



***Apollo & Coronis* | Ravens & Crows**

Apollo loved his aunt, but wheat, well, that he couldn't abide. Something about the ephemeral emerald stalks withering to a pallid brown, that annual spiral into the darkness of winter that just, well, chafed him. And so he wasn't sure why he found himself atop the summit of Mount Pelion looking out over the summer fields of wheat with such longing.

Then, there, a small figure cutting a line through the wagging green stems, her name whispered by the Anemoi,¹ "Coronis, the ivory-skinned daughter of King Phlegyas and Queen Cleophema." With her white shift, sable hair locked in his gaze, the god of the sun floated down to greet her.

He arrived only to find Coronis turning her back to him. "The moon is up, and I'm to tend those nagging gads up from Athens. It'll be grapes for dinner. Meet me here in the lazy part of the morning?" Apollo is caught, words stuck in his open mouth. He watches her go as the day's light fades to the silvery glow of the moon's light.

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Helios and his blazing horses are well overhead when Coronis finally arrives the next day. She wanders into the field, humming a song for Artemis. Apollo is there, waiting expectantly, coaxing his own romantic poem out of his lyre. It sings to her, his Aegle, shining light, of the iridescent beauty of her raven black hair, a wit that shines as bright. He adds a verse for her radiant smile, the one that disarms roses, another for the patient touch she lends her garden.

¹ Anemoi were the Winds personified. Anemoi also forms the roots for many wind-related terms, such as anemophilous (wind-dispersed pollen), anemochory (wind-dispersed seeds), anemone ("wind flower" named because it opens when the wind blows). Aeolus, who ruled over the Anemoi, lends his name to a range of other wind-related terms, like the aeolid nudibranchs (named after their cerata, horn-like appendages, which seem to flutter about in the water like streamers).

The song is unfair, a picture too perfect to be mortal. Apollo is blind to the smudge of earth on the knees of Coronis's skirt from when she stopped to look in on her larkspurs.² So Coronis ambles slowly past the god, sweeping her hands over the rows of blue and purple flowers, sparing him not even a glance.

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Coronis's father warns of the uncaring hearts of the gods, their fleeting lusts, and so she holds Apollo at a distance. But oh, that undeniable charm, his sandy, wind-tumbled hair, delicate hands that dash across the neck of his lyre like a weasel³ hunting in a warren. "I'm taking a horse and riding down to the land of cicadas⁴. Those Athenians wish to honor he who gives light, the Olympian who guided their famed King Theseus as he crept through the darkness of the Minotaur's labyrinth. Would you, Phoebus Apollo, that very god of light, son of Zeus and Leto, care to accompany me to this year's festival⁵?"

"I was just about to..." the god looks around his camp, seeing his lyre and, well, not much of anything else "...gather my things." Apollo scratches the back of his neck awkwardly, a swan⁶ trumpets in the distance. "I suppose there's nothing tethering us here. Shall we then?" and he offers her his hand.

The trip seems removed from time, a flurry of carnal passions, that dominion of young lovers. They arrive, stupid grins, clutching tightly to one another, protective of this insatiable, budding love. The Athenians shower him with eiresione⁷, olive branches wrapped in wool, adorned with the abundance of the autumn harvest. Drunk on wine, and Apollo's intoxicating scent, Coronis feels like Daedalus surely felt flying ever closer to the alluring tug of the sun's heat.

And then, the tryst is over. Persephone's sorrow grips the land. Autumn's embrace, snow caps on harsh peaks, a chill enveloping the valleys below. She didn't need a prophecy to foresee this, and

² Apollo's temples were often adorned with larkspurs, *Delphinium* spp. Apollo accidentally killed one of his great loves, Hyacinthus. Apollo was associated with healing herbs, but with all his healing power he could not bring the young warrior back to love. From Hyacinthus's blood he created a flower to remind him of his love. The flower is the larkspur, not the hyacinth. The genus for larkspurs, *Delphinium*, possibly comes from "delphin," the Greek for dolphin, in reference to the spur on the back of the flower, which appears similar to a dolphin's nose. , though it should also be mentioned that the Temple of Apollo is called Delphi (though this may be from Delphyne, the name of the serpent Apollo slayed)

³ Gale and Galanthis were both turned into weasels by Hecate and Hera. The root "gale" shows up in a number of genera, as in Neogale (which includes the American mink)

⁴ The Athenians considered themselves autochthonous, born of the earth. Because they prized music, they pinned golden cicadas to their clothes. Cicadas are also autochthonous, emerging from the earth to sing their summer song.

⁵ Called the Pyanopsia

⁶ Apollo was often depicted in a chariot led by swans. The genus for swans, *Cygnus*, is derived from Cynus, lover of Phaethon, who mourned when Phaethon, the son of Helios, attempted to pilot the chariot but crashed in a fiery blaze. Cynus spent endless days diving into the river Eridanus attempting to recover Phaethon's bones. The gods saw his devotion, took pity, and ascended him to the stars as the constellation Cygnus.

⁷ Eires is Greek for wool, and the domestic sheep is *Ovis aries*. The Pyanopsia was an Athenian fall harvest festival to honor Apollo for his role helping Theseus slay the Cretan Minotaur.

Coronis is not surprised to find Apollo's gaze drifting to warmer lands. The Anemoi now sing another name, Cyrene.⁸

In his absence, Apollo has left behind Lycius, a bone white raven. No sweet flirtations or amorous songs from this one. Instead, Coronis notes the raven's leering eye tracking her movements, not as the shepherd, but the wolf. It watches her at the water's edge while she looks out at the swans bobbing on the waves. It sees her belly swell. It hears her crying, alone by the hearth. And then...

And then Coronis finds comfort in the tender touch of Alcyoneus, a salt-weathered man with rough hands. It is not the passionate, untamable burning of Apollo, but the small, comforting flicker of a candle. The raven sees this too. But he cannot understand how Coronis could feel this mortal's presence as a gentle reprieve from the long nights of winter. Not when there, burgeoning inside her, lies the seed of Apollo.

A secret is a hard thing to keep hidden. And when spring comes, beckoning life from the darkness lying beneath the snow and fallen leaves, the milkweed shoots wrestle up from the duff, the first of the flowers paint the barren lands, and the lovers too are called out into the light. They brave a stroll through the meadows come alive, then lie together under the sun and amongst the larkspurs. Only then does the raven know the true name of what has been hidden from him.

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"Lord of the Light," comes the rasping plea from Lycius⁹. "Coronis, her heart strays to the mortal Alcyoneus. Even now, they lie together, an affront to your patient and endless love." Apollo is enraged, a furious, searing bolt of light bursts from his outstretched hand, the same hand that once held Coronis close, the hand that paints such light into the world with the lyre. The flash sends Lycius crashing back, slamming him against the wall, and the once-white raven, feathers charred a jet black, gasps in shock, fear. Just as he loses consciousness, Lycius sees the beautiful form of Apollo the Musagetes, leader of the muses, striding angrily out of the temple.

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The crooked-tongued god, Loxias¹⁰ as he's called, finds Artemis perched at the mouth of a spring, looking down at a deer, their breathing coming into a rhythm. "Sister, I am spurned. By the mortal Coronis." His outburst shocks the quiet forest.

"Ah, but isn't she just a prick in your side?"

"A thorn?"

"Sure, a thorn."

⁸ Cyrene was thought to be from Libya in Northern Africa. She would bear another son to Apollo, Aristaeus, associated with beekeeping, animal husbandry, and cheesemaking.

⁹ According to Antoninus Liberalis, the raven in this story was once a man named Lycius who was transformed by Leto and Artemis into a white raven, saving him from donkeys driven mad by Apollo.

¹⁰ *Loxia* is the genus for crossbills, *loxos* the Greek for crossed or crooked. Loxia in reference to Apollo comes from Apollo's cryptic and often confusing prophecies.

“Ah, well, then yes, a thorn indeed.”

“What then, brother? Shall I use my own thorn to strike her down?” Artemis glances at a sword resting against an olive tree.

“No grace, leave that to the brute, Ares. An arrow, loosed from afar, with a flame at its tip to cast light on her deceit, illuminate her cowardice.”

“A flame then.” And so Artemis, acting the fox, speeds off to Pelion. She finds Coronis asleep, blind to the streak of orange light arcing through the spring air. It strikes the base of her bed, an orange glow reveals Alcyoneus at her side.

Apollo is watching. He sees Alcyoneus in what should be his place at her side, and is filled with an angry, righteous sense of justice as the flames slither up the side of the bed. He attempts a laugh, but then Coronis screams out in pain. He sees her now, the first time in months. Her belly, so round. Her flesh, the only thing protecting his child. He didn't know.

He rushes to her side. He cannot feel the flames, but for her, for her it has always been different. She is mortal, and it is an agony, the flames blistering her skin, Apollo's capricious, jealous rage. He applies a healing salve, his breath, his tears to cool, but they are all empty. And like he failed Hyacinthus, he is failing to save her. He looks to Artemis for help, but her feral eyes offer no comfort. Instead she extends her hand holding a knife free of its scabbard.

Apollo takes the knife then looks at Coronis, an apology escaping his lips. But it is too late for any of this.. He takes the knife, slides it across her belly, and there, revealed, a new light, a child. It is weak, gasping for breath. Apollo exhales, and this time it takes. The baby respires that divine air.

His next breath: “Asclepius,” from Aegle, shining, brilliant light, gift of Coronis.

Artemis leaves a weeping Apollo, taking the still form of Coronis, child of Zeus, into her arms and places her in the sky. Coronis, the crow, a constellation. From her place amongst the stars, she will watch Asclepius take his first steps on a path that will lead him to Chiron, the great healer. May her son bring his own light to the world.