

# Interlude in Arcadia

*By Corey Flintoff*

**T**HE GIRL STEPS OUT FROM behind one of the old oaks along Euston Avenue. Swain doesn't see her until she's right in his path. She's naked. It's the first really cold morning in October, and he's regretting not wearing an overcoat for his walk to campus. She wears nothing, coming toward him barefoot on the leaf-strewn sidewalk.

He exclaims something — My God! She doesn't react or even glance toward him. She seems dazed, lost, looking from side to side in an uncomprehending way. This is barely five blocks from the college, a neighborhood of peeling Victorians subdivided into grad student housing.

She might be an older teen or a twenty-year-old, about the age of the students in Swain's Classics of Greek Literature class. Hair that's almost blonde and skin so white it has a blueish cast. Her breath clouds in the chill air, but she's not shivering, doesn't even have goose bumps. The only sign of cold is that her nipples have tightened into pale knots on her small breasts. She's beautiful, like a dryad in a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

Swain stands looking at her, perhaps longer than he should. This is an

emergency, obviously — an assault, a rape maybe, drugs or alcohol, an episode of mental illness — any of the awful things that befall young women at other colleges, but not this one. It *would* happen on the one day when he desperately needs to get to a meeting, but he thinks Pauli will probably forgive a little tardiness on his part, given the circumstances. It might even make her more sympathetic to his position.

"Miss? Are you all right?" She's not, but he doesn't know what else to say. He's a professor, not a policeman or a medic. She doesn't look at him, in any case, but she does stop walking. Her face takes on a puzzled expression, as if she's trying to make out a sound heard from far away.

He realizes she must be nearly hypothermic. He has to get her covered and warm before he does anything else. Swain takes off his jacket, his old tweed, and tries to put it around her bare shoulders. That's when she finally becomes aware of him. She shies away from the jacket that still holds some of his body heat. She looks up at him, her gray eyes wide with alarm.

"It's all right," he says. "Don't be afraid. You need to get warm. Just let me put this jacket on you." He tries again to drape the jacket over her shoulders, but she gives a little cry and twists away from him. He catches hold of her arm. Her skin is smooth and cold as a chilled apple. Swain pulls her against him and forcibly wraps the jacket around her, grabs the lapels and clutches them close to her chest. She shudders and tries to wrench away, her face contorted with disgust. There's a wildness to her that's unsettling, as if Swain might place his hand between her breasts and feel the pounding of a lynx's heart or a wolverine's, something sullen and dangerous when cornered.

"Calm down!" he says, or almost shouts. "It's all right. It's okay. I'm going to call the police. We'll get you to a hospital." Swain realizes that his phone is in the inside pocket of his jacket, now wrapped around the struggling girl. He has to reach in for it, touching her breast, brushing her stiff nipple. She cries out again, so plaintively that he stops. "Look," he says, "I've got to get to my phone, or I can't help you."

"What's going on there!" It's a shout from behind him. He looks around to see a woman running toward them, about halfway down the block. "Stop!" she says. "I'm calling the police." She wears jogging clothes, and she pulls her phone from a holster strapped to her biceps.

Swain lets go of the girl, who stops struggling and stands there as the woman taps at her screen. The girl drops her arms and lets the jacket fall open, exposing one breast, her belly, and a pale fluff of pubic hair. He wants to pull the garment close around her, but the angry look on the jogger's face deters him.

"She's stark naked," the woman says into her phone. "There's a man here. He was struggling with her."

"I wasn't," he says. "I was trying to get her warm. I was..." But the woman isn't listening. She's describing their location. He's already assigned the woman a nickname in his mind, Atalanta, the foot-racing virgin from Greek mythology.

A regal-looking lady in a pink ballcap comes down the street, leading two tall dogs. Racing greyhounds, rescue dogs probably, wearing sweaters in the college colors. His nickname for her would be Artemis, the hunter goddess. She's less skeptical than the jogger, listening to his story of how he'd encountered the girl on his way to work. She has to pull one of the dogs away when it tries to sniff between the girl's legs.

Atalanta sees that and glares at Swain. "I know who you are," she says, "a professor, for God's sake."

Police cars arrive, two of them, lights pulsing. They angle up to the curb, blocking the street. One of the officers is a woman who speaks softly to the victim, as the girl is now called. The policewoman gets an arm around her and ushers her into the back of the cruiser. It troubles Swain that the girl's bare bottom will have to touch the soiled seat, but he sees the officer wrap a silvery heat-reflecting blanket around her legs.

As the car drives off, he realizes that his jacket is still with the girl, along with his wallet and phone. "It's all right," the policeman says. "You'll have to come down to the station anyway, for questioning." Swain hasn't felt cold until that moment. He begins to shake. His legs tremble and even his backside starts to quiver with the chill.

"I can't go now," he says. "I've got a meeting on campus. It's very important. I can come to the station after that."

"Got any other ID, like maybe your faculty pass?" As luck would have it, his pass and its lanyard are coiled in his jacket pocket. "No choice," the policeman says. "This is a possible sexual assault case. I have to take you in. We can recover your wallet and get this thing straightened out." He

takes Swain's arm and guides him into the back of the remaining patrol car, putting his hand on the older man's head so it won't hit the edge of the door. This strikes Swain as an affront, an unwanted familiarity. He's not handcuffed, so it's hardly necessary. The car's heater is blasting warm air, but the screened-off back seat reeks with the sour funk of prior suspects.

The door to the Central Police Station should have an "Abandon All Hope" sign. It's clear from the moment Swain arrives that nothing is going to be resolved quickly. The young officer parks him with the desk sergeant while he goes to see what happened to the girl and the tweed jacket. Swain is already a full half-hour late to his meeting with Pauli. "Look," he says to the desk sergeant, "I'm entitled to a phone call, aren't I?"

The sergeant sets a land-line phone on the counter. "You can make all the calls you want. You're not under arrest."

"Does that mean I can just walk out of here?"

"No." The sergeant plops back into his chair. "Dial nine for an outside number."

Swain tries Pauli's cell phone a few times. She's not picking up. It's a tactic she uses on her parents when she's irritated with them, but she's never tried it on him before. He calls Melissa, his department secretary, and explains that he was supposed to meet one of his grad students, but that he's been unavoidably detained. "Pauli Karas?" He thinks he detects something arch in the way she says the name, and he wonders if she's been taking note of Pauli's comings and goings. "She waited outside your office for about half an hour, then left. She looked upset."

Swain hangs up, slamming the receiver down harder than he intended. He tries Pauli's number again, misdialing in his haste. Where the hell is she?

The patrolman who brought Swain in never returns. After about half an hour, a detective comes out and calls the professor into his cubicle. He's a big guy stuffed into a suit from some discount menswear barn, but his handshake is warm and vaguely reassuring. "Detective Ramsey," he says. "And you are...?"

Swain explains his circumstances. Ramsey gives a sympathetic nod and turns to his computer. It takes only a few seconds to call up the professor's faculty page on the college website. "Professor of Greek and Roman Literature," Ramsey reads. "Mythology, huh? Cool. We did a unit

on that in my high school. One of my favorite things. Jupiter, right? King of the Gods!" Ramsey is a light-skinned black man with reddish hair and a whole galaxy of freckles. Swain can almost pick out the constellations of gods and mythic figures on his face.

"Yeah, Jupiter — or Zeus in Greek," Swain says. "I got hooked on them when I was in school, too. Listen, Detective Ramsey, I'm in a bit of hurry. May I please have my wallet and phone back now?"

Ramsey clears his throat. "Turns out there's a little problem with that. They took the girl to County General for an exam, so your stuff will probably be over there. Don't worry, though. When we're done here, I can get you a ride over to the hospital."

"When we're done? I thought I just explained everything."

"Just a few questions, though. Like, what was your relationship with this girl? Did you have her in any of your classes?"

"I told you, I never saw her before."

Ramsey laces his fingers together and bumps his knuckles against his lower lip. His hands are freckled, too. "So how did she get hold of your wallet and your phone?"

Swain has to suppress a gust of irritation. The detective's nickname could be Koalemos, the deity of stupidity. He re-explains the whole thing as patiently as he can.

"And your phone," Ramsey says. "Anything on it? I mean, anything you wouldn't want other people to see? Photos, maybe? Did you take any pictures of the girl?" Swain gets indignant, letting the cop know there's nothing of the kind, maybe only a photo or two of him and his wife at the faculty club. It occurs to him that if anyone has photos, it would be Pauli. She has that selfie addiction that infects her whole generation. While he tried to keep things discreet, she teased him into taking a few selfies together. The real danger might be texts. He usually deletes them, but he's had a hard time keeping up with the swarm of stinging messages after he told her they were going to have to break things off.

Eventually, Ramsey gets tired of his little interrogation game and decides to let Swain go. He calls over to the hospital to see whether the professor can pick up his jacket, his wallet, and his phone. Swain can't make out the metallic voice on the other end of the line, but it goes on for some time. The detective's eyebrows rise higher as he listens, rearranging

the patterns of freckles on his forehead. He hangs up and shrugs. "They say she's not at the hospital anymore," he says. "Seems like she just walked out when no one was paying attention. All she had on was one of those paper hospital dresses and your jacket."

Swain could wait for a patrol car to give him a ride, but Ramsey warns him it might be another hour before one is free. It'll take less time to walk. The detective has the decency to dig up a hoodie from the lost-and-found locker. It's a little long in the sleeves, but thick enough to keep the professor warm on the way back to campus. He should get there in plenty of time for his graduate seminar. His stomach churns as he realizes that he may also find out whether Pauli has made good on her threat to drop out of the program and denounce him in a letter to the dean.

It might be just as well if she leaves the discipline. She's a resourceful researcher, Swain concedes, but her scholarship sometimes strays into fantasy. Her dissertation is on the rituals and prayers the Greeks used to call for the aid of the gods. In one of their first quarrels over her work, she'd accused him of dismissing the religious power of the ancient beliefs. "The trouble with you is, you've never believed in the gods," she said. "To you, they're just literary characters, so you can never appreciate what they meant to the Greeks."

"Believed?" He could hear the sneer in his voice, but there was a stillness about her that spooked him, something that warned him not to go further. "There's a reason they're called myths," he said, and they left it at that. She'd insulted his own scholarship, and that was the beginning of their unraveling.

Swain's way back takes him through the wooded paths of Arcadia, which is normally one of his favorite parts of the campus. He and Pauli walked in the more secluded stretches of the park in the early days of their affair, and now he half-expects to see her around every turn. There's no one, though he fancies he can hear riotous movement, like a dance of nymphs and fauns obscured by the trees — the patter of running feet, rustlings in the brush. He can almost hear Pan's pipes in the fluting of some solitary bird.

At the Grecian pavilion by the pond, he hears splashing and what he could swear are girls' voices, but when he rounds a bend, he sees only two swans heaving themselves out of the scum-curdled water. They stop on

the bank and regard him with obsidian eyes, necks swaying as if they might unfold like origami and reshape themselves into fantastic creatures. Shadows stalk beneath the trees, watchful and malignant. He looks up into the canopy with a foreboding that he might see Pauli hanging from one of those oak branches — no, she may be distraught, but she's a life-loving, practical girl. She'll get over it soon enough, he tells himself. They all do.

His way out of Arcadia leads onto Euston Avenue, just a couple of blocks from where he met the naked girl. He decides to walk past the spot, if only to reassure himself that the encounter really happened. The morning's clouds have given way to wan sunlight, flickering over the oak leaves as they drift to the ground. Somehow, the professor is not surprised to see the shoulder of his tweed jacket peeping out from behind one of the deep-seamed tree trunks. She must be sitting on the ground, he thinks, leaning against the bark. He pauses a second, unsure what to do. Should he rush her, grab hold of his jacket, snatch the phone, and call the police? He decides to walk up to her at a deliberate pace, convey some dignity and authority, and demand the jacket back. If she doesn't respond, he'll just take it.

It's a shock, then, to find that the figure wearing his jacket is not the girl. It's some homeless bum, huddling cross-legged on the ground with a shaggy blanket over his knees. He seems asleep or drunk, head lolling so Swain can't see his face. He has a mass of dirty brown curls, bursting out of a baggy knitted tam. He smells of spilled wine. Swain can swear he sees a flea spring from the collar of the jacket.

"Hey, buddy! Where'd you get that jacket? That's mine." The homeless man begins to stir, turning his tangled beard toward the professor. "Look, you can keep the jacket. I don't want it, but I need my wallet and my phone. They should be in the inside pockets." Swain has no expectation that he's going to get any money back, but he's hoping for his credit cards. There's something odd about the man's face, almost deformed, the nose too long and flat, the thatch of eyebrows too wide apart. His leathery cheeks wrinkle into something like a grin. He takes hold of one tweed lapel and pulls it aside, as if inviting the professor to reach in and grope for the wallet. The open coat exhales a musty reek like that of a rutting animal. He wears no shirt and the matted hair of his chest is thick as fur.

The professor hears a giggle behind him. He pivots to find the girl. She's naked again, except for one of those plastic hospital bracelets, flaunted on her wrist like a piece of jewelry. Swain wonders what name, if any, the hospital workers put on that label. He suspects it must be a very ancient one. In the girl's other hand is the phone, which she dangles toward the professor like a toy before a cat. If she seemed disoriented before, she's fully alert now, and focused on the professor with malicious glee. She dances around him and the homeless man, just out of reach, and Swain knows he will never be quick enough to catch her.

The homeless man looks up, and the professor sees his eyes clearly for the first time. Goat's eyes. The irises are flecked with gold, the pupils horizontal slits. The man rises, somewhat awkwardly, and comes forward on what Swain sees are shaggy goat legs. A satyr. The creature has an erection so stiff, it curves up to his belly. The nymph and satyr lean in, arms extended, as if to corral him.

The professor tries to shoulder past the girl, but she catches hold of his hoodie. For such an ethereal thing, she is surprisingly strong. The hoodie peels away like flayed skin. Swain barely wrests himself out of it before the goat-man can grab him. Swain dodges around a tree and into the street. He runs as hard as he can, hoping for a passing car he can flag down or someone he can call to. His heart heaves and clenches in his chest. The leaves rustle behind him. The nymph's excited laughter mingles with the clack of hooves. As he reaches Arcadia, he can see swift-footed Atalanta sprinting toward him from a side path. Ahead of him, Artemis the huntress stoops to unleash her hounds. †