

Ἀστερίων Asterion by Richard Sylvan

Under the white shawl the young prince snuffles and suckles the warmth of his mothers breast. Her vacant gaze far beyond the nursery walls. The rhythm of her son's legs kicking in time with his hungry mouth. Her nipples sore from his sharp frustrated teeth, careless as he tries to fill his belly with nourishment and his heart with her love.

Pasiphae speaks in a dream like voice, stories remembered from her own infancy to make sense of her sons inheritance. To find hope. Her Persian doulas vowels pre-echo in her nursing trance and channel from her own lips; tales of the Celestial Cow holding the heavens for the gods to race their chariots, of Amun Ptah the ancient creator whose heart and words built the world, his bull-head proud divine. 'Like you sweet, Asterion' she whispers.

Asterion woke to the scuttle and drag on the stone floor. The fruit and cheese of his uneaten supper has drawn the rats again. It is night and his amber eyes see in red monochrome. By his open cot three warm bodies squabble and snatch his bait. Feigning sleep he rolls and snores. They pause with the alertness of the unneeded. **He too has senses honed for the ever possibility of attack.** He smells their sour urine, his own musky bed, the extinguished torches soaked in fat. He breathes deep and slow, hoping his growling stomach won't scare his prey. He has his own constricted animal, Hunger, struggling in his gut, trying to gnaw it's way free.

Slam! His stubby fist drops and cracks the closest rats spine, the other two flee before their companion twitches her last. Asterion licks the ooze from his bruised knuckles; like warm red congealing milk. Then ravenously he peels open the rodent. His groans of satiation mingle with the mastication of sinew and muscle, the slurp of the brittle marrow straws. The flavour on the back of his thick red tongue, ferrous and rich.

His friend Daeda holding a lamp, steps through the curtained arch. Asterion grins and squints into the light.

'I set trap. I catch with own hand. Ha.' His voice triumphant. Daedalus observes the scene, hiding his disgust.

High on the Cretan Palace terrace, Asterion stands, his linen tunic flapping at his eight year old legs and a padded helm with leather fastenings hiding his head. Though the Autumn sea and dawn sky blur like all distant things for him, he can hear clearly the bustle of slaves and sailors readying the floating jetty for King Minos's arrival. He treasures the news of King Minos' return and the chance it brings to play Hermes for his mother.

Through the twisting servants corridors he scampers anticipating his mother's pleasure. Dropping to all fours he charges between the pillared shadows of the palace halls. His new helmet blinkers and muffles his senses but he knows the way, by memory and smell. Damp stone and wet mortar from the deepening wine cellars to his left, past the foul yeasts and scorched flours of the kitchens and on to the Queens chambers.

Asterion skids to a halt. Youths twice his age, swagger ahead. The tallest of the three turns and laughs and now the youths face him. His brother Androgen's friends, his tormentors.

'Ho beast, where to and why your haste?'

'No muzzle can conceal your ugly face'

'Let's put the Ass in his place'

The anticipation of his loving mother's face is erased by images of his limbs twisted by these commoners, with rhymes of poison. He is fast though and they are lazy before lunch. There is another route he knows and so he veers passed the forgotten statue of Aphrodite, behind the tapestry of his Great Grandmother and Zeus, following an internal map. Up on his feet and down the black stairs towards the acrid studios and laboratories of his Master Daedalus. Glimpses of works in progress; a table littered with maps and scrolls, an intricate model of a labyrinth hanging in mid air, Benches fashioned of timber from wrecked ships covered in half built traps and puzzles. Passed his new apprentice rooms, warm by the forge and on through antechambers and arches until he has to crouch to catch his breath. In the narrow passage to the Queen's room he listens through the fabric in the doorway.

His mothers voice, '...it is all that sustains him'.

Daedalus replies, 'I have a solution my lady, there are some raw foods he can keep down'. The unspoken word, meat, brings saliva to Asterion's mouth.

On his belly the boy Prince peeks under the coin hemmed wall-hanging into Pasiphae's room, it's scent of lanolin and tea tree floods his nostrils. His mother sits on her day throne massaging ointment into her chest. Daedalus opens the ornate shutters throwing a block of cool morning sun across the room, highlighting the shameful bruises and cuts his mother appears to be trying to rub away.

'Europa's offspring dodged this curse. If only I could ask her advice.' What curse could she mean? Asterion thinks.

'My lady, oracles would like as not complicate our situation. I hear Minos has already visited Delphi. Triumph in war only swaps the migraine of military strategy for the diarrhoea of administration.'

My mother laughs, a rare and beautiful sound, conjured by a magician. She adjusts her robe and says, 'thank you for the balm, it soothes'.

Daedalus turns suddenly. 'The King's ship approaches and I see Androgen at his side'.

She raises her eyes to his, her back straightens and Daedalus looks down.

'Then they are safe' the Queen says, 'I have matters to attend to. For now the monster is still your apprentice, keep him out of sight'.

Asterion shuffles backwards and away, a word lodged in his throat. Monster.

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Under the Bacchus moon in the King's pasture Asterion squats and watches the sleeping herd of muscular cattle, his face to the wind, helmet at his feet. He feels the wind on his ears and watches the cold light dance on the horns of the resting bulls, knowing Artemis danced on his too. This is his secret sanctuary now, now he must not be seen. Time passes. The moon reddens and his hunger tightens.

There is a sound of wings and he's entangled in a net weighted with stones. He tries to stand but his feet are pulled together by rope, felling him. He can hear them now, Androgen and his three low-born allies. Asterion bellows and rolls onto his knees, fresh manure smeared on his cloak.

He tries to reason with them 'I am Prince,' and staggers up. He smells fear but not from Androgen, 'King Minos will...'

‘Will what?’ his brother slurs, ‘I am the best son and you, you are a mistake. No one will miss you’. He motions with a wine cup and Asterion is tugged over again. ‘You know why I have come for you, the sailors gossip of the curse of Athens, they say I will be killed by my fathers cherished beast to spoil his victory. Well not if I kill him first.’ The trapped boy hears a sword drawn and Androgen command ‘leave us and not a word of tonight, on the Styx.’

‘On the Styx’ the three accomplices swear, and they step away into the wind.

Asterion makes a low keening sound, like a woman in childbirth.

Upwind now Androgen circles closer reeking of sour wine his bronze blade as red as the moon, ‘You were hoping the Attics would finish us off you bawling dwarf,’ he says and tips back the last of the wine in his venomous mouth. ‘Hungry for the throne changeling,’ he waves the sword. ‘Take the Queen for your own, beast.’ and this last punctuated by throwing his cup to the ground and thrusting his hips.

Asterion’s mouth hangs open and his eerie lowing carries across the darkening hill. A sound like running thunder, his heart beating? His veins pulsing? It gets louder and closer as Androgen lifts up his sword. The moon above, demonic, eroded, painting the field brown and the charging bull red as it hits the eldest Prince like a meteorite. A spiked battering ram into flesh. The magnificent Bull lowers it’s head to it’s frightened calf Asterion, his son. Brother blood drips thickly down it’s curved horns an echo of the partial eclipse above and as the Prince drinks, the moons hollow slowly fills and it’s umber glow lightens.