

The Consequences of Attraction

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From set *Theros*

The vole had crept too close. Xandria had been waiting for most of the day and night and through the rain. The rain was cold and lashing, but comforting in a way. It was like being touched by someone. Besides, she would not die from sickness. She would not die at all. The same could not be said of the vole.

The hunger was constant. There was no large game on the islands, but the others rarely deigned to feast on the smaller creatures. Those were mostly left to her. She had wondered what would happen if she stopped eating, but at some point the hunger became compulsory. She must eat.

Nyx was obscured by the dark clouds, and Xandria could barely see her own feet perched on the rocky outcropping, but she heard the vole scabble close, and she began to sing. The scrabbling stopped and was replaced by a dreamy pattering of tiny clawed feet. Her voice filled the dark, wet night, overcoming the sounds of rain and wind and fury, overcoming fear. She hoped that was true, that there was no fear at the end.

The vole crept right in front of her. Although she still couldn't see it, she could smell it, the wet fur, the life of it. As it crawled onto her leg and up her body, she could hear its tiny heartbeat, now synchronized with the tempo of her song, as it quested ever further for the music's origin. She opened her mouth wide as the vole crawled on to her face. She relished the feel of its fur on her face as it entered her mouth before she crunched hard on its spine, breaking the body in two.

The feel of blood and muscle in her mouth was the strength she needed to tear and swallow the rest of the tiny carcass. It was never easy to eat this way, even after so many years, so many awful meals. She hoped the vole's last thought was of her beautiful song.

Another song erupted in the night air, and then several more. Xandria whirled back to the watery darkness, wondering what had drawn the attention of the others, and over the ocean she saw lights. A ship. Xandria lifted her wings and launched off her rock, swooping close to the water before flying toward the lights. The lights from the ship offered a feeble glimpse of the curling waves and driving rain, although she didn't need to see to navigate around this stretch of rock and ocean.

The ship was a trireme out of Meletis, large and majestic, likely staffed by seasoned sailors and warriors, presumably on a trade route. The ship was far off course to be on this edge of the Siren Sea. Perhaps it was the storm, perhaps it was carelessness, perhaps a fatal bravery that sometimes seemed to grip men. Xandria never knew which, and by then had stopped caring. These encounters between men and the others always ended the same.

There were twenty or so of the others, swooping in and out and unleashing bursts of song. The ship was important enough to have a mage on deck, and some form of magic protected his ears as he hurled fire at the others to keep them at bay. The other crew members on deck had no magic to protect them—many of them walked willingly over the railing of the ship, some of them grabbed in the embrace of an

other, some of them plummeting to the dark water below, struggling to stay afloat to continue hearing that glorious song. Most of the oarsmen had stopped rowing at this point, most of them entranced, and even the deaf ones knew how this would likely end.



The mage had failed to bring down a single one of the others. It was one thing to fight in the light, while dry and on land, quite another to be in this hell. Xandria gave some momentary thought of aiding this man. He looked young and handsome, from what she could see each time a burst of light came from his hands, but this too was a path she had been down before. The others couldn't hurt her, but the last time she interfered they had drawn every living creature from the islands for weeks. It was then she realized that madness would be her eternal companion, not death, until finally they had relented or grown bored with their sport, and they left her to her birds and fish and rats. She would not help this man.

And then one of the others swooped in behind him and gouged out some of his back and shoulders with her talons. He must have screamed but the sound was drowned out in the rain and in the songs. Xandria flew in closer, looking down on the scene illuminated in the ship's deck lights. Whatever protective magic the mage was using vanished in the assault, and he stood there, blood pouring from his back, one of his shoulders and arms dangling by threads of muscle and bone. But his face, so recently dominated by rage and fear, now looked serene. Happy. He approached the other and her beautiful song. Did he know what awaited there? How could he not?

Xandria looked away as the other began feasting. The beautiful melodies that had filled the wet air were now replaced by sounds of eating and slaughter, and the unfortunate cries of the deaf who could only be placated by violent ends. Xandria looked at the others, willing them to look at her, to acknowledge her, something to fill this emptiness. But the others refused to be distracted from their feasting and raucous cries to each other, only hissing when she came too close. Xandria flew from the ship, back into the darkness.

He was beautiful, and his name was Ninis. She remembered little else about him. They had both been young scholars in Meletis, and while she was shy and far more comfortable around books than people, it had been impossible not to notice him.

It should have been impossible for him to notice her. No one noticed her. But after an ethics class together he approached her, fascinated by her insights. They talked for hours that day. And they talked for hours more for the next several days, walking throughout the academy halls, talking and talking until one night they walked onto the beaches outside the school, and they stayed together throughout the night.

When she woke up on the beach the next morning, and he was still beside her, in all his beauty, she could not believe how happy she was. He was beautiful. He was smart. And he was hers.

She stood and stretched, enjoying the luxurious morning, the sun a mere red shimmer over the blue conjoining of sky and sea. A trick of the light played over the water, dancing to and fro, and only gradually did Xandria realize that the light was coalescing, forming into a *shape*. The *shape* began to move from the middle of the water toward the beach.

Even immediately after everything happened, she couldn't recall more than a *shape*. The *shape* was accompanied by a soft susurrations, a murmuring nothingness that failed to catch the ears the same way the *shape* failed to catch her eyes. She knew that something was horribly wrong. She moved to wake up Ninis, shaking him roughly, but he did not stir.

He will not wake. The voice was directly in her mind, and it hurt. *I do not want him disturbed further.* The shape hovered over the sand a few feet away from them. This was a god in front of her, one of the pantheon that ruled Theros from the land of Nyx, the night sky. Which one, she could not say, and at this proximity it did not matter. She thumped onto the sand on her knees, head bowed in pain.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

You loved something that was mine.

"We didn't know." Blind panic drove her words. Each time the voice spoke, the pain increased, and when the voice left her head the low susurrations grew louder.

Worse, you attracted something that was mine.

"We didn't know. I didn't know! He didn't tell me! Please. Please."

Know? Why does your knowledge matter? Or his? I marked him as mine when he was a baby in his mother's arms. A perfect combination of body and mind not seen on this land for countless generations before or after. Mine. And you dared to love him. You dared to have him love you.

She was on her knees, huddled close, weeping, begging, and even though her head was down and her eyes closed, she could see the *shape* reach out, reach out and touch her.

You will learn the consequences of attraction.

She screamed.



Xandria woke the next morning on her rocky island, the scream from her dreams still echoing in her mind. She rarely dreamed about that day anymore, the day her old life ended. She stretched her wings and flew to find her breakfast.

Despite the realities of her existence, she still felt joy every time she flew. As a girl, she dreamt of running over hills and plains and suddenly being able to take off from the ground and fly.

Flying was exactly like those dreams. In those first few days after her transformation, she delighted in her newfound powers—flight, her beautiful voice, the power to captivate most living creatures around her. She loved her wings, their black, soft, feathers; her wings that unfurled to catch the wind, or that she could hug close to her body to keep her warm.

The first morning after the jealous god had wreaked its vengeance, she woke up on this same island and immediately flew off, somewhere, anywhere. Her plan was to find civilization, and from there find her way back to Meletis. There would be someone, a teacher, a mage, a priest, someone who could help her navigate her way back to being human, back to Ninis.

In the middle of the ocean, out of sight of the islands, she discovered the truth of the one of the last two sentences the god spoke to her before it left. *You shall not leave.* Over time, she found she was trapped, an invisible leash linked her to her island. She could roam far, a number of leagues, but it was only ocean and other islands dominated by her ilk circumscribed by her divine fence.

It took longer for her to discover the truth of the last sentence the god spoke to her. *You shall not die.*

She was brought back to the present by the silvery flash of movement below her. Most mammals and birds were smart enough to avoid her and her kind. Treats like the vole the night before were an exception. But there were always fish. Fish never seemed to learn. Two of them jumped out of the water and she stunned them briefly with a burst of song, then grabbed their flailing bodies and gobbled them

down. She had never liked the taste of fish before her change, and many thousands of fish meals later the taste was not better. But she had to eat. She turned back toward the island.

Another path had been possible, back in those first few days. Back when she first discovered she was not alone on these islands. She had certainly heard of sirens before, when she was human, but had never seen one. And while she could see her reflection in the waters of the ocean, she had not believed it real. It was not her. She would be cured, be healed, be reunited with Ninis.

The sirens had been waiting for her when she returned from that first journey. She could not deny their beauty. Slender and long-legged, and those beautiful black wings gently flapping in the ocean breeze. They opened their mouths, and Xandria reflexively turned away, the horror stories of a siren's song a part of her childhood, the same as every citizen of Meletis. But instead of song, she heard raucous cries and trills, which Xandria was surprised to realize she understood as neatly as if they spoke human tongue.

They beckoned her to follow them, and she did. She still thought of this situation as temporary, as the early part of an adventure, like one of the stories she had so loved as a child, the happy ending awaiting her with a confident destiny. But it was better to make peace with these creatures, and besides, she had thought to herself, maybe one of these sirens would one day be the key to her rescue. If stories were any guide to life, surely one of them would be.

They brought her to a horror.

Two men lay on the beach, shipwrecked sailors from a small sailboat that had washed ashore. One of them had had most of his guts torn out, blood and fleshy tubes spread out in a wide aura beneath him, melting into the sands. But he still breathed, at least for a little longer. The other man seemed mostly unharmed, although in a stupor, as he refused to look at anything but the sand in front of his face. Her mind raced at how to help these men. She knew little of medicine but she had to do something.



The sirens around her started singing. Both men stirred, the fatally wounded man even picking up what guts he could and gathered them close to his body as he struggled to stand. Failing to do that, he

crawled in labored starts toward the voices. It was the first time Xandria had heard a siren's song. It was certainly a pretty melody, but it sounded no different to her than that of a well-trained singer at a festival. But for these men, the sirens' song had all the impact promised by legend.

At first, Xandria thought the voices had some sort of healing property. The injured man was moving with an animation she would have thought impossible, but then suddenly the last of the man's innards gave way and he fell down dead. The other sirens immediately set upon the corpse, tearing and grinding, *feasting*.

The disgust she felt was only overcome by her horror at seeing his healthy shipmate walk right up to one of the sirens, rapture on his face. She had no time to scream a warning as the siren walked up to the man and snapped off most of his neck with one bite. The man crumpled to the ground and Xandria could still see his serene smile bizarrely matched with his dead eyes. All she could see was Ninis's eyes, and pictured them cold, dead, glassy.

She screeched, all human sounds failing her as she flew at the murderer. The siren squawked in surprise and flew away from her, eating. The other sirens turned and flew toward her. They grabbed her arms and her legs, even her wings, and they brought her down to the ground. She struggled and cursed, and demanded they stop this travesty. They laughed at her, and each one pecked at her cheek, tearing out a small bit of flesh and muscle, and they continued to laugh as they chewed and then spit out a small piece of her. The pain was immense, and she would have described it as the worst pain of her life except even it paled in comparison to when the god had touched her.

After each siren had its bloody mouthful, they rose up and left her there, in between the two ravaged corpses, now little more than skeletons. She thought she would die, and she realized with sadness that she welcomed the release. But no death occurred. Later, she got up and looked into the water and was both fascinated and horrified by her smooth cheek, with no sign of the previous injury.

But from that moment, the sirens refused to speak with her, refused to even look at her. She had attempted to stop their predations on humans several times, and had even come to look forward to their violence against her, as some kind of tangible proof that she mattered. Until the time when they changed their tactics and instead drove all her food away. That had broken her.

You shall not leave. You shall not die.

She had not left. She had not died. She could curse the gods for many things, but not for lying.

When she returned to her island from the morning's hunt, still hungry despite the fish, she came across a human body lying on her beach. His clothes were tattered rags, worn away by the sea and rocks. He was probably one of the oarsmen from the ship the other sirens attacked the night before, one of those who had fallen off the deck in search of that alluring song.



The body moved.

In all the years Xandria had been living on the island, she had not seen another human while by herself. Always the others were around, cultivating and protecting their food from her interference. She was startled about the feeling in her chest. She could not identify it, could not catalogue it, she could only know she had not felt it in a very long time.

She approached the body, the *person*, and knelt down beside him. She turned him over, gingerly, with softness and care. His mouth burbled up some sea water, and he woke, gasping and crying.

Hope. She felt hope. A human. She was touching a human. She was touching *someone*. He was breathing, but still not looking at anything, just gasping and crying. She continued to stroke his arm softly, marveling at the feel. He finally opened his eyes fully, and looked at her. He screamed.

“No!” she shouted, but it came out as a screech. It had been so long. She slowed down, forcing herself to remember what it was like. Human speech was still possible.

“No!” this time it came out as she intended. Human. Her voice sounded horrible to her ears. Foreign and monstrous, but still human. “I can help you. I won’t hurt you. I’m not like... them.”

The man clearly wanted to be away, but also had little strength to move. His eyes were wide, his pupils tiny flecks, as he struggled to breathe and inch himself away from her.

“Who... who are you? Where am I?” His accent sounded strange to her, not from Meletis. Perhaps a sailor from Akros, working on a Meletis vessel.

“You are all right, you are all right. I am a friend.” She tried to make her voice sing-song without actually singing. She was talking with another human. She could do this.

“My ship, my friends, where...” he looked around frantically, as if he could find his friends if only he moved quickly enough.

“They’re dead. Everyone is dead. Your ship was attacked by...”

"You!" The man snarled but he could not move. He just sat there, breathing heavily, the panic in his eyes replaced by rage.

"No! Not me. Them. I am not them. Please, I am not them. You must help me. Please." She could not stop the tears. It had been a long time since she had cried. Those first few days, hundreds of years ago, the tears had been constant. But the tears had stopped when she realized there was no one there to see them.

The man looked confused, but some of the rage left his face, so she continued. "Your name, what is your name? I am Xandria. Xandria from Meletis."

"Tolios. Tolios from Meletis." Xandria was confused. He sounded like no Meletian she knew. Had it truly been so long?

"Why was your ship so far from its course, so close to... this place?"

Tolios turned his head and spat. "Chakros. That damned mage insisted we reach shore by dawn. There have been strange reports of new creatures at the border. We were sent to investigate. It was Chakros's first command, and he was determined to be there first, before the other ships. When the storm came, the captain prepared a path far to the north, but Chakros demanded we cut south through the storm instead. I thought the captain would throw him overboard then, but instead we traveled through these infested straits. Did the mage make it?"

"No, dead like the rest."

"Good, good. There's that at least. And how does a monster like you hail from Meletis?"

She was so thrilled to be asked a question, to be looking at another human face and conversing, that she was not dismayed by his blunt description. It was fine to be a monster as long as there was conversation and touch. He even smiled. It was a beautiful smile. He lifted one hand up to scratch his ear, but kept the other arm carefully still. Perhaps it was broken. She hoped she could fix it.

"It's a very long story. I would love to tell you about it. But are you hungry? Are you well? I can help, if you need it." She gazed at his face, his body, looking for other signs of injury or sickness. She knew she would have to get him hidden, safely stowed away before the others came. This time she would fight. She would fight them all if she had to.

Tolios continued to smile. "There's something torn up in my back. Can you take a look?" Xandria felt a surge of panic. She hadn't seen any blood or obvious injury when she first came across the body, and now he might die from her oversight. She moved to examine him. The man moved with a speed she had not thought possible, the dagger in that previously still hand coming out of nowhere aimed straight at her face. Song burst from her lips.

Tolios continued to sit, awkwardly twisted, as the dagger fell onto the sands below. The smile on his face had been replaced by a look more familiar to her. A different smile. A smile she trusted.

"Why? Why? I wanted to help you!" She slapped Tolios in the head, and he flopped to the ground. Her talons left deep gouges in his cheek. When she stopped singing, the fear and panic returned to his face, and she resumed her song to pacify him.

She sang through her tears, through her heartbreak, and Tolios looked at her adoringly, crawling closer to her.

How flimsy they are. The thought came to her unbidden. But she couldn't deny its truth. Humans were so *weak*. Death, sorcery, gods, monsters... humans were beholden to these forces they could not comprehend nor control. And all their cares came to an end for a song.

Her song.



Shipwreck Singer | Art by Daarken

Xandria heard the flapping of wings behind her, and she turned her head. All the others were there, flying behind her. But instead of their usual screeches of hatred and rejection, they simply hovered, looking at her. Looking directly at her. One of them approached her and smiled.

She smiled at Xandria. An other... a siren... was smiling at her. Xandria turned back to Tolios while still singing, watching his vacant eyes and delightful smile. The other sirens drew closer, and Xandria could feel their heat, feel their hunger. They crowded around her, but gently, softly. They reached out their hands and stroked her feathers and her back, cooing and trilling, but not singing. The singing was all hers.

The sun was now directly overhead, but its warmth paled to what Xandria was feeling. She stepped closer to Tolios, her song lifting in the air, becoming louder, more insistent. Drool dropped from the corner of Tolios's mouth, and his eyes expected ecstasy to come. Xandria stepped closer, closer.

She opened her mouth wide and bit into his neck with a ferocious bite. His blood and flesh gushed into her mouth, the taste immediately satisfying in a way that no vole or fish had ever been.

Now the sirens behind her started singing. Their voices carried far along the ocean air, singing a song she had never heard before, but felt she had known all her life. The sirens made no attempt to share in the meal. The food was all hers as the songs of the sirens, the songs of her sisters, filled the heavens.

He was delicious.