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WordsUncaged Submission
(Short Story)

“Ritual of Devotion” (2017) * *Author’s Note: What would you do for love? How much would you sacrifice?*

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“Promise me.”

Her hands pressed against his chest, her body consumed in his embrace. His scent mingled with a lush oceans’ breath; an intoxicating fragrance. She could feel the hair on his chest against her face as she tried to bury herself into him, to fuse her body with his, to weave their veins together, to braid a human tapestry of blood and fidelity. His hands held her fast, refusing to release her—the desperation clear in his eyes. Bobbing idle in the water next to the dock, the war vessel waited. Men boarded the ship across a wooden bridge carrying spears, bows and quivers, swords and shields. The stench of fear hung like withering vines around his body, holding him as tight as he held her. Careful not to draw undue attention, a few of the men who were friends quietly motioned for him to hurry up. Her presence was a risk, a risk he was willing to take. For her, he would do anything.

She looked up into his eyes, an act of avarice, coveting the moment his eyes found hers once again. She saw, in the vastness of endless blue, trepidation, and doubt. Begging tears pled for freedom.

“Every fiber of my spirit cries out in agony—you must go. Go. You are strong and I love you. Promise me, before the gods and all. Promise me you will return to me.”

Her sunlit violet eyes were resolute, though he saw the tears, poised like vipers, waiting to slither through. He knew she was right. There was no way to escape his duty, no way to avoid his fate, whatever it may be. Their bond was more than a secret affair—it was love.

“I promise,” he responded. “The Gods will see to my safety and return.”

His words echoed in the air—the intricate skeins of destiny softly resonating in a place beyond knowing. “And when I return, we will go to your husband.”

His gaze held hers, hypnotic swirling cerulean zeal. The ship, the sea, the sky—all fell away for one, desperate second. The moment devoured them, flesh pressed in silent prayer, joined as one, reveling in a private passion abruptly punctuated by a firm voice calling from above.

A familiar face peered down from the deck.

“It’s now or never, brother. Questions lead to problems. I’m sorry but you must come *now*.”

The face disappeared. Her throat closed. His spine froze. Dread sank needle claws into their hearts. He kissed her lips. She kissed his and soared above ecstasy. Then, he was gone.

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His eyes opened. The world spun and shrieked insane, twisting his senses. In his parched mouth, the taste of sand—hard and brackish, coarse and bitter—imbedded onto a shriveled, cracked tongue. The cool brine climbed the shore to lick at his feet. It offered no comfort, ignored his dying, crumpled form, slowly siphoning his blood to dance endlessly with the spirits of the sea.

His eyes closed, not in slumber or peace but in anguish. Memory flooded the wasting fields of his mind, humming hymns of devotion, reminding him of what he must do, inspiring him to move, to run, to fly—silenced as a spasm of barbed agony ripped his frame in half, rendered him immobile, panting like a beaten dog. Exhausted, he rolled onto his weary back. He drew an arid breath, wincing as wounds awoke. The ocean is all he smelled. The tide eroded him. The auburn sun, deep within a withdrawn veil of gray clouds, glared down in disdain.

How close I have come.

He damned his broken carcass; he cursed his mortal chains. He suffered the serrated realization of defeat. He whispered oaths, swore his soul, traced profane symbols in the emptiness. A gentle breeze sighed in response.

How close I—something is near!

His eyes roared open—blurred ghosts began to snake and shiver out from earthy tombs around his body; tendrils of mummified corpse limbs ensnared his arms and legs with frozen touch. Alarm blared in his head—*Move! Evade their greased tentacles, you fool!*—as ineffable power surged and tore his essence from flesh. The warm, indifferent sun faded as he descended into a motionless darkness.

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For anyone else, to begin each day as she did would be a blessing. She wakes from dreams on a goose down cloud, with gilded trays covered with fresh fruit, creams, and delicacies. She stands on a balcony overlooking the vast, undulating Mediterranean, absorbing its breathtaking splendor. To most, this would be how they lived in indulgent fantasies but for her, it meant nothing. For her, it was excruciating.

Her wardrobes overflowed with beautiful garments of the finest silks, and satin, decorated with gold, silver—a kaleidoscope of countless rare gems sewn into the fabric. She had dozens of servants and a kitchen full of the finest chefs. She had everything. A wealthy husband, a handsome and charming master of land and affluence, a stable filled with stunning horses, a decadent garden dressed in flowering tapestries—all these things were hers, and she wanted none of them.

Far from the angel's feather cradle, she slept on a small pile of fresh hay. Instead of precious platters of melon and cakes, she caught her meals in a small fishing cove. Rather than waking to the endless, sparkling seas' sapphire face, she watched its infant waves slowly creep up the shore on the small, quiet beach where she spent her days. She chose to wear light cotton outfits in place of the priceless fabric constellations in her closets. What is the point of having things if you have no one with which to share them? The lavishness is fake and the joy of the horses and plants fades when you turn to smile at someone, but there is no one—she realized long ago that her husband preferred the company of the men in his court and had no interest in courting his wife. He did care for her but only as a friend. She did not need friends. She needed a pair of gentle hands to touch her, arms to protect her, a chest to bury herself in—she needed him, wherever he may be.

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Cold, wet stone, as black as a moon's shadow. Soft noises filled the empty space around him. The incessant chirp of liquid dripped above. Distant chimes and bells tolled in the far, echoed recesses of forgotten catacombs. A shuffling, droning figure shambled to his right. His hand went for his dagger but found nothing.

I can move.

He stood. The consecration of relief washed him clean, as his strength returned. Another shuffled footfall. He swallowed a jagged dose of apprehension, and spoke, "Show yourself! Let me look upon my captor."

One heartbeat. Two. Just as he inhaled to speak again, a deep, resonating voice rumbled throughout the cavernous depths of his head.

"Be not afraid, mortal...I mean you no harm."

Light flared up around him. As his eyes adjusted, sitting on a throne of massive granite blocks, he saw a colossal humanoid with skin the color of ash, eyes glowing a deep, blue light, like jewels affixed to ancient gravestones. Around its body, neck, and each limb, mighty chains of a blood-red metal ensnared it. Atop its head, with sharp spikes and points digging into its stone-like flesh, sat a great steel helm obscuring all its face except its luminous eyes. He stood in a boundless place gazing up at the huge seated figure, in awe. Humanoid forms moving back and forth in some disjointed dance, swaying to a rhythm he did not feel; a melody he did not hear.

He took a breath. "Who are you?"

Heavy silence, infinite eyes ever staring. "I am Hades." A staggered hush swept through the chamber. "I am the God of Death. Speak your final words, cherish your final breath."

The mortal slumped to the floor. "So, then this is it. I cannot be dead! I have failed her. I was so close."

As he crumpled beneath his grief, Hades did not speak, allowing him to weep. The mortal raised his head to the dark heavens above, eyes alight with shattered rage, and howled, "My heart has run dry, cut open, left to ache and blister in the scornful sun! All my effort, all my dreams, my sacrifices have meant nothing..."

His head drooped, loose and weak, tears dropping onto his clinched fists. Utter despair saturating each syllable, "I have failed her."

"Rise up, mortal, and look at me." The mortal stood, gazing up into the shackled deity's bottomless eyes. "All mortals are bound to life and tethered to death—it is inevitable—but I offer you a choice..."

Hope began to bloom, its treacherous blossoms taking deadly root.

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She stretched and rose slowly from her bed, crossed the small space of her wooden house to the oak chest she had found years ago and made into a desk. A quill and inkpot sat next to the small stack of letters she had received from him. She looked down at the most recent letter, quickly scanning the familiar words, an abrupt sadness striking her heavy heart like a poison arrow. Her eyes lingered on the last line: “If life still runs warm in my veins, I will not stop until we are together.” An errant tear wiped away.

A deep breath came and went as she walked to the window to stare blankly at the distant, shimmering horizon. Her eyes wandered as she tried to quell the agony, rising like bile in her throat, threatening to consume her—suddenly she noticed a huddled body crouched motionless in the sand a few hundred feet down the beach.

Her heart raced as she watched the person roll onto their back, arms and legs splayed out. The person did not move anymore. Her scalp prickled with sweat, her mouth went dry—*they could be hurt and I am the only one that can help them*—and, taking one last look at the figure, she steadied her will and stepped out into the sunlight.

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“What say you, mortal? Do you accept my offer?”

I will not fail her. I cannot fail her.

With a last look at his healer and condemner, he nodded, “Yes.”

The grand helm began to rise from Hades’ head, lifted by unseen hands, until it hovered above him. His face was gentle, almost tender, and almost human. Sorrow scarred his mouth with its snarling discontent. In awe, the mortal watched as a single tear fell from the titan’s right eye, a blasting emerald explosion of light nearly blinding him, as it poured forth into the void. As the tear touched the stone floor, the mortal convulsed, rose, and vanished. The darkness, the light, Hades—all disappeared, as though never there, replaced by crashing waves, the sun’s irreverent radiance, and the soft texture of sand pressing against his back.

I will not fail her.

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The oppressive sun beat down on her face as she ran down the beach. The wind had died a silent death, each step taking her further away, until she found herself approaching the body and—*oh sweet Goddess, is that him?*—chaos ignited in her mind as—*my love, my love! Bless the heavens!*—she found herself in his presence.

She knelt down next to him, held a shaking hand over his mouth, felt the force of his breath and cried out, regaining a mouthful of air, knowing that were he devoid of life then she need never draw another breath. His legs bent and twisted at unnatural angles. There was a deep wound at the base of his spine. The injuries looked infected. She wept for a few moments, calmed herself with a deep breath, set her jaw, and began to drag his body back to her house, knowing that nothing would stand in the way of fate. The sun’s ominous glare sapped her strength, and though she stumbled, fell, and sobbed, she never gave up. She told herself over and over, chanted like song, intoned like prayer, *were he in my place, he would not fail.*

An eternity passed. The rusting sun slowly disappeared beneath the liquid horizon, painting the sky with delicate brush strokes of an autumn incantation. She laid his body on her bed and slumped to the floor next to him. For the first time since he left, she smiled. She had not failed. Beaming, she turned to him to find a pair of beautiful, blue eyes, deeper than the ocean’s gentle susurrus of colored vitality, gazing back at her. Her body seized, transfixed, as his hand reached up and softly touched her face. His skin felt like fire and she knew she would rather ascend, consumed in its flame, than decay in its absence.

Her heart soared higher than the celestial firmament, beyond the realm of the gods, above the cloaks of clouds and blankets of stars that held mortals captive in the insistent thrall of reality. Her dreams had come to life, to exist in her sacred sanctuary as one, to complement her broken, fading shadow with blazing, endless light.

And he spoke, “my love.”

And she wept.