

Erin Palm

The Oracle Way

1.

It's a girl's biggest fear to end up like Medusa with snakes for hair; or turn up as Arachne, constantly spinning silk with her spider legs. In the back of my mind, I have always been afraid of the stories of the Gods and Goddesses. Anyone could be turned into a monster like Scylla or Charybdis if they didn't obey the word of the Gods. Or a person could be cast away to fight Crete's Minotaur to death or to be pecked for eternity by an eagle. I've never been one to seek the eye of the Gods; I would rather keep them away from my thoughts and go on with my days. But with every new legend, it's gotten harder to look away from these unbelievable transformations and tales, especially since I seem to have gone through my own transformation. See here, the blood of my body seems to have changed to the color of purple. Now I'm not an herbalist or a doctor, but I'm pretty confident that this isn't quite natural.

I mean it really is something when you just wake up one morning to see the vibrant color of purple streaming through you. You may be thinking that seeing a person's veins is okay, but just think for a moment more on that topic. Veins should not be seen in a person's whole body, maybe around the wrist or the foot, but not everywhere. Furthermore, they shouldn't be purple, blue, yes, purple, no. And I'm not talking about the fading pale purple of a lilac, but instead the pulsating purple of a gemstone. I'm like a walking map of the human body, traced with gemstone-lined rivers. Follow my blood ornaments and you'll see how the top of my head links up to the pads of my toes.

In seeing the water works of my body become more visible than I desired, I quickly turned to my mother. Recently, she has insisted I go seek out the old Oracle that lived on the mountain. At first I didn't bother with her advice; she's always going on about these home remedies that she swears cures all diseases, while in reality it gives you more diseases. But after seeing what happened to my body, I decided to take my mother's advice for once.

After first seeing the sight of my purple veins growing throughout my arms, my mother explained that I wasn't breathing enough. Lack of oxygen she said. I rolled my eyes.

"Do you want to die, Acantha? You must breathe in more air," my mother said, flapping her arms about as if to move air into her nose.

"I breathe as much as the next person, mother."

"Apparently not. But if that's the case, then start breathing double time now."

"That makes no sense."

"Your talk is wasting your breath. Stop blabbering and take deep breaths in through your nose."

I conceded and sat for an hour letting my nose do my breathing.

But, of course, a lack of oxygen wasn't the problem. I started noticing purple veins coming from my stomach. They flew from my belly button and rounded my body to my spine, tracing rivers heading upstream to my heart. They didn't bother me much since my dress hid the streams from people's view as well as my own. But mother, of course, saw through the cloth and my lies.

"How are your arms?"

"Fine. Same as the other day," I swirled around her to avoid eye contact.

"Let me see."

I showed her my arms. They were as notable as the day before, unchanged in color and growth.

“It has grown somewhere else though.”

“What? No.”

“Show me your legs.”

I showed her my legs. Nothing. They were just my clear creamy skin.

“Undress.”

“Mother, it hasn’t grown.”

“If it hasn’t, then you would be willing to take off your dress”

The woman had won; I lifted my dress and showed her the exact location.

“Must be something you ate,” she had announced after investigating the purple streams on my belly and around my back. “I have herbs for that.”

The herbs didn’t work, of course, they never do. But I took them anyways for her sake. A month after my veins emerged from my belly button, they surfaced on my legs. I showed my mother the development, hoping her herbal supplements would end since they had no effect on me.

“You walk too much, that’s it.”

“I don’t know about that, mother.”

“Trust me, Acantha. Your constant walking about the town is the cause. To bed, now.”

And with that I was on bed rest for a week – until my veins traveled to my face.

“Veins on your legs. Veins on your arms. Veins on your head. I don’t know what to do,” my mother said while pacing about my room. I sat in my bed tracing the vein roots on my arms. I particularly didn’t mind my purple veins. In them I saw the trees of the family orchard, with the

branches and roots drawing about my arm. Sometimes I could see a snake, slithering through the trees and up to my neck where it licked my cheek. And other times, I saw the flow of water about my feet, running to my knee and emptying out to my belly.

“You must see the Oracle.”

My mother’s statement pulled my mind from dreaming about my bodily illustrations.

“Why?”

“For once, my herbs aren’t working. I don’t know what else to do, other than send you to the Oracle.”

“How could she help me? It’s not like I’m some hero warrior wronged at birth or a princess out for revenge. I have no good reason to go to her.”

“No, you’re just a simple girl with purple veins circling her entire body.”

“Exactly, just a simple girl with simple veins.”

“There’s no simplicity in those veins of yours. You’re going to see the Oracle. It’s our only hope for answers, Demeter told me so.”

“You prayed?”

“Of course I did. I was worried, and so I prayed to the goddess.”

“You prayed.”

“Get over it, girl, tomorrow you’re going to the Oracle.”

There’s a mountain to the north of my hometown. When I was younger, I would look at the mountain from my bedroom window and day dream my life away. Crowned and clothed by greening trees, it looked down at the small white patched houses of my village. The very top of the mountain is said to be the home of a sage old Oracle, who foretold of and helped shape many heroes over several centuries. Legend says that heroes climbed the mountain to its peak, testing

their strength against the mountain dwelling monsters, testing their discipline against the harsh winds, and overcoming all obstacles to gain entrance to the Oracle's sanctuary. People from around the countryside have come, thinking they were the next hero to rise up from the ashes of their past. But no, they weren't the next hero of the century. They never rose from their ashes. They only sank into the freezing snow or were eaten by monsters, or at least we who lived in the village nearby always thought so. But in any case, I never had the desire to climb the mountain, never had a desire to become a hero, or to learn of my future. I didn't want to care about the Oracle, the gods, and their heroes. I never believed heavily in their powers, in their ability to cure diseases, give strength to those made of only skin and bones, or to reshape lives. Those immortal legends never stuck with me, until now.

And so the next day, off I went to climb up to the mountain. Legends about great heroes climbing the mountain to meeting their fate surrounded it. Heroes with great strength, skill, and willpower scaled their own way up this mountain. I felt out of place among the rocks and trails that these legends walked upon. What in the name of Hades was I doing here? I didn't want to know my fate or become something other than what I was currently. I didn't care if my veins traveled about my body with their purple waters. I didn't care what people thought of me, or if I was a freak to them. So be it. I hated most people anyway. People are annoying. And if my mother was embarrassed, then I would just hide away and stay home. I didn't need the outside world. I didn't need a cure from some Oracle perched on top of some dirt-infested mountain.

Dirt. I had always thought that the mountain was mostly snow or rock, but not dirt. The trails I was walking through were all paved with dirt – not a single rock formation lay in my way. I didn't have to scale any steep cliffs or climb any sheer rock faces. There were no monsters to rip my purple veins out. I faced nothing like I'd heard about in the legends. Instead, I went on a

pleasant walk up this large dirt hill. I wondered past trickling spring waters, past blooming trees, and through rays of the comforting sun. Whoever wrote the first stories about this mountain and the Oracle had apparently gotten everything wrong.

It was still morning; I had only walked for an hour to get to the end of the trail. I was pretty happy with the pleasant walk, glad my strength and skill wasn't tested. But the path ended at a crumbling white building. It was a circular, open building that once had tall pillars holding up its archways. The pillars now lay about the ground, letting weeds and flowers decorate their sides. The white face of the building was coated in the dust and dirt of storms, taking away the once mystical quality of what I presumed was the Oracle's home. Then again, the dirt and undergrowth did add to a natural, simplistic feel; if that's what the Oracle was going for.

Stepping over weeds, and pushing back vines from the archway, I slowly walked into the building, keeping my eyes open for the Oracle. But I stopped as soon as I got inside. Did the Oracle not possess items that you might find in a normal home? Did she despise light? Or hate to dust the walls every once in a while? Because nothing was there. No furniture. No books of wisdom. No potions of vitality. No strange glowing light source foretelling the future. No Oracle at all, just a small wooden sign that hung off a wall, opposite of the archway. I walked over and read the sign, thinking it was some secret message or a great omen. Instead the sign read:

"On Vacation."

2.

On Vacation.

I stared at that sign until the sun started to set. I blinked and looked around me. The building was encased with vines, walls were crumbling apart, and dirt carpeted the once marbled

floors. This building once housed heroes in training. It once held endless shelves of books about history, tales, legends, battles, mystic creatures, charms, everything. It once housed magic that could turn mud into riches, rocks into towers, and warlords into frogs. But I found no enchanted crowns, maps of lost treasure, or a cure for purple veins. I found nothing.

Bewildered, I looked back at the sign. It was the only thing in this phony sanctuary that resembled anything from a previous life in the building. It hung cockeyed off one nail on the wall. Its cracked wooden frame barely clung to its backboard and was inscribed with the crude letters “*On Vacation.*”

It mocked me. I swear to my unforgivable gods; it was mocking me. And so I took this sign with both of my hands and flung it to the other side of the room, letting it hit the wall and fall, unbroken, to the floor. I couldn't believe, after hearing about these astounding tales of the spooky Oracle on the mountain and about the heroes who won wars and the villains who they vanquished, that nothing was actually true. I was supposed to believe that this so-called Oracle was on vacation! Who goes on vacations anymore? Especially Oracles? What do they do, go to Cyprus or Sicily for a week? Take a tour of a palace, drink some wine, or watch some gladiator shows? In what part of the hero tales does the hero happen upon a sign about how he would have to wait for his destiny because the Oracle was out getting a tan in Troy? What kind of crazy old bat would leave her post and not tell anyone that she was gone?

Frustrated, I left that stupid building and started home, but before I stepped back to the trail, a shimmer from the direction of the sign caught my eye. It had changed. It no longer said “*On Vacation,*” but instead said:

Hey, twat.

“What? That didn’t say that before.” I walked over to the sign as it changed words before my eyes.

Nope it did not, you twat.

“Don’t call me twat. And what’s going on? How is a sign talking to me?”

The sign isn’t talking to you. I’m talking to you through the sign, stupid.

“Don’t call me stupid. Are you the Oracle?”

Oh, now you finally show me some brains. And, of course, I’m the Oracle you dunce.

“Don’t call me dunce. No, I...”

I’ll call you a dunce if I want to. You threw my sign into a wall after all.

“That’s because I walked all the way up here just to find that you’re not here.”

Oh, and that was such a long, tiresome walk.

“Look, lady, or whatever you are, I just need a cure for my veins. That’s all I want.”

Why didn’t you say so then ya dolt. What’s the matter with your veins? Are they not in your body?

“No they’re inside me, but they’re...”

Are they bleeding?

“No, not bleeding.”

Are they bulging out of you?

“No!”

Are they talking to you?

“What? NO!”

Then what is the matter with them?

“They’re purple!”

Oh, well, why didn't you say so? Yes, I would say that's not right.

"Can you help me or what?"

Well, first I should say that you should be grateful that they aren't green.

"Ok..."

Yes, green is very bad, means you've been messing around with slime and got it in your blood somehow. Deathly to beauty for sure, that's what happened to Medusa.

"How is this helping me?"

Now orange veins, well, let me just tell you about this guy down in Carthage...

"Will you help me or what?"

You? Help you? After yelling at me? Well, fine. But I'll need to see you in person to help you, of course. Don't expect to get an accurate cure if I can't see the symptoms with my own eyes.

"Then where are you?"

I'm at my sister's place, over in Rhodes, near those other islands. I'll send you a map with the address. See ya soon, twat.

"Oh great," I sighed as the letters vanished on the sign.

I had more travelling to do before acquiring my cure. Then even before I could be cured, I would have to deal with the Oracle and her love of calling me names. I shook my head at the sky that covered the opening in the ceiling of the building. Really, I didn't have that much of an issue with purple veins. Why did I have to go through all of this for something I cared little for?

Walking back into my house, I found my mother sitting at the table, sewing her worries away. Seeing me enter the home, she jumped up, letting her needle and sewing work fly through

the air, and caught me into an embrace. Squeezing my purple streams to the point of a flood, she looked straight into my eyes.

“How was the climb? Did you see any monsters? Are you hurt? Did you find the Oracle? What was she like? Was it a she? Did she have a cure? Did she say what was wrong with you? Did she explain what caused this? Did she cast a spell on you? Tell your future? Are you doomed? Well, Acantha? Speak!”

“I’m going to die,” I squeaked.

“What?” screamed my mother.

“If you don’t release me.”

“Oh, Acantha,” my mother swatted at me as she released her grip. “Now tell me what happened.”

I breathed out and rubbed my sides, “It was easy. There were no monsters, no rocks to climb. It was actually a pleasant walk to go on.”

“But the tales all said...”

“Don’t even get me started on those tales, mother. They’re all just lies as far as I can tell.”

“Well, then what about the Oracle? Did you meet her?”

“Well, you could say I did, through some sort of sign messaging thing.”

“Through a what?”

“It doesn’t matter. She wasn’t there, though. She’s on vacation at her sister’s house somewhere. She said she would send a map with the address.”

“Good! Then everything is going well, we’ll have a cure for your poison veins in no time.” My mother smiled at me, patting my arms as if to pat the purple out.

I watched her walk away, probably to go pray to her mother goddess again. As I strolled over to the doorway of my room, I noticed the stitching my mother had flung to the floor. Purple thread entwined with cream-colored thread creating a scene I couldn't look away from. There was a purple pond that formed at the base of a purple waterfall. Streams ran past and through large but thin purple rooted trees with purple branches and leaves which overhung a red village in the background. Small red doll-like people stood in the village. I counted five red threaded people, but there was a sixth, standing opposite the group. Bringing the stitching closer to my eyes, I saw that the sixth town person was actually made of a crude purple thread. This little figure, thin and frail, was the outcast of Threadville. And she was to go out to the wilds of the Yarn forest to fix herself. Out where thread monsters with three heads of cotton and arms of needles could cut her. She could drown in the waves of Lake Wool.

My mind raced around the meaning of the thread work for far too long. I threw the needle work back on the ground. I was reading way too much into it. But really, what kind of story was my mother sewing?

3.

That night I couldn't sleep, so I sat up to look out my window while tracing my veins. The mountain was covered by smoky clouds, shading the Oracle's home from sight. By morning, the house would be even more dirty and layered in filth; the Oracle would have a heck of a cleaning job to do when she got back from her sister's. I shook my head and looked around the town. It was late into the night and only a few torches lit up the street. A few guards were up,

walking along the cobble streets. One hummed his way through the streets, with a breeze following behind. He walked past my house and up the street towards the docks. The breeze followed him, blowing the vines of potted plants and the curtains of open windows towards the guard and the docks. I watched the guard go through the archway of the docks, and heard his hum fading away. I picked up the tune where he left off, and hummed to myself as I looked back up the mountain.

Happily, I was humming myself to sleep as I leaned my head on my arm, propping myself up to face the mountain. As I closed my eyes to the mountain and my sleeping town, I was smacked right in the face by a piece of parchment. Awake, I yanked the parchment off and was about to throw it back to the wind when a faint shimmer danced off the page.

Drawn on the parchment was a map of the Aegean Sea, complete with details about cities, islands, and landmarks. Small sketches of sea monsters were drawn in what would be barren areas of water while animals were arranged inside the land masses. Faint curved lines, which indicated wind, graced the page pushing small boats to distant shores. At the top of the map was a pair of mermaids holding up a large banner that said, “*Onwards to Rhodes.*”

“To Rhodes, that’s all I get? No details about where in Rhodes you’ll be? Great,” I sighed.

But upon folding the map closed, I soon found more writing on the other side. A nice letter from the Oracle:

To lady with freaky veins,

Once on the island of Rhodes, go to the town of Rhodes. And yes, yes, I know. My sister lives in Rhodes, Rhodes. A bit redundant but easy to remember (Athena never bestowed any knowledge on that end of the family, let me tell you.) Anyway, get to the town, go to the beach off

of the harbor, and walk till you get to some hut that seems to be made of small tree branches. If you go too far, you'll run into a hut made of rocks. Don't go in that one, it's actually a cave. There's probably something nasty inside so don't bother with it. You want the tree hut, not rock hut. TREE. I'll be inside waiting. Hurry up now.

Sincerely,

The Oracle

P.S. - Don't lose my map. It's worth more than all that purple blood you could ever bleed out of your body!

The shimmer of the words died as I read the last line. It was simple enough now. Just charter a boat, sail across the Aegean Sea, find the Oracle at her sister's hut, and collect the cure. Nothing to it. I would just need to avoid the other islands, any battles between the city states, stay clear of any surprise monsters that could lie below the sea, and keep on the bright side of the Gods.

Before morning had come, I had begun planning my own arrangements for the trip. To charter a boat, I would look to my friend Ponteus and one way or another get him to take me to Rhodes. I would then need supplies for the journey; food from the market or the family orchard and money from the family vault. As I walked out of my room, ready to get to work, I was surprised to see large sacks of food being carried from the house to the docks.

"Up and ready for your journey I see. Good," my mother yelled from the courtyard of the house. She was ordering a few servants to help carry sacks. "Put on your hood and wrap and come down, I need your help."

"So you've been busy," I said as I wrapped a scarf around my shoulders and placed a hood on my head to cover up my veins.

“Yes, all for you my dear girl. I can’t have you dying of starvation while at sea. That would defeat the purpose of the whole trip.”

“Of course, so have you gotten a ship then?”

“Well, see here, that’s where you come in. I have gotten food, water, money, and other supplies all prepared for you, but the ship we still need. Not just anyone will take you across the whole sea. You remember Ponteus though, right?”

I sat down on the edge of the fountain in the middle of the courtyard, dangling my hand through the water, “Yes, I’ve only known him since we were babies.”

“And you know how he fancies you, right,” my mother smiled at me, leaning in closer to emphasize her obvious hint.

“Really? I doubt he’ll be so fancied with me when he sees my veins.”

“I know, I know. But you don’t necessary have to show him your face. Say a few nice words, get him smitten, and then tell him I’ve some gold and a remedy to remove that wart from his mother’s nose. Zeus knows we’re all tired of hearing her complain to everyone and his grandmother about her inability to remarry,” my mother said as she placed a sack of coins and the remedy in my hands.

“All right, if you think it’ll work.”

“Of course it will, Acantha. My plans always work, you know that.”

“And what does father know of this whole plan?”

“The only thing he knows about is the hospitality of the Spartans, and we’re leaving it that way,” she warned me with one finger pointed to the docks.

Clutching my scarf and holding the bag of gold in the other arm, I rounded my way to the docks, stopping at the top of the staircase and looked down to where Ponteus' boat docked. He was just cleaning up his boat from unloading barrels of fish onto the dock where other workers carrying them away. The sea was calm and the boats softly bumped against the dock. Ponteus easily walked about his boat without tripping from the sea's motion. Growing up, he had always been stronger but quieter than most of the kids in town. In fact, the people of the town would say that he seemed to be built from the sea's waves; he could endure the cold chills of the sea, stay strong and steady as a rock, and keep a never ending supply of food flowing to the town people. Ponteus was the town's own private Heracles, though he never showed any reaction to the comparison. Instead Ponteus kept fishing.

Walking down the stairs to the docks, he recognized me as I waved at him. He stopped his work and jumped out of the boat to meet me.

"Don't see you down here so much," he said as he eyed the many layers of scarves I wore.

"Yeah, well, I'm here on a bit of a business." I jingled the bag of coins at him while keeping my hood low.

Ponteus shook his head and scratched his beard. He looked down at the wood deck and said, "What? We haven't talked in weeks, and you come at me with just a business proposition. Can't we start with a 'hello there, how are you?'"

"Hello, Ponteus, long time no see. How's business. Good? Yeah. Great. Now how about we talk about my business. I need to get to Rhodes."

"Why do you have so many scarves and a hood on? The weather is amazing."

"Don't worry about that. I need to charter your boat to Rhodes."

“Why Rhodes?”

“I’m meeting someone there. Look, I have gold and some remedy for your mother’s wart.”

“Gold and medicine for a wart. Well, that really makes me want to take this deal.”

Ponteus waved me off and started to walk away as I reached for his arm.

“Ponteus, please, you’re the only one experienced enough to get me there. And I really need to go; it’s for a very personal issue for which I need to find help.” I clutched at my scarves and looked down at the wood boards of the dock.

Ponteus was silent but placed his hand on my shoulder. “All right, if it’s so important to you, then I’ll take you.”

Excited, I smiled up at him, almost forgetting to keep the hood low. “Thank you! I’ll go tell my mother and we’ll be off soon. But please, take this remedy to your mother first. I can smell the garlic stinking up the bag.”

4.

“What do you see in the flow, Acantha?”

I jerked back as Ponteus had startled me and broken my concentration. I had been mesmerized by the flow of my veins, it was true, but how did Ponteus know? I hadn’t showed him my veins yet and didn’t plan on letting him in on the secret. Had he seen them under my hood or on my fingertips as I rested them on the railing of the boat?

“Acantha? Did you hear me?”

“Um, what was it you said?”

“What do you see in the water? You’ve been staring at the sea for hours now.”

“Oh! Yes, the sea! Yeah, it’s...flowing or whatever.”

Ponteus nodded at me slowly and looked away. I looked away from him, as well, and back to the sea. I was getting stuck in my own head, in my own blood. I needed a cure badly, and this boat was not getting to Rhodes fast enough.

“How much longer will it be till we’re there?”

“Two more days, if the wind keeps up.”

“All right then.” I looked far off into the distance and could see the land masses of Kea and Kythnos. It was reassuring to be close enough to see land instead of being so far away that you didn’t see any land. I let out a heavy breath and closed my eyes to the sun. The trip was going well so far. We had fair weather and no interruptions. Apollo was shining bright on us as we passed below him. I slowly slid my hood down, letting the rays strike my face and make my veins glitter the purple out of them.

“Be careful ol’ Apollo doesn’t burn that pearly skin of yours, Acantha. Some gods like Poseidon prefer their girls to be white as a pearl.”

“I’m not interested in appealing to the Gods.”

“Really? Is that why you’re smiling so proudly up to Apollo?”

“Shut it. I smile for myself,” I said while stretching my body across the deck as Ponteus untangle nets at the back of the boat.

“As you should be. Couldn’t you smile for other people as well?”

“Depends on who those people are.”

“Would you smile at the old hag who sells silk scarves?”

“If she had anything good to sell, then maybe.”

“What about the old scholar that lives on the edge of the forest?”

“He doesn’t talk to a single soul, why bother him with a smile?”

“Alright, how about that simple fisherman fellow you grew up with?”

“The one bothering me with silly questions?”

“That very one.”

“Only if he stops pestering me.”

Just then a shadow came over me and blocked the sun. My veins stopped their gleaming, and I quickly went to shield my face. Ponteus stood above me, looking down.

“If you smile first, I’ll stop pestering.”

“No,” I mumbled under my hands.

“Only for the Gods you smile for then.” His shadow walked off as the sun ran down my face again. I sat up and placed my hood on as quickly as I could.

“When you get me to Rhodes, I promise I’ll give you that smile.”

“Deal then, and in the meantime, I’ll go on pestering. How about you tell me a story? Maybe the one about our home?”

“You know I hate that one.”

“I do know, that’s why I asked. Now tell it.”

I complied and settled into a shady area of the boat, where I was out of Ponteus’ sight.

“When you are born on the island of Aegina, they clean you and swaddle you, murmuring hymns of providence and prosperity. They show you the currents of the ocean, the roots of the grove trees, and the peaks of the mountains. They recite to you the same thing they tell every child: when you go to the ocean, the currents will always return you home. When you sit under the shade of the trees, the roots will hold you together. When you reach for the mountains, the peaks will lift you to the Gods. You’re then told the story of Aegina, of how it is

our soul and a body. It's a name and a right. We are told as babies, and told as children, then as teenagers, and finally as adults about the origin of Aegina. For without Aegina, we have no peaks to climb to the heavens and no roots to keep us whole. We only have the currents of the ocean to turn us around and around in circles.”

“But with Aegina we have strength, knowledge, and a home. After all, without Aegina, King Aeacus, son of Zeus, would not have empowered the island. It was his mother Aegina, who the island is named after, who nurtured him, taught him, and inspired him to lead. Aegina had been the daughter of the river God and a nymph. She was beautiful, nimble, and passionate. Legend says that when Zeus abducted Aegina from her father, Zeus struck him down, and he became a slow-flowing source of water when he tried to chase after them. Aegina was moved that her father would try to fight a God to save her, and this free flowing passion ran from her father's blood to her. Aegina soon gave birth to her son Aeacus on the island where Zeus left her. With her mother's nature ability to nurture and love, and her father's passion and strength, Aegina raised a hero, one who would later give rise to the island's strong military power and navy.”

“It was Aegina who told Aeacus to pray to Zeus when their home was on the brink of collapse from a plague that killed nearly every person on the island. Zeus blessed them and gave them people. But it was from the ants running along the trees that the people came. Large men with six arms grew from tiny ant bodies. Aeacus didn't know what to do; his people came from mindless insects. Aegina comforted him, reminded him of the nature of an ant. Aegina told him that ants were strong, hardworking, and would form a large community. Thus, we the people of Aegina came to be from the inspiration of mother Aegina and the ants of her own earth.”

“Even the greatest of all heroes, Achilles, whom would be her great grandson, was in awe of the men in Aegina’s military. From our island, fearsome men dress in all black armor went to war under the command of Achilles. So, Aegina gave way to might and power. When Zeus needed an army, he got it from Aegina. But all of this is from the blood and labor of the mother Aegina. Without her, the island and its people would be nothing. We would have no home, shelter, or food. Without Aegina, there would be no name, power, or passion. That is the story told to us as children. One that we are a part of and continue to carry. We remember our past bloodlines and create our future legends from Aegina.”

I rolled my eyes to myself as I told the story. Little things like manners or sayings stick with you as you grow up. Other times, ideas or stories are beaten into your head for eternity. This story was one of those.

“It’s always Aegina, Aegina, Aegina. What about the others?” Ponteus blurted out.

“Others? Like her sisters? I’m sure the other Gods abducted them as well.”

“No, the other islands. I bet they have their own stories of importance.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. I don’t know any though.”

“Neither do I. Never seem to get away from old mother Aegina much.”

“No, and as the story goes, we can never get away from her.”

“Has anyone tried?”

“Why would they? We supposedly come from ant like men in harsh black armor. And everyone always talks on and on about the blood of Achilles in us. Why would someone walk away from something like that? We are decedents of Gods, as mother always puts it.”

“Everyone claims that fame, though. The prisoner from Athens said he was the grandson of Theseus. And that wanderer from Crete claimed to be a cousin of Perseus. There’s a bit of immortal blood in all of us apparently.”

“Well, Ponteus of Aegina, do you accept the hero blood that ran through King Aeacus and Achilles to be the same blood that runs through your veins?”

Ponteus thought for a moment, ruffling his hair. “Didn’t Achilles have that whole thing with his ankle?”

“Yes, it was his weakness.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t seem any good. Can’t have a bad heel when you need to walk everywhere. What was his mother thinking?”

“Well, the rest of him was good.”

“True, but I don’t want to die from tripping over my own feet. Terrible way to end it all.”

“So you deny the blood and passion that Aegina gives us?” I laughed at him as he walked away to look at the sails.

“My blood and passion comes from myself and no one else,” Ponteus protested as he climbed to check the sails.

5.

We saw the Colossus before we could see the actual land it stood on. Ponteus stood, guiding the boat closer and closer to the island, avoiding other ships in the process. We didn’t need to go into the harbor that lay beyond the Colossus’ legs. Instead, we viewed him from afar; he probably had better posture for all his years than I would ever have at any point in my life. We gawked at this giant green man for some time, slowing the boat down in the process. His

cold demeanor of the titan-god Helios held our focus, until a faint shimmer caught my eye. It came from the Oracle's map that lay untouched in my bag. Opening it, I found the mermaids were now holding a banner that said *Tree Hut*. I was just one step away from seeing the Oracle and getting a cure. Flipping the map to its back side, I was not surprised to see a small note:

Hooded Twat,

He's been there for many years now and he'll be there for many more years to come. Now get your butt and veins over here! We've got work to get done, and Helios doesn't have anything to do with it. Tree hut, now.

-The Oracle

Instructed on where the hut would be located on the beach, Ponteus anchored the boat and took me to the island by way of a small rowboat. I kept my face to the shore, away from Ponteus. Just a few more steps and I could get back to being normal. But Ponteus had other things on his mind.

“So who are you seeing again?”

“She's an acquaintance who's going to help me.”

“Help with what?”

I bit my lip. I should not have said that bit. “She's going to help me with a problem. Will you accept that answer?”

“No.”

I knew he wouldn't. “Listen, I'll tell you after I'm done here, okay? It won't take long, and once I get what I came for, I'll tell you my whole story, okay? You just need to be a bit more patient.”

Ponteus grunted. He wasn't pleased, but then again I wasn't either so he would have to deal with it.

Eventually we got to the shore and stood before the tree hut that the Oracle had mentioned. It was certainly a shabby looking home, maybe big enough for one room. It was made out of tree branches and large leaves, strung together to create something like a sagging box. One corner of the hut was made from a firm looking tree. But even the tree seemed to sag to the side. The whole thing was braced upon the slanted frame.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Ponteus questioned. He obviously saw the unstable work and didn't trust it.

"No stay here with the boat, I'll be fine."

He nodded at me, but stood before the rowboat. He would wait for me, but if he heard the slightest sounds of distress, he would run in. I glanced at him for a second. I admired him for his patience and mind, but I believed his loyalty to someone like me would lead him to be restricted, to be overlooked. Once in a while when he would wait for me to be done with my chores, I would find him sitting so still and silent in the courtyard that I thought he had turned to stone. Patience was a virtue, but poor Ponteus had too much. He would become a rock someday and never be moved from his perch. A man destined to sit and wait for all time.

I hesitated at the door of the hut, but then lightly placed my ear to the driftwood door. No sound. She had better be home, I thought as I finally knocked on the door. But again there was no answer. Ridiculous! If this mad old Oracle had ended her vacation and gone back to her home, then I was sure going to raise the entire underworld, even Hades himself, to set her straight. Flustered now, I pushed the door open and walked in.

"Oracle? Hello?"

There was just one room and what seemed to be a small pantry in the back of the room. It was hard to tell, though, since the room was shut off from all light. Only small bits of dust surfed through the air. I entered the hut further and walked away from the door.

“Really, no one?”

As I spoke, the door of the hut creaked close, taking away most of the light that came into the shabby place. A few twinkles of light filtered in from holes in the walls and ceiling.

“How rude of you to just walk in without knocking!”

The shrill and high pitched voice came from the darkness of the hut. I couldn’t figure out where exactly, but she seemed to be close to me, almost standing next to me. But when I reached out, nothing was there.

“What? I knocked.”

“I don’t believe it, not for a second. Who are you? What do you want?”

“I’m Acantha, from Aegina. I believe I talked to you Oracle through that sign back at your place. You told me to come to Rhodes.”

“I said no such thing, and I certainly didn’t talk to you or anyone through a sign!”

“Yes you did! Don’t you remember? I’m the girl with the purple veins. I need help.”

“Purple veins? You certainly do need help.”

“Yes, your help.”

“Can’t be help from me though, dearie. I only work with the dead, not the living.”

“But you said...”

“I said nothing to you! Maybe it’s not the veins that are wrong here, but your mind.”

“No, no, no! You told me to come. You gave me the map! See!” I handed the map into the darkness.

“How did you get this map?”

“You sent it to me.”

“Lies. I don’t believe you. Why are you here?”

“I am not lying you crazy lady! If you want the truth about what I’m saying, then just look at me,” I explained as I tore the hood and scarf off of my head and shoulders, revealing the streams and rivers of purple swirling about my body.

“What do you make of this, lady?” Running from my fingertips to the beak of my nose, a frail finger lingered in the air now. Coming out of the darkness, the finger traced the veins in the air.

“Well, ain’t that something.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m here. It’s why you asked me to come.”

“I’m sorry there, girl, but I did nothing of the sort.”

“For the love of the Gods, sister! Have you even thought for a moment that if you hadn’t sent for someone, than maybe I had?” This new voice came from the back of the hut, from what I thought was a pantry but could have been an extra room.

Out from the shadows walked two old crooked women, covered in worn tan clothes. Both were short women, with identical features. They both had small wrinkled noses that pointed high up to the holes in the ceiling of the hut. They had the same small squinting eyes that seemed to be searching my own face. And the same pale blue protruding veins ran through them both. The only difference I could see in these two women was in the style of their hair. The sister had long dark brown hair with gentle streaks of grey embedded in the braids that sat as a soft halo bun on the top of her head. The Oracle had long grey hair that flowed freely about her.

“You never told me you were expecting company,” explained the sister.

“Does it need to be explained that some girl with glistening veins of purple ooze should be here to see me and not you?”

“Well, if I had gotten some warning beforehand...”

“Well, if you had any common sense...”

“Well, if you had any heart...”

“Well, if you...”

“Will you both stop and focus!” They stared at me in silence. I had had enough of their bickering.

“Acantha? Is everything all right?” Ponteus was knocking on the other side of the door, alerted to my yelling.

“Oh, yeah, yeah! Everything’s fine. It’s all good!”

“Is that a man out there,” questioned the sister.

“Of course it is! You didn’t tell me you were bringing a friend with you, twat.”

The Oracle circled over to a hole in the hut, peeking outside.

“He’s a very nice looking friend,” she announced.

“Let me have a look,” the sister waddled past me and to the Oracle, poking her to move over.

“Will you two stop it? I am here for a reason. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about the girl with the pulsating plum veins already.” I held up my arms to gain their attention.

“Plums you say?” The sister fluttered to me now, examining my veins.

“Bug off, sis. The living are my line of work, remember?” the Oracle said while scooting her sister to the side of the room. “Oh, yeah, lookie here. Looks like you drank Dionysus’ whole wine cellar!”

“I know...”

I rolled my eyes at the thought. I would have loved to be drinking out of Dionysus’ cup, but instead I was being poked, squeezed, and stretched by two scrawny aging old hags.

The Oracle placed me down on a make shift table of two barrels, a stack of ruined books, and a piece of driftwood. Not a pleasant thing to lie down on, but she insisted I try and relax as she examined me. The sister stood right behind the Oracle’s shoulder, eyeing my veins with her shrunken eyes and giving her back seat diagnosis.

“She eat something weird? Get into something funky? Piss off someone important?”

“Be quiet,” said the Oracle as she compared my arms to each other.

“Most have been something she ate,” muttered the sister.

“I know what it is.”

The Oracle stood back and ordered me to stand. I obeyed and looked at her expectedly. She nodded at me and rubbed her chin, “So, you want some tea?”

“Yes, please,” the sister peeped up.

“What? No!” I declared.

“We’ve got different flavors,” said the Oracle as she walked to a cupboard and began rummaging through small boxes.

“I don’t care,” I said.

“There’s apple, orange, scorpion...” the Oracle said as she dove into the cupboard.

“I don’t want tea. I want to know what’s wrong...”

“We even have one called Poseidon’s Breath, which has a bit of a salty taste if you ask me.”

“I’m asking you about my veins, not tea.”

“Oh, what do you know, we got one called Dionysus’ Tears. Pretty relevant for you, girl.”

“A bit bitter that one.” The sister chimed in as the Oracle went on through the cupboard.

“Maybe that’s what’s wrong with you!”

“Nope. Wrong there, sis.”

“Really? Well give her some of that Athens’ Air tea.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, yeah, always does me some good.”

“Not Spartan Seas? She looks more Spartan.”

“Well, now that you say that...”

“STOP IT! Just stop! I climbed a whole mountain and traveled across the sea to find a cure, and all you’ve done is talk about crappy flavored teas! All I want is a cure, no more talk of tea. Got it?” I yelled this at the top of my lungs and stared them both down. The sister looked at me wide-eyed, as she let small packs of tea fall out of the box she held. The Oracle held her head up to me and gave a small smirk.

As the Oracle began to open her mouth, Ponteus flung through the door of the hut. Scaring us all, he looked about the hut as we three women jumped in different directions. The Oracle scampered back into the cupboard, the sister tumbled to the back of the hut, and I clung to the top of the driftwood table. Ponteus eyed us all.

“What’s going on, Acantha? Who are these women?”

“They are...ladies from...”

“I’m the Oracle,” the Oracle spoke up and took a step towards Ponteus.

“Oracle?” Ponteus looked over to the sister then.

“I’m the Oracle’s sister, professional in the dead, not living.”

Ponteus nodded his head slowly, “Right, of course. Acantha what is going...”

Just then his eyes grew as he saw my plum colored veins.

“Yeah, so you know how you asked why we were coming here. Yeah, it’s because my veins are all crazy purple, and I needed the Oracle’s help.” I breathed out the words as quickly as possible. Ponteus stared at me with his mouth slowly opening and closing.

Without a sound, the Oracle appeared before Ponteus and looked at me. “You wanted to know what was up with your veins, right? I’ve got the answer.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“First off, nothing’s wrong with you. Secondly, look at that map I gave you. There’s a list of items you need to get later. Thirdly, I’m retiring.”

“What?”

“I’m not done, dummy. Fourth, you are to replace me.”

“And again, what?”

“Are your ears plugged up with that purple blood of yours? You’re like me. In fact, you’re going to be me. Nothing’s wrong with you, child. You’re growing into the role of an oracle.”

6.

Dear Plum Blood,

I’m giving you a bit of a grocery list here. The map will take you to the location of each item. Go get them.

One tear from a King

An eye of a beggar

Bow of the Centaur

Pearls of Sirens

Bone of a Ghost

Breath of a God

Get them, then we'll talk back at my place. Hurry up now!

-The Oracle

“How nice of her to send me her grocery list,” I said after reading out loud the list of ingredients that appeared on the back of the map.

“Sounds like a load of crap,” Ponteus remarked. It was the first words he had spoken since we left the Oracle and her sister. The ride back to the boat was quiet since Ponteus sat with his back towards me as he rowed. We sailed out past Rhodes’ harbor to a location with some calm waves, where I looked back down at the map to find the section of writing had turned into my Oracle mojo grocery list. Only then did Ponteus finally speak.

“This whole thing sounds like crap,” he continued.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you? An oracle? That can’t be real.”

“Why can’t it be real? Can I not be an oracle?”

“Of course you can’t.”

“Why not, though?”

“Because you’re you. You’re not some lost orphan or wronged nobleman. You’re just Acantha, the girl who’s okay at playing tic-tac-toe.” He waved me off like a disapproving father

to a child. I had never been dismissed like that before. My own father had never even dismissed me like that before.

“Excuse me? Okay at playing tic-tac-toe? I can do more than play tic-tac-toe, I hope you know!”

“Yeah, okay.” Ponteus walked off, only half hearing what I was saying. He rounded about to the other side of the boat. I followed him around in pursuit of a better answer.

“I’m serious here. Don’t give me the answer of *you’re you*. What do you mean by that? Why can’t I be an oracle?”

“Well, it’s not like you do much around town. You’re the daughter of an ambassador. You have fields of fruit in your backyard, servants waiting on you, jugs of wine throughout your house, and finely woven clothes. You’ve got a good life. Nothing has ever happened to you. Why, all of a sudden, are you chosen to be an oracle? It doesn’t add up.”

I was taken aback by his blunt thought. He had never talked to me in such a way. He made me think more about this whole situation, which really made me think about how I wanted to slap that stupid beard right off his face. What right did he have for talking to me in this manner? What right did he have for thinking I couldn’t be an oracle? How could he deny what the Oracle said?

“The Oracle seemed pretty sure I was to succeed her.”

“You believe that nutty old bat? Didn’t you get a good look at that hut her sister was in? It was a crap hole. You can’t trust someone who lives in a crap hole.”

“That’s not where the Oracle lives, though. She lives on the mountain.”

“On the mountain?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what they say about hermits, Acantha? Didn’t your mother tell you to stay away from hermits? They’re screwed up in the head from avoiding society.”

“The Oracle isn’t a hermit.”

“Yeah? Who does she talk to up in the mountain? Does she have friends anywhere?”

“Well, there is her sister.” Ponteus rolled his eyes at me. “And also the Gods. She can talk to the Gods.”

“Oh, and you’re okay with talking to the Gods now?”

I bit my lip and looked away from him. He had a point.

“Well, what other explanation is there as to why my veins are this way.”

I held my arms out, letting them sparkle in the sun’s rays. Ponteus walked over to me and looked my arms over. He spread my arms apart and saw my lilac veins running from the tip of my fingers to my shoulder. He dropped my arms and looked directly at my face. Then tracing his finger along a small vein in my cheek, he looked into my eyes:

“The purple’s in your eyes you know.”

“Is it. Last I looked, it hadn’t appeared there.”

“Yeah, it’s freaky looking.” Ponteus dropped his hand and stepped away from me.

“Maybe you’re just sick.”

“That’s what my mom thought, and she tried all sorts of recipes to cure me. Nothing worked, so the only option I had was to talk to the Oracle.”

“I still don’t buy it.”

“You don’t have to buy it. I’m paying you to sail me around, remember?”

“You know, I’ve got this friend in Athens who could look at you and help. He’s some sort of philosopher.”

“Philosopher? What could a philosopher do for me?”

“I mean he’s a little different from your average philosopher. You’ll see.”

“Will he poke at me? I don’t want to be looked at like I’m some sort of mystery. I would rather not go.”

“He won’t do that. I’ll make sure of it. Give it a chance.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“Well, you have no choice. I’m the one able to sail this boat and we’re going to Athens.”

And like that, I was on my way to the philosopher. Fears of being experimented on, put through tests, and maybe even sliced up were clouding my mind. What if this guy took me in front of a group of men, and they talked about me as if I was some wonder to be solved – some creature that had a rare treasure that they would want to unlock and suck out of me. I did not want my veins to be sucked out of me.