

Remedia Amoris

By: Judith Tarr

* * * *

Readers know Judith Tarr as the author of meticulously researched and gorgeously crafted historical fantasies like *Alamut* and *The Dagger and the Cross*. More recently, she has moved into Macedon and Egypt with *Lord of the Two Lands* and *Throne of Isis*, about Alexander the Great and his equally charismatic descendant, Cleopatra.

* * * *

Like Katharine Kerr, Judith is a writer who is usually so busy with novels that we don't get enough of her short fiction.

Fortunately, in her nonexistent spare time, she has remedied this situation to some degree; and readers are finding in short stories by Judith Tarr a wry, ribald, and even gonzo streak—nowhere more than here. I think that Ovid, her inspiration, would understand... if he wasn't laughing too hard.

I stumbled onto it. Staggered. Cock first and no mistake, skin full of the old Falernian, and Whatsername shrieking and whacking me with her thyrsus just hard enough to keep me good and hard, which was all in the game, and the old bitch-goddess should have known it.

Dear Mother Three-Face Hecate wouldn't know a good game if it tugged her from behind.

So there we were, tumbling on the grass, mooncup swelled and brimming over, me-cup getting near it, and Lalage, or was it Phyllis, paying top-of-the-lungs tribute to her Bacchante's vows. She was just about through the Third Twist-and-Shriek, and she'd winked at me once when the moon caught her eye. And the silence crashed down on us.

They ran up to thirteen in full coven. Tonight they were down to three, but three were enough when they were Threefold Hecate. Maiden was ripe-fig sweet and dripping honey, and when I was done with Phyllis I'd make a run for her. Mother was a little off the peak and bellyful of baby. Crone was Crone incarnate.

Maiden was horrified. Mother was indignant. Crone was in midcurse and not pleased to be interrupted. Maiden swept in and rescued Phyllis, or maybe Lalage, and fine thanks she got: Lalage, or maybe Phyllis, crowned her neatly with the thyrsus, told her what she could do with her maidenhead, and cut for the deep cover. Mother made a leap for the altar and raised a pitchy smoke. Crone stood over me—no will in me to move, even if I'd been able, and every bit of me as limp as the old hag's dugs. She reached out her staff and tested it. I couldn't even flinch.

Maiden came up behind her. “Faun,” she said in the sweet severe way they have before they know a man. “Faun, you were mad to have come here.”

My tongue was my own; just about all of me that was. “Fauns are mad by nature,” I said. I tried to grin. Insouciance, old Silenus always told us, drives the ladies wild.

I don’t think he meant this kind of wild.

Mother was chanting through her smokes and lighting them with bits of fire. The purple was particularly fine. It made me think of once-dyed Tyrian.

I told her so. She paid no attention to me. Crone prodded me again with her staff. No more life there than before. Maiden said, “You are a very shallow creature. Drunk as a sponge, raping anything that moves—have you no more use in life but that?”

“I eat,” I said helpfully. “Lots. I play the pipes. I herd sheep for old Mopsus, up by Volaterrae, and I leave the ewes alone. Nymphs are better. And Bacchantes.” I showed her my best smile. “And witches?”

She shuddered. “He is dreadful,” she said.

Crone nodded with too much satisfaction. “And he profaned our rite.” She stopped prodding my jewels, for which I was properly grateful, but her expression was nothing to comfort a poor lonely Faun. She turned round toward the altar. In a moment, so did Maiden.

They had their backs to me. I thought of crawling away. The best I managed was a flop onto my face and a scrabble in the grass. My tail hurt. My head hurt worse.

The three weird women raised their voices. Most of it was nonsense, and some was no language I ever knew, but enough was decent speech that I knew I’d not been forgotten. They were cursing me, as Mopsus would say, right proper. Starting with the tip of my left horn and working down to the point of my right hoof, with stops between. Somehow I was standing upright, and that meant all of me. Pipes in hand, too. Just about ready to play.

The marching-drums in my head had stopped. So had the throb in my tail. I felt... cool. And smooth. And chiseled clean. Marmoreal, for a fact.

“So mote it be,” said Crone. She stood in front of me. She was smiling. I would have closed my eyes if I could. That was nothing I’d be doing, for a while.

“Be so,” Crone said. “Be bound forever as the stonebrain that you are.”

“It’s only just,” said Mother, “for a ravisher of maidens.”

Maidens! I would have howled, if they’d left me with a voice. Those were

good lusty Bacchantes, and fine chases they led, too, and all the Rites in order, and if a lad was new to it, then they'd help him along.

But Mother never heard me. "Stand for all of time as you stand now, with your phallus for a luck piece."

"Perhaps we should have made him a fountain," mused Crone. "He might have been more entertaining."

"Oh," said Maiden, and her voice could melt my heart, even turned to stone. "Oh, the poor thing. Were we too severe, do you think? Shouldn't we just let him stay for a while, and then let him go? He only did what Fauns are born to do."

"And who was first to curse him for it?" Mother inquired.

Maiden blushed and hung her head. "I let my temper get the better of it. I confess it. You helped me," she said. "Don't say you didn't."

"Very well," said Crone, and she was impatient, but even she was hardly proof against Maiden. "A witch who weakens her curse with codicils is a fool, but we are all born fools. You, Faun! For this Maiden's sake—and do remember it, if you are capable of such refinement—I offer you one escape. Marble you are, and marble you shall be, and your fate shall be to watch unsleeping, until two mortals shall come before you, and show themselves true lovers."

"None of this reckless ravishment," Mother said, "or she-wolf with her flesh for hire. True love, and true lovers, and goodwill toward you who watch."

"This is excessive!" Maiden protested. "Love comes, and comes true, but goodwill for a marble Faun?"

"There's no changing it now," said Crone. "It's spoken and it's done. When true love comes, he shall be free."

Maiden sighed, but she had no more objections. I had a worldful, and a tongue as hopeless-heavy as only stone can be.

"Iron's worse," said Crone. She rubbed my best man—for luck, what else? And I felt it, no doubt about that, and not a whit of good it did me.

The moon was down. Dawn was coming. They went about their business, all three. Only Maiden looked back. She sighed. So would I have done, if I could. All those might-have-beens.

II

It was against nature. A Faun was never loot; a Faun did the looting. But a Faun was never marble, either, and here was I, and there were they, big flapping man-shaped vultures with a lust for statuary. Never a whisper of True Love, not that I'd seen any in my grove—Fauns stopped going there, once it got about that I'd

chased my last sweet Bacchante, and witches didn't bring their lovers, except to give them to the goddess. I was a rack for their cloaks and a prop for their spells, and they rubbed me for luck when they left.

Then the men in armor came, and it was true, what Crone said. Marble was a cold still way to spend one's years, but iron was worse. They loaded me in a wagon and carried me away. Rubbing me, of course, for luck, and making comparisons. The sculpture was a jester, they said. Nobody was hung like that.

I could have shown them something, if they'd happened into the deep cover when there was a bacchanal.

The wagon creaked and rattled and came skinned-teeth close to chipping a piece off my left horn, but in the end it brought me whole into the City.

That was what they called it. The City. Roma Dea, Roma Mater—Old Rome she wasn't yet, and to listen to them you'd swear she'd never be. They set me up in the middle of her, in a garden as wide as half Campania, and I had my own glade in it, my own oak tree for shade, my own fountain to stand over. So Crone had her wish after all. I didn't piddle forever into a pool, but I stood in the middle of one. If the air was still, I could glimpse my reflection.

It stopped people rubbing me, which I was glad of. The few who tried, had to wade through the pool to do it, and they were too drunk to go halfway before they slipped and fell in.

A philosopher had a school for a while in my tree's shade. Most of what he said was arrant nonsense, but it made good chewing over. Two separate sets of assassins plotted under my nose. I never did learn whether they got their man. There were always poets yelling at the Muse, and mothers yelling at their children, and children yelling for the joy of it.

And lovers. Lovers in scores. Every one swore undying love, and every one left me as mutely marble as before. One hanged herself from a branch of my tree. That was a pity. She'd been a tender young thing till her father found out she'd been tumbling with his secretary. Since the secretary was supposed to be a eunuch, it was a scandal to put it mildly. He was a eunuch sure when they killed him. She told me all about it before she knotted up her mantle and threw it over the convenient branch; and not a word I could say to stop her. They buried her with the proper rites, but her ghost hung about still, not saying anything, just sitting by my pool and keeping me company.

While I was the witches' marble Faun, I'd soaked up enough sorcery to make me glow like the moon, and enough over that to damp me down again. Not that I could do much with it with no tongue to say the spells and no hands to make the gestures, but the sight it gave never left me. I could see the cords that bound the world. They ruled the moon in its course. They stirred the wind, and made my tree grow, and wove as rich as Arachne's web round the mortals who passed me by.

Even I was part of it. On me it was like chains and light—chains for the curse, light for the magic I was steeped in. Nobody but witches, and I, could see it.

There were colors in it, every color that was and some that I'd never conceived of. When they were clearest, my world was calmest. When they went dark, I braced myself for the storm. They were blood-black when Cornelia hanged herself on my tree, knotted and tangled like a witch's hair.

Once she was a ghost, she saw the web as well as I. Sometimes she played with it. She could smooth a knot if it was not too tangled, and stroke a gray thread silver. She stopped a lovers' quarrel so, and they went away arm in arm, though they didn't set me free.

We settled in together, the ghost and I, and maybe she was happy—though if she had been, surely she'd have gone where the joyful dead go.

When the moon was full, the world's web was bright enough to run a revel by. A few had done it in my glade, but they'd grown tired, or the world was in one of its gray times. Those came, and mercifully went. The bloodred times were worse, and the black ones were worst of all; but gray had its own drab charmlessness. Everyone was stiffly proper then, the philosophers were all Stoics and the women were all chaste, and when they noticed me at all, they disapproved. "Greek luxury," they muttered. "Eastern corruption." And I a good Italian Faun, straight out of Etruria.

This gray time was turning bloody. There was a new cult, and the more of its believers they disposed of, the more there seemed to be. They multiplied like a Hydra's head, said the scholar who droned to his yawning students under my tree. They were unshakably stubborn. They would not sacrifice peaceably to any gods but theirs, and who was he to keep them all to himself? The Senator who liked to walk through my garden in his mob of friends and hangers-on, could not see why they should be so obstinate. It was a matter of form, no more. Sacrifice to Rome's gods, give the nod to Rome's power, go about their business. There was nothing in it about *believing* in the gods. A man's mind was his own. After all.

He'd never seen Triune Hecate in a snit, or spied on chaste Diana while she rested from a hunt—and if that was chastity, then mortals were worse fools than I'd taken them for. She might guard her maidenhead with chains of adamant, but she liked her slim young lads, and her lissome lasses, too.

Not that he ever asked me. He went his way, and I watched the sun go down, and the moon came up, heavy and full. The world's web was as dark as wine, and pulsed like a heart. Cornelia shivered under the oak. Even the moon's light couldn't lure her as far as the pool.

They came by ones and twos as the witches used to do, ragged like the witches, too, and by the nick of an ear or the gleam of a collar, more than one of them was a slave. Some started when they saw me, and made signs against evil. The

same man always comforted them. He was as ragged as the worst, the top of his head shaved in the slave's tonsure, and one ear missing. He sat beside my pool where Cornelia liked to sit. He was obviously a city slave, and he had a gladiator's scars, but he carried a shepherd's crook. It made me think of Mopsus. Long dead, gods rest him, and he never had forgiven me for getting myself cursed the night before I was supposed to move his sheep to the winter pasture.

This was a strange shepherd. He said that mortals were his sheep. He was deadly earnest about it. When my glade was full and there were rustlings in the hedge that marked a posting of guards, he stood up.

Most of what he said was nonsense, and none of it was good philosophy. It dawned on me early that this was the cult the Senator spoke of, and meeting in his favorite garden, too. When the man with the crook had talked for a while, and told them all about the devil—by that he meant me—whom their god had vanquished, and done the maddest thing I'd seen yet, wrapped me in somebody's sweat-stinking cloak, they set up an altar. I waited to see who would die on it, but no one did. They took bread and called it flesh, and took wine and called it blood, and by grim black Styx they believed it.

Somewhere in their rite, Cornelia crept out from her shadow. She looked as starkly terrified as she had before she died, but there was hope in her face, too, and a desperate longing. I wanted to shout at her. I couldn't speak, no more than I could when she died. They ate their magicked bread and drank their magicked wine, and the web was throbbing and knotting, and its colors were mad. I don't think they even knew what powers they raised. My witches would have been appalled. Pure lack of discipline, and magic that snagged the world-web till it frayed.

Cornelia drifted like a leaf in a sharp wind, and no more power to stop herself, either. Just before she touched the altar, she hesitated; or the web held her, tangling around her. She reached through it. The priest was just raising the cup to his lips to drain the last of the wine—raw stuff, nothing like my good Faleraian. Her shadow of a hand curved around the cup. He felt it, felt something; and started. A drop of the awful wine spilled on her wrist.

She went up like a torch. White light so bright even my eyes were dazzled. Her face—it showed no fear at all, no pain. Later I named it, to give my grief a center. Exultation.

The mortals never saw. She was gone, gone right out of the world, and they were oblivious. Their rite went on. The web was quieter now, as if Cornelia had taken some of its power with her. Its knots and tangles were smoother, and more of its gray was silver.

They took their altar and their magics, and relieved me of the ridiculous cloak, and went away. I had my glade to myself again. All to myself. No gentle ghost to sit by my pool and smile. No quiet undemanding company with eyes to see what I was.

The slave-fanatics never came back, either, not as they were that night. Their cult grew into Rome's cult, and all the old gods died. I felt them go as Cornelia had: like dry grass in a fire.

I was marble, and I was cursed. Even the name of their Christ had no power over that.

III

Roma Dea died, and Roma Mater shrank into a crone. My oak tree took Jupiter's last bolt and fell. My pool filled with weeds and disappeared. A thicket grew up around me. People stumbled on me now and then. A flock of sparrows had a kingdom in what had been my glade. The queen nested on my head. I'd have minded it more if I'd had any dignity left. As it was, I was only glad that the vine that twisted round my cock a-crowning was a thornless thing.

Lovers always managed to find me. It was part of my curse. They were particularly lusty along about the time their Latin stopped being Latin, but the curse said nothing about lust. The ones who came after them wore clothes that beggared belief, and stank to high heaven.

By the time they began to be clean again, some of them cleared away the thicket and evicted the queen sparrow from my head. I'd grown mossy with the years, but all my bits were still in place. They cleaned away the moss—not too gently, either—and put a roof over me, and had what they called salons. Which meant that they drank a great deal of bad wine, ate too much, and talked endlessly of nothing in particular. The women looked at me and giggled. The men eyed me sidelong, often with a glower. No rubbing me for luck in this age.

They still rutted as eagerly as human animals could, though they made a rite of protesting and calling it a sin. Sin was what the priest of that old cult had gone on about so endlessly. It had made no sense to me then. It made no sense now, however lengthy the explanations. The ones in black with the tiny circle of tonsure were the loudest in condemnation of lust, and the hottest in pursuit of it. I wondered what they would have said if I'd told them the truth about Diana. They disapproved of her divinity, but they made much of her chastity. She was more like them than they would ever want to know.

There were no true lovers. Or else the Crone had lied, and there was no escape from my curse. That would be like a witch. Small comfort that they were all dead, the lot of them, and Hecate too.

I was thinking so, one gray dim morning. For some reason I shivered inside.

The salons were long gone. The roof over me was still there, but it was crumbling. The sparrows had come back to nest in it. A cat or two made forays into their kingdom, but I'd learned a little through the years. I could think at the web that still bound the world, and shift it a little. Enough to keep out the cats, and to hold up

the roof long after it should have fallen in.

This was the strangest age that I could remember. It seemed gray, gray as ash, with great clots of blood and corruption. But there was brightness in it, too. I'd never seen the web so complicated, or the colors so varied. Either mortals were swimming in blood or they were reveling in a golden age. The web said it was both. The gray in it was often silver, sometimes tarnished black, sometimes so bright it blinded. It was terrifying. Exhilarating. Men flew like birds. Men lived undersea like fish. Men sailed to the moon. They were like gods.

They were still men. They still came to my garden, and they still danced the old, old dance. They brought their music with them, trapped by magic in a box. It was a different magic than mine, cold metal magic, and they saw no wonder in it.

Often of a morning a lady came to sit on the stone bench near me and read her book, or write, or simply sit and think. Once in a while she talked to me, because, she said, I looked like intelligent company. She was writing a book on Old Rome. It was a stubborn thing, and it kept going off in unexpected directions. She liked an adventure, she said, and mostly she was glad to go where it took her, but at this rate she didn't think she'd ever finish it.

Every morning as she worked on her book, a gentleman walked briskly by. If she happened to notice him, she'd nod. He'd nod back. And off he'd go, and there she'd stay.

This was hardly a lonely place, though it was never crowded. My scholar had it to herself, mostly, but people wandered past, peering curiously at me and not seeming to see her at all.

On the morning that I marked by reflecting that the gods were dead, my scholar came as always. She had her satchel of books, and something new, that she showed me. More magic. A little box full of words, with a page that one wrote on without ever touching it. The world-web shimmered around it, but it always did where my scholar was. Her name was Cornelia. I thought it an interesting coincidence.

As she settled down with her books and her box, a dreadful cacophony startled her almost into dropping the box. A pair of this age's young lovers came entwined like a vine about an elm. Her hair was indescribable. His screamed pink so loud it made my eyes burn. Their music came out of a great gleaming thing full of bone-deep thumpings and mating-cat wails.

Cornelia's box of words was silent but for the click of the keys that made the words grow. She struggled on, with her neck bent at a stubborn angle and her fingers flying. The young lovers arranged themselves in front of my plinth, did something to their box that made it sound like mountains falling, and went at it as people did in this strange age. A great deal of kissing and groping, a symphony of moans drowned out in the tumult, and nothing like getting down to honest business.

That was the Christians' innovation: tease oneself to insanity, and promise more for later. Later, when it came, was never what they hoped for.

Cornelia was angry. I could see the web darkening around her. Just before she could have moved, a brisk figure stepped in over the lovers, snapped something on the box, and stepped coolly out again. The silence was thunderous. The lovers unknotted. He had his hackles up. She had her shirt off. Sweet and almost ripe; but I'd seen better.

Her young man was all righteous indignation. The brisk gentleman looked down a noble nose at him and said, "You were disturbing the lady."

The boy swelled his pretty muscles and beetled his handsome brows.

"There is ample space in this garden for anyone who wishes to come there," the gentleman said. "I would advise you to find some of it, and not to trouble this lady further."

The lady said nothing through all of this. Neither did the girl on the grass. The boy blustered and sneered. It was a game, like the game of Faun and Bacchante.

He didn't seem to know it, but the gentleman did. When the boy gave up on words and transparently thought of fists, the gentleman said, "It does amaze me that you would bring your inamorata here. She can look at the Faun, after all, and compare."

The boy's fist went wild. The gentleman's cane caught his elbow as it flailed past. It seemed a light blow, a tap, no more, but the boy howled and collapsed.

They limped from the field, the boy clutching his arm and the girl her blouse, dragging their box. I applauded in my head.

"How heroic," Cornelia said. Her tone was acid.

The gentleman tucked his cane under his arm and bowed slightly. I'd seen his face a thousand times in a thousand years, an inescapably Roman face, big nose and thin mouth and uncompromising jaw. My Senator had looked like him, back when Christians were a thorn in the Empire's side.

"I really didn't need a rescue," said Cornelia. "Or a knight in shining armor."

Cornelia, it should be said, was not a Roman. She came from somewhere that Rome had never heard of, on the other side of the world. She believed in independence. She didn't believe in thanking a man for doing what she could perfectly well have done for herself.

"Signora," said the gentleman, "whatever you needed, or thought you needed, I was offended by those barbarians."

"They weren't so bad," Cornelia said. "You did a terrible thing to that poor

boy. She'll never let him forget that he's not as fine and upstanding as a Faun."

The gentleman looked shocked. Then he laughed. "Ah, but what man is? A man of parts would accept it. A young Goth with all his wits below his belt—he would never stop to think."

"I think he was solid Roman," Cornelia said. "And you, sir?"

"Giuliano," he said, bowing. "Giuliano Cavalli."

"Signor Cavalli," said Cornelia. She'd softened a bit. She liked him, I thought. So did I. He talked like a book, as she would have said, but he was old enough to do it gracefully. He was a scholar, too, as it happened. Not of Old Rome but—he looked mildly embarrassed and slightly wicked—but of the new philosophy, the doctrine of signs and shadows.

"You're a literary theorist?" Cornelia had cooled again, but not as much as before.

"Theoretician," he said, "please. And one does make a game of it. *Ecce Eco, vale Vergil...*"

"And *sayonara Petrarca!* Cornelia shook her head. He was smiling and nodding, looking as close to an amiable fool as a Roman could. She laughed, very much as if she didn't want to, and said, "I don't believe in theory. It gets in the way."

"But, Signora, if you use it properly, it sweeps away all obstacles, and there stands Meaning bare."

"Do I want to see Meaning naked? She's not a pretty sight at the best of times."

He sat down beside her. He was going to make a convert, I could see, or burst his heart trying. She was going to resist him to the utmost.

It was the strangest love dance I'd ever seen.

I listened, I could hardly help it. None of it made a great deal of sense. A Faun took the world as it was, and if he happened to be marble, and me, as it showed itself in the world-web.

They argued all morning and half the afternoon, and went away still arguing. Cornelia was looking ruffled. Signor Cavalli had lost his elegant aplomb. They were gloriously happy.

They came back, of course. Often. Cornelia had her book, still, and she insisted that she have an hour at least to glare at it before he came to distract her. Actually she did more than glare. She'd got through a particularly tangled thicket, and the rest, she told me, was looking almost simple. "Scary," she said. My grin was

carved on my face, but she seemed to know I meant it.”

He scared her too, but it was a wonderful terror. She called herself a fallow field. Now she was growing green. Blooming. And arguing, endlessly, delightedly arguing about everything under the sun.

Then they stopped coming. It rained for days, and my roof dripped and dribbled abominably. But the sun came back, and they didn't.

Mortals did that. Even mortal ghosts. I should have known better than to miss them; but a marble heart is as unreasonable as a living one. I'd actually been starting to understand Signor Cavalli's philosophy, which is proof that either it becomes comprehensible with enough time and explanation, or I was missing a piece of it.

The sun came and went more regularly than anything human. The moon swelled and shrank. My days stretched. I wondered if a marble Faun could die, just will himself to crumble away. My kind were all gone. Great Pan was ages dead, and there was nothing of my old world left.

And then, one morning, she was there. Cornelia with her books and her box of words, sitting on the bench she'd claimed for her own. She looked tired, worn to the bone. There was more gray in her hair than I remembered.

After a while her fingers slowed on the keys. A while longer and they stopped. She looked at me as if she'd never seen me before. I couldn't read her expression.

She put her word-box down on the bench and stood up. She stood in front of me. Without my plinth, I'd have been just a little smaller than she was.

“He died,” she said. She was very, very calm. “I'd just begun to know him, and he died. Do you know how angry that makes me? Do you even begin to imagine how bloody *unfair* it is?”

Did I? I'd felt it when they were near me. I'd felt the marble softening, remembering—for a precious instant—the shape and feel of flesh.

“He was dying when I met him,” she said. “He knew it. He was living on time he'd stolen from the monster in his body. He—we—stole a whole three months of it. Counting every blessed minute.

“Why couldn't I have died instead of him?”

She started to cry. Quiet at first, just the tears spilling over and running down her face. Then harder. Falling forward onto my cold flanks and howling in rage and loss, pounding marble that bruised her poor fists, raking it till her nails broke and bled.

She couldn't hang herself. There was no oak to offer a branch. But hanging wasn't the only way to take a life. She'd tear herself to pieces in front of me, and

never a thing I could do to stop her.

Never.

I didn't know what it was that swelled inside of me. It felt like fire, but with edges like a sword, and it was black, and red, and gray, gray, gray. My freedom had been in front of me. One day, one more day, and I would have known it, and give it its name.

Death had taken it from me. Death and Chance, and Fate with her Crone's face, laughing at the poor ensorcelled fool. I'd be marble forever, and no hope of breaking free.

And to what? the wind seemed to ask. It was small and cold, nosing about in corners. This was no world for a goatfoot monster out of a long-discredited myth. I wasn't even authentic. I should have had a horse's tail and horse's ears, and spoken country Greek.

Great Pan is dead, the wind moaned. Mocking me. No more Bacchae, no more choruses. No more love-games in the deep coverts. They were gone, all gone, and I was marble, and mad.

The web was black, shot with lightnings. Jove was dead, too, and Pluto in his Underworld, and Hecate of the three faces, whose servants had laid the curse on me. Signor Cavalli was dead, who had had three months' true love before he died, and that was more than I would ever have.

Oh, Faun, the wind said, and now it aped the Maiden's voice, and now the Crone's. *How you have changed!*

Years out of count, and a marble heart, and no hope, no hope ever, of everything else. I'd been stone-simple. Stone-stupid, too. I'd paid, and paid, and paid. I'd never stop paying.

Cornelia had stopped pummeling me. She was still crying. Still holding tight, arms around my knees as if I'd been a king and she a suppliant. Begging me to change the world. To bring back the dead.

The witches had done that, but it was a grim thing, and the dead were never glad to be called back. The web hated it; turned black and rotted where the un-dead were.

And did I care for that? I was a cursed thing. I should have been long dead myself. Let him come back. Let Cornelia be happy. I'd give my life and substance for him—life stretched out of all natural measure, substance as cold as Hades' heart.

The web was thrumming. She didn't know. Couldn't. I didn't care. It was full of magic. I poured it all out of me. All. Every drop. While she clung to me and wept, and the wind fled shrieking, and the web caught fire.

I tore it from top to bottom. “Giuliano!” I thundered in a voice I’d never known I had. “Giuliano Cavalli!”

He came out of the shadows, moving slowly. His shape was firm still, only a little blurred around the edges. He didn’t have the terrible blood-hunger. Not yet. Though when he saw Cornelia, his nostrils flared at the blood-warm scent of her. He licked his lips. And cried out in horror.

“No! No, I am dead, let me be!”

I was merciless. “She mourns for you. Come back to this life. Take this flesh. Live.”

He looked at me. He was dead. He could measure the depth of my meaning. As opposed to Meaning, which the dead understand completely, and reckon absolute idiocy.

“No.”

That was Cornelia. Her voice was rough with tears, but there was no yielding in it. “I’m not that selfish. Let him go.”

“You are damnably independent,” said Signor Cavalli, and he sounded so much like his old self that she gasped.

But she wouldn’t weaken even for that. “Go,” she said. “Have peace. I’ll be with you soon enough, as the world goes. Then we’ll have all of time to be together.”

“If by then you want it,” he said.

She let go of me and planted her fists on her hips. “Giuliano Cavalli, if you think I’m going to forget you for one moment of this life *or* the next, then you’re a worse idiot than I ever took you for.”

“But you are young,” he said, “and beautiful still, with a heart that needs so much to love, and a body that pays all tribute to it. God forbid that you live your life a widow, and die a withered and shriveled thing.”

“What, you won’t want me then?” She was wonderfully angry. “Now that’s a pity, because you’ll have me—whether I turn into a nun or take a dozen lovers a year. You’re the one I want to spend my death with.”

“Alive still, and you know that?”

“I know it.” She clapped her hands together. “Now go. Rest. Wait for me.”

He hovered. His substance was thinning for all that I could do, shredding like a fog in a sudden wind. He held out his arms. “Wait,” he said like an echo. “Wait for me.”

She wouldn't touch him. Wouldn't reach, wouldn't soften. "Go," she said.

He went.

The web was still, gray shading to silver. Its shadows were black. Its knots were almost smooth.

I fell off my plinth.

Marble shattered. Flesh bruised. It hurt. It hurt like blessed Hades.

Cornelia stood over me. Her face blurred and shifted and broke into threes. Maiden Mother Crone, every face of woman, and who but me had said that Hecate was dead?

She helped me up. She was too stunned, I think, to notice the horns or the goatfeet, or the marble dust that sifted and fell when I moved. My cock wasn't crowing, by the dead gods' mercy. He hid in his dusty thicket and hoped we'd all forget him—such trouble as he'd got us into.

She pinked herself on a horn, brushing dust out of my hair. That brought her to herself. She stared at me.

I'd worn a grin so long, I'd forgotten how to start one. I backed away instead. I still had my pipes in my hand. I let them fall. They dangled by the string around my neck, bumping my flanks. My tail was clamped tight.

"There," she said as if I'd been one of the million Roman cats. "There."

I stopped. She came toward me slowly. Her face had a blank look, as if it didn't quite know what to do with itself. She touched me. I started. My back went flat against a wall I'd forgotten was there.

"It was you," she said. "Calling up the dead."

I couldn't duck. I'd have gored her: she was that close. Her hands were on my shoulders, holding me as fast as any curse.

"I think I'm supposed to do something," she said. Her brow wrinkled, as if she strained to catch a voice she couldn't quite hear. All at once her face cleared. She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I can do that."

She looked at me and my puzzlement, and smiled. It was dazzling. "Look," she said gently. She pulled me around. I came as meek as a ram to the altar. She held me so that I couldn't help but see.

Web. Light. Gate. Pillars and lintel, and on the other side...

"There," she said. Her voice was Cornelia's, it always had been. It was Maiden's, too, and Mother's, and Crone's. "There they all went, all your people.

Shallow silly things, the lot of them, but they had their charm. Even you. They're waiting for you."

My voice found itself. It was rusty. "Oh, they are? There aren't any more bacchanals, then? Or grapes to grow and press into wine? Or sheep to herd? Or woods to run through with the barefooted Bacchae?"

"All of those remain," said Cornelia-goddess. "They're just not in this earth any longer. Any more than Giuliano is." She caught on that, but she rallied in an eye blink. "The gate's open. Go on."

She let me go. I scampered toward the shining gate.

Just outside of it, I stopped. I don't know what it was, A sparrow twittering. A cloud across the sun. Cornelia being a goddess and being a woman with marble dust on her hands, watching me go.

I turned around and went back to her. Past her. Climbed up on the plinth I'd stood on for so long, and said, "I don't think so."

We Fauns used to boast that we could knock even a goddess off her stride. I did it then, no doubt about it. She was speechless.

"Look here," I said. "I've been a piece of statuary for longer than some of us got to be gods. I'm used to it. I'd be the odd Faun out, out there. I'm the one who got trapped. I'm the one who changed."

"We can undo that," Cornelia said. She sounded like Maiden-remorseful.

I shook my head. "Even you can't put the lid back on that box. I'm not simple anymore. The next time I tried to chase a Bacchante, I'd stop to wonder about it, and then I'd wander off course, and before I knew it, I'd be teaching philosophy to the sheep."

"They would be *your* sheep," she said.

I swept my arm around. "So is this my place, and those my sparrows." I took a deep breath. Air felt good, so good, in lungs that weren't airless marble. "Put the curse back."

She wouldn't move.

"All right then," I said. I was getting angry. I picked up my pipes. I knew the notes that would shift the web. This, and this, and this. One-two-three, up-down-swoop, slow, slow, sudden trill like a sparrow's twitter. Then slow again. And slower. And slower yet. As the cool smooth stillness spread over me. As the air died from my lungs, and my lungs set into stone. This eon I wouldn't be a grinning idiot. I'd be a dancing Faun, piping down the long years. And maybe, when the moon was full, and the web was all a shimmer and a shadow, someone would have

ears to hear; and I'd fill the night with music.

Cornelia put her arms around my marble middle. Her eyes were full of tears. And not for herself, or for Giuliano. For me.

I couldn't tell her not to cry. She stopped after a while. And kissed me just about *there*, and if I could have blushed, I would have. She did it for me, a splendid, scarlet blaze of it. "I won't forget," she said. "What you tried to do for me. Because—because you loved me."

That was Threefold Goddess, and Woman, too. Stating the obvious as if she'd just invented it. I couldn't shrug, or tell her not to be silly. So I waited till she went away, and then I played a run on my pipe. The wind was pleased to help me with it. The sparrows were back, squabbling over a crust someone had dropped. The world rode in its web, wobbling and tottering but never quite falling over. My world, when it came to it, and my choice, too. What's a Faun if he can't pick the story he wants to be in?