

Wisdom has built Her House

The Story of a City

1.

There he sat on his throne of shiny black Egyptian marble, speckled with precious gold befitting a King: Zeus, supreme amongst the gods of Mount Olympus.

He was the son of Cronos and Rhea, raised by nymphs and victorious in the Battle of the Giants. He was Lord of Lord and King of Kings - immortal yet subject to mortal passions, to pleasure, pain and Eros.

He was the master of metamorphosis. As a bull he seduced Europa. As a shower of golden rain he enveloped Danae. As a swan he made love to Leda. As an eagle he snatched the beautiful young boy Ganymede.

He boasted that he was ruler of the world but this; this was a sight to behold. Zeus - sipping his nectar with trembling hands. Glancing over to his wife Hera, for help, for a sign of what to do. It was a glance of helplessness, mixed with lust, for he had never ceased to be enthralled by her beauty.

Her hair a ravishing red that curled down her back; her luminous green eyes would sparkle with luscious joy yet...that sparkle could so easily transform into a glare of such envious poison he knew what would come next. Hera, overwhelmed by jealousy, wounded by infidelity, would hunt down and punish any female mortal that had lain with Zeus - guilty or not guilty.

'I too am ruler of heaven and earth,' she would remind her treacherous husband. 'I am the protector of marriage, she who ensures the continuance of the mortal race. With this simple cushion I am sitting on I can create life-sustaining rain and end droughts. I was before you and I will always *be* despite of you.'

Hera was now reclining majestically on her throne of ivory, a hand placed under her chin, her hair adorned with peacock feathers. She stretched one of her legs and twirled her toes, then crossed the one leg over the other. Her tunic of shimmering golden silk was split so high it revealed her incredibly long legs and buttocks with utter shamelessness. Silken straps coiled around her lower legs and jewelled trim accentuated her breasts.

She sat there as if indifferent, mocking him, demanding that he make a decision.

They were all there, all the gods of Mount Olympus, now seated on their thrones and facing Zeus and Hera. Summoned to the house of the gods where there was untroubled peace, where the rays of the sun shone gloriously day and night, and where Apollo - the god of music - delighted all with the delectable sounds of his lyre. Where the Muses sang with such sweetness and beauty it left all brimming with ecstasy so that they forgot about the chaos and destruction of the world of man, choosing to remain gleefully deaf to their cries.

But they too sipped their nectar with tremulous hands and lips, all the while remaining silent lest they miss out on the drama unfolding before them. They looked at each other with a worrying sense of unease, and then turned their eyes back towards Zeus, who clutched his chalice with force before allowing it to drop with a loud clank onto the marble floor.

The precious nectar flowed gently down, down the steps only to transform into three dandelion flowers. The sun, the moon and the stars were encapsulated within these flowers and all marvelled when the great hall transformed into a starry

wonder as millions of dispersing seeds drifted through the air; upwards they went – swaying and dancing and determined to get to wherever it was they were going. With a loud thud the hall darkened before it again shimmered – this time in a halo of pink light.

All clapped their hands with delight – all except Athena and Poseidon.

Athena slowly made her way up the stairs leading to Zeus' throne; each step reflecting one of the colours of the rainbow. She took a dainty step and appeared to pirouette on one of the colours; it was the colour violet and no doubt she looked at it with a prophetic sense of wonder.

Violet, this most intense of colours, reflected who she was. It was the colour of higher ideals, of spiritual transformation, of creativity and mystery. It was the colour of philosophers, of poets and of Kings and Queens.

'I want it. I want this city to be named after me. I am the goddess of wisdom, of intellect and insight. I have given to humanity innumerable gifts and skills. I am the wise one and will make the city renowned for its intellectual greatness and prowess in war and art. I will protect this city from its enemies, guide and defend its people with love and devotion.'

The goddess Athena stared hard at her father, her grey-eyes boring into his with force.

'I am part of you,' she whispered with resentment, as she longed to have that power denied hers, as she gazed upon his crown of glittering yellow gold as dazzling as the sun's fierce rays.

'I sprang forth from your head – victorious and shouting my battle cries. I taught Prometheus the secrets of architecture and astronomy, of mathematics and medicine and you cruelly punished him because he gave these secrets to mortals. But I will continue to inspire men with knowledge of health and healing powers, of philosophical truths and musical genius. And they will honour me; revere me with such passion that they will proclaim me god above all gods.'

The congregation looked on, awed by Athena's courage and boldness. The Muses thought of what new songs they could create, the Nymphs dreamed of the tales they would declare to their lovers, the Titans hoped for conflict and another glorious battle.

Athena's dress flowed softly with feminine virtue and grace. But the helmet that lay hard on her dark locks contrasted sharply with the beauty of her crimson-red robe and reminded the other gods that Athena was an enigma: a matriarchal goddess with patriarchal virtues and strength.

She was a war goddess who taught mortals the skills of war, who deprived herself of carnal love and whose violent temper alarmed even Zeus. But she was so unlike her brother Ares – himself the god of war – who was associated with the chaos and the inhuman brutality of conflict.

Her enormous shield of polished bronze lay beside her – that infamous weapon with its image of the dreaded snaky-headed gorgon killed by Perseus under her inspiration. Her owl, which reinforced her status as the wise one, sat snugly on her shoulder, cooing and nuzzling its beak against his mistresses' elegant neck.

'I admire you for your wisdom, O daughter Athena, but I believe the city belongs to me.'

Standing behind the goddess was the great sea god himself – Poseidon.

'Brother,' Zeus boomed with a hint of affection, acknowledging the bond between the two gods despite the underlying hostility that existed.

Athena looked contemptuously at this god with his burly hulk of a frame, his wild hair and beard that flowed like sheets of ice.

His irrational temper combined with his maniacal desire to maintain power over the sea was infamous amongst both mortal and immortal.

He hated her – *that* she knew. He could never forgive her for protecting the hero of Troy – Odysseus. *Her* Odysseus, whom she protected as if he were her own son; she had enabled the hero to finally make his way back to Ithaca, to his wife and to his home. She had clutched him from the tyranny of the sea that would have gladly devoured him had Poseidon had his way.

Poseidon, whose sexual libido was as insatiable as Zeus' himself and who saw women as mere objects of desire to be dominated and exploited. Who shamelessly transformed himself into a stallion to violate the goddess Demeter, herself transforming into a mare to avoid his lustful snares.

For he too could transform in the way Zeus could – whether into an animal or a peaceful and alluring flow of water.

'Do I not rule the sea my Lord? Am I not responsible for its calm and for its rage? With one command the tranquillity becomes the terror of crushing waves, the hearts of men are filled with the dread of Charybdis as she swallows the sea and the ships and the mortals that inhabit them. As she drags them down to Hades itself.

Impetuous Poseidon you all say – with his monsters and demons and nymphs and their deathly temptations. Yet it is this Poseidon who brings blessings by taming the sea like a docile pup and protecting sailors. Do I not allow ships to traverse my abode at my will – and only my will? For my home brings much death and destruction – yes – but it also brings the abundance of life.'

2.

He didn't know what he relished more: emerging erect in all his glorious nakedness from the abyss of the raging sea - from his legendary seabed palace of corals and gems – to punish at whim those who crossed his path. His monstrous body and magical trident would invoke such fear amongst the mortals in their flimsy ships that they no longer saw him as a god but a Sea Demon; and with one tap of his trident he would obliterate them all before disappearing.

What power, what strength was granted him by his brother Zeus when he gave him the sea to rule over!

Or did he far prefer the praise and devotion he inspired when he rode over the waves of the sea in his chariot with his majestic seahorses – with their golden manes and fish tails – with their kaleidoscope of colours that shone a dazzling array of hues every time they moved? The sea would transform into an Elysian peace as he glided through whilst deep below the sea monsters, the nymphs and all the creation therein would surround his chariot in a circle of dance and sing praises together with the men:

To Thee Poseidon we sing- our dark-haired lord and saviour of ships...

He was fickle and merciless yet forgiving and benevolent; he was akin to the sea in all its volatility yet beautiful calm. But for too many amongst the mortals and gods alike he was a cruel god who would punish men for failing to sacrifice in his honour or who contemptuously disregarded his rule of the waters.

As for the wily Ithacan King Odysseus? The murderer of his beloved son Polyphemos? He would never have had him return to his home island but return he did – a broken shell of a man no doubt thanks to the torment the god inflicted upon him.

‘You are a terrifying god, my dear brother. Rash and unpredictable. Moody and pitiless. Why should you get the city? Why should it be named after you?’

‘With my power over the sea, with my strength and my loyalty, I will give this city success in war. It will triumph over the world and its kingdom will extend to vast continents because its people will navigate with ease the waters that I control. That only I have power over.’

Athena let out a harsh ‘ah’ and directed a menacing look towards Poseidon.

‘She will turn him into stone,’ a female voice gushed as if in anticipation of such a marvellous victory.

‘Or into a slab of ice to be crushed and tossed into the sea,’ a rougher voice sneered with disgust.

‘You brag about your strength rash one,’ Athena declared. ‘You might have given life to the first horse that you so love to boast about, but I created the chariot that you ride upon my dear Poseidon. Your strength cannot match my knowledge of skills and crafts which have made the life of mortals more blessed. You rule over the sea but I gave humanity the gift of ship-building, of ploughing, pottery-making, and weaving. I am the goddess of fertility. I give men courage and strength on their adventures. I preserve the order in creation...’

Zeus looked down at the empty chalice with increasing alarm and then towards Hera who was now twirling her hair with her fingers as her eyes scanned with salacious delight his brother’s semi-naked frame. He could see her legs trembling with desire.

‘The whore,’ he muttered under his breath.

Another chalice fell, as if on purpose, from the hands of Poseidon. His eyes fixated on the nectar as it surged towards the throne of Zeus, as it too transformed but this time into a fountain of bittersweet sea.

Lush voices could be heard from within and at times a nymph would emerge naked and full of euphoria and laughter only to dive right back with wild hair streaming and with such force it was as if the great hall was now no longer drowning in the seeds of flowers but...but...

Once again the great hall clapped and stomped with sheer delight. The fountain now transformed into a pine tree flourishing with an abundance of cones that purified the air; from within its branches some could discern the shapely form of a young woman who was nuzzling what appeared to be an owl.

Zeus was not amused – nor was Athena.

‘I have made my decision: let the heavenly council decide together with the inhabitants of this town. Let us go down and let both make an offer to the city. If the people accept Athena’s offer, the city will be named after her. If Poseidon’s, the city will be named after him.’

The gods and goddesses agreed in unison and praised Zeus for using his intellect in diffusing a potentially disastrous situation. Ares looked upon his sister

Athena with scorn and detested her arrogance. Clearly he hoped Poseidon would win.

3.

'O Citizens of this illustrious town - you who boast over the beauty of your home, with its ancient mountains cradling you in its arms. The river Cephisus, which flows through you with its crystalline waters, nourishes and infuses you with life. Your forests, with their lush green foliage, offer you protection from the sun and remind you of the eternal beauty of creation. You boast of your perfect climate and above all your access to the sea in all its mystery. To which of these gods will you name your town after? Which gift will you accept - which will seal your fate and from which will you be remembered in history?'

Zeus then invited Poseidon to offer the first gift. He strode into the centre of the crowd, his robust, bronze-like build instilling dread into the hearts of the people, and with a loud yell and bang struck the rock of the Acropolis which then opened up a spring of salt water.

'This is my gift to you. You will excel in mastering the sea. You will defeat your enemies and you will rule faraway coasts and kingdoms. Your ships will sail with ease through my waters and never will your men suffer from storms and all the terrors therein.'

The crowd gasped with astonishment as Poseidon struck with force, as lightning flashed across the sky and the sea crashed against the shore.

They murmured amongst themselves and marvelled at so terrifying a feat. They looked out towards the sea itself; its dazzling blue hues, serenity and its mischievous sea nymphs riding on dolphins had always captivated them.

But its beauty was an alluring and deceitful temptation, for it was also a watery vault that housed demons and monsters and which oftentimes became none other than the battlefield of the gods themselves; where wave after wave would come down upon them with such raging power and where the sky itself became a black shroud hanging over them.

Yet wonder of wonders, Zeus would then shoot flames of fire from his home, transforming the black sky into a radiant shower of light that zigzagged with incredible speed, disappearing then appearing again and creating a sound akin to a snake's hiss.

Whilst most dreaded the impulsive, if not selfish bickering of the gods that created such havoc, some stood in awe at the spectacle before them and saw in these wondrous events an access to the divine and hence - to their own divinity.

But to master the sea, this was the desire of all the citizens.

Athena strode forward like a lithe ballerina and took off her helmet. Her hair fell down like silk and flowed gently along the arch of her bare back. Her gown now clung to her body, revealing the curves of her hips and her breasts; her supple flesh appearing paler - more ethereal - against the deep red of her gown.

She posed before her enthralled audience, allowing them to savour her in all her exquisiteness; men fell down on their knees and hid their faces, paralysed with lust yet not daring to look upon that which was forbidden them.

She opened her delicate hand and dropped a seed to the ground. All were silent. The sea moaned from afar and the hearts of all beat in unison. Men stood up again and the crowd broke out in wild delight as an Olive Tree miraculously grew – Athena’s gift to the people.

‘I – my beloved people – offer you the fruits of peace and wisdom. I will protect and guide you as you explore land and sea. I will bless your crops and nourish your children. I will defend your walls from your enemies and you will prosper beyond your wildest imaginings. You will be renowned for your wisdom; for your art and poetry, for your great philosophers who will inspire and teach all of humanity – who will enlighten the world with words of truth and justice. I will bless you and keep you; I will lead you and guide you.’

Athena stretched her arms out to the people as if to embrace them and rapturous jubilation followed.

‘Athena, Athena, Athena,’ they chanted, possessed by a divine spirit and swaying as one indestructible body.

The gods and goddesses granted the victory to Athena. The town was named ‘Athens’ and a temple was built on the Acropolis in honour of the great goddess.

The goddess kept to her word by protecting and fortifying the city, by infusing it with a love of the intellect and godly wisdom.

Her Olive Tree adorning the Acropolis for eternity, never withering, a testament to Athena’s words that from this city the world will be enlightened with truth and beauty.

Forever.