moved in. The cold, hard marble floors and pillars and some exceptionally fine metalwork contributed by Juventas’ half-brother gave the front hall elegance and gravitas, but there was nothing the least bit welcoming here. Iris would have added color before spending a night there.

Juventas, on the other hand, appeared to have done absolutely nothing, brought no comforting trinkets from her real home, or even placed the traditional shrine to Juno over the door. “Juventas!” Iris called again, but her own voice was the only indication of life.

When a thorough search of the quarters turned up no sign of the young goddess, Iris muttered a popular Olympian curse and sighed. With no idea where Juventas might be, she'd have to search everywhere for the girl, and the queen would not be pleased about the delay.

She searched all of Juventas’ favorite hangouts in Olympus, and questioned every deity she met along the way, but eventually the horrifying truth crashed in upon the messenger: she would have to report to Juno that Juventas was, as far as any god could tell, well and truly gone from the Olympian realm. This could only mean that the girl had followed the lead of so many others of their kind and taken her luminous self into the mortal world.

Iris the Messenger had as one of her most useful gifts the ability to find any god in Olympus. Tracking one down in the mortal world, however, was not so easily accomplished. It took the entire day and most of the night to locate Juventas’ earthly dwelling, and Iris almost wished she'd never found it.

“Son of a hydra,” Iris muttered. “Juno will storm.”