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The Poison in the Blood

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Extract

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Cast of characters

Alcmena – mother of Heracles
Aphrodite – daughter of Zeus; the goddess of love
Athena – daughter of Zeus; the goddess of wisdom
Cronos – son of Sky and Mother Earth; father of Zeus
Dianeera – wife of Heracles
Helen – daughter of Zeus and the Queen of Sparta
Hera – wife of Zeus; Queen of the Heavens
Heracles – son of Zeus; world's greatest hero
Hermes – son of Zeus; the messenger of the gods
Iolus – boy who helped Heracles defeat the hydra; the brother of Dianeera
Odysseus – love rival of Philoctetes; husband of Penelope
Paris – Prince of Troy; lover of Yonani; kidnapper and lover of Helen
Penelope – Helen's cousin; wife of Odysseus
Philoctetes – goatherd who lit Heracles's funeral fire; future king
Yonani – goddess of the mountain; lover of Paris
Zeus – King of the Universe

ONE

THERE ONCE LIVED A goddess in a forest on a mountain. Her name was Yonani. She was wise and beautiful, but also very shy. She never climbed on the winds to Mount Olympus, where Zeus, the King of the Universe, had his palace. Yonani preferred trees to marble. She preferred grass and moss to gold. She would rather run with deer and speak to birds than feast with her fellow gods. On the mountain Yonani could be happy. On the mountain she could be alone.

Below the mountain there stretched a plain. A city named Troy stood on it. The King who ruled there was the richest man in the world, so nowhere had more towering battlements, or lovelier daughters, or braver sons. Bold as they were, however, the Trojans were afraid to visit Yonani's mountain. They never saw the goddess, but they knew that she was there. They did not wish to anger her, so they left her to herself.

Sometimes a shepherd might climb the mountain, if he had to, if a sheep were lost. But he would never stay after dark. No one would. Then, one night, when the Queen of Troy was pregnant, she had a terrible dream. In it, she gave birth . . . but not to a child. Instead, the Queen dreamed that she gave birth to fire. The flames leapt from her room. They set all the wide streets ablaze. The city's towers came crashing down. Troy was burned to the ground. The Queen woke up screaming. What had the dream meant? The priests knew and they told the Queen. The baby in her belly would prove the ruin of Troy. The Queen wept. The King held her in his arms . . . but he wept as well. Both knew what they had to do. When the baby was born, it was a beautiful boy. The King gave him to a shepherd who was told to take the baby to the top of the mountain and abandon him there to die. The shepherd left Troy. The Queen watched him go. Still she sobbed. She knew that she would never see her baby boy again.

Years passed. At the foot of the mountain, Troy grew richer still. Her ships sailed over all the

seas. Her golden chariots raced across the plain. Her king fathered a host of brave princes. Meanwhile, in her forest, Yonani still lived alone. Then, one day, by a spring, she saw a man. He was young and very strong. The silver water shone on his shoulders as he swam. Yonani felt her heart rise into her mouth. The man turned and looked up at her from the spring. His blue eyes glittered. Yonani gasped. She thought she had never seen anyone so desirable – not even a god. Suddenly a longing for him came over her. She did not recognise her feelings at first, but then he stood and rose from the water, and she understood perfectly what she felt. She had discovered what it was to be in love.

Yonani was used to men feeling terror of her. The stranger, however, did not seem afraid. He fixed Yonani with a cool and easy gaze. His name, he told her, was Paris. He was a shepherd. He lived with his father and his mother at the foot of the mountain. He stepped out of the spring. Behind Yonani, leaves moved in a breeze. 'Beware,' they whispered in her ear. Yonani turned. She melted into the forest. As she vanished, as fast as the wind, she glanced

back over her shoulder. Paris was still standing there.

The next day, Yonani returned to the spring. Paris came to find her. He was carrying a lamb.

'You are the goddess of the mountain,' he said. It was not a question, but a statement of fact.

Yonani nodded.

'They say you can heal anything you care to. They say you only have to see a sickness and at once you know the cure.' Paris paused. 'Is this the truth?'

Yonani nodded again. She still said nothing.

Paris held the lamb up to her. The creature's head was lolling. All its body was limp. 'Please,' he begged.

Yonani took the lamb. She laid her hand upon its fleece. And at once she knew what was wrong. 'A snake,' she said. 'It was by the river. The lamb went to drink and was bitten by a snake.'

'Can you heal him?' asked Paris.

Yonani laid her hand upon the lamb's head a second time. She closed her eyes. She listened to the clouds, to the breeze, to the sap rising in the trees. She felt a surge of power. It was like gold

in her blood. She felt the lamb raise its head. She opened her eyes. The lamb began to struggle in her arms. She placed it down on the grass. 'It is cured,' she declared.

Paris smiled. 'Thank you.' He did not bow, as a mortal should to a goddess.

'Beware,' she heard from the leaves. This time, Yonani ignored the warning. She waited for Paris to take her in his arms. When he did, she let out a puzzled sigh. Then she met his lips. And with the kiss, all her puzzlement vanished away.