

Crossing Paths

By: RaddaRaem

Rote. Predictable. Uninspired. The wolf closed his eyes and yawned as a mental malaise settled upon his shoulders. "Such is the life of a god," Amulius groggily opined. Arms tossed out to his sides, the wolf grunted while he stretched.

"A listless one, at that," he mumbled. Brows arched, Amulius continued to stare into the back of his eyelids. As he nestled the back of his head into his pillows the wolf idly pondered when, or if, the day should begin. Smacking his dried lips together... he casually decided it should not. Bringing his hands together, the canine clapped his palms together loudly.

"You beckoned, Almighty?"

Amulius' fuzz filled ears twitched at the immediate inquiry. The reverberations produced by his padded palms clapping together had yet to even fade. "A timely enough response, I suppose," he thought. The wolf allowed an uncomfortable silence to hang in the smoky filled room. "On this day, which shall not dawn, you are my lips. Go, and spread my word."

The unseen attendant nodded furiously before pitter patterting out of Amulius' quarters.

Lying prone in bed, the wolf stifled another jaw splitting yawn. Blinking slowly, Amulius pitifully regarded how limitless power and potential sat unused at his apathetic fingertips. He furled and unfurled his clawed digits against his palm. It had taken him some time, months, after ascending the throne to realize his potential. From there, he wasted no time embracing it. Amulius did allow himself to crack a smile at the thought that he once considered himself an emperor. How foolish. No mere emperor, no mere mortal, could possess what he did. Now a god... a god certainly could. Should, even. His word, no, his *power*, was absolute. An utterance was all that was required to reshape the land or something as insignificant as an individual's life.

Faint but fleeting tremors shook his bed. He bit down into his lip and creaked open his eyes reluctantly at the wakeup call he did not recall to be made. No matter, such an event could only have come to pass had he willed it. A faint breeze filtered through the gaps in the fluttering violet drapes that ringed his starkly furnished veranda. Amulius propped himself up. As he swatted away the smoky trails of frankincense, rising up from the clumps of hardened resin burning within the bowls at his bedside, the wolf scratched at his chin. His domain, a walled city carved out of the rocky hills that Amulius' lavish residence rested atop, lay below. "Life inside these marbled walls has slowed to a halt because I willed it. It would be a waste not to revel in it." Once more, he clapped his hands.

A pair of padded soles hurriedly shuffled across the polished floor. Amulius' gaze drifted towards the trembling feline that was attached to them.

"You," he flatly stated as he traced her unimpressive curves with his eyes. "I bestow upon you the honor of clothing me."

Forcing down a heaving sigh with a swallow, the maid approached the side of Amulius' bed. Reaching forward, she pinched his bedsheets between her fingertips and gingerly pulled them back. "I am not worthy, Almighty," she answered with a frightened smile.

"I'm well aware," Amulius dismissively replied.

Hands clasped together and bowing in deference, the ram humbled himself before his emperohhh god. God. God god god it was suicidal to think of him as anything less than a god. "Greetings, Almighty," he spoke. The sheep shuddered as he painstakingly planned out every syllable of his next utterance in advance. "As your lips, I have made your word known to the populace. The city sleeps for, as you decreed, the day has yet to dawn."

Amulius stroked his fuzzy chin as he stepped out from the haze that permeated his mansion. An ashen colored tunic, tinted with flakes of gold and dried blood that circled his neckline and the openings of his sleeves, adorned his lithe and wiry form. "As it should be," he declared. With a loud series of claps, the soles of his leather sandals slapping against stone steps, the wolf descended from his make-believe pantheon towards his city-sized plaything.

The sun, glowering overhead, prompted him to flash his teeth. "The gall of that bastard Helios," Amulius snarled. "Carrying sol across the sky in defiance of my decree..."

Lips, or at least that's what he thought his name was now, throttled his pacing. All in the vain hopes of fading out of Amulius' field of vision and his thoughts.

Amulius slowed to a halt. "Lips," he growled.

He tried. "Do not sigh. Do not stutter. And most importantly," the ram's eyes dipped to the bottoms of their sockets. Rotting, broken, and various well-dressed corpses lay strewn amongst the slopes of the rocky hillside. "Stay outside his reach," he worriedly reminded himself. Lips cleared his throat and responded. "Yes, Almighty?"

"Helios will be made to suffer for this indignity. Steal sol and make it my own." Squinting, Amulius glared at the celestial orb that mocked him. "That'll put that braggart in his place."

Teeth clenched, Lips restrained himself from reacting. He merely blinked and forced himself to nod. Amulius wanted him to... steal the sun. From the god of the sun. "Of course, Almighty," Lips promptly answered. Advancing past Amulius, mindful to hug against the earthen wall the misshapen steps jutted out from, he hurriedly made his way towards the eerily silent city below.

Lips' breathing faltered as he came to be alone with but his thoughts and his footsteps. His heart quaked at the fate that awaited him should he... *when he...* angered Amulius for failing to complete the Sisyphean task imposed upon him.

His mind failed him. Feet carrying him forward without thinking, Lips couldn't bring himself to panic, much less plot, given that both were equally useless endeavors. Plumes of dirt kicked up around his ankles as he shuffled on through the empty streets.

"What am I going to do?" Lips asked himself as his heartbeat faded to a subdued murmur. Shoulders slumped, his eyes swiveled towards the hastily abandoned stalls that lined the streets. He grimaced at the flies and clouds of gnats that had since overtaken them. They were hungry, having long since picked clean the mangled bodies of the countless stray animals that had once resided here. Each and every last one of them eradicated for some petty, and probably imagined, slight that Amulius couldn't even recall. Lips swallowed hard at the recognition that they would be the ones to claim his soon to be corpse. Just like they had all the others.

The ram exhaled heavily and turned his attention elsewhere. Anything to get his mind off that incessant buzzing that had since come to trail him. His eyes darted towards the shuttered shops that remained under lock and to every door and window that lay slammed shut. Inhaling deeply, Lips dragged a hand across his forehead and swatted at some gnats. Not yet. He wasn't ready to be theirs just yet.

"I..." Lips faltered as he tugged at the sweat-stained neck of his tunic. Head tilted back, he peered up at the glistening marble walls that... that... He exhaled a long held breath. The ovine struggled to recall a time when those wondrous white walls, dirtied with whorls and whirling imperfections, didn't serve to entomb them all. Although... his brows furrowed as he continued to gaze upon them. Resting atop those walls, as if perched in placed directly atop the gates leading into and out of the city, lay the morning sun. A thought occurred to him.

"If I'm lucky, Helios will grant me an audience," the ram reassured himself. His eyes could faintly trace out the vertigo inducing staircases that emptied out atop the walls. "And promptly reduce me to ashes for my hubris. If not, I can always just throw myself off," Lips shrugged. Dry, forced laughter spilled free from his maw at his own attempt at gallows humor. His guffaws tapered off to pathetic and pleading whines as he slowly relegated himself to his death march.

Eyes clenched shut, Lips steadied his breathing and prostrated himself. A faint breeze, laced with pollen and dirt, pelted against him as he, and the sprawling arid hills before him, baked beneath the sun. Some part of him still held out hope even now. That a god, a proper one, could deliver him an escape from this madness. Palms pressed flat against the burning hot stone, the ram began to entreat the skies above for aid. "Helios, I know it is not my place as a mere mortal to entreat you. To dare ask that you bring your fiery chariot to a halt for someone as insignificant as me. But please, oh mighty Helios. Please, I beg of you, grant this lowly mortal an audience." Lips curled his fingers against his palms and trembled as he awaited a response. "Anything, please, anything other than the suffocating silence that has been draped upon this land," he begged.

"Well, to be fair, Helios stops for no one," a thunderous voice replied. Its tone, in contrast to its volume, was gentle and understanding. "It's nothing personal."

Raised and then dashed in an instant, Lips' hopes lay in tatters. The ram allowed his horned head to tilt forward pressed it against the scalding marble. "I see."

"It may not be quite the consolation that you were looking for but... I am more than willing to grant you an audience, should you desire it! Would you want that?" the voice inquired.

Lips sighed bitterly. "I care not. In the end, this changes nothing," he solemnly replied.

A prolonged silence followed as Lips' newfound company took its time parsing the nuances of his answer. "How can you be so sure?"

The ram mustered what little will remained within him and brought himself back up to a kneeling position. Chin tucked against his chest, he spoke. "Because my fate, my death, is guaranteed. No one can save me, no one can deliver me from this madness. All I can do now is choose how to meet it."

"Fate is not as rigid as you would believe it to be. Trust me!"

Frustration began to crowd out the hopelessness that filled the ram's head. With a roll of his eyes, Lips reluctantly carried the conversation forward. "And who might 'me' be?"

Restrained laughter was provided in response. "Do you wish to know?"

Lips' strength, faint yet fueled by his welling irritation, trickled back into his limbs.

"Well?" the voice asked.

His curiosity, much to his chagrin, was aroused if truth be told. "Must I?" he grumbled.

"I will not say that you must but... I certainly encourage it. Come! Approach the edge and cast your gaze below."

Lips ran a hand through the tuft of fur atop his head and furrowed his brows. The will, the desire, to end it all was finally at hand. Rising to his feet, Lips clenched his fists. He... he would see for himself who the owner of this voice was. During his free-fall.

The dust caked soles of Lips' sandals tread gently against the stone. Each step forward proved harder than the last as his sense of self-preservation all but turned his limbs to lead in a frantic effort to halt his advance. Yet still he marched, right up until the edge. "N-nothing left to do but... but..." Trembling, Lips leaned over and-

"There you are!" A feline face, feminine in its features and gargantuan in size, greeted him with a smile. "I was beginning to wonder when you-"

"A-a-a titan? Here?!" Lips gasped. A second, and much more panicked gasp, followed when he lost his balance and tumbled forward.

The titan's smile inverted in an instant while her eyes went wide. "No!" she all but shrieked. Lurching forward, her arm slammed against the wall as she came to cup an open palm against it. She guided it underneath the freefalling ram and winced when he slapped against it with a painful sting.

Lips groaned painfully at the cooling sigh of relief that blew over him courtesy of his undesired savior.

"Are you... well of course you're not okay," the lioness thought aloud. Eyes half lidded, she ashamedly brought the back of her hand to rest upon the ground. "Forgive me, mortal. This was not what I intended."

"I'll live," Lips managed to mumble in between coughs. "Not that I want to," he mouthed out under his breath.

Lying flat on her chest, legs kicked up behind her, the titan struggled with how to proceed after exhausting her supply of apologies. "Would you mind if I tried this once more? From scratch, I mean," she timidly inquired.

"Try what?" Lips replied. Eyes closed, he had allowed himself to sink back into his newly made acquaintance's broad palm. His everything ached terribly.

"An... an introduction. This is not quite how I imagined ours would play out," the titan nervously mused.

"Nor I," the ram answered. His will, and strength, lay felled before him. Gods, real and self-imagined, toyed with him still and denied him what little agency he possessed. All he could do now was speak. "I may as well relish it before the gods take that away from me too," Lips thought.

"...Titan?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

Lips creaked his eyes open. As he came to lock, and then lose his gaze within her own, the ram's jaw went agape. He could disappear into the sapphire oceans lodged within her skull were he not careful. "Your eyes..." he trailed off.

She cocked her head to the side. "What about them?"

No matter how hard he try, he couldn't tear himself away from them. "Like oases in this dry land, they are," Lips answered.

Her cheeks pressed up against the bottom of her eyes as a warm smile creased her lips. "I must confess... most mortals turn their attention elsewhere upon me when first we meet. What do they call you, little one?"

"I... have been known to answer to Lips," the ram replied with an embarrassed sigh.

"Lips, huh?" The titan pursed her own together in thought. "A fitting name, given the silver tongue you have sheathed between them."

The ram's bashful laughter quickly transitioned into pained groans. He... he didn't mind being referred to as such when he thought of it that way. Lips cleared his throat and nestled the back of his head into one of the many creases in the titan's palm. "And you? What name am I, a mere mortal, permitted to address a titan with?"

"Little one, you don't need to humble yourself before me. Your acknowledgement, not your worship, is all I desire." She carefully guided her open palm into the shade cast by her prone figure. "Since we've broached the topic, you may call me Theia. A pleasure making your acquaintance, Lips!"

That smile of hers was as beautiful as it was infectious, the ram duly noted. "Likewise, Titan. I-I mean, Theia! Theia."

"Worry not," she reassured him. "I understand that, no matter how I carry and present myself, my stature will always prove imposing. It's uhh... it's why you found me like this to begin with. Flat on my stomach before this great marbled city. I imagined it would be preferable to speak with me face to face rather than into my ankles."

"If even that," Lips opined. Rolling his head to the side, at least as far as his sore neck would allow, he took in the great pillars of furred flesh and muscle that curled inwards towards him. Theia's very digits shamed even the most opulent and grandiose of monuments that Amulius had demanded be crafted in his image. The ram couldn't help but wonder if he himself could compare to so much as a single segment of her fingers.

"You're not helping," Theia teased. "Be honest, little Lips. Would you have still approached me knowing what I was beforehand?"

Lips bit into his, well, bottom lip and quietly pondered.

"My point exactly," Theia chimed in. "Even though I lack ill intent, I know that I still strike an imposing figure. Were I to stand before your city... those shimmering white walls wouldn't even reach up to my waist. My very presence would blot out sol itself and my shadow would blanket the land. Would you have dared approach me then?"

Staring up at Theia's visage he couldn't help but regard the halo of the unseen sun, hidden behind her head, casting a radiant glow upon the long and curling hair that tumbled past the lioness' shoulders. Admittedly, Lips did find the thought at least somewhat appealing as a blush fell upon his cheeks.

"I cannot say," he shyly mustered in response. As his flushed thoughts faded, Lips' attention drifted back towards what led him atop the wall to begin with. "Though... I want to say I would have."

"Oh?"

Lips nodded. "You perceived it an accident, but I had every intention of throwing myself from these walls and smashing myself against the rocks below. Maybe, just maybe, were you to stand tall before us... I would have asked you to deliver me from my mortal coil."

A worried expression adorned Theia's soft features. "Tell me, Lips. What is this fate that ensnares you? Why is your death welcomed if not assured?"

The ram's eyes drifted down to the bottoms of their sockets. "Because my emperor, my god, wills it."

Hands cupped together, the lioness and brought Lips close.

No matter where he turned his gaze, Theia's comforting visage always managed to broach the periphery of his vision. He clenched his eyes shut in protest. "What difference will telling you make?" he asked.

"Fate is not as rigid as you would believe, little one. It is a malleable, ever-changing thing."

"So are you saying you can change mine for me?" A sullen Lips inquired.

Theia shook her head side to side. "No. I am saying, I am asking, something that only you can answer. Lips, why is your fate beyond your own control? What is stopping you from changing it as you see fit?"

Lips stifled a feeble growl that reverberated within his throat. "A great deal. Amulius, the Almighty, thinks himself a god both inside and outside these walls where even the most trivial of acts comes to be because he wills it. The masses, scared and cowed into obedience, are his eyes and ears. His hands and claws, the legionnaires that worship only his coffers and who will gladly turn on one another if paid to do so, seek out and destroy any threats to him, both real and imagined. And his demands and decrees only grow more conceited and capricious by the day."

Wry laughter spilled out from between the ram's lips as he continued. "Just today, Amulius declared that the day has yet to dawn even as Helios gallops overhead. And so the city sleeps. Everyone forced to wait and see when, or if, they are allowed to live out our lives. Then..." Lips blinked away the tears while he spoke. "I was tasked with the impossible errand of stealing sol itself because, in Amulius' eyes, Helios had the gall to oppose both him and his latest asinine decree. I know I cannot complete such a task. And I know better than to run, for his reach is as long as his pockets are deep. So, you ask why I cannot change my fate? It is because I can neither run nor hide from it. Amulius will kill me, torture me, for my failure."

Tossing his head back against the wrinkled flesh that comprised a negligible crease in her palm, Lips turned his ire towards Theia. "What little choice I had left to me was in how I faced my certain death and yet even that was taken away from me! Why did you save me? Why would you curse me, resign me to, living out this life any longer than I need to!?" Panting, Lips couldn't even bring himself to gesture, slap, or so much as flail his arms against her palm while he gnashed his teeth at his lot in life.

Theia regarded him with silence. Only when he had finally tired himself out, panting as tears stained his wooly cheeks, did she speak. "So that's why. I did think it odd that, no matter how long I waited, not so much as a single soul ventured into or out of the city. ...Madness festers within these walls."

"Aye," Lips tiredly acknowledged.

The lioness allowed the fragile ram another reprieve before she continued. "Lips, do you truly resent me for saving your life?" Theia watched as he struggled to articulate an answer and a pained look plastered itself upon his face.

"I... I..." Shaking his head side to side, Lips could not bring himself to say it. Much less mean it. "No. The moment my feet left the ground I knew I had made a mistake," he replied utterly defeated.

Theia cracked a smile. "I uhh... well I won't say that I'm happy that fate brought us together, given how terribly it's been treating you as of late. But umm, uhhh, I am glad that we were able to meet."

With a resigned sigh, Lips nodded. "As am I."

To their mutual disappointment, the sentimental moment proved to be short lived. As the shared silence toed the line towards becoming an awkward one, Lips took it upon himself to kill the mood. "This still changes nothing," he glumly stated.

Pulling herself up to a sitting position, Theia hunched over her handheld companion. "Are... are you sure?" the feline implored with him. "Lips, your fate can still be changed. The point I was trying to make was that I cannot just make that decision for you."

The ram's ears voice cracked. "What are you..."

"Little one, I can, I will help you. But you need to be the one to ask for it," the titan consoled him.

As the weight of her words came to bear upon his shoulders, Lips collapsed into a sobbing heap within her grasp all over again.

Theia resisted the urge to giggle. Instead, she turned her attention towards the lifeless city while she waited for the tiny ram to become capable of conversation once more. Which proved quite simple given that even while sitting the lioness stood errr... sat head and shoulders above the walls that encircled it. ...She couldn't help but regard the warped display of power it represented with a mixture of pity and morbid curiosity.

"This seems... selfish," Lips confessed while he leaned into the lioness' neck and held tight.

"Hmmm?"

The ram's bones rattled as Theia's spoken word pulsed through him. "I just feel so selfish. For being given, for taking advantage of, an opportunity that they will not have." He weakly gestured towards his former walled home.

"That's an awfully odd way to phrase a thank you," Theia answered as she circled round the thigh high prison. Her every lumbering footstep echoed like thunder across the hills as the parched earth molded itself to her gait. She brought a hand up to her shoulder and gently palmed him. "I tease, Lips. But I cannot save everyone."

Lips shuddered as Amulius' mansion, and the hillside it rested upon, came into view. Even from up here he could make out the bleached white bones speckled amongst the pines and the stones that dotted the many peaks and valleys that surrounded it. "Theia... what do you intend do to?"

"I have words for this Amulius of yours before we make our departure." Resting her hand atop the wall, cracks splintering throughout the marble beneath her fingertips, the titan casually vaulted herself over. Theia's tattered clothes, a former toga dirtied and torn into something unrecognizable from excessive wear and tear, swayed with the sweltering gale of air that her movements kicked up. As she advanced upon Amulius' estate, the many gently rolling slopes trampled beneath her feet crumbled into craters.

Rhythmic tremors shook the entirety of the estate. Burnt clumps of resin, ashen and white, knocked together within their bowls before collapsing into a pile of faded embers. The many vases lining the hallways bounced and wobbled dangerously in place. Various beds, couches, and benches scuttled across the tiled floors as banners tapered.

Amulius paced the halls, adjusting his gait to the rhythm of the tremors. Hands clasped together behind his back, the wolf warily regarded this course of events. He had not willed this. Not this morning and not now. ...Perhaps it was within his power to do so yet he saw no value in it.

What servants and attendants that remained on Amulius' retainer were wise enough to remain holed up within their quarters. They were more than happy to let whatever was responsible for this monopolize both that maniac's attention and aggression.

"Who? Who dares intrude upon my order?" Amulius asked himself as the fur on the back of his neck bristled. Rote. Predictable. Uninspired. That was how it should be. His word was law. His will was absolute. The world itself bent and reshaped itself to his command via his personal retainer or legionnaires or an army of slaves and engineers. Nothing could, should, surprise him for anything and everything that happened was only because he made it so. These tremors... these...

Clawed hands clutching at his head, Amulius' eyes went wide as he came to an understanding. "Ahhhhh. I see. I understand now." His lips peeled back to reveal a manic grin while he continued to think aloud. "These were planned as but a test of my resolve. A test of my own unconscious design." Straightening his posture, Amulius laughed off his near mental collapse. "Of course! What else could it be? This was nothing more than a much needed, and well-rehearsed, effort to prepare and inoculate me against those who would dare question my power and godhood like that bastard Helios."

He arched his brows as the tremors came to a halt. "Like I thought. Although... come to think of it." Amulius tapped at his chin. "It's not entirely unexpected that Helios, along with the rest of that decaying pantheon, would be loath to yield to my newfound power. Why... they might even perceive me as a--"

The smug silence that Amulius had comfortably wrapped around himself was shattered by the heaven's bellow. "Emperor Amulius, the madness that resides among the marble. I will have an audience with you."

Amulius flashed a toothy smile. The wolf tossed his arms out to his sides and confidently strode out onto his veranda. Stepping over the toppled vases and smoldering incense, he tossed open the drapes to confront his latest challenger. Even with their parting, no light yet reached him. An all-consuming shadow swallowed both Amulius and the entirety of the hill his imagined pantheon rested atop.

In stride, Amulius accepted the challenge thrown down before him. "Will you now?" he called out to the titan without hesitation.

Theia narrowed her gaze. "Big words from such a little man," she casually remarked.

"Little god," Amulius corrected her as a matter of fact. Leaning forward onto the railing, the wolf stared at the undersides of his guest's breasts.

The lioness crossed her arms about her chest and brought a foot forward to come to rest against the base of the hill. Streams of dirt and uprooted trees sifted out from beneath her sole. "God of what?"

Amulius scrunched his lips. "A fair question. But why needlessly tip my hand? I can understand why you and your ilk might see me as a threat though. Can't have me upending the established order now, can we?"

Theia could have very nearly rolled her eyes right out of her skull. His stupidity was matched only by his arrogance. Both of which he appeared to possess in limitless supply. Even so... he did just provide her a convenient segue. "Word upon the winds is that it's not for lack of trying. Why just earlier today, I intercepted a retainer of yours. One tasked with plucking sol from the sky above." Biting laughter rumbled free from the lioness' toothy maw. "A laughable effort from a mockery of a god."

"You what?" Amulius hissed.

Eyes half lidded, Theia smirked. While his delusions of grandeur were fiercely guarded they could still be shaken. Instead of questioning the validity of his godhood, she could threaten that fragile ego of his by debating the quality of it. "Surely you jest? You may not treat this as a joke but we certainly do." The lioness could contain her biting laughter no longer. "That Helios himself couldn't even be assed to concern himself with such a trivial matter, sending me in his stead, speaks volumes to how seriously we regard this 'power' of yours, little god."

"Silence!" he screamed. Fists clenched, blood dripped from between Amulius' fingers as his claws buried themselves into his palms.

"To think," Theia teased, "I need only my words to rankle you so." She leaned into the earth piled high beneath the Amulius' abode. Fissures spread out from beneath her foot and the entire structure groaned as it threatened to slide free. Her point made, Theia eased off. "Fear not, Amulius. We shall not strike you down this day or any other. You are simply not worth the effort."

Amulius howled out at the lioness. The... *indignity* of it all. He trembled with rage as the canine screamed at the titan. "You will acknowledge me as your equal, as your superior! The gods will know my name and fear it!"

"Will they now?" Theia cooed. "How about this then, little god? If you are able to steal back your retainer from me, a trophy I now proudly have perched upon my shoulder, perhaps I'll reconsider. Why... perhaps I'll even arrange an audience with Helios for you."

"You will do more than that... I will have you bow down before me," Amulius promised with teeth bared.

Theia playfully gestured at Lips with a swish of her wrist for emphasis. "You're welcome to try. Oh and... before I leave." Without warning, the titan casually backhanded the roof clean off Amulius' estate. Following the initial and ruinous crunch, tiles and rafters alike sailed noiselessly through the air before crashing against those white walls some seconds later. "Given your fascination with sol, I thought I would do you a kindness. Now its rays can shine down upon you always."

The lioness shot the wolf, who seethed with murderous intent, a wave. Back turned to the little 'god,' Theia vaulted those marble walls once more before lumbering off towards the horizon.

“And you say I’m the one with the silver tongue!” Lips cackled. “Amulius ate up every lie laid out before him.”

“I do!” Theia insisted. “Your words carry a sincerity behind them that mine do not, after all.”

Shades of crimson came to crease the ram’s cheeks. Looking back behind him, conflicting twangs of guilt and elation tugged at his heartstrings as his home faded to a shining speck lost among the dry sea. The many hills were its gentle waves and the scattered stones strewn upon them bubbled up like white caps.

“I cannot thank you enough, Theia,” Lips stated as it finally started to sink in. He was the one that got away.

The lioness’ face ached from smiling so much. “You are very welcome, Lips! I was more than happy to lend you my assistance. And happier yet that you asked for it.”

“The strength to trust in, to make yourself vulnerable before another... I did not think I still possessed it.” As he spoke, Lips continued to look back at what, and who, he was leaving behind.

Theia cast a sideways glance towards her tiny companion. “Are you worried about them?”

Lips nodded. “It’s strange. When I lived within those walls, you could only afford to look after and care for yourself. Yet here I am, scared for what Amulius will do to them. How they will be made to bear the brunt of his wrath.”

“I can only hope that does not come to pass,” the titan prayed. “The intention was to draw his ire and his armies towards me. If there was a better way to help them... I failed to grasp it.”

The little ram turned his gaze forward. Towards both his new friend and his future. “Then why not get rid of him altogether?”

Theia’s own lips tugged downwards as her eyelids slid shut. Exhaling heavily, a pronounced silence permeated the blistering air. “...Because I’ve tried that before. It doesn’t work as well as you would think,” she answered.

Lips squeezed gently at her neck. She had let him speak his mind without interruption. It was his turn to let Theia speak hers.

“If I had deposed of Amulius, who would have succeeded him? Would it have been a peaceful transition of power? Or a bloody one?” The lioness pitifully shook her head side to side. “And what of the neighboring kingdoms and empires? Would they have patiently waited for you to pull yourselves together? Or would they strike and pillage what they could while you were at your weakest?”

“Theia...”

She cupped a hand against Lips and held him close to her neck. “I’ve come to walk this path, or what I hope to be the right one, only after treading down the wrong ones first. There is much about me that... lends itself to shaping my own fate. That and those around me. Yet, I’ve come to find that just because I can doesn’t mean I should.”

“But you changed mine. And arguably for the better!”

“Yes, but only because you asked me to. I can’t, I shouldn’t, be making that kind of decision for anyone. Lips... even with all my power, thus far you’re the only one I’ve actually been able to save with it.”

Lips rested a hand upon her thumb, one many times his own size, and squeezed it gently. “I know not what hardships brought your path to intersect mine, but I am glad they did.”

Theia swallowed hard. “As am I, little Lips. This umm...” The feline coughed into her free hand and struggled to compose herself. “Uhhh given that Amulius’ legionnaires are sure to pursue me with an unbridled zeal, perhaps it would be wise to deposit you somewhere safe. Somewhere you can carve out a new life for yourself in peace.”

The ram’s ears perked to attention. The raucous, if not oddly comforting, rhythm to Theia’s thunderous footfalls punctuated his thoughts. “Scared that I’ll tarnish your sole success were you to retain my company?”

“N-no!” the lioness replied rather flummoxed. “I-it’s just it would be awfully untoward of me to expect you to accompany me wherever I may roam. I know not where my travels will take me or if you’d want to follow...” Theia trailed off.

He chose to accept her help and now he chose to cast his lot with hers. Brows cocked, Lips pondered putting his namesake to good use. “The strength to trust in and to make yourself vulnerable before another. I possess it, Theia. Do you?”

Theia snorted. With a huff she neglected to answer him directly. “You and that silver tongue of yours,” the lioness retorted with a blush.

Lips slowly reacquainted himself with the concept of smiling. It had been ages since he had done so and actually meant it. Very well. For now though, he’d give her an easy out. “If you won’t answer that question then how about this one? What was it that brought you to this land anyway? To all but throw yourself before the shining gates embedded into the madness tainted marble? I can’t very well part ways with you until something of such import is addressed!”

All manners of hmms and haws proceeded to echo within the titan’s throat as she gladly chewed upon the bait Lips had cast out for her. “Well now, that’s quite the tale to be told! You may be stuck with me a while yet then, little one. ...Not that I mind,” Theia happily confessed.