

Zachary Tan

A Retelling of Cadmus and Harmonia

As Cadmus read the missive, his hands began to shake. His eyes glazed over, and a ghostly silence fell over the room.

“You may take your leave now,” he said to the kneeling attendant before him.

The attendant stood up and bowed. “As you wish,” he replied as he quietly slipped out the door.

“What troubles you, my dear Cadmus?” Harmonia asked, peering over Cadmus’ shoulder.

“Poor Ino has died,” he said in a somber tone. “It was all my fault. The gods must be upset after I slayed that great serpent. This is my punishment.”

Harmonia placed a gentle hand on his neck, slowly stroking to comfort him. She knew words could not console one who had lost a child, so she remained silent.

“I must leave this place,” he said, looking up. “If the gods must curse me, I shall not drag my city with me. I shall bear their wrath on my own.”

“I shall follow you, wherever you will go,” Harmonia said instantly. “I will not let you separate yourself from the world to die on your lonesome, for if the gods are against you, they are also against me.”

“My dear Harmonia,” Cadmus said. “You are untouched by mortal sin. You should not have to suffer for mine.”

“Would you sooner see me torn apart by my grief in your absence?”

Cadmus paused, then relented seeing the determination in his wife’s eyes.

“Do as you wish.”

Cadmus and Harmonia called a select few attendants to travel with them. Their destination was where Cadmus had slayed the monstrous serpent. Cadmus, Harmonia, and their attendants all departed the same day the missive had arrived. Cadmus did not wish any harm to befall his city. They set off as soon as they could with minimal belongings. They disappeared silently from the city of Thebes with no intention of returning.

Their brief journey was full of silence. The attendants had no reason to speak if their king refused to speak. Cadmus remained silent out of guilt and grief, and Harmonia, out of respect for Cadmus' sorrow.

They reached the place where Cadmus had slayed the serpent before the sun had set. Cadmus then separated from the group with Harmonia following close behind. After stepping a few paces away, Cadmus turned his head to the sky.

"Gods!" He exclaimed. "I angered you when I claimed the life of that sacred serpent, so I beg you to avenge it by becoming a serpent myself!"

"Cadmus?!" Harmonia had not yet heard her husband's plan to appease the gods. She clutched one of his arms and turned to face him. "Cadmus!"

Cadmus turned to face his beloved wife and opened his mouth, but when he was about to speak an aggressive hiss sounded in the place of words. Shock flickered across his face as a forked serpentine tongue broke through his lips to taste the scents in the air for the first time. Then, a sad smile that didn't reach his eyes. He gestured for Harmonia to come closer with his hands since arms were folding in on themselves. His eyelids rolled back and his pupils grew, but he and Harmonia did not break eye contact. Emotion drained from his eyes.

Harmonia reached up and stroked his neck, but couldn't find where his neck ended and his shoulders began. Peach fuzz was replaced with glistening black scales with blue spots. He hissed again as his legs began to fuse together starting from his groin.

"Gods!" Harmonia shouted. "If you wish to punish him for his deeds, you must also punish me! We made a sacred oath to stay together and love each other, and I refuse to let us part ways as thus! We agreed to share everything, so make me a serpent as well, for we too share our sins!"

No sooner had Harmonia cried these words that Cadmus wrapped his tail around her legs. He stared at her, not as a serpent does to its prey, but as a wife does to a husband. She looked up at his crested head and smiled.

How beautiful.

The attendants, long forgotten by their former masters scrambled in terror as they beheld their masters' changing forms. Harmonia's legs, intertwined with the serpent's tail grew black and scaly. Her feet fused together and elongated as the gap between her legs closed. Her arms embracing, but not fully circling the serpent's body shrunk into her torso. As her body lengthened, she instead used it to wrap around the black serpent's body. Once. Twice.

"Gods," she whispered. "I wish to stay by his side forever. If he will have me. Let us not be separated. Let those who wish to face the consequences. Let us remain together."

Her voice grew quieter as her words devolved into hisses.

The bodies of the two serpents soon became indistinguishable from one another. Their tangled forms did not spare the shivering attendants any glances. One serpent pulled its head from the pile of two limbs and was soon brought to the ground by the other. The two writhing serpents did not separate as they slid away together.