

## **The Eternal Punishment**

Millenia ago, Prometheus came to see mankind's plight; he saw in them a perennial longing for food and warmth. He knew that Zeus, the most powerful of the Titans, wouldn't approve of giving man fire but he was undeterred. So, he stole fire from the gods and gave it to man.

For this, he was condemned by the gods and punished for all eternity. Yet, he harbored not a single ounce of regret.

Millenia passed, and perhaps fire became all the solace of man's existence. A burning flame that kept man warm in the dark of night – a fitting metaphor for man's own worldview, some might say.

Yet, Dires felt all but hopeful as he stared at his village that was now a shell of its former self. It was a mere moment, but he felt it nonetheless. He stared at the flames engulfing everything within their reach. Oh, how they burned. They were indomitable. They were relentless. They wouldn't stop, even with the deafeningly loud screams. They wouldn't stop, even as families and livelihoods came crumbling down in a matter of minutes. They wouldn't stop – even as Dires' entire world shattered right in front of his very eyes. And all he could do was watch...

## **The Longing for Fire**

*2 days earlier...*

Dires was looking at Angela, just as affectionately and with as much awe at her mesmerizing beauty as he did the day that he first saw her. It was just an ordinary winter afternoon, yet Dires kept staring and smiling as if it were the most special day of his life.

One would surely not have been able to tell how unmoored he truly was in life. He detested both his work and his daily company nor was there any love lost between him and his parents. Worried about his prospects, they used to remark like a broken record, “You’re worthless – your life is not going to lead anywhere!”, or something along those lines. In fact, just a few days earlier, he had finally gotten the courage to stand up for himself. It was yet another day of constant demeaning and berating, but after an intense conversation, his exasperated father exclaimed, “I wish you were never born!”. And there it was...the last straw. A pregnant silence filled the room – those cruel, awful words could never be unsaid. Dires’ shock gave way to tears, and his anger never burned brighter. He stormed out of the house, never to look back. He left behind his childhood home and moved in with Angela the day after.

Yet, despite all discouragement that could be, today was the most special day of his life – just as the previous day, and the day before that, and all the way back to when he first laid his eyes on her. He still remembered it like it was yesterday – how could he ever forget that frigid winter afternoon? Their eyes were drawn to each other like moths to a flame. When they spoke, it was a symphony of words and uninhibited emotion. When they first touched, it felt like two long-estranged worlds finally colliding and becoming one. When he grabbed her by the waist and

their lips intertwined, it felt like that was the very reason for their existence. It was as if they had already been given all that they desired from their lives. It felt beautiful. It felt...right. It was a word whose meaning Dires had long forgotten– “right”. And for him, it had felt like that every day since.

As the rising sun set the horizon ablaze, sunlight streamed through the bedroom window. Angela’s eyes slowly fluttered open, as she woke up to a grinning Dires. She couldn’t help but smile too, and gently caressed his soft, ashen hair. They just looked at each other, as they so often did, and didn’t let out even the slightest whisper. Their eyes did all the talking; they spoke in a language that would have eluded the world’s understanding – but they liked it that way. For he was her world, and she was his. And that was all that mattered.

“We should get up, my love,” Angela whispered. Dires wistfully looked at Angela.

“Just two more minutes,” he whispered, still staring deep into her eyes.

Angela took a deep breath.

“I’d love to, ”she said.

She paused for a moment, and continued, “only if it weren’t this close...”

“This close?” he asked, confused.

“It’s the 20<sup>th</sup>, Dires,” she said, slightly surprised that he didn’t remember.

Dires’ face fell in an instant.

“Two more days...”, he said somewhat nervously.

“Two more days”, she echoed, her resolute voice tinged with just a hint of apprehension.

Perhaps if it were any other day, Dires would have given in and just stayed in bed with Angela. But not today, not tomorrow, and certainly not day after.

Both of them got out of bed and got ready for the day. Dires was a bit more distant than usual but even then, his affection made it barely noticeable. As they were heading out the door, he gave her a soft peck on the cheek.

“I’ll see you tonight”, she said.

Dires smiled and nodded. She was the closest person to him in the whole wide world, yet he put up a façade for such was the tradition. After all, how could he be completely open with her when he himself so often struggled with the truth? He had been running from himself – from parts of him that he detested; parts that he wanted to shove so deep down inside of him that they would never see the light of day. They were parts of him he so vehemently refused to see, but a reckoning was coming; a reckoning that had already begun forcing him to open those willfully blind eyes. And for the first time in ages, he felt afraid.

“I can do this”, he reassured himself.

He placed his hand on his chest, hoping to soothe his rapidly beating heart. He was afraid, but he knew he had to remain undeterred. He finally mustered the courage to leave the house and walked all the way to the furnace where he worked.

“Just pretend as if it’s a regular day,” he said to himself. “Yet another monotonous, soul-consuming day...”.

He walked in, ambling about in a suspiciously nonchalant manner. If anyone had been watching him, he would have surely raised an eyebrow or two.

Towards the end of his working day, he found one of the hidden tunnels leading out from the furnace. Therein, two paths lay in front of him – one leading to the back furnaces, and the other a narrow hallway with a locked door at the end. He walked down the latter, and upon reaching the door, he grabbed a pair of keys from his back pocket.

He looked around a few times, making sure of his low profile. He placed the keys inside the hole and took three deep breaths. His heart was racing ever so fast. Sweat began to drip down his forehead, as his palms were sticky and moist.

“May love remind me,” he said to himself. “May what’s right guide me.”

He put his hand on his chest once again, gently caressing it. He couldn’t afford to waste any more time. He slowly twisted the key three times clockwise and unlocked the door. He saw boxes and boxes, stretching as far as the eye could see. His breaths quickened and his vision blurred. One couldn’t overstress his role’s importance – all their plans hinged on it. And he couldn’t let her down...he just couldn’t. The very thought of it seemed suffocating – it was unimaginable. He swiftly grabbed the box closest to him and walked out the door, gently closing it behind him.

On the way back to the house, he gazed at the setting sun. It lit the horizon a bright orange, with a hint of grey. It was beautiful, he thought. But such beauty was short lived. As his eyes fell from the heavens above to the cesspool of mankind below, an all-so familiar lamentation filled his being. He saw street urchins begging for scraps of food for mere sustenance. Beside them, there was a mangled dog limping across the path. The helpless creature looked like it hadn’t eaten in days. He gave them a bunch of almonds that he had stored in one of his coat pockets, which - although insufficient to survive on for even a day – were better than

nothing, he thought. As he saw the poor dog and children excitedly eating the almonds he gave them, he pondered the injustice of it – as he often did. He saw himself in them: someone so terribly failed by not only his own family, but the very system of which they were a part. In his eyes, they had become one and the same. And so, he knew that things had to change. He knew that he had to do something for those powerless and pure souls like him that the world had spit out like rotten meat. He knew.

Soon after, Dires returned to the house, feeling slightly more resolute. He searched for a place to keep the box for the meanwhile. The wardrobe was brimming with coats and dresses, so he decided to place the box under the bed instead. It was dusty and murky under there, but it was only a matter of a couple of days. He crawled under the bed and wedged the box inside, but on his way out he noticed a little card lying under the bedside table. Maybe it slipped out from one of his clothes when he brought all his belongings here.

He flipped it around and inspected it. There was a birthday cake, filled with 9 candles, drawn on the front page. He opened the card and read it.

*Happy Birthday Dires! We love you. We couldn't have asked for a better son, and we hope you have an amazing 9<sup>th</sup> birthday, my love. Even though you're growing up so fast, you're always going to be our baby boy.*

Beside the note was a picture of Dires blowing out his birthday candles, with his mother and father by his side. They all looked so happy. He rubbed his thumb along the picture, reminiscing over those rare moments when they had been a loving family. This would make today even harder: an echo of the past that he so desperately wished to forget. Where did it all go wrong? Didn't the 9-year-old boy in that picture deserve all the happiness that the world had to

offer? As hard as Dires tried to maintain an angry and righteous front, it was all in vain. His incipient anger gave way to ever so violent sobs, that grew softer and softer. With his silent tears, he felt every conceivable human emotion all at once – he felt every single emotion that had been trapped under the surface for years, yearning for their inevitable escape.

“Dires, did you get the box of...”Angela said as she walked into the room, eventually trailing off as she saw Dires lying on the floor in a fetal position. She rushed to him.

“D-Dires...what happened, my love?” she asked. “Are you all right?”

Angela placed her soft, warm hand on Dires’ icy cold face. He turned his head and looked at her. Mystically, everything seemed a bit easier all of a sudden. He tried to gather himself and sat against the wall.

“I...I don’t know, Angela”, he replied, trying to rub remnants of the tears from his eyes but once again, in vain.

He rarely called Angela by her name, so she knew something was wrong. She put his hands in hers and held them tightly yet gently. He felt safer now.

“I don’t know if we should go through with it”, he admitted. “I just...you know I want this – after everything this place has put me through - but it’s just too much of a risk.”

“It’s not, my love – we’ve thought all of it through,” Angela said, trying her best to reassure him. “We’ve been planning this for a while, haven’t we?”

“I know, I know – but that’s not what I mean. What if it ends up harming more people? What if there’s collateral damage?”

“We planned it all out so that there wouldn’t be any,” Angela replied calmly. “We’ve gone over this, Dires.”

“I know, but...”, Dires’ voice faded out.

Angela knew that Dires still lacked faith. The seeds of doubt were stubborn this time.

“You know why we’re doing this, right?”, she asked him. “Do you remember what they did to you – what they did to me? I didn’t ask for it, Dires. I didn’t ask for any of it”.

She took a deep breath and looked out of the window.

“I know how you feel. I know it’s been terribly hard for you too, Dires, but...your parents didn’t leave you on the street as an infant.”

A tear emerges from her perfect, hazel eyes.

“A tiny baby girl, who never hurt even the smallest fly, and they just left me there. My biggest, most grievous mistake was my very existence. I didn’t choose to be born, yet it was all my fault, wasn’t it? And then...someone saw that little poor, little girl and took her home. They didn’t leave a single stone unturned trying to find her parent but once they realized their search was fruitless, they gave her up. I went from family to family, from orphanage to orphanage, but not a single soul stayed with me. And I prayed every single night, yearning for a savior. I prayed to possess just a single thing that was worth losing...something to make every heart-wrenchingly painful experience worth it. And the naïve girl I was, I fell for someone when I was 16 and it just...made it hard to trust again. I remember how every part of me was so vulnerable and he just...”



Her voice began to break, but there were no more tears. Dires reached out to her, softly placing his hand on her thigh. He knew it would bring her comfort.

“And do you think any of it would have happened if the system were just? It’s on them, Dires. I don’t want a single girl to ever feel that pain again. They need to understand us...and nothing will change without a baptism by fire.”

He nodded understandingly.

“I know, my love.”, he said. He was more certain now.

She smiled at him.

“You were the first and only person who ever understood me,” she said. “You nurtured every flawed, vulnerable, and authentic part of me. You saw me as who I was, and you stayed.”

Dires smiled lovingly. He remembered the first time they spent the night together, it was a night of such unadulterated beauty and passion.

“And that’s when I realized that my prayers were answered,” Angela continued. “I had finally found my home.”

Dires embraced Angela. He closed his eyes and lost himself to her touch. Their lips intertwined, and their two worlds became one once again. Everything seemed right – almost right.

*1 day earlier...*

Dires woke up, only to find an empty pillow beside him. It was mid-afternoon, and he quickly realized that he had overslept. Angela knew that it had been far from easy for him, so

perhaps she wanted to give him some space. But Angela was the one who made the mornings worthwhile, and not waking up next to her gave rise to a hollow feeling inside of him.

But he felt different today. There was a strange, inexplicable feeling pervading him. It was unshakeable, even after last night's conversation, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Angela wasn't home, perhaps allowing him to heed this faint voice inside him. It left him no choice; he knew what he had to do. Unbeknownst to him, however, that little voice echoed the sincerest part of him – yet it grew fainter every day.

He put on the grey coat imprinted with purple stripes, which he thought a peculiar color combination, that his parents had given him as a present last year. Soon after, he headed out the door hoping not to lose the day.

As he walked, letting that voice lead him, he felt a fire growing in his heart. He was nervous, yet hopeful. What did he truly want from his parents? Reconciliation? Merely, a vent of emotion? He wasn't sure. But this was right, he thought. It felt true.

He reached his childhood home, and a sense of comfort bloomed inside him. He headed to the door and hesitated for a moment before knocking. There was no response. He knocked again, but to no avail. He walked around to the backyard, hoping that they were there. And then he saw them...smiling.

They were dancing and laughing, looking at each other like they were all that mattered. They looked truly happy; happier than Dires had ever seen them. His eyes began to well up with tears. Perhaps his father was right. Perhaps truer words were never spoken that fateful day, as harsh as they sounded. Perhaps, their lives would have been so much better without him.

He stormed away angrily, his shoulders quivering in the mélange of melancholy and anger that he ever so often felt. But each step that he took roused the flames that burned inside him, turning the embers into an inferno. Indignation seethed within him. *How dare they. They don't fucking care. They never did. Perhaps no one cares.* Upon reaching Angela's house, he dug into his coat pocket and took out the birthday card. He furiously ripped it into shreds until there were dozens of fragments scattered across the ground, never to be whole again.

That night, he didn't need much more reassurance. It was crystal clear to him now. Dires and Angela laid in bed, about to slip deep into their slumber.

"Goodnight, my love," Dires said. "Tomorrow is a big day."

"It is. Is everything all right now?" Angela asked.

"I think so," Dires replied. Perhaps there still lied a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"Have you heard of Prometheus?" she asked.

"Vaguely," he replied. "What about him?"

"He wanted to help the mortals, those that the gods deeply disdained," she said. "So, he gave them fire and with it, hope. It was only after this that human civilization could truly thrive. He set them free. But, like everything else in this godforsaken world, there was a caveat attached to it. He was chained to a rock, and Zeus' eagle fed off his liver every single day. He was condemned to endless torture, yet...if he were somehow given a second chance at that moment, he wouldn't have changed a thing."

Dires wore a gentle smile, one of greater acceptance and understanding.

"We need to do this," Angela said.

“We do,” he replied, noticeably more determined.

“And remember what we talked about, my love,” Angela said, maintaining a soft yet serious tone. “I know you’re worried about me, but I’ll be okay. I know everyone else will be in the common area of the headquarters, but I want you to wait for me in our special spot. It’ll mean a lot to me.”

“Of course, my love,” Dires said.

“May love remind me,” Angela said.

“May what’s right guide me,” he continued.

## **The Theft of Fire**

### *The Day Of...*

Judgement day had finally arrived. It was the moment they had all been waiting for. It was everything that their lives had led up to. It was their resurgence. It was their redemption. The stage was perfectly set. They had the box, explosives within, and Angela would take it all the way from the headquarters to the Crownhold building. However, Crownhold was very heavily guarded. After all, it was the power center of the state: home to ministers, officials, and even the royal army itself. It’s the reason they chose it to launch the resistance in the first place. With the help of Arthur, an insider at Crownhold, Angela would be able to sneak inside fairly easy. From there on, she knew Crownhold’s underground chamber like the back of her hand. The oil-filled barrels would be rigged with explosives, triggering a chain reaction that would bring the entire building crashing down. And with it, the plagued bureaucratic heart of their kingdom. They would be able to start anew. They would usher in a new epoch of peace and justice. They would

forge a kingdom wherein every human life would mean something. It was the perfect plan in service of the noblest of causes— at least, that’s what Dires told himself.

Dires stood at the special place that he and Angela had decided upon. It was a short walk from the headquarters, where the rest of group was taking refuge, but still had a good view overlooking the city. Favorably, it was at the end of a secret passage, aloof from the world. He and Angela had come here often during the past few months, for it was one of those places in the world that belonged only to them. They used to come here when the world was too much too bear, and their hearts felt far too heavy to carry alone. It was just them against the world and in here, they were in a beatific universe of their own making. It was probably the place that they considered the closest to home.

As Dires peered out of the small opening in the strong brick wall, his eyes were transfixed on the Crownhold. Its majestic, dome-like structure stood firmly in the distance. He gazed at it with anticipation yet a pervading sense of fear. Their plan was perfect theoretically, but reality had always blindsided them, hadn’t it? Dires had always hoped for minimizing casualties, and he still did. Even with his newfound sense of righteousness, the faint voice that had led him home the previous day – albeit merely a whisper now – still had a soft spot for his mother and father. He even remembered the terribly injured dog and the starving street urchins from the other day. This would be a new beginning for them, he thought. This would be a rebirth.

But most of all, he prayed that the love of his life would come home unscathed.

“May love remind me.”, he whispered to himself. “May what’s right guide me”

And then, it came...

## **The Judgement of the Gods**

It didn't happen gradually nor in waves. It happened all at once. But for a moment ever so brief, Dires saw fire. He didn't hear the screams, or maybe he forced himself to forget. But he watched as flames engulfed all he had known. He watched...for that was all he could do. He watched for only an instant that felt like an eternity. And then, before he could blink, there was complete and utter darkness.

It was like a dream to him.

He woke up a few minutes later, picking himself up from the floor. He wiped the dust and blood from his face, and slowly limped across the rubble. A pile of bricks stood in front of him, and he slowly climbed them one by one. As he reached the top, he saw it.

To his north, there was nothing as far as the eye could see – just dust and rubble. He turned to the left, there was nothing there either – just dust and rubble. He turned to his right, there was still nothing – just dust and rubble. It seemed like their special spot was one of the only places that was spared from total obliteration. The back wall and most of its structural integrity was surprisingly intact.

He looked a bit further down, and he finally saw something there – a skull. He looked around once again to find not just one, but a swarming sea of skulls and bones. It was just a dream to him, one that his mind so miserably failed to comprehend.

He heard a voice ever so familiar that broke the silence.

“Dires.”

He turned around and saw her there. She was unscathed: no blood, no dirt, not a single mark on her pure body. It was just as he had hoped. Inside him, a tiny candle lit up once again. But he knew that it was far too convenient. Even though it was a confusing, disorienting, unbelievable dream, a part of him knew what she had done. He stared into the distance, seemingly lost.

“The Crownhold chamber...was connected to the city tunnels,” he whispered to himself inaudibly, with words skewed and slurred. Even as he tried to understand what had taken place, he struggled to comprehend the very gravity of his own words.

He limped towards her and tried hard to find a thought, or even a word. He took his time, and she waited for him. He finally found one.

“Why?”

She didn’t need her facades anymore, for there was no use of them.

“We start afresh now,” she said. “You cannot truly rebuild something unless it is first turned to ashes.”

She came closer to him and touched his bloody face. She smiled.

“It’s just you and me now, my love.”

As her ever so warm touch fell on his face, he felt at odds with himself. Every trace of guilt washed away and hid itself deep within him where no light could ever reach. Every trace of anger went into that chasm too, never to return. That little voice inside him, which had grown fainter and fainter, would never dare to utter a word again. It was lost. And with it, every part of him – every flawed, vulnerable, and authentic part of his being– disappeared forever as well.

After all, he didn't need them – they were of no use anymore. He had his world, and that was all that mattered. It was a dream to him, one from which he would never leave.

Dires and Angela locked eyes, never to be unlocked again, and smiled. Their lips intertwined, as their worlds became one till death would do them apart. It felt more beautiful than ever. It felt more right than ever.

Perhaps, they knew their fate. For their sins, they would be condemned by the gods and punished for all eternity. Yet...neither of them harbored even a single ounce of regret.