



Sylvia

Once upon a time, when the world was still young, nymphs roamed the earth protecting the realms of nature. This was before the coming of the fairies, and nymphs were numerous for the world was vast and their duties were many. There were nymphs to care for the oceans and the rivers and nymphs to watch over the sky. Some protected the mountains and others watched over the green parts of the earth and, in these days, there lived one such nymph named Sylvia. She was a forest warden and a handmaiden to the goddess Diana, whose rule was over the moon and the animals and the laws of the hunt.

It was Sylvia's duty to protect the creatures of the forest from wanton destruction. In those days, hunting was a way of human life, and was a necessity of man's survival. But there was balance to be maintained, as in all things, and she charged herself with preventing man from overstepping the bounds of his need.

She was straight and slender, with dark hair like her mistress. She was very much like a human in appearance except that her ears came to slight points at the tops and her face was impossibly delicate, seemingly untouched at all by time. But she had been touched profoundly by it. She had lived long and seen much cruelty in her life and, so, had grown hard. As a divine handmaiden Sylvia's work was her life and there were a great many things forbidden to her. Interaction with human beings, for example, was outside of her world entirely and she was loath to form emotional attachments of any kind, lest they interfere with her service to the goddess.

She saw little use in such trivialities anyway, especially when there was so much work to be done. This attitude made her steadily more cold and aloof until she began to shun all interaction with anyone. With the rare exception of her sisters or her mistress, she spoke only to the animals and the trees, for her charges did not waste a moment on frivolities. More importantly, they did not demand any more of her than to do her part.

Her domain was a glade where the dryads and fauns would often gather to celebrate the phases of the moon or the changing of the seasons. The forest had weathered the biting cold of winter and all the creatures now had cause for jubilation. Spring was upon them. The animals emerged from their long slumber and reawakened to a world that had scarcely changed in their absence, except that it was a little warmer and a little brighter.

It happened that at this spring festival, as the magical creatures gathered in Sylvia's glade, Cupid came amongst them with astounding news.

"Apollo, brother of your mistress, is to visit your forest, Sylvia," he said to the nymph excitedly. This was a singular honor; for her glade to host an Olympian on such an occasion.

"Lord Apollo shall not be disappointed," she responded with much gravity. "for I have minded my duties faithfully."

“Why must one so beautiful be so very hard?” the child god asked, gliding after her with his feathery wings. “Is there no room today for you to be happy?”

“Happy is she who lives for her work and mine is the only life I’ve ever known.” But despite her coolness, Sylvia knew that there was still a great deal to be done before Lord Apollo arrived, that all might be ready to receive him. So she left Cupid to look after the congregation in the glade and she went, herself, to inspect the borders of her realm.

Sylvia was quite fond, for her part, of Cupid for the cherub had been a faithful friend and steadfast ally of hers for many years. Of all the Olympians, he alone treated her more an equal than a servant. For these reasons she loved him, but she could not abide his fixation on romantic daydreaming and lovesick foolishness. Always he was trying, in vain, to soften the nymph’s heart. But Sylvia knew that a soft heart was a vulnerable one. Her cousin Naila had always warned her to keep her mind on her duty and not allow herself to become caught up in the business of others, especially mortals.

Now, of all times, her duty was of the utmost importance to her for she had heard of a strange hunter having been seen in the woods, and she could not allow such a thing to disrupt the visit of Lord Apollo. She went, therefore, with her longbow, toward the edge of the wood to make certain there were no mortals about. As she went her thoughts turned toward Naila. She had not seen her cousin for many years and, aside from Cupid’s sporadic visits, she had little contact with anyone. Her sisters dwelt in the faraway temple of Diana and, though she had always appreciated the silence of her woodland wards, she couldn’t deny her need for true companionship forever. After a hundred and one unreturned statements even one such as Sylvia longed for a response.

The truth is, when she was away from prying eyes, she would dance through the glades. She would have all those she knew think she had a heart of iron, but she was often lonely and would step lightly amongst the fallen leaves, imagining that someone was stepping with her and that the burden of her responsibilities was not on her shoulders alone. It was a beautiful sight, her dancing, but one that none would ever see for it would utterly destroy the image of stone that Sylvia had carved for herself.

Aminta saw it that day. He had ventured into the forest hoping to find his supper but instead happened upon the loveliest sight his eyes had ever beheld. He crouched low behind a wall of thick branches with his horse tethered to a tree behind him. He leaned on his spear and watched the maiden intently. The nymph, cloaked in green, twirling gracefully as her black hair was caught up in the wind of her fluid movements; dancing for no one’s eyes.

But when she heard Aminta’s horse snort and saw the tip of his spear rising above the foliage, she ceased her revolutions and drew her bow upon the stranger, demanding he reveal himself. The silent intruder stepped slowly into the open, placing his spear upon the ground between them as a show of peace.

“So you are the hunter I was warned about,” Sylvia said coldly and without lowering her weapon. “Your horn was heard just this morning.”

“I am no hunter,” Aminta replied with hands raised in supplication. “Not really. I have, on occasion, had to forage for my meals, but I have never taken more than is necessary.”

She cocked her head at the man curiously. “The hunter I seek is known to butcher without regard for the laws of the forest.”

“You are a nymph,” he said, bewildered. “A forest warden. Then you must know that I am no butcher. I am a simple man and I have always respected the nymphs and their ways. Never would I cause the forest or its creatures undo harm.” She eyed him suspiciously but something urged her to be merciful. She had seen evil in the faces of men before but she saw none in Aminta’s. Reluctantly, she lowered her bow.

“You should not be here today,” she said, preparing to take leave of him.

“Wait,” he called to her. Despite her better judgment, she turned toward him again and her slivery eyes met his. She was so beautiful and had such an air of mystery about her that Aminta could hardly help but be fascinated. “What is your name?”

Never before had she revealed her name to any mortal for it was not the business of men to know such things. “Sylvia,” she found herself responding. It went against everything she had ever known and was ever taught. Yet the words she had bottled up inside seemed intent on making themselves heard, regardless of her efforts to silence them.

“My name is Aminta and I should dread parting with you, Sylvia, for I have never set eyes upon a more exquisite creature in all my life.”

“I am afraid you must suffice to set your eyes upon mortal women, Aminta, for I am not a creature of your world and you are not a creature of mine.” She left him now and returned to the glade where Cupid awaited her. She pretended not to take notice of the young man on his horse, trotting a fair distance behind her but adhering closely to her trail. She wasn’t sure why she did not stop him but something within her appreciated the attention this mortal was lavishing on her. It was selfish, she thought, but it was a feeling new and intriguing to her. She was, however, wholly unaware of the yellow eyes that were observing both as they journeyed through the woods.

Sylvia came into the glade and stepped proudly next to the hovering cherub. “Is all well in the forest?” Cupid asked.

“All is well. It turned out that rumors of this supposedly terrible hunter were greatly exaggerated. He will cause us no harm, I am sure.”

Cupid looked at her now and his face went from one of quiet duty to unforeseen gladness as he read something unspoken in her eyes. It was slight and would be all but invisible to any but the god of love, himself, but it was beautiful. “My dear Sylvia,” he said with a warm smile. “You have seen something that makes your heart sing!”

“I have seen nothing,” she responded flatly.

“You need not speak of it if you wish but you cannot hide your joy from me, no matter how you may try.” Though she said nothing, she was moved by his words and feared that they were true. “Now we all have cause for joy,” he added. “for Lord Apollo has arrived! Look!”

At his announcement there appeared in the air a brilliantly shining white swan descending gracefully into the glade with spreading ivory wings. It settled nobly on the ground and, enfolding the white pinions around itself, its form became that of an impossibly handsome man dressed in stark raiment and bearing a halo of light around his golden head. Apollo looked gratefully upon the nymphs, dryads, fauns, and animals gathered in his honor and especially upon Sylvia and his fellow Olympian, Cupid.

“I am truly privileged to be so welcomed into your domain,” Apollo said, nodding to Sylvia.

“The honor is all mine, Lord Apollo, that you would grace us with your divine presence.”

“You have tended carefully all the corners of your realm and, as such, this forest is a place of peace and beauty, as it should be.” He approached her and placed a hand on hers. “You have done well and my sister is proud of you. Always you have been the dearest of her children and I have no cause to wonder why. I hope you will enjoy yourself today for hard work should always be rewarded and no reward is so great as the admission to oneself that one has done well.”

The gathering burst forth into revelry as the fauns played upon their pipes and the dryads danced and spun in the warm sunshine. Cupid tried to encourage Sylvia to dance as well but she could not allow herself to join the celebration in such a way. Her only reward was the silent dignity she took in watching the others enjoy the fruits of her labors. Aside from that, her mind dwelt too much on the strange young man she had met earlier and she found that, despite her efforts to ignore him, Aminta’s face was foremost in her thoughts.

‘Could it be,’ she thought. ‘that I have feelings toward this mortal? Have I been alone so long that such a frail and impermanent creature as this should stir my heart so?’ But she could not deny that there was value in this man that could not be measured by how many ages he had existed nor by what great feats he had accomplished. He was a simple creature, of little importance to the world, and yet she found that he had an increasingly profound importance to her. There was a gentle magnificence in such a man as he and this nymph, whose scope was as grand as the forests are vast, found herself unexpectedly captivated by him.

While all of this was going on the frightful yellow eyes were watching silently from the shadows. Their owner was a fiend whose only joy was in destruction. He had made war against the nymphs and their laws for ages and held an especial hatred of the Olympians, for his allegiance was only to the lower powers of the world. He clutched the warhorn in his monstrous fist and sounded the dreadful call; its dire groan resounding throughout the glade.

The dryads and fauns ceased their merriment and, in a panic, fled the grove. Apollo recognized the horn as the harbinger of Orion the Terrible and would not give the villain the chance of slaying an Olympian, for the hunter’s strength was great and Apollo’s was limited while on earth. Resuming the form of the swan, he took to the air on his return to Mt. Olympus.

It is at this time that Aminta arrived in the grove, unaware of what was going on, and, spying the beautiful swan, thought it would make a fine supper. He had no idea it was Lord Apollo and was prepared to heave his spear at it. Sylvia saw this from afar, even through the chaos and commotion of the fleeing beasts, and did not know what to do. She drew her bow and pointed it at the crouching young man as thoughts whirled through her head. As a nymph she had a grave responsibility to defend the gods from harm and, given such a choice between a mortal and the Lord Apollo, would be forced to slay the man if necessary.

Yet, her stony heart would not release the bowstring for she feared for Aminta's life as well. Even though he was only a man and she an immortal. Even though love was forbidden to the nymphs of her order. Even though admitting she could have any feelings of tenderness toward him meant a betrayal of her sacred vows. Her normally calm face was twisted now in unspoken agony and, out of time at last, she aimed where the hit would do the least hurt and released. The arrow pierced his arm and his throw went awry. He clutched his wound in pain as the swan disappeared into the sky.

Without a second thought, Sylvia dropped her bow to the ground and ran over to the young man's bent form, inspecting the wound she, herself, had given him.

"I am truly sorry, Aminta, but I could not allow you to harm that swan for it was my Lord Apollo." Carefully removing the arrow, she caressed his arm and brought him healing leaves. "Are you in great pain?"

"No," he lied, bewildered by this sudden change in the nymph's demeanor. He adored her, it's true, but seeing her unfeeling exterior fall away to reveal the tender woman within caused his love for her to swell. "Why do you show such concern for me? Am I not a mortal man; a mere trifle in this world?"

"All the far-reaching powers of Olympus are of no worth to me if I cannot look into someone's eyes and see more than a piece of clay. I see your spirit, Aminta and it lends comfort to my own. That is why, despite all the laws of my kind, I cannot bear to exist as a distant custodian of this world and it is why I cannot leave you."

There was nothing Aminta could say in return, so overcome was he with gladness that his lady had finally opened her heart to him. She dressed his wound and helped him to his feet as Cupid watched with affectionate reverence. He had known, for some time, that Sylvia was destined for more than a nymph's life. That was why he tried so vehemently to soften her heart over the years. He knew this day was long in the coming but it was finally here. Sylvia and Aminta, now together, were just moments from a passionate embrace when the horn resounded once again and the tremendous shadow of their secret enemy lunged forth from the darkness.

Orion the Terrible had scoured the earth for prey of every kind and never failed to kill what he hunted. He was a hideous creature, one of those centaurs that are half man and half horse though no part of him resembled anything found on earth, be it man or beast. He was of a gigantic stature with hooves that could grind marble into dust. His hide was of a dark violet hue but the long hair flowing from his head was jet black. Rising above his yellow eyes were a thicket of antlers and beneath was a grinning mouth full of

teeth shaped for the ravaging of flesh. Around his waist he wore the pelt of a lion, the king of all beasts, which his brutality had brought low.

He stood boldly in front of the nymph and her mortal companion, gripping an enormous spiked club in his clawed hand. He laughed now for, though he had failed to catch the Olympian, the prospect of capturing one of the gods' beloved nymphs intrigued him. He reared up with a throaty growl and slammed his forelegs into the ground. Aminta grasped for his spear but the sharp pain in his arm halted him and he winced. Sylvia was defenseless, as well, for she had carelessly cast her bow aside. Orion stooped low and picked it up; seeming only a toy in his massive hand.

"You are a thorny rose, little nymph," the beast thundered. "but you are not so sharp without this!" He slung Sylvia's weapon over his back and strode toward her with quaking steps. "You are a lovely creature, indeed. Though I am sworn to the annihilation of your Olympian masters and all their works, I fear destroying you would be a waste." His face stretched into a feral grin. "Perhaps I shall take you back to my grotto and make you my wife!"

Sylvia's eyes flared with ire. "How dare you speak to a maiden of Diana in such a manner?"

"I shall do as I please for I am strong and the strong rule the earth!" He was about to smash her and Aminta to bits with his club, when he was assailed from behind by a barrage of arrows. Cupid would not allow the monster to touch Sylvia if he could prevent it, but his best efforts did little to deter Orion. One fierce swing of the centaur's arm swept the cherub out of the way.

"Fear not," Orion snarled, snatching the nymph into the air. "If the gods care to have you back then perhaps they shall come, themselves, to liberate you!" Then he threw her over his shoulder and bounded into the depths of the forest.

Aminta called after her as he struggled to mount his horse. He was ready to give chase but did not know where the fiend would have taken her.

"I know the way to Orion's lair," Cupid called to him, fluttering over. "Follow me and we will track our dear Sylvia, wherever the demon chooses to hide her! Come!" Aminta was no warrior but he recovered his spear with a savage determination and was prepared to face any peril to ensure Sylvia's safety. Therefore, with Cupid leading the way, he urged his steed onward and they journeyed together through the woods and out into the vast and wild world in search of the nymph they loved so.

Orion's sanctum was a dark and hidden grotto on the edge of the sea; far beyond the forests and over the hills. It was nestled in the land of the Satyrs; a race of violent goat-like creatures who served the villainous centaur and protected the borders of his domain. His lair was filled with riches stolen from the vaults of temples and palaces he had sacked in his wretched crusade against the gods. Its rocky walls were covered with the skins, bones and heads of the many beasts and monsters he had slain, and they were many for he was a hunter of fearful renown. It was within this dank and evil place that Sylvia now awoke.

She looked about and shuddered at this vulgar insult to the glory of Olympus. In the center of the chamber sat a shallow pool of stagnant water that reflected the torchlight and the colors of the gold and jewels strewn about the room. There were many violated statues that had been abducted from the holy shrines; of Jupiter and Venus and Apollo, and even of her beloved mistress Diana. Sylvia seethed with indignant fervor as the desire grew hot within her to reduce the entire profane place to rubble. But she could do nothing, alone and unarmed as she was.

She began to wonder now if any of this would have happened if she hadn't allowed herself to become weakened by her emotions. Always she had been focused and kept herself safe from all distraction. Now her grove had been violated and she had been caught at unawares; all because she had lowered her defenses, for but a moment, and carelessly opened herself to love and all of the hurt and vulnerability that came with it. But when her thoughts strayed to Aminta again she found she could not relinquish her feelings for him, no matter how they pained her.

A pair of rusted and thorny iron gates parted and the fiend Orion stomped arrogantly into the chamber. "I see you are awake at last my little rose!" Sylvia gazed hopefully at the doorway but the gates closed behind him and locked with a heavy groan. "No, my thorny rose, escape will not be permitted." He approached and extended a grotesque hand toward her. His nails were long and black and she could smell the blood of countless innocents still clinging to them. "You shall live here with me for quite some time." She convulsed at his repulsive touch and glowered as he retreated to the other side of the chamber and sat himself in a tremendous golden throne; worn by time, half sunken into the ground, and covered in moss and lichens. "Or else you shall not live at all."

"Your threats do not frighten me, Orion; great heaving blasphemy that you are. Nor do the gods fear you, for a single thunderbolt from Jupiter or a strike from the hammer of Vulcan will easily cleanse the world of you forever!"

Orion let out a bellowing laugh. "Indeed they are mighty and yet I survive in spite of them. If your precious Olympians seek my destruction they have done little to bring it about. Even your great Lord Apollo fled from me like a terrified animal!" These words stole the courage from her heart for the notion that a demon had no fear of the gods chilled her blood and left her fearing she truly would spend eternity in that stygian cavern. She lowered herself to the cold ground and silently lamented her plight while her captor continued to taunt her.

"Why spend all your days in mourning when you have been chosen as consort to the great Orion? You may find me a most agreeable companion if you would but try."

"I shall never feel anything but contempt for you," she spat in return. You may think this would anger the terrible hunter but he laughed for he had been victorious, yet again, and he knew that Sylvia's steadfast will could not endure much longer in that place.

With a clap of his hands a host of satyrs appeared, bearing jugs of wine and platters piled high with fruits and meat. They placed these things before Orion's throne and left with a bow. Then the centaur clapped again and a trio of beautiful women sprung up from the water. They were naiads, water nymphs, dressed in fine dyed silk and

sparkling gold jewelry. They danced with the grace of the ever flowing seas; the glow of torchlight leaping from their slick skin.

Sylvia watched as Orion drank deeply and indulged his voracious hunger, and a hope for salvation came to her at last. The monster had become complacent over the years and today he was drunk with victory. The nymph knew that she could not best him in battle. The demon was far too strong for her to overcome by any physical means. However, she was not powerless against him for his ego was a great source of vulnerability for one who had learned to fear nothing over the centuries.

She rose slowly and stepped toward him; his eyes glaring suspiciously at her every movement. She lowered her head in despondent acquiescence and said, "You are right, mighty Orion. There is no hope for my escape now and your supremacy cannot be denied, especially by a mere wood nymph." She bowed low and humbled herself. "I surrender myself to your will."

He stroked his beard as he eyed her up and down. He did not trust this sudden change in her temperament and he growled. "What trickery is this, nymph?" He clasped his huge fingers around her throat. "I have lived far too long to be made a fool of!"

"It was not my intention, great one. I only wished for a greater understanding of your magnificence." Orion caught the sly glint in her eye and read her true feelings within.

"If you think false flattery will coax me into a more susceptible state, you are sorely mistaken. I know your game, nymph, you have no interest praising me. Only in plying me with artificial charms that are wholly incongruous to your nature and unbefitting of a maiden of your order. Besides, I know your heart beats only for that mortal man; a union your goddess would surely frown upon." He sneered and Sylvia's countenance grew heavier, though still bearing a smile.

"Your mind is as sharp as your body is strong," she said now, dropping all pretense of adoration. "and that is no false flattery. Perhaps we should say, rather, that I am intrigued to know how you plan to oppose the gods when they arrive to rescue me."

Here, Orion belted out a thunderous laugh. "You presume much, my thorny rose, to expect the heavenly host of Olympus to march upon my lair for a single nymph."

"You suggested such an idea yourself, demon. Surely you would be prepared for an assault if it were to come to that."

"You will find my servants to be skilled and my allies to be many."

Sylvia chuckled. "A band of satyrs pitted against the might of the gods? They must be skilled indeed."

"I have not only the loyalty of the satyrs but of the giants as well; and the Cyclopes and the harpies! All the enemies of Olympus I call my friends and they will aid me without question."

"Your confidence impresses even me, beast." Orion proudly snatched up a goblet of wine and drained its contents quickly, not even noticing that Sylvia had presented it to him. After he had finished drinking, she refilled the cup and said, "Even if you have a vast army at your disposal, are you truly a proper match for the gods? For example, are

you as skilled with a bow as Apollo, whose poisoned arrows rained devastation on the Greek fleet at Troy?"

"I have no need of poison or plague for my aim is keen and a single shot from my bow is fatal!"

"Are you as quick as Mercury who, when only just born, was swift enough to steal Apollo's cattle and return to the crib before the great god could catch him?"

"The games of an infant god do not concern me," he growled haughtily, taking the next cup from Sylvia's hands and draining it. "My four legs can carry me for leagues in but moments. You, who I bore here upon my back, can attest to my speed!"

"Perhaps you are skilled and swift, Orion, and I know that you are strong. But are you as strong as Jupiter whose lightning and thunder defeated even the fearsome Titans and banished them to Tartarus?"

"What need have I to fear lightning and thunder," he roared. "when a strike from my claw stings like a storm bolt and a stomp from my hoof shakes the very earth?"

"Even if you have great skill, speed and strength, you shall be no match for the gods if you haven't wisdom. Have you the insight and acumen of Minerva whose counsel led to the defeat of Medusa and Cerberus and the destruction the Stymphalian Birds and the Nemean Lion?"

"I have bested monsters and terrible beasts many times over and, unlike Hercules and Perseus, I needed not the aid of Minerva or any god of Olympus to do so!" He grasped for another goblet of wine and Sylvia was quick to supply it. She continued to regale him with the tales of the gods and he countered each one with an assertion of his power. When, at last, he had proven himself superior to all the gods, he boasted of the many creatures he had battled and triumphed over; of scores of armed men overpowered and demons of many sizes and dreadful shapes laid low beneath his hooves.

He had partaken of much wine now and began to eat again and, when he was finished, he ordered his naiads to sing for his new bride, of the myriad accounts of his greatness. The naiads did as their master commanded but they, who were akin to Sylvia, took pity on her and were determined to aid her in escaping if they could. So they sang slowly and with low, cool voices that drifted upward and downward with the steady rhythm of the tides; for Diana, herself, had taught that rhythm to the sea and to its protectors. This was the tempo of the moon, the gentle measure of the night, and its sound soon lulled Orion, dulled by drink and fulfilled with feasting, into a deep slumber.

While her two sisters continued the song, one of the naiads sped over to Orion's massive form and bent down to a small chest hidden amongst the piles of treasure there. She probed the recesses of the box with her tiny fingers and drew out a rusty key. With one final glance at the centaur to make certain he was still asleep, she hurried over to the nymph and handed her the key with a glare of fear in her blue eyes.

"This will unseal the gates. Your bow and quiver hang upon that hook, there, beside the doors. But you must move quickly and quietly if you are leave Orion's domain before he awakens."

"What about you, my cousins from the sea?" she returned.

“I fear for our fates once the beast rouses, but we must remain here and continue our song. Go and, should you meet our Lord Neptune or our elder sister Naila, tell them that we dwell still within this hell of Orion’s; so near to our home and yet we cannot return there.”

“It has been long since I have last seen my beloved Naila, but I will send word to deliver you from this place even if the whole force of Olympus must be mustered to destroy Orion and his infernal realm!” The naiad gave Sylvia a cold kiss on the forehead and the nymph made for the iron gates, recovering her weapons and cautiously turning the lock. With one eye on the slumbering centaur, she pulled the door open as gently as she could, slipping out like a shadow and closing it behind her. Once she was gone, the naiad locked the gate again and returned it to the chest. Then, taking a shredded green tapestry, laid it over a mound of earth in the rough shape of a sleeping body and resumed her place between her sweetly singing sisters.

Sylvia now found herself alone in the dark halls of Orion’s subterranean lair. Dim torchlight shone on the rocky surface of the slick and wet walls and the echoes of the centaur’s marching soldiers resounded through the twisting tunnels. The nymph drew the hood up over her head and, with an arrow tautly set upon her bowstring, explored the gloomy realm in search of an exit.

She inched her way around a jagged corner but halted when she heard hooves and pulled herself back into the shade. A pair of armored satyrs trudged by, carrying long-handled axes, and Sylvia watched them disappear into the darkness until the ominous sound of their clanking hoof beats vanished. She came upon a spiraling staircase cut directly into the black stone of the cave, circling upward to unknown heights. With another wary look around, the lovely nymph ascended with her cloaked body pressed tightly against the wall so as to blend with the deepening shadows as she climbed.

Steps below and steps above caused her to stop again, holding even her breath for fear of alerting her captors. Once the sounds had passed she rose to the top of the stairs and came to the upper level of the cavern. The place seemed vaguely familiar to her. Yes, she caught a glimpse of it as Orion was carrying her in, just after she last saw the light. ‘The entrance to the cavern is nearby,’ she thought, glancing up and down the hall. She spied a glow not far away, not of fire but of the waning daylight. Her salvation was just ahead. Her feet carried her quickly down the dismal tunnel toward the iron door that marked the edge of Orion’s domain.

But behind her the clanking and clattering sound of iron-shod hooves was rising up into a fearsome din, accompanied by inhuman shouts and growls. Two satyr guards stood between her and escape, and it was clear to her now that they were not the only ones aware of her presence. There may have been an entire legion close behind her.

With hardly a chance to aim, she fired on her attackers, felling one of them and stepping aside of the other. Within the next moment she had readied another arrow and fired upon the second satyr. He was wounded, but continued to call to his brethren for aid. Sylvia’s skill with a bow could not be doubted but even she had little chance of standing alone against a legion of satyrs. She pushed onward toward the door but it was sealed and she hadn’t the raw strength to wrench it open. The nymph turned in dread as

the gleaming heads of her enemies' axes appeared bounding over the top of the stairs and the fiends were close upon her.

She drew her bow and fired bolt after bolt into the fray, killing several of the brutes. But even as she struck one after the other they continued to come and she feared she would soon run out of arrows. Spinning about, she pressed her face close to the bars of the gate and shouted for help even though she held little hope that any would come. She gripped the iron tightly and fell to her knees in despair. She cast her eyes down at the ground, wondering what would become of her now. Sylvia only raised them for a moment but, in that moment, her dying hope was rekindled and her face became aglow with delight.

Aminta had journeyed far with Cupid as his guide, through lands he had only heard of in the tales of merchants and adventurers. His quest was sure to bring him through dangers only dreamt of, but his thought was bent on Sylvia alone. With a courage he had never known before he drove his pure white steed into the forbidden land of the satyrs and, with the red sun setting over the glittering sea, the fearsome crag of Orion's lair rose up before them. The cherub led him to the edge of a gently falling valley and toward the rocky beach below where the mouth of Orion's grotto yawned ahead.

Before he could prepare himself for battle the yipping and hollering of satyrs erupted on all sides. With a single brief scan of the vale, he charged forward with his spear gripped firmly. Cupid fired into the enemy ranks and did his best to keep the demons away from Aminta as he approached the gates of the underground cavern. One of the goat-legged soldiers, who had evaded the whizzing flurry of darts, bounded past the cherub and assailed Aminta from behind. But the young man wheeled his horse around and, without even thinking, thrust his spear forward, striking the enemy before any harm could come to him. He was somewhat stunned by his victory and his still mending shoulder stung fiercely, but he hadn't a moment to waste for he heard his Sylvia's voice calling out to him.

She stretched her arms through the bars of Orion's gate, struggling to reach him. "The gate is locked, Aminta, and there are many foes upon me!"

"Stand away from the bars!" Cupid shouted to them. There was one arrow the god of love seldom used, for it was forged by Vulcan and its might was terrible. He released his bowstring and, in an instant, the gate was thrown aside with a flash of fire and a tremendous shudder. From the smoke and rubble Sylvia emerged and threw herself into Aminta's arms. She praised the gods for their mercy in leading her friends to her.

"Come, my love," he said, lifting the nymph into the saddle in front of him. He brought her head to rest against his chest and she could hear his heart beating rapidly. She needed say nothing to him, but discerned that the simple man had never felt such fear of death before. However, as she looked into his face, none of that fear showed through for he knew he had to be strong for her. He turned his steed about and made for the sloping way out of Orion's domain as a new legion of satyrs arrived, sounding the centaur's dire warhorn.

The bellow shook the whole of the grotto and Orion himself was roused from his sleep. Still the three naiads swayed and sang before him but, after the monster rose with a

start and swept away the green tapestry, he realized that Sylvia was gone. The sister sea nymphs vanished beneath the water to escape his wrath as the savage brute roared with blazing ire. He galloped across the chamber and smashed the door down with a single blow. Then, gathering his club and battleaxe, he charged upward through the labyrinthine lair and exploded through the ruined gateway just in time to see his captive escaping.

With thunderous steps he hurtled after them, brandishing both weapons with a merciless rage. Sylvia turned and gasped at the hideous form, swiftly gaining on them, and fired upon him. The arrows pierced flesh and sinew but would not slow the beast. Cupid wheeled around in an effort to distract the demon, continuing to fire without restraint. But Orion was undeterred and, with a swing of his club, Aminta was thrown from his horse. The wind shot out of him as his back struck the ground, his spear gripped in his folded arms.

“Go, Sylvia,” he shouted up to his love. Slowly he brought himself up and, ready for battle, stared down the galloping centaur. “Go! Cupid and I will distract him!” Sylvia would not leave her mortal beloved to face destruction alone but, a swat from the hand of his master caused the horse to gallop away with his precious passenger and all she could do was watch, with wet and straining eyes, as the man she loved more dearly than the earth or the rivers or the heavens above faced the unconquerable enemy, both shrinking in the distance.

Orion leaped over a great rock and landed before the insignificant mortal who dared steal his bride from him. Rising to full height, the centaur absolutely dwarfed Aminta but he could not turn away. He thrust his spear in and out, the beast dancing effortlessly around his every strike. When the club came, roaring like a hurricane, the man’s heart stopped for a moment and he stepped well out of reach while he recovered from the shock. He had seen the beast wield his cudgel from afar but, being now so close he could smell the wood mixed with rust and blood as it blew past him, he was terrified beyond all reckoning.

Then came the axe, gleaming in the red light of the setting sun, and his breath was stopped altogether. Before Orion could strike, Cupid turned about again and, firing an arrow through the monster’s wrist, cast the weapon from his barbarous hand. As the fiend dislodged the barb from his arm, Aminta struck him in the side with the head of his spear. Orion, enraged, gripped the man with his still bleeding hand and lifted him into the air by his neck.

“Little gnat,” the centaur barked, pulling the spear from his side. “if ever your nymph sets eyes on you again, she will scarce recognize the twisted wreck I shall make of you!”

Sylvia could bare no longer the thought of retreat. Never before had she fled from an enemy. She had changed much since meeting Aminta in the forest but one thing had not changed; she was no coward. Gripping the reins tightly she wheeled the horse around and charged back toward the battle. Even from the back of the fiercely galloping steed, her hands were steady and her aim true. An arrow was loosed from her bow and struck great Orion in the neck.

The brute dropped Aminta to the ground and, wheezing and sputtering, doubled over in pain. Sylvia halted her horse to allow her love to mount in front of her and, with Cupid fluttering close behind, they raced off toward the forestlands. She peered backward for only a moment and saw Orion raging as he mustered the satyrs gathering around him. The beast could not be slain and he would never stop hating them, she feared.

“It is to the temple of Diana that we must go,” she said, wearily. “Only my mistress can help us.”

“I have been to the city where your temple is located,” Aminta responded. “Fear not. I can get us there.” She laid her head against his back as they went, overcome with love for the mortal who left behind his simple life for her and was now prepared to give up everything he had; everything he was. None had ever done so much for her and she was just so thankful they had each other again. She closed her eyes and the steady pace of the hoofbeats lulled her to sleep.

While she slept soundly, many leagues passed beneath her as Aminta drove on toward the temple of Diana and strove to put as much distance between them and Orion’s realm as he could. The sounds of music and merriment met Sylvia’s ears as she awoke. She felt the horse beneath her slow its pace to a trot and she looked about. It was daylight and they were in a part of the forest somewhat familiar to her; a wide glade similar to, but larger than, her own, in the center of which there rose a rocky spring bursting with clear water. Aminta helped her to dismount and she saw a multitude of beings approach from many directions; fauns, dryads, naiads, centaurs, cherubs, sylphs, and nymphs from several regions. They were accompanied by animals and bore flowery garland and urns filled with sweet wine.

It was a celebration, Sylvia realized, to honor Bacchus. And the god of drink and revelry, himself, appeared at the head of the procession astride a tiger, marching with crooked steps. He carried a goblet of wine in one hand and a bunch of rosy grapes in the other, and was flanked by a pair of his wildly dancing maenads who scattered rose petals as they stepped. Cupid flew to embrace his kinsman as the assembly broke into song and gaiety.

Aminta was quite intimidated to be surrounded by so many spirits but Sylvia, gladdened by the presence of her fellow nymphs, led him into the throng. After her ordeal in Orion’s lair she was eager to see her family and Aminta was glad to have some rest. They were warmly welcomed and each given a drink of wine and some fresh fruit to restore their vigor. Though she relished her present company, the nymph’s attention was drawn somewhat away from the rest of the gathering. Standing beside the spring was a water nymph tending a flower with large petals of royal blue. Her skin was like the color of the afternoon sky and her hair white like sea foam.

“Naila,” Sylvia called. The water nymph turned and a look of unanticipated joy spread over her delicate face.

“My beloved Sylvia,” she returned, embracing her. “How long it has been, cousin, since last we met.”

“It has been long indeed.” Sylvia admired the flowing spring beside them. “I thought this place was familiar to me, though it has been many ages since last I was here.” She turned now to Aminta, marveling. “If we are in Naila’s domain than truly we traveled far in the night!”

Naila silently observed the strange man; with his light, curly hair and peasant-like garb. Surely he was not an Olympian nor was he a faun or a priest. “Who is this?” she inquired with a curious light in her eyes.

“This is Aminta,” Sylvia returned.

“He is not an attendant of the gods, is he?”

“No,” her cousin answered. “He is a mortal.”

“Lord Cupid led us here,” Aminta finally added, uneasily.

A look of confusion became apparent in Naila’s face, so shocked was she that a human being had been invited to an Olympian celebration. Then she saw how Sylvia clung to him and read in her much that was never there before. “You are in love,” the water nymph slowly uttered; half in question, half in statement.

“Yes. Yes we are. Very much so.”

Naila did not understand how a chaste servant of the gods could shirk her responsibility and sever her vow of solitude, for a nymph could not rightly tend to her duties *and* give herself in love to another; and to a mortal of all men. It was something altogether foreign to her, and Sylvia understood this.

“I know that this is a thing you may never comprehend, Naila, but I owe Aminta my life and we have already pledged ourselves to each other. I need him and he needs me and that is how we will spend our days.” Suddenly it seemed as if a veil had been pierced in Naila’s heart and her tender lips were drawn into a smile.

“My spirit sings for you, Sylvia, and I rejoice that you have discovered something that brings joy to your life if, indeed, it was unfulfilled. Love like that is a thing unknown to our kind and I suppose you are most fortunate of all for having found it.”

They put their arms around one another and Sylvia returned, “Perhaps one day you, too, will find it.”

“No,” Naila answered, just barely hiding the sadness in her tone. “This spring is precious to the gods and I think my work shall keep me quite occupied until the end of my days, whensoever that may be. But tell me what brings you so far from home after so many years?”

“Orion the Terrible.” Her cousin shuddered at the sound of his name. “He attacked my grove and bore me away to his lair. Only thanks to Aminta and Cupid am I free but, doubtless, the brute will not rest as long as I am so liberated. He is utterly without mercy. Even three of your graceful naiad sisters he holds captive in his foul dungeons.”

“How does this brazen fiend dare to seize our holy sisters?”

“We journey now to the temple of my mistress for help. Orion must be stopped and we will need the power of Olympus to aid us.”

“Of course,” Naila agreed. “The temple city is still some leagues away but you are on the proper path. Until then, rest yourselves and be glad, for you have had a frightening trial and, no doubt, a wearisome journey. You are safe amongst your fellow nymphs.”

Wine was passed around and all the enchanted races performed their native steps to amuse the gathering. All present were filled with a gladsome contentment, as if all troubles and worries beyond their celebration had been done away with for the time being.

The nymphs and dryads were especially fascinated by Aminta for many of them had never been so near to a mortal man before. Sylvia allowed them to indulge their curiosity, though both she and Naila kept a close eye on them to ensure they did not make themselves too familiar with her beloved. And although he was fawned over by lovely creatures, the young man could not take his eyes off of Sylvia, so different was she from the rest of her kind. Though duty laden, the nymphs were full of happiness and wonderment and their personalities were bright and bold.

Sylvia, on the other hand, had a sadness hidden inside; one that she was only just beginning to overcome. Like the rest of her magical kinfolk, she had been absorbed by her duty but, unlike them, she seemed to find no joy in it any longer. Aminta, strange as he may have been to the other immortals, brought her joy. Beneath her smile were still the remnants of her sorrow and, though she kept it hidden, she would never be rid of it altogether. For she was in love and, despite the ecstasy it brought her, she knew that it was a sword that cut both ways. The other nymphs did not know what these feelings were and, most likely, would never know.

In the midst of the revelry a deep, dreadful horn bellowed in the distance. Sylvia shot upward. "No!" Her head spun this way and that as Naila looked up at her in confusion. "It can't be! So soon?" Aminta pulled her to himself and placed his arms around her.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bacchus demanded, clumsily rising to his feet as many of the enchanted guests fled into the woods.

"Orion has found us already, it seems," Cupid stated, readying his bow.

"No creature of the earth would dare intrude upon a sacred celebration!"

His face grave and covered in a grim shadow, Cupid said, "Orion would, for he neither recognizes nor fears any power but his own." Before he could elaborate, satyrs wielding swords bounded out of the depths of the forest and scattered the assembled nymphs in terror. The fauns and some of the bolder immortals did their part to hold back the attackers but, once their evil commander arrived, there was little anyone could do to stand in his way. Orion shoved trees aside as he pressed his way into the grove. The wounds he had received the evening before had not been dressed at all and the festering pain of each one just multiplied the villain's rage.

It was clear to Sylvia, as she tremulously clutched her bow, the fiend would not even abide rest until she was his again.

"We must go on," Cupid warned, ushering she and Aminta onto the horse. "If Orion will not rest then nor can we."

She feared for the fate of her fellow nymphs and looked longingly at her cousin. "Lord Cupid is correct," Naila assured her. "Drive onward and ford the river at the crossing. I will do my best to halt his pursuit there!"

Before Sylvia could argue, the steed was galloping off beneath her. She held tightly to Aminta as the horse raced away from the glade, reluctantly peering backward as the place swiftly shrank. But the enraged image of Orion grew in the distance as he held feverishly to their trail. He shoved all resistance aside and chased down his quarry with a single-minded resolve and was made pure in his mad desire to crush them underfoot.

With Cupid fluttering beside them Aminta pushed his steed as fast as the beast's legs could carry them, until the river came into view ahead. Close by was a crossing, as Naila had said, where the water was shallow. Cautiously but with no small amount of haste, Aminta led the horse into the water and up to the opposite shore. Neither he nor Sylvia knew what Naila had meant when she said she would slow Orion's passage, but they could not afford to wait and find out.

Now the centaur approached the gentle river, followed closely by his satyrs. Seeing his prey on the opposite side he and his servants bounded into the water without fear. But Naila appeared now standing in the stream and glowered at the villains who dared enter her domain and sought to harm her kinsfolk. Orion seemed amused at the water nymph's attempt to halt him and tried to end her with a single blow from his mace. But with a wave of her hand, the beautiful nymph vanished, becoming one with the river and the water quickly rose up around the fiend.

Just for a moment, Sylvia peered behind as they hastened onward, and saw the once calm river roil into a savage deluge, swallowing Orion and his satyr minions in a massive wave. Though he could be bested by no physical opponent, the centaur's brutal club could do nothing to stop the merciless current from sweeping him away. Relieved and grateful to her cousin, Sylvia looked hopefully ahead now for, though she greatly doubted that her enemy was defeated for good, she knew that his delay would give them the chance they needed to reach Diana's temple.

Many more leagues their journey took them, far across the wide world and over plains and rocky hills. They rested in a stony hollow as dusk descended and hid themselves amongst the rocks for the night.

"How is your shoulder?" Sylvia asked Aminta as he laid himself down.

"It is much stronger now than it was. In our journeying I nearly forgot that it had been hurt at all."

"That is good," she replied, bending down and kissing it. "Let it be a reminder of how I hurt you and it shall remain the last time."

He peered deeply into her dark eyes. "Have I changed you so much, Sylvia?"

"The change did not come from you," she said. "I think it came many years ago." She placed her hand upon his. "But I did not recognize the change until I saw you. Then I knew the course of my life would be forever altered, for better or for worse."

"Surely it will be for better. I will give my life and more to see that you are safe and happy."

"No," Sylvia blurted anxiously. "You must not do that." She set herself down next to him as Cupid watched over them with tender eyes. He knew it was her destiny to fall in love and he had worked hard to see that she did one day. He looked now upon his handiwork and smiled. "You must live," Sylvia said to her lover as she closed her eyes,

the bright stars above her fading into blackness. “Whatever happens, you must not leave me.”

She slept soundly and dreamt of the sky that night. In her visions she and Aminta were hurtled into the sky upon Cupid’s arrow and settled amongst the stars. There, all the twinkling lights around them were roused to life and she rode upon Leo’s back and conversed with Virgo. Aminta cast his spear, like a shooting star, at Cygnus but the swan flew away into the darkness. The two lovers danced as all the constellations watched in awe, but Orion was among them as well. The fiend, with his club raised high, shattered the sky and, with all the stars, Sylvia and Aminta fell to earth and the light of morn broke through the black veil of Nix.

Upon awakening, she and Aminta resumed their journey, urged on by the blessed and comforting daylight. And, always, Cupid kept a keen eye on the horizon behind them, on constant lookout for a glimpse of their pursuers. By the time they had reached the end of their travels, they had trekked from one coast to the other and there, by the edge of the roaring sea, rose the walls of great Diana’s temple city.

Sylvia had not been to the city since the temple was first erected many years ago, and marveled at how it had grown in sheer size and grandeur. The sentinels at once recognized the child god Cupid and parted the heavy wooden gates for his companions. As they entered and the bright marble buildings and wide streets opened before them, Sylvia found herself suddenly as timid in the company of so many humans as Aminta formerly was among the immortals. Everything about them seemed strange to her; their dress, their mannerisms, not to mention their overall appearance. Unlike most of the immortals humans were not all so beautiful and even the ones that were lacked the perfection that nymphs and gods had.

Even still, Sylvia liked the imperfections and flaws because they made each person so unique and they were altogether different from what she had become so accustomed to. She was used to being warden; protector and overseer of everything around her. But in this city of men she was like a child experiencing everything for the first time. Aminta led her through the streets, for he had been here once before, and showed her the shops and the markets and all the sights she so longed to see.

There were men cooking and selling meat right on the roadside, and merchants exchanging their wares and services for pieces of gold and silver. There was so much of the world of men that Sylvia thought she understood but, living always so far away from them, she realized she never *could* know their ways at all. As much as she loved the wild forest, Sylvia had to admit she now envied her sisters at the temple who dwelt so nearby the mortals and even had occasion to converse and deal with them.

Aminta directed her gaze to the mounting hill before them and there, rising up from a gleaming marble staircase, was the great temple of Diana. White statues of the goddess flanked the stairs and Sylvia’s own sister nymphs nobly stood guard at the entrance. She was thrilled to have reached her goal at last and suddenly grasped how long it had truly been since she had even been in the presence of her mistress. Cupid hastened up to the temple and Sylvia was about to follow but stopped when she noticed swirling dresses below.

The city square was filled with dancing women, spinning lightly upon the stones while music was played all around them. Everything was different now and Sylvia could not suppress her urge to live any longer. She would live and love and dance to her heart's content and she did just that. Joining the celebration, she entered into the revolving throng, a dress of green among the white, and stepped more feverishly and with greater joy than ever she had while alone. Aminta looked lovingly at her revelry and was tempted to accompany her.

But the horn was heard in the distance and Sylvia halted as if waking from a dream. She looked at first to the musicians but understood it to be no horn of mortal make. It was a warhorn forged in the foundries of the underworld and she knew her hated enemy had reached them at last. She drew her bow as the civilians fled into their homes and all the city's guards mobilized to brace the outer gates.

"Surely even *he* hasn't strength enough to force his way into this city," Aminta offered hopefully as Sylvia hurried to his side.

"I fear there is nothing this fiend hasn't strength enough for." Again her blissful fantasy of a new life had been shattered and here she was anew; the hard and beleaguered nymph of Diana. She stood at the ready with an arrow set tight upon the string and the savage head pointed toward the west gate, from whence issued the terrible sounds of her tormentor. With a titanic blow, the high wooden doors were broken inward; splintered bits of timber clattering to the ground; and mighty Orion strode forth, flanked by his ruthless satyrs. His face was swollen with malevolent pride for, in his mind, he had already conquered the temple city and Sylvia was as good as his.

His army poured forward and were met by human soldiers at every street and building but Orion, himself, had no interest in these mortals. His tremendous body was aimed, like a bolt, toward Sylvia and Aminta. The nymph let loose several arrows and, though every one found its mark upon the demon's body, they would not even slow his pace. Gripping his beloved's hand, Aminta urged her up the marble staircase toward the great temple. Cupid remained behind them, assailing the beast with a relentless barrage of arrows, and even this child of Olympus was staggered by the villain's indefatigable evil.

They were met at the doors by Sylvia's sister nymphs. Normally sworn to keep all but the servants of Diana and the gods themselves from entering, the lovely women were too overwhelmed by what was going on in the city to halt the admittance of Sylvia's human companion. For they were filled with dread by the creature that was now bearing upon their sacred home. Cupid entered and the stone doors were shut and braced behind him.

Before them stood the towering bronze statue of Diana with her bow and arrow drawn, a noble stag beside her, and from every hall and corner came the beautiful ebony-tressed nymphs. Even in the flickering torchlight, confusion was evident in their exquisite faces.

"What is happening, Sylvia?" the high priestess of the nymphs inquired with a mix of fear and indignation. "Why do you come here in so wild a humor and with a mortal man, whose presence in this place is expressly forbidden?"

“Please, Iphigenia, we must call upon our mistress Diana for aid.” She fell before the priestess’ feet. “Orion the terrible is upon us and will see to all of our deaths unless the blessed goddess of the moon intervenes.”

Iphigenia was now possessed with a fierce ire. “You led that vile creature to our holy temple?”

“Please. I knew no place else to turn.”

The high priestess’ manner gradually softened when she saw her devoted sister’s distress and, upon recognizing the presence of Lord Cupid, immediately set to work praying to her mistress Diana for salvation.

“Great Diana; Artemis, queen of the moon and defender of the woodlands and of all chaste women; your children implore that you deliver them from this most heinous of powers.” No answer was forthcoming but she continued, aided by her sisters, burning incense and reciting every prayer known to them. As they did so, the sound of Orion’s fists beating against the doors reverberated throughout the temple. “He cannot possibly enter here,” Iphigenia boasted with much assurance. But the scourge of nature could not be underestimated and, with every massive blow, Sylvia’s sisters glanced apprehensively at one another and struggled, again, to reinforce the gates.

Finally the doors were thrown down with an awesome burst, nymphs fleeing from the entryway with all haste, and Orion tramped inward where no evil creature had stepped foot before. His black hooves crushed the stone doors to rubble beneath them as clouds of dust were thrown up all around. His bloody mace was held high above his antlered head and his eyes burned hot and crimson at the gathering before him.

The nymphs of Sylvia’s order were fearless and skillful warriors and, even in the face of such overwhelming evil, would not retreat. They drew their bows and spears and tried to drive the intruder from their sanctuary with all the strength they could muster. But Orion, whose flesh was already rent by both blade and arrow, could not be turned away by any means. His cudgel smashed through columns and his clawed hands cast nymphs aside left and right. He reared up on his hind legs and the sheer terror of his appearance cast a shadow of hopelessness upon all who beheld him.

First came Aminta with his spear, already stained once with the monster’s lifeblood. He thrust and stabbed and rolled to the ground as Orion’s club came down. Like a thunderbolt it smashed the temple floor and, again, Aminta struck, piercing the demon’s stomach. With a blast of his nostrils, Orion gripped the spear and flung Aminta against the wall. He charged forward to crush the man to bits but was driven back by a volley of arrows from the nymphs and Sylvia, herself, jumped forward, loosing a dart into the fiend’s left eye. With a savage wail he reared up once again and brought his hooves down upon the floor with such force Sylvia was thrown aside.

Pulling the arrow from his scarred face, Orion took the fazed nymph into his spreading claws and glared at her with his one remaining yellow eye. Her vision had been rattled something fierce but she could read in his demonic scowl that he would no longer suffer her to live a prisoner in his dungeons. He would destroy her then and there.

“Your goddess will not save you for you have forsaken your duty to her,” Orion taunted. “and she will not risk herself to rescue a traitor.” He looked up at Diana’s

gleaming image and laughed. "Apollo and Cupid and Bacchus have all fled before me; this you have seen. Now you see that even your mistress fears me." He winced from the impact of several more darts and dropped her to the ground as Cupid hovered before him. He swiped both cudgel and claw but the little cherub managed to slip through his grasp.

While the monster was thus distracted, Sylvia heard a voice in her head.

"Sylvia, my child. Take up thy bow and slay the beast."

"But I cannot," the nymph protested. From where she lay, battered, she looked around at her wounded sisters and at Aminta who was still and silent, not even knowing if her beloved was still alive. "None can slay Orion," she stammered.

"Take up thy bow and thou shalt slay him for I shall be with thee and I shall provide thy arrow." With pain rocketing through her body, Sylvia brought herself slowly to her feet and clutched her bow. Her arm was afire from within as she struggled to draw back the bowstring and level her aim upon the blasphemous Orion. She closed her eyes for a moment and a pure silver arrow appeared loaded upon the rest. She felt now as if her body was no longer hers; that she was not holding the bow but only watching from within. She was relaxed and calm and felt the divine presence of her mistress.

With one final swat, the centaur knocked Cupid from the air and turned his rage on Sylvia. He charged forward, bellowing like a hellish furnace, and baring his barbaric yellow fangs. She had scarcely even opened her eyes when Sylvia felt her fingers release the bowstring and watched the brilliant white light hurtle forward, striking her enemy through the heart. All at once his assault had been thwarted and Orion, his eye wide with horror, understood that the gods had destroyed him.

He could not even cry out in pain but, with his cavernous mouth left gaping, the demon doubled over and collapsed to the ground with a deafening crash. His claws relaxed as he breathed his last and, lo, Orion the terrible; scourge of all nature and enemy of the gods, was dead.

Once the villain had fallen, Sylvia stepped wearily backward and saw that Diana now stood before her with her own bow at the ready. She understood now that she was merely the tool of the goddess and that it was her mighty mistress who had slain Orion. She fell at her feet in supplication.

"Great Diana, I thank you for delivering me from my enemy, though I know that I am no longer worthy of your favor. I have strayed from the path you set me upon so long ago." She glanced momentarily at Aminta's still body and a tear formed in her eye. "I have lost the calling for I have fallen in love with a mortal man who gave up his life for mine. You may now destroy me, as well, if it will satisfy your righteous vengeance but I cannot renounce my love for him."

There was silence as Iphigenia and the nymphs recovered themselves and bowed before Diana. "Rise, Sylvia," the goddess said in a placid voice. The nymph did as she was commanded and looked into the gentle face of her queen. Half of her rich black hair flowed free as the wind while the rest was twisted up in complex braids. Her skin was as white as moonlight and her eyes shone like silver. She placed a cool hand against Sylvia's cheek and motioned toward Aminta. "Go to him and help him to rise, for he is not dead."

She caressed her lover's face and kissed his forehead until he awoke and rose awkwardly to his feet. Sylvia caught him up in a tender embrace and both turned toward the goddess; Aminta lowering his head immediately upon beholding her grace. "Why, my mistress, do you show such mercy," Sylvia asked. "to one who has broken your law?"

Diana strode over to them and smiled. "Because my law serves a greater power than my own; one that even the gods of Olympus must humble themselves before. It is by that power that you and this mortal man have found each other and I cannot stand in its way. I look at him and it recalls to mind a young shepherd I once knew. Would that I could have shed immortality then and lived out a simple mortal life." Her gaze was distant and made her look far more vulnerable than Sylvia imagined a goddess could be.

"The time of the Olympians is coming to an end, Sylvia. We soon will be called back to the powers that created us and, before long, the time of the nymphs will be at an end as well." Sylvia's face was heavy with care as she listened. "Do not fret, child. The duties of thee and thine sisters shall be overtaken by others whose coming is not long away. No longer shall you live to guard the forests. Rather, you shall live as a mortal does and live only for each other." She clasped Sylvia and Aminta's hands together. "We all must adhere to the path placed before us and thy path has led thee to love. So love well, my dearest one."

Diana gave them both her blessings before returning to Mt. Olympus, and Cupid ushered Sylvia and Aminta out of the darkened temple and into the pure daylight beyond. As they stood, side-by-side upon the marble steps, all the denizens of the city were gathered to bear witness to their love. The Satyrs had all fled in the wake of their commander's destruction and scurried back to their faraway realm. But when they arrived there, they found the halls Orion's grotto overturned and laid bare to the sky by the spear of Mars. For the host of Olympus had destroyed it, freeing the captive nymphs and returning the centaur's stolen treasure to its rightful places across the world.

Aminta took Sylvia into his arms and kissed her sweetly upon the lips.

"I will never leave you, Sylvia, as long as I live."

"Nor shall I leave you, as long as I live." As they enfolded one another in true love's embrace, Cupid gave them each a kiss on the forehead and then, his work finished at last, took to the sky on return to his heavenly home. And he and the other gods looked down upon the pair and knew that theirs was a love unlike any other; like none that ever had been, nor ever would be again.

That day marked the end of the life of Sylvia the wood nymph and the beginning of Sylvia the woman. Not once did she mourn the loss of her immortality for she had lost nothing but a future of unending loneliness. Now, she knew, she and Aminta would be together forever; first in life, then in death. After a long and blissful existence with Aminta, Sylvia and her lover were at last summoned by Cupid. The child god had brought them together and he charged himself with seeing that they remained together in the next world.

In the days to come she would be followed by her sister nymphs for, as Diana had predicted, the eternal presence of her kind slowly waned over the years as the coming of

the fairies grew nearer. They passed, in scores, across the veil of the world, returning to the power that spawned all things and, there, at the edge of the eternal seas, they were welcomed by Sylvia and Aminta. Always she looked among their numbers for her beloved cousin, Naila, but never did she come. For some of the nymphs elected to stay behind and aid the fairies in their work.

The years passed and the earth changed, and still Aminta and Sylvia waited for the last of her kin. Finally, the water nymph appeared in the world of the undying, her long labors at last ended. Upon seeing her, Sylvia's heart was filled with gladness for she read in Naila's eyes that she, too, had found love. For ages they would talk and laugh and cry for, of all the nymphs of their age, only they two understood what it was to feel such devotion in their hearts. Only they two understood what it was to be in love.

THE END