

Ischys

Ischys, son of Elatus, was in love. He was dearly, deeply, madly in love with a woman named Coronis.

He was not the only one.

But he did not know this. All he knew was that the sun shone more radiantly against her hair than any others, and how it reflected in her eyes the way starlight dances across the endless sea in night. He knew that she was beautiful. He knew that she was a Thessalian princess, daughter of some king he didn't care to know.

Courting her was slow. She had a gentle shyness about her, a hesitance to open her heart. Ischys was nothing if not patient, enjoying her beauty as one might enjoy the intricacies of a beautiful painting. He wondered at her smile, beaming with joy beneath the summer sky. He wondered at the way she regarded hyacinths, his favorite flower. Her features never quite betrayed what she was thinking, but sometimes Ischys could swear he saw sadness there.

Every day, he would bring her a hyacinth flower and tie a small poem around the stem. Every day, she would politely decline his advances, but accepted the flower with gratitude. Every day, her wariness waned and her fondness for the ritual grew. Ischys stayed awake late into the night, thinking up new poems to keep her interest, a white raven feather quill scratching at the papyrus until the sun began to rise and he at last hid the words away to dry.

Three months and three days it took for Coronis to remember his name, and three months and three days it took for her to agree to a courtship. "I have three conditions," she said before he could begin to celebrate the achievement, "We can only court at night." These words held a

certain connotation, one that Ischys was going to bring to light when Coronis blushed, holding up a hand with a firm, "*Court*. That is all we will do."

"Alright," he nodded, confused but otherwise intrigued, "and the others?"

"No more hyacinths." Ischys didn't understand, glancing at the one she still held in her hand that he'd given her just moments ago. "I don't like them." Though he could hear a tremor in her voice, he was too hopeful and moved past it, nodding his assent.

"And the last?"

"And last, we tell no one else. I can't promise you anything more than this, no one can know."

Kissing her hand in the shadow of the hall, he agreed to her request, and their tragic love story began.

They met in secret in the dark of night, eating olives and speaking of everything from politics to passion. Ischys broke the second promise first: he brought hyacinths to their first date. "I couldn't help it," he smiled sheepishly, "I want you to like them as I do. They don't compare to your beauty, but I think they look lovely with your eyes." As he said it, he tucked one behind her ear. Thus, he circumnavigated the promise.

The next he broke was the third. After their third date, he was so desperately in love that he told his friend. "But you mustn't tell anyone," he said, giddy with joy, "she wants it to be our secret!" Thus, he betrayed the third promise.

The last came late, after many stolen kisses and romantic murmurings, Ischys surprised Coronis by taking her out to a picnic in the daylight. She panicked, shouting that he was a liar,

but Ischys in his innocence said, “I’m sorry my love, I’m sorry! I wanted to see you when I kissed you this once. I just wanted to give our love a chance to thrive in the light!”

“It will die by the light!” she snapped back, but her heart and tone had softened, “You’re a fool Ischys, what do you even see in me?”

“I see love,” he responded simply, crossing the distance between them to move the hair from her face, “I see hope. I see *you*.” Thus, he convinced her of the impossibility of their first promise.

They made love for the first time by the light of the moon, a union Ischys prayed the gods would sanction and make this woman his. Coronis was beautiful. She was kind. She was his.

She was not his.

But he did not know this. He enjoyed the warmth of her skin and the softness of her breaths against the crook of his neck in the night. Though he woke up every morning to the curtains drawn and her gone, he merely thought her an early riser. *How thoughtful*, he thought to himself, that she would draw the curtains to allow him to sleep in. She was so loving, and he was so lucky.

It was a day like any other when, for the first time, Ischys was the first to wake. For a time, he studied her features, tracing each line and curve of her face like he wanted to remember every inch of it. Thinking of a romantic gesture, he kissed her cheek before leaving their bed, dressing, and setting out to the garden. *A small bouquet of hyacinths*, he thought to himself, would surely brighten her day and reassure her of his love.

With flowers in hand, he began his journey back to their chambers...

And that was when the light faded from the sky.

Ischys froze, looking to the sky where the sun had begun its ascent just moments ago. All was dark, people who had begun to rise for the day confused and baffled by the disappearance. What could possibly draw the gods from their duties? What could possibly have done this?

If Coronis was awake, she must be so afraid, all alone in their room!

He hurried as fast as his feet could take him across the stone and grass back to their home. Opening the door, Ischys crossed the threshold. Flowers in hand, he went to the bedroom where beautiful, wonderful, loving Coronis lay.

Ischys could not believe his eyes. His heart sank, and the flowers fell to the floor as his blood ran cold. All he could see was the ever-increasing puddle of blood that ran inside from the open doors to the outlook.

“It was right, O Phoebus, that I suffer thus from you,” her voice, weak and choked with blood echoed from outside the doors, “but first I should have borne my child. But now, the two of us shall die in one.”

Die? Coronis? Die? *My child?* His thoughts ran in circles, fear and dread and a million other things pushing and pulling him from the scene at once until at last, Ischys took a step forward.

A cry rang out like nothing he had ever heard. It was as though all the anguish and sorrow in the world were surmised in such a wail that he imagined those on Mount Olympus could hear it and feel its power. Ischys was frozen by it, unable to do anything more than fall to his knees as though repentant, bowing down in shared anguish over a crime he had not yet seen.

“*You*,” the voice outside, surprisingly lyrical spoke to someone, “I curse you! I curse you for what you have done! You will never be welcomed among the pure again, you of the black heart!” An audible caw answered in return, along with feverish, panicked flapping.

Ischys crawled forward on hand and knee, trembling from head to toe. He feared the things he could not see, but he had heard Coronis speak. His love for her outweighed the fear. He thought of the sun in her hair and the shimmer of her eyes and the glow of her spirit and the warmth of her skin.

What he saw, he could never forget.

A god, for it could only be a god, knelt on the stone beside his beloved, wailing his lament without tears. Coronis lay dead in a pool of blood, pierced through by a golden arrow straight through the chest. Around them, dark feathers lay scattered on the ground. Blood covered the gods hands, his only sign of imperfection, as he rested his hands on her body. From them, light sprung forth. But not just light: fire. A pyre to consume her mortal form. Despite the flame, he used his hands and split her belly open. Ischys felt bile rise in his throat as her life’s blood spilt from the cut, parts of her which should not be seen plainly on display. Burning.

He killed her.

This god. Killed her. Killed Coronis.

It was love and fury that gave Ischys the strength to grab the knife from his bedside. It was love and fury that gave him wings to rush at the bright haired bright-eyed god, shouting his own pain at the sight of his beloved and this creature mutilating her corpse. He was going to kill him. He was going to kill him just as this god had killed her.

But just as Ischys rose the knife for the killing blow, the god pulled a child from the mess of viscera, small and helpless. It did not cry, it was too young and not yet fully formed, but it was, no mistake, a child. *Her* child.

Dropping the knife, Ischys fell to his knees again, tears staining his cheeks and her blood staining his knees as he knelt at his burning lover's side and wept. Apollo, for he understood now who this was, stood, his eyes firmly fixed on the child. "For her, I will let you live," he said, holding the child to his chest with only one glance at the broken Ischys, "Only for her."

In a flash of blinding light, both he and the baby she bore were gone.

He didn't know if it was his. He didn't care. It didn't matter, not anymore.

Ischys watched the burning flames and charred remains of who once was until the ashes were cold and the sun once again started its journey across the heavens.